LIBRARY LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Co-Mentoring: A Block Approach

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Introduction

This article discusses a unique approach to a mentoring relationship. Beginning as a traditional mentoring relationship in late 2012, the authors later changed it to a co-mentoring relationship. During the ALA Midwinter Conference's 2013 President's Program in which Peter Block was a speaker, the author who was the mentor became re-inspired by his ideas about abundance, leadership, and community and could see powerful applications to the already formed mentoring relationship she had with the author in the mentee role. This article highlights the evolution of a mentoring relationship, transforming it from a traditional hierarchical nature to one of a "commitment to equality, deep self-awareness and intentionality" (Block's ALA presentation). The authors explore how and why a co-mentoring relationship works for them and how it may be applicable to others interested in sustaining a mentoring relationship. Other discussion includes how this relationship affects careers and lives, with benefits that carry over to the organizations in which they work.

Background

Traditional mentoring focuses on the relationships between inexperienced and experienced, knowledgeable professionals. In such relationships, the focus is more on the mentee's areas for growth, development and gaps in knowledge, rather than on their contributions and gifts. The mentor's job is to play a teaching and guiding role in helping the mentee expand the professional skills that align with the mentee's professional goals or aspirations. For some professionals in mentoring relationships, there is something missing in that more traditional mentoring relationship. Librarians and other professionals have written about how traditional mentoring relationships have not been effective and helpful: "library paths are no longer well defined"… and "as a result traditional hierarchical mentoring relationships are no longer sufficient for developing tomorrow's library leaders."[1]

Though not a new model or concept, co-mentoring occurs with less frequency. There is considerable literature exploring co-mentoring as a different type of practice than traditional mentoring. McGuire and Reger reference feminist principles of equality as a basis for co-mentoring.[2] Another type of mentoring is peer mentoring – a model in which both individuals begin as peers with no power differential in place.

In this article, the approach to co-mentoring described draws upon and applies ideas learned from leadership and organizational expert, Peter Block. It focuses on ideas he presented at the 2013 ALA Presidential Program in Seattle; particularly one of the concepts he talked about: the need to move away from constructs based on deficits to constructs based on assets and abundances.[3]

From Traditional Mentoring to Co-Mentoring

In 2012 the authors entered into a traditional mentoring relationship. After having monthly telephone conversations for several months, they held their first in-person mentoring meetings at the ALA Midwinter Conference in January 2013. Between the two stimulating meetings, Peter Block spoke at the ALA President's Program. Peter Block is an American author, consultant, and speaker whose areas of specialty are "empowerment, stewardship, chosen accountability, and the reconciliation of community."[4] During the President's Program, Block facilitated conversations among hundreds of people who did not know each other. In between the short conversations, he spoke about some concepts that are not only relevant to mentoring relationships but inspired a major shift in the way the authors designed their work together.

Many of Block's ideas were familiar to the mentor - though not fully assimilated into practice. The ideas put forth in some of Block's remarks related to power differentials. As an authority on organizational development, Peter Block was an important thinker in the work of the mentor but it was not until this set of conversations and remarks, when she realized that very specific points of view he presented could be the basis for working differently in a mentoring relationship. As a consultant herself, the mentor read and applied his thinking to organizational issues but nothing in his bibliography prepared her for what he said during that Seattle program. It was to change the course of the mentoring relationship that the authors were just then forging.

Block spoke about focusing on each individual's abundances rather than their deficits; and about relatedness rather than being right. Abundances are one's strengths, the combination of

talents/gifts each person has that makes him or her unique.[5] Deficits, or shortcomings are not a central focus. This does not mean that shortcomings are not perceived individually or in each other, but rather that there is a conscious shift in perspective in order to achieve what each person wants to achieve through using and honoring their talents and strengths. The authors borrow McKnight and Block's ideas that "Citizens create satisfaction by recognizing their individual capacities and skills… A competent community builds on the gifts of its people. Gift-mindedness rests on the belief that satisfaction grows out of the understanding that what we have is enough."[6] The idea that both co-mentors possess "enoughness" indicates that both are equally capable of contributing to the other's well-being and development.

As Block spoke, the mentor in this relationship began to realize that traditional mentoring relationships – however heartfelt and well-meaning – are really lopsided with the mentor being essentially one-up on the "mentee." Even the word "mentee" seems to indicate a *less than* status. As she thought about what she had long preached in the mentoring training she had done – to work to equalize the relationship – she realized that the way we talk about mentoring and the traditional roles we play actively work against that very equality. Peter Block's comments and work with those in attendance at the Midwinter Meeting program struck home. Sharing these ideas with her partner in the relationship at the second in-person meeting led to a turning point for both parties - an exploration of a co-mentoring relationship.

Applying Block's ideas to the newly formed mentoring relationship, the authors began to consciously design and reshape what they wanted to create: a true co-learning relationship that would transcend any existing power differentials. Power differentials are, in actuality, assumed and not constructs considered as useful in the relationship the authors wanted. Learning together was a strong motivator for both partners as they approached the mentoring relationship through a new lens of equality – to create a co-mentoring relationship. Block's view is that maintaining the power differential of coach over coachee or mentor over mentee is counter to building a genuine co-mentoring relationship. This concept served as a catalyst for change in the relationship.

Learning Together: Discovery through Conversation

Mentoring conversations based on the assumption that each of the partners equally contributes to the personal and professional growth of the other are an evolution of standard mentoring conversations. Focusing discussions on individual gifts and capacities, partners enter

conversations openly, thinking "here is the commitment I make, here is the possibility I bring and the value I have."[7] When expressing ideas about building community, Block and McKnight write, "I will speak to you as if you have gifts and are waiting to offer them...A community is a place where you can fulfill these concerns and give your gifts."[8]

A high degree of self-awareness and joint commitment to maintaining the non-hierarchical and intimate relationship are critical for this type of relationship to work. In practice, this means that both individuals must be committed to being self-aware and mindful of tendencies and inherited patterns that would cause a "one-up/one-down" dynamic typical of hierarchical relationships. It is not about how the mentor's many years of experience inform the protegee's fewer years of experience but about what each needs from the other and from the relationship.

Expanding on Block's talk and McKnight and Block's *Abundant Community*, the tenets in Block's "Strategy for Engagement," provide an excellent guide for how to conduct a co-mentoring relationship. Block defines engagement as

…the individual and collective choice of how we choose to be together...This kind of engagement begins with a shift in language, which correlates to a shift in context…" The resulting shift in language and context creates an environment in which we create a potential to shift the experience of our futures.[9]

These tenets influence one's thinking and conversations, helping to shape goals, work, and relationships as the co-mentoring partnership develops. The tenets include:

1. Possibility rather than problem solving

As Block said in his talk in Seattle "Transformation occurs in the realm of possibility." This involves openly thinking of possibilities in situations without assigning barriers to them. While a conversation may begin with a discussion about situations which are automatically considered problems, a significant shift in thinking from problems to possibilities can redirect communication and actions in a positive, productive way. "The possibility conversation frees people to innovate, challenge the status quo, create new futures that make a difference..."[10] This requires an openness to considering alternative possibilities and a painstaking ability to face uncertainty.

2. Gifts rather than deficiencies

The idea of focusing on gifts and assets rather than gaps and deficiencies can be a core guiding principle of a co-mentoring relationship. Instead of dwelling on personal traits and tendencies one might consider as weaknesses, one might consider focusing on utilizing individual strengths and talents in conversations, thinking and actions. This requires a high level of self-awareness and willingness to better know each other and to build trust.

3. Ownership rather than blame

Taking mutual responsibility for a co-mentoring relationship and in conversations, the co-mentors confront each other with the freedom to choose what and how they continue with their career and life goals. This involves asking candid and honest questions, asking if what they are doing is still working and if they are still working to equalize the relationship.

4. Commitment rather than barter

Signaling true altruistic behavior, the commitment goes beyond "I give you something so you can give me something" to sustaining a trusting, safe environment to grow. One approach to this is to ask, "How might I be of assistance? How might I be supportive?"[11] Maintaining and nurturing this relationship is "...a promise for the sake of a larger purpose, not for the sake of personal return."[12] Both co-mentors take responsibility for their own actions and the wellbeing of the mentoring relationship.

5. Invitation rather than mandate

Co-mentors are mutually accountable for what they want to accomplish. In sharing work and life experiences comes trust, help, support, confidence and bonding. The invitation to engage creates the opportunity to challenge each other about what each person wants and what he or she wants to do in order to achieve goals. Unlike traditional mentoring, this does not include giving advice on how to proceed or follow a certain path. By reminding the other of freedom of choice, the co-mentors discover their own ways of approaching and implementing goals and then process these ideas with each other. This point of view is often called "the helping relationship" – one in which help means the concern or goal is owned by the individual with the "helper" serving as a partner and guide through the process of generating options and looking at the issue from different perspectives. Edgar Schein says that "Helping is a basic relationship that moves things forward"; one that most take for granted but that is largely unexplored by many.[13] Schein continues, "What distinguishes the helping situation is that we are consciously trying to help someone else to accomplish something."[14] The emphasis on consciousness and

awareness of being in a helping role is one actively works to realize in this type of co-mentoring relationship.

A co-mentoring relationship is more integrative than a traditional mentoring relationship because it is holistic, including both work and personal aspects of people's lives and guided by a shared commitment to self-awareness. Individual boundaries are openly discussed and co-mentors can aim to go as far as is comfortable in order to understand and help the other. This requires a tremendous degree of personal self-management and clarity. Co-mentors consider what they need for themselves and each other to grow. This shared framework of thinking builds trust and closeness and these interactions positively influence relationships and workplace experiences, stimulating growth beyond the capacity of a co-mentoring connection. To facilitate this process, co-mentors can create specific agendas, focusing on their work, on each of their lives, on goals and aspirations and at times, and on how all of these intertwine.

Benefits and Outcomes – So Far

A simple change in mentoring stance and model has had a powerful effect on each of the authors of this article.

For one of the authors, a renewed sense of awareness about the areas that drew her to librarianship in the first place has illuminated and expanded her sense of what is important in the field today. Discussing future plans for both professional and personal transitions is liberating as these conversations are purposeful and are received in trust and collaborative thinking.

Engaging in learning side by side with her co-mentor has provided new perspectives on the work she does in leadership development. Through our conversations about the challenges of fast-paced work environments where both the traditional and new models of organization co-exist, she has begun to develop new ideas about ways that she might help libraries and librarians she works with.

For the second author, the co-mentoring experience is an empowering and supportive experience. Talking out goals and aspirations in this safe environment has been helpful for processing and considering alternative possibilities and making choices. As the conversations are neither directive nor prescriptive, she is aware that she is in charge of how she wishes to

pursue and implement career and life plans. This approach has also had an impact on how and what she contributes to her organization. In the workplace she and colleagues have noticed in meetings that her expression of ideas and implementation of projects are more focused and directed, which enhances her work with colleagues in the library and throughout campus. It also encourages her to provide her input that previously she may have been less confident in sharing.

The co-mentoring work is highly exploratory and tends to work from the "inside out" spending time describing how the co-mentors arrived at a thought or idea and exploring what it might mean to pursue it in a particular way.

Helping and relating to each other promotes deeper self-awareness of professional practices, personal tendencies and, in turn, develops a new perspective and improves confidence to try out new and challenging projects in the workplace. In her article "Only Connect," Rymer discusses the increase in social capital that is created whenever there is growth and development in an individual who is part of a larger professional community – it is the learning ripple effect, in essence.[15]

Considerations and Why It Works

In the 2013 ALA Midwinter Presidential Program, Block spoke about "how communal transformation depends on leadership that includes role modeling, holding people accountable and shared ownership, independent of style. His approach focuses on creating workplaces and communities that work for everyone in them, with a goal of effecting change through consent and connectedness rather than through mandate and force."[16] If one applies these ideas to mentoring relationships, it creates an environment in which both people are equally held accountable in a symbiotic environment; both free to grow and develop in self-directed, nurturing yet challenging environments.

If the traditional model of mentoring had been kept, this co-mentoring relationship would have had a glass ceiling in which tacit boundaries would have stifled professional and personal growth for both people, in spite of the intention being the opposite. Some of the challenges to entering a relationship based on the commitment to equality and deep self-awareness and intentionality have to do with resisting the impulse to forget these very qualities and commitments. It is habitual to give advice and to take the roles of "more experienced" and "less

experienced." In a co-mentoring relationship it is critical to establish a new habit of reminding one another and oneself that the intention is to contribute to the other and to be of true help.

As this co-mentoring model is not hierarchical, it could be practiced with peers and any professional in one's field. What matters is what works for the individuals participating in such a relationship. Choosing someone in the field that one admires, possesses shared interests and goals, or merely having a hunch that another person may work well with oneself is a great way to start but it is up to both individuals to sustain the relationship: "Ultimately it is up to us as individuals to make co-mentoring happen. Mentoring programs don't make the difference; people do."[17] In continuously working to equalize co-mentoring experiences, open and honest dialogue is expected. Although not always a comfortable experience, it promotes growth beyond original expectations.

The underlying value is the respectful freedom given one to the other in conversations – freedom to dream, explore, figure out future plans, and consider how each wants to proceed with a project or goal. During conversations, the co-mentors grant each other patience and openness to discuss what's on their minds in the moment yet do not lose track of their intended agenda. Michael Galbraith notes that "a true and complete mentoring process (a) promotes the enhancement of self-directedness in learners, (b) fosters transformational change in the way they view their world in which they live, work, and play, and c) encourages autonomy, creativity and independence."[18] A co-mentoring relationship focuses on promoting positive growth in both people through helping one another articulate and, at times, discover what each person loves to do, what she's good at and what she'd like to share with others.[19] Intentionally striving to bring out the best in each other, they help each other find their paths which they forge individually through this powerful learning relationship.

The authors believe that co-mentoring helps individuals with sense-making, confidence, independence of thought, and intentionality crucial to effective leadership. It is known that mentoring is critical to the development of leaders and to their success and the authors believe co-mentoring is an ideal model for generating self-sufficient and confident leaders. Co-mentoring creates a mutual learning environment that deeply enriches both individuals.

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