



Beyond the Myth of the Perfect Mentor:¹ Building a Network of Developmental Relationships

The popular press has devoted a great deal of attention to mentoring as a key to career satisfaction and success. Individuals are advised on how to conduct a search for a mentor who will guide and support them over the course of their careers. Implicit in these accounts is the myth of the perfect mentor, a benevolent, more experienced individual willing and able to help a younger colleague navigate through the world of work. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena, in the guise of the nobleman Mentor, was trusted counselor to the young Telemachus. If only each of us had a goddess to accompany us on our journey through our work lives. There are critical competencies to be acquired, professional and personal challenges to be met, and difficult tradeoffs to be made in balancing personal and organizational ambitions. Although perfect mentors can be found in literature, they rarely exist in reality. The fact is that mentor-protégé relationships are difficult to establish and maintain; most people do not have mentors. And mentors are neither omnipresent nor omnipotent. Mentor-protégé relationships demand considerable investment and risk on the part of both partners.

Instead of embarking on a quest for the perfect mentor, individuals should pursue a strategy of being the “perfect” protégé and building a network of developmental relationships. Developmental relationships are dynamic alliances between individuals which enhance both parties' organizational experience and career development. All work relationships should be understood as *potential* resources by which developmental needs can be addressed. In the following pages, we explore the process by which that potential can be turned into reality: (1) What functions can developmental relationships serve? (2) How are these relationships formed and maintained? (3) With whom in an organization can an individual establish such relationships? and (4) What are some of the special challenges those in the minority face in building these relationships? In summary, we offer guidelines for building a constellation of developmental relationships and an annotated bibliography for further reference.

¹ The ideas in this note have been heavily influenced by the work of Kathy Kram and David Thomas (see bibliography).

Professor Linda Hill and Research Associate Nancy Kamprath prepared this note as the basis for class discussion.

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Diagnosing Developmental Relationship Needs

Relationships do play a pivotal role in individual development at every career stage, by providing a broad range of developmental functions.² These functions can be classified into two interrelated yet distinct categories: career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions are those that facilitate an individual's learning the ropes and preparation for advancement in an organization. Psychosocial functions involve the enhancement of an individual's sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in a professional role. Any particular relationship may serve one or several of the functions listed below.³ The array of developmental functions that must be addressed challenges the notion of the "one mentor model." How could a single relationship satisfy all of these needs over the course of an individual's career?

Developmental Functions

Career Functions

Sponsorship
(opening doors)

Coaching
(teaching and providing feedback)

Protection
(providing support and/or acting as a buffer)

Exposure
(creating opportunities for visibility)

Challenge
(providing "stretch" assignments)

Psychosocial Functions

Role modeling
(demonstrating appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and values)

Counseling
(providing a forum for exploring personal and professional dilemmas)

Acceptance and Confirmation
(offering support and respect)

Friendship
(caring and sharing in ways that go beyond work requirements)

Those relationships that provide both career and psychosocial functions are often labeled mentor-protégé relationships, while those that address only career functions are generally referred to as sponsor-protégé relationships. This distinction is useful to keep in mind when assessing developmental relationships, for it alerts us to the complexities involved in establishing and cultivating such relationships. Because mentor-protégé relationships demand some degree of identification or "chemistry" between the parties, they can not be forced. As Thomas (in press) observes, sponsor-protégé relationships require less sustained contact, lower levels of mutuality, and less status differentiation than do mentor-protégé relationships.⁴ Not surprisingly, more people report having sponsor-protégé relationships than mentor-protégé ones.⁵

² For instance, in a review of the relevant literature, Webber (1991) concluded that anywhere from 30% to 75% of managers feel they have benefited from mentor-like relationships.

³ This table is compiled from the work of Kram (1988).

⁴ David A. Thomas, "The Impact of Race on Managers' Experiences of Gaining Mentoring and Sponsorship: An Intra-Organizational Study," to be published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

⁵ See, for example, the work of Hill (1992).

Comparison of Two Types of Developmental Relationships

	<u>Mentor-Protégé</u>	<u>Sponsor-Protégé</u>
Functions Served	Career/Psychosocial	Career
Sustained Contact	High	Moderate
Identification	Strong/Task-based, and Personal	Moderate/Task-based
Intimacy (openness/disclosure)	Moderate/High	As Appropriate
Interpersonal Bond (respect/trust)	High	Moderate/High
Status Differentiation	Moderate/High	Low/Moderate

Establishing and Maintaining Developmental Relationships

Developmental relationships do not emerge full blown, but rather must be cultivated. Their establishment and maintenance requires a proactive orientation, considerable investment of time and energy, and often personal and career risk for both parties. In addition, they evolve and change over time. To illustrate the dynamic quality of developmental relationships, let us consider the typical evolution of a mentor-protégé relationship between a senior person and a junior colleague. As we will see, there is nothing magical about mentor-protégé relationships. They demand hard work on the part of both individuals, do not address all of the individuals' career and psychosocial needs, and often have a limited life-span.

Mentor-protégé relationships last on average from two to five years. They tend to progress through a series of predictable phases: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition.⁶

Initiation and Cultivation

The first stage in any relationship is initiation. It generally lasts from six months to a year. This is the stage during which the senior and junior persons meet and interact, usually as a result of their positions in the organizational structure and their job responsibilities. In the process of interacting, the two discover a complementarity of developmental needs. Generally, career functions emerge first. For instance, the senior provides the junior with coaching, helping him/her acquire appropriate attitudes and competencies. As the coaching pays off and the junior person begins to perform successfully, the mentor begins to create opportunities for the junior person to work on challenging and high-profile assignments. At the same time, the junior person may provide the senior counterpart with much welcomed technical assistance, respect, and loyalty.

Once the foundation for the relationship has been laid, the cultivation stage begins. During this stage, the parameters of the relationship become clear and the range of functions served by the relationship expands to its maximum. The interactions of the mentor and protégé tend to increase and deepen, as both parties reap benefits from the relationship and hence continually reinvest the

⁶ Kram (1988) identified these stages in a major research project of mentoring.

time and effort it takes to maintain it. The young person not only acquires important technical expertise and specialized knowledge about what it takes to be effective in his/her organization, but also receives support and confirmation of his/her professional identity. Analogously, the senior person's power (for instance, recognition for developing younger talent) increases by promoting a junior person who is making significant contributions to the organization. And the mentor is revitalized both personally and professionally by leaving a legacy in the next generation of leadership.

The cultivation stage is the time during which mutual trust, respect, and emotional interest grow between the senior and junior persons. Consequently, both tend to take more personal and career risks on behalf of the relationship. They disclose more and begin to aid in resolving both professional and personal matters. For example, they not only regularly impart more "public" information about corporate matters that they might have, but also they share more "privileged" knowledge as well. As their mutual commitment increases, they both take advantage of opportunities to promote the other's reputation and career; not only do they "quietly" support the other, but also they make whatever "public" interventions that might be demanded. What started out as a series of temporary interactions has evolved into a longer-lasting, more involved relationship.

Separation and Redefinition

Alas, mentor-protégé relationships are not static. They often undergo major transformations over the course of time and can even come to an end. The catalysts for change arise from both changes in the individuals and in the organizational context. For instance, the senior person may no longer be able to help his/her junior colleague because of changes in position or power. As individuals go through various career stages, their particular needs and resources change. The junior person may no longer need or desire guidance and coaching. He/she may resent any "parent-like" behavior on the part of the mentor, and begin to clamor for the chance to work autonomously and "make a name for him/herself." Or the senior person may encounter a major career or mid-life crisis, which leads to reassessment of career as well as relationships. Moreover, almost inevitably, tensions and conflicts arise in any relationship. The junior person may make a costly mistake and thereby disappoint the mentor who has invested considerable time, energy, and political capital in the protégé. Or the senior person may fall out of favor in the organization and become a liability to the protégé. Finally, given the ubiquity of organizational restructuring and job mobility, the two parties may simply become separated, making it difficult for them to interact or have at their disposal the resources necessary to fulfill their partner's developmental needs.

The separation stage can be a very tumultuous time, since mentor-protégé relationships are often imbued with emotion. The relationship can deteriorate sharply, if one or both parties feels disillusioned or rejected by the other. (For instance, a mentor often expects some loyalty from a protégé even if the mentor can no longer provide critical resources. A protégé can not simply ignore such obligations.) It is never easy to be confronted by the boundaries of a relationship, to face up to the fact that the relationship may no longer be mutually beneficial.

Some period after the separation stage, the relationship may be rekindled, as hard feelings subside. Often it will be reestablished but in a different form, for instance, more like a peer friendship. Although the protégé may acknowledge gratitude for past assistance, he/she may now wish to establish more equal footing with the mentor.

Again, when one considers the reality of mentor-protégé relationships, the fallacy of the notion of the perfect mentor is revealed. Mentors are not "guardian angels" who have dedicated their careers to the altruistic mission of nurturing protégés. Mentor-protégé relationships, like all developmental relationships, are based on the principle of reciprocity. Both parties must benefit from the relationship for it to be sustainable. Individuals who are aware of their own needs and the needs of others can move beyond the "what's in it for me" mentality. They are more likely to be able to

recognize and take advantage of opportunities to form developmental relationships. Those who ask for assistance and feedback are much more likely to receive career and psychosocial support from others, for in doing so, they demonstrate an eagerness and commitment to learn and are more likely to uncover potential areas of complementarity. For instance, Webber (1991) writes:

The ambitious subordinate who is too blatantly political in seeking the sponsorship of a senior star is likely to offend his or her peers, immediate superior, and even the intended mentor. Nonetheless, effective young professionals simply don't wait for lightning to strike or their good performance to attract sponsors. They seek out information about their boss's goals, problems, and pressures. They are more active in reaching out to senior others, at least to the extent of finding out what they do and investigating whose values and organizational dreams are compatible with theirs (p. 177).

Also, those individuals who have realistic expectations about their developmental relationships are more likely to have supportive and effective ones. Most developmental relationships change and even end over time. Most are fraught with periods of dissension. Hence, it is unfair, as well as unwise, to place one's professional success in the hands of a single individual or relationship. Instead, a more effective strategy is to exploit opportunities over the course of a career to establish developmental relationships with a variety of individuals.

Once the groundwork is laid for the relationship, the individual must be prepared to commit the time and resources and take the risks necessary to maintain it. Without attention and caring, the relationship will surely falter and wither away, especially when difficulties are encountered. It is incumbent upon the individual to conduct periodic diagnoses of the relationship. Have the individual's goals, needs, and pressures changed? Have the other person's goals, needs, or pressures changed? If the answer to either question is affirmative, then the individual must work to reconfigure mutual expectations that fit both parties' current circumstances.

With Whom Should Developmental Relationships Be Established?

The constellation of developmental relationships an individual has can take many forms (relationships can serve a few or many of the developmental functions described earlier) and include a wide range of people, including superiors, peers, and other associates within and outside the organization. What are the opportunities and dilemmas associated with each party?

The Immediate Superior

The immediate superior is often viewed as someone with whom one can or should establish a developmental relationship. In many respects, the boss is a natural candidate. Because of the opportunity for frequent interaction and the inherent interdependency between a superior and subordinate, there is a basis upon which to begin building a relationship. In short, there is usually a complementarity of needs between bosses and their subordinates, some of which are presented below:⁷

⁷ This table is derived from the work of Cohen and Bradford (1989).

Interdependency Between a Boss and a Subordinate

What Boss Has to Offer the Subordinate

- Link to the rest of the organization
- Make sure priorities are consistent with those of the organization
- Secure necessary resources
- Make sure are rewarded fairly

What Subordinate Has to Offer the Boss

- Know will deliver
 - Know will deliver in ways that take into account the power dynamics in the company
 - Rely on as a source of information from other parts of the organization, especially below
 - Rely on as a sounding board
-

In order to take advantage of this potentiality, the subordinate must take some responsibility for establishing a productive relationship. To move the relationship in the right direction, the subordinate should, among other things: (1) be sensitive to the perspective of the boss and work to build mutual expectations that fit both his/her personal and the boss' needs and style; (2) keep the boss informed; (3) behave dependably and honestly; and (4) use the boss' time and resources prudently.⁸

There are, however, some inherent dilemmas in boss-subordinate relationships that can undermine their capacity to foster development.⁹ The conflict between the boss' role as *evaluator* and as *developer* is an age-old dilemma that will inevitably crop up. Consequently, both parties might be reluctant to take the necessary risks (for instance, disclosure) to build a more fully elaborated developmental relationship. Perhaps one of the most consistent and provocative findings in Hill's (1992) research on new managers was that they did not perceive their current bosses to be resources for coping with the challenges of their first year. With few exceptions, most viewed the current boss as one who would threaten rather than expedite their development:

I know on one level that I should deal more with my branch manager, because that is what he is there for. He's got the experience and I probably owe it to him to go to him and tell him what is up. He would probably have some good advice. But it's not safe to share with him. He's an unknown quantity and he is the last place I'd go for help.

It was difficult to ascertain why most of the new managers did not rely upon their current bosses as resources. On the one hand, considerable anecdotal evidence indicated that the cultures of the organizations studied embodied a "sink-or-swim" mentality. Moreover, there were clear norms against asking for help and limited tolerance for mistakes. On the other hand, in some sense the new managers were in "no position to ask for help," as one put it. Psychologically, many of them were not willing to admit that they needed assistance:

⁸ See annotated bibliography for relevant references.

⁹ Nielsen and Gypen (1979) reviewed eight such dilemmas: Alliance versus Competition; Clarifying Expectations versus Second Guessing; Initiative versus Dependence; Competence versus Inferiority; Differentiation versus Identification; Relating Personally versus Relating Impersonally; Mutual Concern versus Self-Interest; Integrity versus Denial.

It's difficult to even go back to an old friend and express a lot of frustration. You're afraid, "Oops, I might let something out." As if you have secrets. I'm still tentative about that. It's like leaving home—the first six months at college. You don't want to talk to mom and dad. Even if they keep soliciting you, "How's it going; do you need help?" You're not going to say yes and start pouring your heart out. You're a grown-up now, out on your own.

Initially, a few of the new managers did approach their superiors for help. Those who did had bosses with reputations in their companies for being "people developers." This seemed to give the new managers the necessary confidence to view their bosses as developmental resources. Eventually, about half of the new managers turned to their bosses for assistance, and were generally relieved to find their superiors more tolerant of their questions and mistakes than anticipated. The new managers' conversations with their bosses were initially very task-oriented; they usually focused on a specific problem the new manager was grappling with. These fledglings were reluctant to rely on their bosses for general advice or emotional support, however. Even at the end of the year, most of the new managers approached their bosses with some trepidation, all too aware of the risks associated with revealing "any weakness."

Admittedly, perhaps their immediate superiors should not have been the persons the new managers turned to first with their problems (especially more personal ones). Still, it seems unfortunate that the new managers were largely unable to utilize a prime resource and establish developmental relationships with their bosses. Their bosses, more than any other constituency with whom they interacted, held the richest appreciation of what the new managers were going through. Because their bosses had gone through the same experience of transitioning into management themselves, they were in a unique position to understand and help the new managers with their struggles. But for the boss-subordinate relationship to evolve into a supportive developmental one required both parties to take risks and treat each other as potential allies and not potential adversaries.

In evaluating particular job assignments and opportunities, individuals should take into account potential superiors' reputations for developing those who work for them. As mentioned, in her research, Hill (1992) found that some superiors were known as good "people developers." These superiors shared many characteristics: they had set high standards, been available, and consciously orchestrated developmental experiences. They were oriented toward the long-term career development of their subordinates and provided what Hall (1976) has referred to as supportive autonomy.¹⁰ They were delegators who allowed their subordinates to participate in important decisions and, when appropriate, make such decisions alone. In addition, they held their subordinates accountable for their decisions and actions, giving them timely and candid feedback about their performance. One new manager described this as being given:

Just enough rope to hang myself, well not quite enough. . . . He let me feel in control. He built up my status—I felt like I owned my own 10 million dollar business. And he talked to me not just about what I did, but how I did it when I'd come back from a call. . . . He gave me loads of feedback about how other people saw me. Sometimes I'd get mad—I didn't always want to hear what he had to say. But now I can use that information to help me know how to handle myself.

The bosses who had been good teachers had also granted their subordinates the "sacred right to make a mistake." By doing so, they had helped them learn how to manage risk, both intellectually (weighing options and tradeoffs) and emotionally (coping with attendant personal stresses). In short, through their actions, the past bosses had led their subordinates to broaden their perspective about the business. In addition, through role modeling they had demonstrated the value of, and

¹⁰ Douglas T. Hall, *Careers in Organizations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Goodyear, 1976).

appropriate method for, managing others' career development. And finally, they encouraged self-motivation and a "learning attitude" in their subordinates: "He was always stretching me, to stretch just as far as I could without breaking. With him you always wanted to do more and learn more."

Other Superiors

Individuals can also establish relationships with superiors to whom they do not report directly. Those who do not allow their narrow job task to overdetermine with whom they interact can take advantage of a number of opportunities (for instance, seniors they encounter while working on a task force or attending a training program) to establish relationships with superiors in their organizations. Other superiors, much like an immediate superior, are in a position to play a liaison role for the junior person. They can represent the person's interests upward and have the expertise and resources necessary to lend career and/or psychosocial support. And the role conflict between evaluator and developer is reduced, albeit not eliminated. In this vein, Hill (1992) found that new managers relied heavily upon *previous* superiors for support and guidance in their new positions. These superiors were people with whom the new managers "had a history." And looking back, the new managers realized that they were people who had behaved in "mentor-like" ways toward them. Hence, they had grown to trust them for both professional and personal support.

More and more corporations, mainly professional service firms, are experimenting with so-called mentoring programs in which senior and junior people are matched. In some programs, the senior person is instructed to assist a particular junior colleague with his or her career development. In other programs, the junior person is encouraged to select a senior person who can provide performance feedback and support—someone who is not a direct superior and with whom the subordinate feels comfortable. Such programs have met with mixed success. They seem to work much better in theory than in practice. Reasons commonly cited for their failure include: the senior members are poor at providing feedback and coaching and are given little incentive to spend time on these activities; and the junior members do not "trust" their mentors and are unwilling to admit their shortcomings and concerns. Further, both parties often have unrealistic expectations of what can be accomplished. As has been discussed, developmental relationships cannot be legislated and are often difficult to establish and maintain.

Peers and Other Associates

Individuals tend to think of developmental relationships as traversing hierarchical lines. Such a perspective is, however, extremely limiting, for relationships with peers can also be developmental. Peers usually do not have the power of superiors, and therefore cannot play the liaison role as effectively or have as much access to critical resources as do superiors. Moreover, peers often find themselves in competition for such things as promotions and resources. However, there are a number of advantages to developing relationships with peers. As Kram and Isabella (1985) note, peer developmental relationships are, of course, more likely to be available. In most organizations, individuals have more peers than superiors. Moreover, the lack of a hierarchical dimension in the relationship might make it easier to achieve mutual support and collaboration:

The current study suggests that peer relationships may offer unique opportunities that should not be overlooked or underestimated. They provide a forum for mutual exchange in which an individual can achieve a sense of expertise, equality, and empathy that is frequently absent from [relationships with senior people]. In addition, peer relationships appear to have a longevity that exceed that of [relationships with senior people]. Several of the peer relationships we studied had lasted almost 30 years. Thus, these relationships can provide continuity over the course of a career, seeing individuals through change and transition, as well as through the day-to-day tasks of work life (p. 129).

Indeed, Hill (1992) found that the majority of managers in her study believed that access to a network of peers was a key ingredient in having a successful experience. After the new managers overcame some of the inhibitory effects of competitive pressures with peers, peer interactions provided a supportive forum in which they could explore how they thought and felt about the challenges they faced:

At first I didn't know how to utilize different people I'd met. I'd call and talk pleasure when I should've been talking business and then waited to see if they'd give me an "in" to ask a question or two. As I saw what an opportunity for learning it was to talk to as wide a range of people as I could, I got better at calling [peers] around the country and getting to the point. I'd admit I was just looking for new ideas. "Here is a situation. What would you do in this situation?" Then, you just sit back and absorb the wisdom.

Another new manager referred to the fact that his peer network represented his "suicide hotline." These were relationships in which he could release pent-up frustration and tension, and therefore free himself to focus on the substantive issues at hand. As these quotes should reveal, relationships with peers were often very informal and supportive ones. The new managers felt free simply to explore ideas and disclose their "real concerns." Many of the new managers had peers they "chatted with" on a weekly or more frequent basis.

Not surprisingly, peer, not superior, relationships came to be the most important developmental relationships for the new managers. They relied on peers as confidants and sounding boards for their ideas, for candid and timely feedback, and for emotional support in handling the different challenges that arose. Associates outside the organization (for instance, from community service work or classmates from college or graduate school) also proved to be valuable resources for the new managers. Such relationships tended to resemble in tone and function (although the career advice and support were less tailored to corporate context) those the new managers experienced with peers inside the organization.

In summary, those individuals with a variety of developmental relationships (with superiors, peers, and other associates)¹¹ seem to be at a distinct advantage, for different relationships serve different functions.

Contextual Factors

Developmental relationships are profoundly shaped by situational factors. Organizations differ in terms of the extent to which they inhibit or facilitate the establishment of developmental relationships. The following is a list of relevant organizational factors:¹²

¹¹ Theoretically, individuals could establish developmental relationships with subordinates, especially more experienced ones. Indeed, such relationships do occur, but the conflict between evaluation and development can make them problematic.

¹² See, for example, Kram (1988), Thomas and Kram (1988) and Hill (1992).

Relevant Organizational Factors

Hierarchical Structure and Culture

The more hierarchical an organization, the more unequal the power distribution in superior-subordinate relationships and the more competition in peer relationships. These pressures impede frequent and open interaction and communication, and hence the formation of developmental relationships.

Task Design

Tasks that include working with others (for example, on cross-functional teams) as opposed to those that involve solitary work are more likely to provide opportunities for the development of meaningful alliances. Individuals who work on tasks that are challenging and critical to the organizational mission will be more attractive to others as persons with whom to work and form relationships.

Performance Appraisal and Reward System

Employee expectations and behavior are affected by the performance appraisal and reward system of an organization. Performance appraisal systems that place some emphasis on development as well as evaluation are more likely to provide forums for constructive coaching and counseling. If individuals are severely punished for taking risks or making mistakes, they are less likely to do so and hence to steer away from developmental experiences and relationships. If individuals are not rewarded for collaboration and the development of others, they are less likely to devote much time and attention to such efforts.

Cultural Context

There is growing evidence that expectations and behavior in work relationships differ across cultures (for instance, norms about superior-subordinate relationships, conflict management, and public/private life integration).¹³ Hence, the establishment of developmental relationships might vary across cultures. It is important to understand what the relevant differences might be and actively to build common ground and a comfortable way of working with those from a different cultural background.¹⁴

The Effect of Minority Status on Developmental Relationships

Both anecdotal accounts and research suggest that women and minorities encounter unique dilemmas in establishing developmental relationships.¹⁵ In this vein, the cynical side of developmental relationships, the "old boy network" and notion of "it's not what you do, but who you know" have been proposed as crucial explanations for the inability of those who are "different" to succeed and flourish in organizations. As we have seen, developmental relationships involve a mix of instrumentality and emotionality. Hence, some degree of identification, affinity, and trust is crucial

¹³ See annotated bibliography for general references on cross-cultural differences in work expectations and behavior. Unfortunately, the research on developmental relationships in particular has been done primarily in the United States.

¹⁴ Schein (1981) elaborates on the attitudes and skills necessary to work effectively cross-culturally. They include: self-insight, ability to take the perspective of the other, a proactive problem-solving orientation, personal flexibility, negotiation skills, interpersonal tact, and patience.

¹⁵ See annotated bibliography for relevant references.

to their establishment. Consequently, it is not surprising that developmental relationships do in fact occur more naturally between "like" individuals. Those who are in minority status (for instance, in most organizations in the United States, women, ethnic, racial, and religious minorities) in an organization are going to find fewer individuals like themselves with whom to establish supportive relationships. And it is the case that there are inherent limitations in developmental relationships that cross gender, race, and ethnicity. Thomas and Alderfer (1989) argue that, in light of the features (outlined earlier) of sponsor as opposed to mentor relationships, members of minority groups might find it easier and more realistic to seek out the former rather than the latter. Analogously, they point out that people in the minority cannot afford to ignore peer developmental relationships, since minority superiors may be a rare (or over-utilized) commodity.

The burden that accompanies the high visibility characteristic of being a token (this is a sociological term for being in the minority; however, it is no accident that the term normally takes on pejorative connotations) creates special challenges for minority persons.¹⁶ First, others correctly recognize that establishing a developmental relationship with a minority person is inherently riskier, since the minority person's performance will be scrutinized more closely. Therefore, women and minorities confront higher hurdles for proving themselves to potential mentors or sponsors than do their majority counterparts. Second, tokens tend to be stereotyped as representing the entire minority group. Hence, it is difficult for others to perceive and treat them as individuals. For instance, those from the majority group may preemptively decide that an individual in the minority group is "too different" to have anything in common with them. Their anticipation of the complexities of managing a relationship with someone different from themselves may lead them to shy away from such encounters.¹⁷ They do not readily recognize that the minority person is a resource with whom they can establish a mutually beneficial relationship. Those in the same minority group tend to rely heavily upon stereotypes as well. For example, Ely (1990) describes some of the difficulties faced by women in firms where few senior managers are women. Her research suggests that the junior women, rather than building ties "naturally" based on a level of shared identity appropriate to the strength of the relationship, tend to overidentify or, paradoxically, overdifferentiate themselves from the few senior women.¹⁸ Initially, the junior women assume the senior women are natural allies and therefore engage in inappropriate levels of intimacy. When they are confronted with the fact that the senior women are indeed different from them (for instance, they do not take the junior women's side on a particular issue), they tend to feel personally betrayed and to retreat to an equally inappropriate level of differentiation.

Consistent with the work of Ely, Kram (1988) outlined five generic problems in cross-gender ties, the last two relating to public perceptions of the relationship:

1. **Men and women are inclined to assume stereotypical roles in relating to each other.** In order to reduce the ambiguity inherent in new work relationships, cross-gender alliances tend to reproduce relationships based on stereotypical gender relationships (father-daughter, chivalrous knight-helpless damsel). Both participants in the relationship may collude in reproducing roles that reduce the effectiveness of the relationship and devalue the intellectual contribution of the woman.
2. **The role modeling function tends to be unsatisfactory to both the mentor and the protégé.** Female protégés may not find typically male solutions to matters of

¹⁶ See, for example, Kanter (1997).

¹⁷ See, for example, Kram (1988).

¹⁸ Robin Ely, "An Empirical Study of Relationships Among White Professional Women at Work: Toward a Theoretical Framework for Understanding Interpersonal Relationships Among Individuals Traditionally Underrepresented in Positions of Organizational Power (draft of working paper, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University), 1990.

- managerial style or development effective as they often face a different set of problems and concerns in their early careers. On the other hand, men may find it difficult to empathize and identify with the struggles of young women managers.
3. **The mutual liking and admiration characteristic of all developmental relationships may lead to increased intimacy and sexual tension.** Growing intimacy can be both a threatening and an exciting aspect in cross-gender relationships, leading to a testing of the boundaries in the relationship. This testing of boundaries is difficult and can be a source of substantial misunderstandings and tension.
 4. **Cross-gender relationships are subject to intense public scrutiny and suspicion.** Given the possibility of romantic liaisons, cross-gender relationships are given heightened scrutiny by other members of the organization. The possibility that sexual involvement and favoritism rather than competence are the basis for the relationship can reduce the effectiveness of both individuals.
 5. **Cross-gender relationships may cause resentment among male peers.** The competition between male peers may make a solo woman's developmental relationship with a male the subject of scorn and ridicule. This relationship may isolate the woman from her peers.

Thomas and Alderfer (1982) looked at the particular problems African-Americans face in establishing effective work relationships. They found that African-American professionals and managers spend more time than their majority counterparts working through issues concerning their professional identity and feelings of alienation and inclusion. It is easier for them to work through these concerns (psychosocial needs) in developmental relationships with those whom they can personally identify. Although members of the majority group (white males) have come into contact with women (albeit not necessarily in a professional context), many may not have interacted with African-Americans and may find it difficult to empathize with minority individuals. Because whites and African-Americans often lead separate lives away from the job, they don't mingle socially and get to "know each other as people." Other minorities may be in a better position than majority members to help minority individuals sort out the pressures of biculturalism; that is, conducting their personal lives according to one set of cultural expectations and their professional lives according to another.

Although the picture painted above is bleak and unfair, it is not an insurmountable task for persons in the minority to establish developmental relationships. However, they can afford to be neither naive nor cynical about their circumstances. Instead, individuals in the minority, like their majority counterparts, must take the initiative and work to establish a network of developmental relationships, one that ideally includes members of their minority group as well as members of the majority group in the company. It goes without saying that majority members have an obligation to confront their attitudes and behaviors which may place minority members at a disadvantage. Furthermore, minority members must be prepared to discuss and explore issues that arise because of their minority status with those whom they wish to build developmental relationships. Although superficial conformity on some issues can be effective, over-conformity on key ones is detrimental in the long run. Thomas (in press) found that those relationships in which the difference (in this instance, racial) was "embraced" and sensitive issues discussed were more successful than those in which tough topics were ignored.

Guidelines for Building a Network of Developmental Relationships

Now that we have explored the reality and complexities of developmental relationships, it is appropriate to offer some guidelines on being the “perfect” protégé and building a network of developmental relationships.

1. **Do not look for one mentor-protégé relationship to carry you through the course of your career.** Instead of embarking on the search for the perfect mentor, view all work relationships as potential resources from which you can meet your developmental needs.
2. **Recognize opportunities to establish developmental relationships and reach out to prospective partners.** Analyze your developmental needs and proactively work to create a constellation of supportive relationships with superiors, peers, and other associates. Take advantage of opportunities (both formal and informal) to establish alliances with others. Express interest in others' goals and activities and be willing to ask for and offer assistance to others.
3. **Be realistic about developmental relationships.** Keep in mind that developmental relationships must be mutually beneficial to both parties. For the relationship to begin, there must be some basis of compatibility or complementarity. Developmental relationships do not emerge full blown; rather, it takes time and effort and often risk to cultivate them and weather the inevitable disagreements or stresses that may arise.
4. **Accept, do not deny, that developmental relationships are dynamic.** Be prepared for your developmental relationships to evolve over time. It is important to reevaluate periodically their appropriateness as individual and organizational circumstances change. Relationships which at one time were healthy can become dysfunctional and even destructive.
5. **When evaluating career choices, take into account the extent to which opportunities are available for forming developmental relationships.** Seek out those positions and organizations that provide a supportive context for establishing developmental relationships. For women and minorities, it is important to be aware of the number of individuals like you in the organization, for that number will have an impact on the availability and character of developmental relationships.
6. **Recognize and be prepared to address the complexities involved in developmental relationships with those in the minority.** Both those in the minority and those in the majority should be sensitive to and adopt a proactive, problem-solving orientation toward the special challenges involved in such relationships. To do otherwise is to deny inappropriately critical opportunities (for both parties) for professional growth and success.

It may be difficult at first to give up the dream of the perfect mentor. But in fact, to do so opens up a whole world of fruitful possibilities. Those individuals who explore those frontiers achieve more career success and satisfaction.

Annotated Bibliography

General References

Cohen, Allen R. and David L. Bradford, *Influence Without Authority*. New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1990.

This book explores in rich detail how individuals can build supportive alliances based on mutually beneficial exchanges. Case examples are provided on how to effectively manage relationships with superiors, peers, and subordinates. Special attention is devoted to methods for influencing others over whom you have no formal authority to lend you their time, support, and resources.

Gabarro, John J. and J. P. Kotter, "Managing Your Boss," *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 58, January-February 1980, pp. 92-100.

In their classic article, the authors offer practical advice about how to proactively build an effective and supportive relationship with a superior.

Hill, Linda A., *Becoming a Manager: Mastery of a New Identity*, Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1992.

The author provides a scholarly but readable account of the experiences of first-time managers. The resources (including developmental relationships) the new managers relied upon to cope with their first year are described.

Kotter, John P., *Power and Influence*, New York, Free Press, 1985.

This book discusses the ways in which individuals can build power bases and effectively exercise influence over the course of their careers. In doing so, specific suggestions for how to establish and maintain supportive working relationships at different career stages are provided.

Kram, Kathy E., *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life*, New York, University Press of America, 1988.

This book represents the most comprehensive and in-depth analysis of developmental relationships currently available. Each of the topics discussed in this note are elaborated upon through the use of case examples and theory. Of special mention, Kram illustrates the dilemmas those in the minority face in establishing developmental relationships.

Kram, Kathy E. and Lynn A. Isabella, "Mentoring Alternatives: The Role of Peer Relationships in Career Development," *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 28, 1985, pp. 110-132.

In this article, the researchers identify three types of peer developmental relationships, describe the various functions they serve, and discuss the unique manner in which these relationships can support career and psychosocial development at every career stage.

McCall, Morgan, W. Jr., Michael M. Lombardo, and Ann M. Morrison, *The Lessons of Experience*, Lexington, Mass., Lexington Books, 1988.

Based on an extensive study of successful executives, the authors discuss the impact of job assignments, relationships, and hardships on personal and professional development.

Neilsen, Eric H. and Jan Gyphen, "The Subordinate's Predicaments," *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 57, September-October 1979, pp. 133-143.

In a provocative presentation, the authors identify the dilemmas inherent in superior-subordinate relationships which can interfere with the establishment of effective work relationships.

Thomas, David A. and Kathy E. Kram, "Promoting Career-Enhancing Relationships in Organizations: The Role of the Human Resource Professional." In *Career Growth and Human Resources Strategies*, edited by Manual London and Edward M. Mone, New York, Quorum Books, 1988.

Although this article is directed at human resource professionals, it is useful for the non-human resource professional as well. The authors describe the impact of different organizational practices and policies on the availability and character of developmental relationships.

Webber, Ross Arkell, *Becoming a Courageous Manager*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1991.

This book addresses typical problems that young people encounter on the job. It considers ways in which they can approach their careers and meet both personal and organizational goals. Two chapters in particular are relevant to the present topic, the chapter on being a protégé and the one on being "different" in the organization.

The Effect of Minority Status on Developmental Relationships

Women

Hearn, Jeff, Deborah L. Sheppard, Peta Tancred-Sheriff, and Gibson Burrell (eds.), *The Sexuality of Organization*, London, Sage Publications, 1989.

This book is a collection of articles presented at a symposium on "Sexuality, Power and Organizational Theory." The entries consider the impact of sexuality on work relationships and career outcomes. Specific topics include the experiences of women throughout the organization (from secretaries to executives), sexual harassment, and the challenges faced by homosexuals in corporations.

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, New York, Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1977.

This book is a classic study of women's experiences in organizations. It portrays in vivid detail the impact of gender on power dynamics and the consequences of tokenism on work relationships. Kanter goes beyond simply diagnosing the problems; she also offers solutions for remedying them.

Morrison, Ann M., Randall P. White, Ellen Van Velsor, and The Center For Creative Leadership, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987.

While women are entering the managerial labor force in ever increasing numbers, they nonetheless have been unable to advance in representative numbers to senior managerial positions. They have run into a number of identifiable barriers, which the authors have labeled "the glass ceiling." Practical suggestions are made for how to break through these barriers by addressing four key issues: What does it take for women to enter the executive suite? What factors propel women upward? What factors derail women; how do they differ from those that derail men? Advice is provided for how women can learn the ropes in their companies, gain the right kind of support, and integrate their work and personal lives.

Racial Minorities

Davis, George and Glett Watson, *Black Life in Corporate America*, Anchor Books, New York, Garden City, 1985.

Based on interviews with 160 managers and experts, the authors depict the experiences of black managers. Of particular note, they consider the impact of the black managers' corporate experiences on their personal lives.

Dickens, Floyd Jr. and Jacqueline B. Dickens, *The Black Manager: Making It in the Corporate World*, New York, AMACOM, 1982.

A framework for understanding black career development is presented. Recommendations are made for career enhancement.

Thomas, David A. and Clayton P. Alderfer, "The Influence of Race on Career Dynamics: Theory and Research on Minority Career Experiences." In *Handbook of Career Theory*, edited by Michael B. Arthur, Douglas T. Hall and Barbara S. Lawrence, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

This article reviews the research on the influence of race and race relations on career dynamics. Particular emphasis is placed on: framing the minority experience as bicultural, understanding the influence of race on an individual's self-concept, minority experiences in receiving social and instrumental support from superiors and peers, and the special challenges facing minority women.

Thomas, David A., "Mentoring and Irrationality: The Role of Racial Taboos," *Human Resource Management*, vol. 28, 1982, pp. 279-290.

The author considers the complexities of cross-race mentoring relationships. He outlines the insidious forces that can lead to superficial alliances between whites and African-Americans.

International

Note: The books below do not address the topic of developmental relationships explicitly. However, they describe the impact of cultural differences on work relationships in general.

Adler, Nancy J., *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*, Boston, Mass., Kent Publishing Company, 1986.

The author explores the impact of culture on work relationships and organizational life. She challenges the assumption that what works in the United States will also be relevant in other cultural contexts. She offers suggestions for how to effectively manage cultural diversity and career transitions from one nation to another.

Kim, Young Yun and William B. Gudykunst, *Cross-Cultural Adaptation: Current Approaches*, London, Sage Publications, 1988.

Prompted by the reality that millions of people relocate each year, the authors explore how the concept of "adaptation" has taken on new significance. This volume presents current theories and research dealing with the cross-cultural adaptation of individuals who are born and raised in one culture and find themselves living and working in another.

Lane, Henry W. and Joseph J. DiStefano, *International Management Behavior: From Policy to Practice*, Ontario, Nelson Canada, 1988.

Relying upon cases and readings, the authors portray the realities of doing business internationally. The authors describe the influence of culture on managers' assumptions, perceptions, and feelings, and hence behavior.

Schein, Edgar H., "Improving Face-to-Face Relationships," *Sloan Management Review*, vol. 22, 1981, pp. 43-52.

The author identifies critical attitudes and skills for managing in the global business community. Only those individuals who know how to manage diversity will be equipped to function effectively in today's corporations.