Facilitating Cross-Cultural Mentoring

Glenn A. Palmer, DeVry University, USA
Dionne Rosser-Mims Troy University, USA

Introduction

Researchers have recognized several factors that are formidable forces preventing African Americans and other minorities to achieve their fullest potentials in organizations (Thomas, 1989; Hackett & Byers 1996). Studies have revealed that African American women are more disadvantaged than African American men in the career development process (Cox & Blake 1991; Cox, 1993; Palmer, 2001). While racism remains a defiant career barrier for both, African American women must deal with the added layer of sexism. Experts and scholars believe that various barriers (discrimination, prejudice, structural variables, lack of mentoring, etc.) have prevented African Americans from achieving their full potentials in the workplace (Carnevale & Stone, 1995). Studies have concluded that the lack of mentoring can have a negative impact on the career development of African Americans. Much of the mentoring that occurs in organizations tends to be on an informal basis and occurs between diverse groups within organization.

Cross-Cultural Mentoring

Mentoring across cultural boundaries is an especially delicate dance that juxtaposes group norms and societal pressures and expectations with individual personality characteristics. Why would you choose to traverse such tumultuous territory and how do you survive the journey? Cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-gender mentoring sometimes ignites irrational fears and speculations, precipitated by existing race and sex taboos (Bova, 2000; Day, 1974; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002, 2004). Thomas (1989) contends sex taboos between White males and African American females sometimes cause tension in this type of mentoring relationship. Nevertheless, African American women and other women can benefit from being mentored by White males. Kovel (1970) contends the historical tension between Whites and African Americans tends to impact the mentoring process across racial barriers.

Several studies have indicated that in the mentoring process, the relationship works to the advantage of those with similar backgrounds, values, and cultural beliefs (Bowers, 1984; Dreher & Cox 1996). Consequently, the relationship between a mentor and protégé works best when both share similar experiences and cultural background. The reality, however, is that White males are usually the power brokers and decision makers in organizations, and must therefore be trained on how to mentor across cultural, ethnic, and gender lines.

Trust—Essential to Cross-Cultural Mentoring

Certainly, the foundation of any successful mentoring relationship is trust. However, establishing trust in a cross-cultural mentoring relationship is a major issue in the development of such relationships, more so than in same-race mentoring relationships (Brinson & Kottler, 1993; Bowman et al., 1999; Thomas, 2001). On the surface the concept of trust as it applies to mentoring appears simplistic: it needs to be reciprocal in nature and it is a matter between the mentor and protégé (Brinson & Kottler, 1993; Bowman et al., 1999; Thomas, 2001). However, in cross-cultural mentoring, what should be a simple matter of negotiations between two persons

becomes arbitration between historical legacies, contemporary racial tensions and societal protocols. Cross-cultural mentoring relationships are affiliations that exist between unequals who are conducting their relationship on a hostile American stage with a societal script contrived to undermine the success of the partnership.

The historical legacy of relationships between black and white Americans is a two sided scenario of mistrust. Black Americans have endured hundreds of years of sufferings and abuse at the hands of white Americans who consistently espoused a mythical rhetoric of democracy and equality. Through hundreds of years of oppression blacks remained loyal citizens, fighting in every war, working peacefully in often menial jobs and waiting for the demise of Jim Crow so that they too could enjoy the American dream. If on any level blacks were frustrated, angry or unhappy about their station in America, they were most likely powerless to act because of the de facto sanctions that translated into socioeconomic disadvantages and legal impotence.

Although minorities may have legitimate power as a result of their official management functions, being on the periphery in organization, with little access to the inner sanctum, diminishes or marginalizes their referent power. From this perspective, minorities may not necessarily be effective mentors (Cox, 1993). Their ineffectiveness can stem not from being incapable or ineptness but rather from the structural and attitudinal barriers preventing them from being fully accepted into the inner sanctum of the organization (Cox, 1993). On the contrary, minorities can be excellent mentors when not limited by structural, attitudinal, or personal barriers.

When used ethically, and morally, mentoring can be effective and beneficial to the mentor, protégé, and the organization in general. The mentor can facilitate the type of learning and insight that will reap substantial benefits for the protégé.

Research Design

This paper combines the research and findings from two separate studies. In the sections that follow, a brief description of the two studies is provided along with the authors' attempt to provide a blueprint on how to facilitate cross-cultural mentoring relationships.

The Palmer Study

The first study, conducted by Palmer (2001), employed a qualitative research design consisting of ten African Americans who work in the areas of training and organizational development and who met the predetermined criteria: (1) The participants were African Americans and in fact self-identified as either African American or Black; (2) participants had a college education, some had completed graduate degrees; (3) participants are older than thirty years; (4) participants had more than five years experience in the field of training and organizational development; (5) participants have spent at least two years with their current employer; and (6) participants included both male and female. The interviews ranged between one and one half hours.

The Palmer's (2001) findings around mentoring center on the formal and informal mentoring experiences in the workplace. In addition, the issues of cross-cultural mentoring and cross-gender mentoring are examined by exploring the relationships of White male mentors and Black women protégée and by analyzing the Black male protégée and the White female mentor as the most typical mentoring relationships in the corporate setting.

The participants all agreed that mentoring positively impacted their career development and advancement. The participants agreed the mentor provides guidance, support, and

counseling for the professional development of junior level employees. They asserted that mentoring is an effective management tool that is beneficial to both the mentor and the protégé. Mentoring is the relationship between an experienced employee (mentor) and a lesser-experienced employee (protégé). While the participants acknowledged the mentor may or may not be employed by the same organization, they believed that if available internally, the mentor might be more advantageous to the development of their careers because of proximity and accessibility. Jeff's story supports this point:

> I think that if I had a person that we have now in charge of this division, who would have taken me under their wings, and provided some mentoring, I would definitely be in senior management at this stage of my career, probably at the vice-president level. But when I encountered people that could have mentored me, they were usually standoffish. They thought I was aggressive and was trying to get their job, when all I was doing was trying to do a good Job, and trying to advance my career. So if I had had a mentor to latch onto, it's just no telling how far along I could have been at this stage in my career.

The participants declared that mentoring helps the protégé by providing: inside information and access to the informal organization. They believe mentoring is one way of piercing through the proverbial glass ceiling. They repeatedly articulated the significance of having someone with insight and power sponsoring the careers of minorities. The mentor is needed from the early stage of one's career. Tracy believes that despite not having the desire to move into middle management, her career would have been further advanced if she had consistent mentoring:

> I had some very good managers. One in particular was L -------. She provided valuable insight on what I needed to do to get to the next level. She was a good coach who took the time to assist me when I needed the help. Had there been a formal mentoring program available throughout the company, I would have benefited from it.

Other participants also believed that if they had received consistent mentoring, their careers would have been further advanced. Jeff another participant is a thirty-seven year old African American male who has worked in the field of HROD for the past eleven years. Jeff works for a large Fortune 500 Company and is based in a large southeastern city. He is the Manager of Organizational Development (OD) for the division

The mentor understands the internal politics, fully knows the business, and has the power and political savvy to strategically position the protégé to achieve professional development. The mentor has the insight and experience to direct the protégé towards the appropriate position.

The Rosser-Mims Study

In the second study, Rosser-Mims (2005) explored African American women's leadership and career development experiences as they pursued a career in elective office in Georgia. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select nine African American female elected officials. These women, who ranged in age from 50 to 80, currently serve or have served in elective office at the local, state, and federal levels. The objective of this study was to uncover the underlying reasons why African American women do not pursue a career in politics. In merging these studies, Palmer and Rosser-Mims uncovered that mentoring was a fundamental factor in the career development of African Americans in both contexts. The study participants' mentoring stories support the need and value of cross-cultural mentoring.

Throughout the interviews in Rosser-Mims's (2005) study, what became very clear was that role models and mentors within family bounds and outside of the family shaped each of the nine women's career and leadership development. More specifically, it became evident that one or more Black female figures (i.e., mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and godmother) were critical in their lives. These women served as role models, oftentimes serving in leadership roles themselves. Conversely, as with role models in the family Rosser-Mims' study participants identified individuals outside of their families who served as mentors, role models and coaches during their tenure as elected officials. In some cases, participants identified having White and Black male mentors. In the following excerpt, former U.S. Congresswoman Denise Majette, shares an experience whereby she was mentored by a White male after passing the bar exam 22 years ago. She shares the following mentoring experience:

> *When I moved to Georgia 22 years ago come September, Keegan was the one who took a chance; I basically found out through his secretary that the decision came down to: does he pick the daughter of one of his old friends to be his law clerk or does he pick a Black woman who he hardly even knows?*

She goes on to explain that after passing the bar examination she made the decision to leave North Carolina to travel to Atlanta, Georgia, to interview for a position as a law clerk for then Superior Court Judge R. Keegan Federal, who now heads the law firm with which she is associated. Denise states:

> *So I was coming for this job interview and I'm thinking okay now, I didn't know who this man was. All I knew is that he was a superior court judge, DeKalb County superior court judge. But my thought was without knowing anything about him, I just knew that he was a superior court judge. I assumed he was White, and I knew he was male due to the name, that he was old and…that he [would be] this dyed in the wool southerner that probably wouldn't be trying to hire a Black girl from Brooklyn despite the fact that I had the credentials and all that stuff. Well, I was very wrong. I mean I came to the interview and saw that he was 40 years old and had been on the bench since he was 32. About nine months or so after he hired me, he announced that he was retiring.…[He] was this maverick, but he was the one who hired, he hired the first African American law clerk employee to work in the courthouse and I was the second…[He] was the kind of person who was willing to take risks. He identified me as being somebody who was smart and he was willing to take a chance on alienating his [long time] friend whose daughter had just gotten out of law school and needed a job. So he gave me an opportunity to do something like that which was out of the ordinary and risky, I guess potentially for him. I proved that I was able to do the job and do it well. He has been my friend and mentor for the last 20 years.*

Overall, the narratives shared by the women in this study illustrate how mentors outside of race boundaries have contributed to the direction in which Black women travel during their journey to become leaders in the political arena.

Implications for Mentoring and Learning in Cross-Cultural Contexts

What are the implications that can be drawn from our examination of cross-cultural mentoring? There are two major areas that encapsulate our discussion: the impact and significance of mentoring at the organizational and individual levels. Most of the literature examines the individual dynamics of mentoring—issues concerning trust, risk and matters of interpersonal styles. Overall, the literature effectively analyzes the various factors that influence the psychosocial and developmental components of mentoring. In summation, it is clear that mentoring benefits both parties. The protégé gains access to an experienced and expert guide. Studies report that faculty who are mentored achieve more job success, report higher salaries and have greater career mobility (Murrell & Tangri, 1999; Smith et al., 2000).In exchange for their services, which significantly benefit the protégé, the mentor receives career enhancement, recognition and personal satisfaction (Smith et al., 2000; Dedrick & Watson, 2002). Indeed, both persons involved in the mentoring equation grow from being exposed to another culture and the challenge of stepping outside of their comfort zone.

Recommendations

Both studies conclude that the lack of formal mentoring emerged as a career-defying barrier. This was probably the single issue on which there was complete agreement by the respondents in both the Palmer's (2001) and Rosser-Mims's (2005) studies. Furthermore, both studies revealed that all of the participants believed their careers could have been further advanced if they had received the appropriate guidance through an organizationally sponsored mentoring program. Mentoring is typically defined as a relationship between an experienced and a less experienced person in which the mentor provides guidance, advice, support, and feedback to the protégé. Hence, the significance of mentoring in the career development process as outlined by Bierema (1996), Kram (1985), and Thomas (2001), emerged as a factor that could have tremendous impact on the professional development of the participants if they had been exposed to formal mentoring in their respective organizations.

A comprehensive career succession program must include mentoring as an integral part of the program. The authors have proposed developing a comprehensive training program that would prepare individuals involved in cross-cultural mentoring. While much of the cross-cultural mentoring that occurs in organizations tends to be on an informal basis, the model being developed by the authors aimed at a comprehensive training.

While much has been written about the benefits and challenges of cross-cultural mentoring, there is very little guidance on how to develop and facilitate such mentoring relationships. We could not find a model that facilitates cross-cultural mentoring. Thus the authors have embarked upon developing a model for cross-cultural mentoring. This model is in the developmental stage and will be refined through ongoing research by the authors.
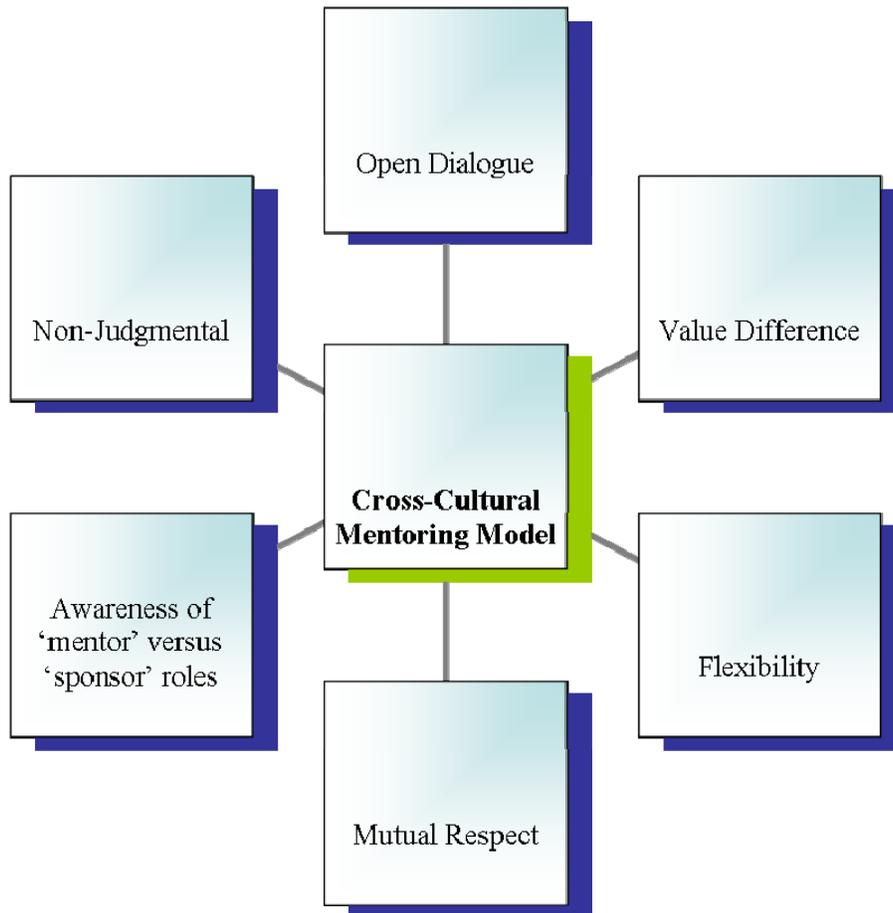
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