Benefits of formal mentoring for female leaders

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Abstract

In this study we examined mentor function and communication in relation to potential benefits for female protégés. Data were collected from 36 female leaders (10 with a female mentor and 26 with a male mentor) enrolled in a formal mentor program. A self-reported questionnaire measuring mentoring function (e.g. coaching behavior and counseling behavior), communication skills (e.g. listening quality and communication structure) and relationship similarity was sent to the participants after the formal mentor program ended. The participants reported that the mentor relationship increased their job satisfaction, career planning and perceived leader behavior. No significant differences between protégés with a male mentor and protégés with a female mentor, or between perceived similarities on the measured variables, were detected. The findings also demonstrate the importance of coaching behaviors on perceived leader performance.

Keywords: mentoring, female leader, job satisfaction, career planning

Introduction

The lack of females in senior executive positions and in board positions is a common phenomenon in Western cultures (Colbjørnsen, Drake, & Haukedal, 2001; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007). The absence of females in these roles has been related to cultural and contextual factors such as lack of informal networks, support, role models and homo-social reproductions (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2007; Jadenska & Kraimer, 2005; Tharenou, 2005) as well as specific female barriers such as the Glass Ceiling Effect (Arulampalam, Booth, & Bryan, 2005; Colbjørnsen, Drake, & Haukedal, 2001). Mentoring may be one suitable approach to overcoming gender related barriers and fostering the career advancement of female leaders. Mentoring relationships have been recognized as one organizational tool for increasing leader performance and career advancement (Dougherty & Dreher, 2007). Moreover, it has been reported that those who are mentored often report higher salaries, greater awareness of their organizations and a higher rating of employment and life satisfaction than those who are not mentored (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Chappell & Ringer, 1994; Koberg, Boss, Chappell, & Ringer, 1994; Scandura, 1992).

Whether the mentoring should be based upon a formal program or informal relationship is still an open question, but it has been documented that females with formal mentors are less satisfied with their mentoring programs than are their male counterparts (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). One explanation for this may be due to a lack of in-depth understanding of the mentoring process and relationship when working with female protégées. If we look at mentoring as a structural conversation process, and the fact that the role of the mentor is to guide the protégée through the process, then communication skills and knowledge about how to organize the process are significant factors in producing an optimal outcome (Høigaard, Jørgensen, & Mathisen, 2001; Mathisen, 2008; Mathisen &

Høigaard, 2004). Research in mentoring, counseling and coaching (Egan, 2002; Grøtz & Prehn, 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007) has indicated that working effectively with individuals in order to enable self-reflection, learning, and development requires specific attitudes (e.g. empathy, openness) and skills (e.g. active listening, questioning, contextual awareness and understanding). The purpose of this study was to expand our understanding of mentoring relationships and communication skills and their benefits to female leaders.

Method

Participants

Thirty-six female leaders (mean age = 41.7 years, SD = 6.1 years), who were enrolled in a formal female mentoring project, were invited to take part in this study as protégées. All the leaders (N=36) in the mentoring program participated in this study.

Leader experience for the protégées was 8. 8 years (SD=4.8 years) and all the participants were in middle management positions. Thirty-six mentors (10 female and 26 male) with a mean age of 51 years. (SD = 6.4 years.) participated. The mentors' leadership experience was 17.4 years (SD= 7.3 years.) and the experience as mentor ranged from 0 to 20 years, mean years. 2.7, (SD=4.0 years). Ten protégées had a female mentor and twenty-six had a male mentor. The protégées had between five and seven one-to-one mentor conversations with their mentor over a period of 12 months.

Design and methodology

Before the mentoring process started, all mentors were enrolled in a 25-hour mentoring skills program focusing on communication, mentor strategies and functions. The course was based on university module in guidance and mentoring, but was adapted for the purpose of this mentoring program.

A web-based questionnaire was used to obtain the data, and the data was collected immediately after the formal program ended. All participants were informed about the purpose of the project. They were told that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical clearance was provided according to the standards of the University of Agder.

Measures

1. Mentor functions and communication

Coaching and counseling. Eight elements from Noe's (1988) mentoring functions scale were used to assess the mentors' coaching and counseling behaviors. *Coaching behavior* is related to task-specific and career concerns. *Counseling behavior* is related to personal and emotional-related issues. A sample item regarding coaching behavior was: 'Mentor suggested specific strategies for achieving your career goals', and 'Mentor gave you feedback regarding your performance in your present job'. A sample item for counseling was: 'The mentor has encouraged the protégé to talk openly about anxiety and fears that detract from his/her work', and 'The mentor conveys empathy for the concerns and feelings the protégée has discussed with him/her'. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated that the participants perceived greater coaching and counseling behavior. The α for coaching was .82, and counseling .91.

Listening and communication structure. In order to assess the mentors' active listening and question skills and their ability to organize and structure the mentor conversation deliberately, a 6-point questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study. The items were derived from Mathisen and Høigaard (2004), and sample items for active listening and questioning were: 'My mentor has demonstrated good listening skills in our conversations' and 'My mentor is skilful at posing questions which encourage me to answer freely'. A sample item for communication structure was: 'My mentor creates structure and progression during our conversations' and 'My mentor has a unique ability to arrange various topics in their order of importance during our conversations'. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated increased quality of listening and in organizing and structuring the conversations. The α was .82 and .88 respectively.

2. Relationship

Similarity Using 7-point scales, the participants indicated how they perceived their mentoring partners to be similar to themselves. Items were derived from the measure adopted by Burk, McKeen, & McKenna (1993), and concerned intelligence, personality, ambition, approach to work, social attributes and communication skills. Higher scores indicated higher perceived similarity. The internal consistency estimate for this scale was .83.

3. Mentoring outcomes

Perceived leader performance. A 7-point perceived leader performance scale was developed specifically for this study to assess how the participants perceived consequences in their leadership behavior. One example is the following: 'Mentoring has made me more capable of decision-making' and 'Mentoring has improved my ability to motivate co-workers'. Participants rated each item on a seven- point Likert-type scale ranging form 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated that the participants perceived that the mentoring process had been beneficial for their leadership performance. The α of this scale in this study was .96.

Job satisfaction. A 4-point scale was developed for the purpose of this study in order to investigate the influence of mentoring on the participants' position. A sample item was 'Mentoring has contributed to increased enjoyment in my role as leader' and 'Mentoring has helped me to think that I have a job that is exciting and challenging'. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated that the mentoring process had increased their job satisfaction. The coefficient alpha was .82 for these items.

Career planning. Based on Gould (1979), a measure was developed to assess the extent to which mentoring has contributed to career planning development as well as a plan or strategy for achieving the person's career goals. A sample item was 'Mentoring has resulted in my being able to clarify my career objectives' and 'Mentoring has helped me to develop a strategy for achieving my career goals'. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging form 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated that the participants had developed and engaged in a higher degree of career planning. The α of this scale in the present study was .95.

Results

Means, standard deviation and correlation between all variables are reported in Table 1. As shown, a positive relationship between all mentor functions and communication variables on the mentoring

outcome variables emerged. No relationship was detected between the relationship variable similarity and the mentoring outcome variables.

No significant differences among the selected variables emerged when comparing protégées with a male mentor and protégées with a female mentor. Multiple regression analyses were computed for each of the three independent variables: perceived job performance, job satisfaction and career planning (Table 2). The analysis showed that the mentoring functions, communication variables and the relationship variable accounted for 55 %, 41%, and 59 % respectively. Only coaching was a significant positive predictor on the dependent variable perceived leadership behavior ($\beta = .54$).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics (number of participants, means, standard deviations) and zero-order correlation for all main variables

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Mentor functions and communication											
1. Counseling	35	4.85	1.65		.49**	.45**	.38*	.08	.43*	.48**	.44**
2. Coaching	35	5.05	1.25			.56**	.71**	.32	.69**	.54**	.69**
3. Listening	35	5.78	1.00				.66**	.37*	.61**	.57*	.59**
4. Structure	35	5.26	1.20					.34*	.59**	.42*	.70**
Relationship											
5. Similarity	35	4.80	.97						.23	.17	.25
Mentoring outcomes											
6. Perceived leadership performance	34	4.11	1.37							.84**	.61**
7. Job satisfaction	33	3.71	1.68								.57**
8. Career planning	35	3.75	1.59								

p<.05. **<.01.

Table 2
Results of multiple regression analyses

	Perceived leadership performance	Job satisfaction	Career planning
	B	β	β
Mentor functions and communication			
Counseling	-.01	.09	.07
Coaching	.54*	.38	.34
Listening	-38	.42	.16
Structure	.00	-.16	.34
Relationship			
Similarity	-.05	-.05	-04
R^2	.55	.41	.59
F	6.87**	3.83*	8.23**

*p<.05. **<.01. ***<.001.

Discussion

This study attempted to replicate and expand upon previous research (Dougherty & Dreher, 2007; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007; Noe 1988) by including mentoring functions as well as the use and quality of mentors' communication. The quality of communication and mentor function appear to play an important role for all measured outcome variables. The quality of communication underlines the fact (which is well documented) that communication is vital in `helping' relationships (Egan, 2002; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Protégées reporting more mentor functions were also more satisfied with their position and career planning as well as their own leadership performance. Moreover, the regression analyses performed in this study indicated that the only significantly different contribution was the coaching function on perceived leader behavior. This result paralleled previous research findings that have documented a positive relationship between coaching and performance (Druckman & Bjork, 1991; Olivero, Bane & Kopelman, 1997). Increased perceived leadership performance may also be interpreted as increased leadership efficacy. Leadership efficacy is: " a person's judgment that he or she can successfully exert leadership by setting a direction for the work group, building relationships with followers in order to gain their commitment to change goals, and working with them to overcome obstacles to change." (Paglis & Green, 2002, p. 217). Both theory and research have pointed out several positive consequences of self- and role-efficacy e.g. motivation, effort, persistence and thought patterns (Bandura, 1977; Marcus, Eaton, Rossi, & Harlow, 1994). This may indicate that an effective mentoring process may positively influence leader efficacy and, in turn, leader behavior.

The results detected no significant differences between protégées with male mentors and protégées with female mentors, or between perceived similarities on the measured variables. The lack of gender differences on the measured variables is partly in line with Burk, Burgess and Fallon (2006). In their study, female protégées with female mentors reported greater role modeling and more psychological functions, however there was no such difference in relation to work and career outcomes, or in relation to psychological well-being. Moreover, Ragins and Cotton (1999) reported in same-gender mentor relationships, protégées reported receiving more challenging assignments from their mentors when the mentor was formally assigned. Furthermore, they suggest that same-gender mentor relationships should be used in formal mentoring programs that are aimed at developing the protégée's job performance. Similarities in personality, values and attitudes between mentor and protégée are often used as matching criteria because of a perception that they have an impact on the mentoring relationship and the outcome (Burk et. al, 1993; Ensher & Murfy, 1997). According to the results in this study, however, no such relationship and outcome effect was detected.

In all, the present study indicated that mentoring has several positive benefits for protégées. In addition, it seems that the mentors' ability to be a good communicator is particularly important for female protégées. Moreover, the coaching variables in which the focus is on task- specific and career concerns seem to have a unique impact on the participants' leadership behavior. The lack of gender differences on measured variables may be related to the fact that the mentors have been trained in mentoring and communication, which may in turn override the gender effect. From an applied perspective, a program designed to increase the mentors' skills seems to be a vital factor in creating effective mentoring.

Limitations

A few limitations on the research should be noted to set the findings in a wider context. First, the sample size was relatively small. Second, a self-reported questionnaire was the sole source

of information regarding the protégées' leadership performance. The use of additional information concerning their co-workers or employee experience with their leader would strengthen the validity of the study. Third, with regard to career planning, while the respondents appear satisfied, there is still the question as to whether or not the protégées will take the next step in order to fulfill their plans.

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Formal mentoring programs help organizations retain employees, increase job satisfaction and commitment, and cultivate organizational citizenship behavior. In this course, management professor and mentoring expert Ellen Ensher outlines five critical elements of a formal mentoring program, and explains how to establish a program in your own organization. She covers designing a framework and a needs assessment for your mentoring program, creating a mentoring culture, choosing participants, and providing training and ongoing support for participants. To wrap up, she shares ways to evaluate your p Data were collected from 36 female leaders (10 with a female mentor and 26 with a male mentor) enrolled in a formal mentor program. A self-reported questionnaire measuring mentoring function (e.g. coaching behavior and counseling behavior), communication skills (e.g. listening quality and communication structure) and relationship similarity was sent to the participants after the formal mentor program ended. Â The purpose of this study was to expand our understanding of mentoring relationships and communication skills and their benefits to female leaders. Method Participants Thirty-six female leaders (mean age = 41.7 years, SD = 6.1 years), who were enrolled in a formal female mentoring project, were invited to take part in this study as protÃ©gÃ©es. Unlike formal mentoring, informal mentoring has minimal to no structure and oversight and may or may not have a clear and specific goal. Â Benefits of Mentoring for the ProtÃ©gÃ©. As a result of having a mentor, the employee: â€¢ Makes a smoother transition into the workforce; â€¢ Furthers his/her development as a professional; â€¢ Gains the capacity to translate values and strategies into productive actions; â€¢ Complements ongoing formal study and/or training and development activities; â€¢ Gains some career development opportunities; â€¢ Develops new and/or different perspectives; â€¢ Gets assistance with ideas; â€¢ Demonstrates strengths and explores. Â After senior leaders are able to define a successful mentoring program, present them