PLAYFUL COMMUNICATION IN MENTORING

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Freshmen in an orientation course at a state university answered questionnaires about their peer mentors' playful communication and about how well their peer mentors help them ease tensions of socialization. Results showed that a mentor's perceived playful communication helped the protégé ease tensions of socialization. Protégés liked mentors who engaged in playful communication, but regression results suggest that it was protégés' perceptions of the mentors' playful communication that helped protégés adapt to the organization and not the protégés' perceptions of their mentors' attitudes.

Playful communication is a non-serious type of informal communication that includes humor, telling stories, teasing, and gossiping. People in organizations engage in playful communication primarily for enjoyment. Some studies have examined humor in organizations (Yarwood, 1995), but other forms of playful communication have not been studied, including how playful communication works in the mentoring process. The authors of the present study propose that playful communication leads to effective mentoring because these forms of communication help the protégé ease tensions of socialization into an organization. Young and Cates (in press) found that both emotional and directive listening by the mentor as perceived by the protégé helps the protégé's socialization into the organization. Playful communication may also help the protégé's socialization into the organiza-tion. Specifically, the protégé balances tensions associated with the dual processes of assimilation into an organization (Miller, 1995). These tensions are similar to the primary dialectic of interpersonal relationships (Baxter, 1988; Baxter, 1990). Primarily, protégés want to feel connected to the organization. With this connectivity comes a sense of belonging and conforming to the organization. At the same time, protégés want to feel free to express their individuality. We propose that through playful communication with their protégés, mentors help them to feel both a sense of connectivity and individuality, ease their tensions of socialization, and thus help them adapt to the organization.

Review of Literature

Many organizations have developed mentoring programs as means of foster-

ing learning and development of new members (Allen & Poteet, 1999). Several studies have found that mentoring positively correlated with protégé satisfaction and success in a variety of organizations (Baker, Hocevar, & Johnson, 2003; Campbell & Campbell, 2000; Galbraith, 2001; Kram, 1985). For example, Baker et al. (2003) found that midshipmen in the United States Naval Academy who were mentored were significantly more satisfied than midshipmen who were not mentored. Similarly, mentoring programs in education have been linked to success and satisfaction of teachers (Clifford, 1999; Strong & Baron, 2004) and students (Campbell & Campbell, 2000; Erdem & Özen, 2003; Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002; Van Gyn & Ricks, 1997). Additional evidence suggests that mentoring may increase retention of nurses (Green & Puetzer, 2002; Hurst & Koplin-Baucum, 2003) and college students (Hurte, 2002; Lee & Bush, 2003; Pidcock, Fischer, & Munsch, 2001).

Playful communication between mentor and protégé should be a key factor in effective mentoring because playful communication helps people deal with paradoxes inherit in organizations, is a component of healthy relationships, and is an important communication skill.

Playful communication, especially humor, is well suited for dealing with paradoxes and ambiguity that occur in organizations. For example, humor and other forms of playful communication are ways that people in organizations can deal with the primary dialectic between autonomy and dependence (Baxter, 1988). Boland and Hoffman (1983, p. 188) explain that humor "provides an ambiguity in resolving the questions of individual freedom and self-determination such that the individual both is and is not free, both is and is not self determined, but continues to act" (cf. Yarwood, 1995, p. 5-6).

Scholars, (e.g., Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1993; Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993; Kram, 1985) agree that communication skills play a key role in effective mentoring. A competent mentor has a large repertoire of skills and knows how and when to use these skills (Kram, 1985). Most scholars of interpersonal communication concur that flexibility is perhaps the most important element of communication competence (Fisher & Adams, 1994; Weimann, 1977). Communication competence helps mentors and protégés build positive relationships (Burke et al, 1993). Effective mentoring usually develops from a positive healthy relationship between mentors and protégés.

Playful communication has been found to be crucial to the development and maintenance of positive personal relationships (Baxter, 1992; Betcher, 1981; Glenn & Knapp, 1987). Baxter (1992) noted that scholars have suggested that play performs several functions in close relationships including: promoting intimacy and togetherness, moderating tension, introducing a safe strategy for discussing emotionally risky topics, serving as an outlet for creative expression, and enhancing meaningful communication. An axiom of interpersonal communication is that "couples that play together, stay together." Further, Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992) demonstrated a tie between humor and communication competence.

Competent professional or work relationships are also marked by a sense of play. Newstrom (2002) argues the underlying features of play give energy to individuals at work. Conversely, the lack of play can be an indication of incompetent or unhealthy relationships. Mentors and protégés can use play to keep their relationship positive but not uncomfortably close (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993); to help each other relax in stressful situations; to demonstrate mastery of difficult tasks; to manage conflict; to ease the monotony of work (Roy, 1973); to inform each other about the values, networks, and chain of command within the organization; to discuss difficult or sensitive topics; to reduce the risks involved in entry into in-groups (Meyer, 1996); and to informally initiate a mentoring program (Meyer, 1996). The versatility of playful communication is reflected in many forms including humor, gossiping, physical play, teasing, role-playing, and games (Baxter, 1992).

There is some evidence that informal peer mentoring may work better than more formal programs. Raabe (2003) concluded that mentoring functions were best served by coworkers and supervisors rather than assigned formal mentors who were at least two hierarchal levels above the protégé. These formal mentoring relationships were not related to protégé job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

A frequently overlooked attribute of communication competence is a good sense of humor. Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield (1995) found that individuals with a good sense of humor ("humor orientation") were more compe-tent communicators, more adaptable, elicited more positive impressions, and had a better understanding of how emotions guide behavior. Individuals with a good sense of humor and play are well suited for mentoring in dyads.

According to Yarwood (1995), humor is an informal activity, largely unrecognized by managers, but with the potential to create a supportive atmosphere in organizations because humor is "intrinsically enjoyable." Furthermore, joking contributes to the preserving of social structures by revealing and maintaining social distance. Conversely, some communication that is at times perceived as negative can also serve as play. Alberts (1992) suggested that teasing is typically or potentially a negative statement, but is framed as play. Later, Alberts with Kellar-Guenther argued that the recipient decides whether or not the teasing is negative based on the attribution of intent to the one teasing (1996).

Decker and Rotondo (2001) in studied leadership, gender, and humor, and suggested, "Positive humor seems to be a useful managerial tool for both genders." They argue men use humor more than women do, but women benefit more "in terms of perceptions of desirable leader behavior and leader effectiveness when using positive humor." Finally, they conclude all managers, but especially female managers may enhance their effectiveness by using humor with subordinates. Fox and Amichai-Hamburger (2001) argue that appropriate humor makes organizational change easier for managers and subordinates.It follows that playful communication would make it easier for the protégé to

adapt to the organization.

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between protégés' perceptions of mentors' playful communication and protégés' perceptions of their mentors' ability to help them ease tensions of socialization.

H2: There will be significant positive relationships between the protégé's level of liking the mentor and each of the following variables:

A. Protégés' perceptions of their mentors' ability to help them ease tensions of socialization.

B. Protégés' perceptions of their mentors' playful communication.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

During the last week of the semester, questionnaires were distributed to instructors of a university orientation course for first semester freshmen in a state university in the southern United States. Most of the students in this orientation class were between the ages of 18 to 20. Each student in this orientation course is assigned a peer mentor by an office of the university charged with providing new students with orientation and instructional support. The peer mentor is an upperclassman that helps the protégé become better acquainted with the university. There were 25 students in each of the eleven sections of orientation classes making a target population of 275 protégés. Each section was assigned a peer mentor. Three instructors failed to distribute the questionnaires. Eight instructors of these sections distributed questionnaires to their students, and 183 (79 males, 104 females) of these 200 questionnaires were returned. These protégés reported having 153 female and 28 male mentors with two missing responses.

Peer mentors posted their office hours (10 hours a week) and were required to be available to meet with protégés during these times. Protégés could voluntarily visit with their mentors during these times. Frequencies of response to the question about how often protégés talked with their mentor were as follows: everyday = 25 (13.7%), two or three times a week = 46 (25.1%), once a week = 19 (10.4%), three or four times during the semester = 50 (27.7%), once or twice during the semester = 43 (23.5%).

Measures

A total of 28 seven-point Likert type items were used to measure protégés' perceptions of outcomes and mentors' playful communication. Thirteen of these items were concerned with outcome—that is how well protégés perceived their mentors as helping them balance tensions of socialization into an organization. Fifteen items addressed the protégés' perception of mentors' playful communication.

A principal component factor analysis was conducted on the thirteen outcome items. These items addressed how the protégés perceived their mentors as encouraging them to feel a sense of autonomy, personal identity, and experimentation; as well as a

sense of belonging, conformity, and dependability. Results of this factor analysis yielded a two-factor solution with eleven items loading on one factor and two items loading onto a second factor. Since these two items ("I have a different outlook on life than my mentor." and "My mentor pressures me to conform to the rules.") were not strongly correlated with each other ($r = .24$; $\alpha = .39$), these were eliminated, and a second factor analysis was conducted on the remaining eleven items. This second factor analysis yielded a one-factor solution, and the eleven items formed an outcome measure with high reliability ($\alpha = .93$). Each of the eleven items along with their factor loadings on the one balancing tensions component is listed below.

1. My mentor has encouraged me to be myself. (.885)
2. My mentor has stressed the importance of being dependable. (.848)
3. My mentor has encouraged me to talk openly about my fears and anxieties about being a student. (.790)
4. When my mentor is around I feel free to express my thoughts and feelings. (.778)
5. My mentor has encouraged me to experiment with different areas of study. (.771)
6. My mentor makes me feel like I belong in this University. (.768)
7. My mentor has treated me like I belong in this University. (.760)
8. My mentor has conveyed feelings of respect for me as an individual. (.760)
9. My mentor has encouraged me to do more than study by taking on additional responsibilities. (.725)
10. My mentor has reduced my feelings of uncertainty about succeeding in this University. (.666)
11. My mentor helps me realize that being a student means a great deal to my personal identity. (.663)

The playful communication items included questions about the mentor's use of different types of playful communication and were adapted from Norton's (1983) dramatic style measure. A principal component factor analysis on the fifteen playful communication responses yielded a two-component solution with twelve items dealing with different types of playful communication (telling jokes and stories, teasing, having fun together, sharing gossip) and three items loaded on the second component dealing with protégé's perception of their mentors not being overly serious and sensitive. The twelve playful communication items and the three "not being too serious" items are listed below with their respective first and second component factor loadings. The twelve-item "playful" communication measure yielded a high amount of reliability ($\alpha = .93$). The three item "not too serious" measure also yielded an acceptable level of reliability with an $\alpha = .87$.

Playful communication items: (* = absolute value < .10)

1. My mentor tells good jokes. .715/ -.230
2. My mentor tells good stories. .792/ -.159
3. My mentor is someone I can easily have fun with. .838/ *
4. My mentor knows how to tease me with-

out hurting my feelings. .795/ *

5. My mentor has a good sense of humor. .866/ *

6. My mentor treats me as an equal. 802/ *

7. My mentor knows how to take a joke. .831/ .110

8. I feel free to tease my mentor because I know he/she won't take it personally. .692/ *

9. My mentor laughs at my jokes. .782/ -.230

10. My mentor and I share humorous stories and experiences. .680/ .389

11. My mentor and I talk about gossip. .405/ -.619

12. My mentor is very humorous. .825/ .202.

"Not too serious" items:

1. My mentor is too sensitive about getting teased. .468/ .721

2. My mentor is someone that I just do not want to joke around with. .529/ .663

3. My mentor takes life too seriously. .511/ .769

For each of the measures (outcome, playful communication, and "not too serious") scores on the items were totaled, and then averaged, so that scores for each of these measures were on a seven-point scale. The questionnaire also included a single item measure about the protégé's level of liking for his/her mentor. This liking question was a five-point scale. The scale and frequency of responses were as follows: (1) disliked very much = 0, (2) disliked = 0, (3) neutral = 21, (4) liked = 68, (5) liked very much = 91.

Construct Validity of Listening and Outcome Measures

One test of construct validity is the "known groups method" (Stewart, 2002). This method compares scores on a measure with an expected high-level group to an expected low-level group. Women have been found to be better than men at easing tensions and using humor effectively; therefore, we would expect that female mentors would score higher than male mentors on all three measures of outcome, playful communication, and "not too serious" (Barker and Watson, 2000; Decker and Rotondo, 2001; and, Hatcher and Nadeau, 1994). To test this position one-way ANOVAs were conducted for men and women on all three measures. Results from these ANOVAs demonstrate the construct validity of these measures: Playful communication results were $F(1,176) = 28.85$, $p < .000$ with women's $M = 5.4$ $(n = 150)$ and men's $M = 4.3$ $(n = 28)$. "Not too serious" results were $F(1,177)$ 6.75, $p < .01$ with women's $M = 5.4$ $(n = 151)$ and men's $M = 4.6$ $(n = 28)$. Outcome (easing tensions) results also showed significance $F(1,174)$, $p < .002$ with the women's $M = 5.8$ $(n = 148)$ and the men's $M = 5.3$ $(n = 28)$. In addition, one-way ANOVA results revealed that protégés liked their women mentors $(M = 4.5, n = 151)$ better than their men mentors $(M = 3.8, n = 28)$ $(F(1,177) = 29.16, p < .000.)$

Data Treatment

A hierarchical regression will be used to test Hypotheses 1 and 2a. The dependent variable in this regression will be the outcome measure of the protégé's perception of the mentor's helping them to reduce ten-

sions of socialization. As control variables, the sex of the mentor, and reported frequency of protégé-mentor interaction will be entered into the first block of this regression. In the second block of this regression the protégé's perception of the mentor's playful communication, non-serious attitude, and liking for their mentors will be entered.

A hierarchical regression will be used to test Hypothesis 2b with playful communication as the dependent variable. The control variables will be entered into the first block and then protégé's liking of their mentors will be entered into the second block.

Results

Results from the hierarchical regression analysis support Hypothesis 1 by revealing that protégé's perception of their mentor's playful communication was a significant and strong predictor of outcome, the protégé's perception of the mentor's helping them reduce tensions of socialization ($t = 9.41$, $p < .000$, $\beta = .607$, $r_{sp}^2 = .491$, $N = 172$. These regression results also support hypothesis 2a showing that protégé's liking of the mentor was a significant predictor of outcome ($t = 3.33$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .22$, $r_{sp}^2 = .174$, $N=172$). The protégé's perception of the mentors having a "not too serious of an attitude," however did not make a significant contribution to the regression. In the first block of the regression the control variable of sex was not significant ($t = 1.52$, $p < .129$, $N=172$), but frequency of interaction was significant ($t = 4.25$, $p < .000$, $N = 172$). The overall model was very significant ($F(4,167)$ 50.1, $p < .000$, $N= 172$) and

explained 53.5% of the variance for outcome (Adj $R^2 = .535$).

Results from regression analyses support hypothesis 2B. There was a strong, significant relationship between liking and playful communication ($t = 5.8$, $p < .000$, $\beta = .417$, $r_{sp}^2 = .359$, $N = 176$). In the final model the sex of the mentor made a significant contribution to perceived playful communication ($t= 2.27$, $p< .003$, $\beta = .202$, $r_{sp}^2 = .183$, $N = 176$), but frequency of interaction did not make a significant contribution ($t = 1.57$, $p < .117$). The overall regression model was significant ($F(3,172) = 30.68$, $p < .001$, $N=176$) and explained 33.7% of the variance (Adj $R^2 = .337$).

Discussion

Results from the regressions support all the hypotheses and demonstrate the importance of protégé's perceptions of the mentor's playful communication and liking of the mentor for effective mentoring. The protégé's perception of a mentor's playful communication helps the protégé ease his or hers tensions of socialization into an organization. Additionally, the protégé liking of the mentor helps protégé's ease tensions of socialization. Furthermore, results suggest that mentor's perceived playful communication is a part of a liking relationship between the mentor and protégé. Results, however, indicate that it is the protégé's perception of the mentor's playful behaviors (e.g., telling jokes, telling stories, having a good sense of humor) that facilitates the protégé's assimilation into the organization and not the perception of the mentor's attitude. Playful communication and liking work together to help the protégé feel both a

sense of individuality and connectivity to the organization.

The effectiveness of playful communication is underscored by research showing that humor facilitates a person's healthy participation in an organization. Researchers (Giacobbi, Lynn, Wetherington, Bodendorf, and Langley, 2004) found that humor helps college athletes manage stress, and they recommend that sports psychologists use humor with students. Likewise, Boyle and Reid (2004) found a correlation between students' sense of humor and emotional wellness. Other research has linked supervisor's sense of humor to subordinate's job satisfaction (Decker, 1987).

Previous studies have found that other forms of informal relational communication, such as empathy (Cobb, 2000) and emotional listening (Young & Cates, in press) lead to effective mentoring. Findings from the present study fit well with results from these previous studies suggesting that an ideal mentor is one who engages the protégé in a positive, liking relationship that includes empathic listening and playful communication. Peer mentoring programs that train and encourage mentors to develop this type of positive relationship should boost student retention.

Conclusions concerning the importance of the protégé's perceptions of the mentors listening and playful communication are limited to peer mentoring and may be constrained by characteristics of the population of this study. It may be that for freshmen in college (ages 18-22) these forms of communication may be more salient than for older protégés. Results may be most applicable to women protégés who have women mentors since most of the protégés were women (104 out of 183) and most of the mentors were women (153 out of 183). Further research should investigate listening and playful communication between mentor and protégé for different academic settings and populations.

This study represents only one prong of research of playful communication and mentoring: that is the perceptions of the protégé. To triangulate the results future research could examine playful communication by observing the interaction between mentor and protégé. Additionally, future research should compare mentor's and protégé's perceptions. The results of this study underscore the critical importance of playful communication and provide insight into how playful communication helps protégés reduce tensions of socialization.

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