Enhancing Learning for Participants in Workplace Mentoring Programmes

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Abstract

This study examined learning for matched pairs of mentors and protégés who participated in a formal workplace mentoring program in the United States. The use of matched pairs enabled the analysis of how affective trust, perceived organizational support, and mentoring received were related to the learning by both the protégés and the mentors. Protégé learning was positively related to protégé affective trust and the amount of mentoring received by the protégé. Mentor learning was positively related to mentor affective trust and protégé perceived organizational support. Recommendations are offered to enhance the learning for participants in workplace mentoring programs.

Keywords: affective trust, perceived organizational support, formal mentoring programs, mentoring learning, mentoring received

Introduction

In our rapidly changing and highly competitive business environment, employee knowledge and skills can become easily outdated and need to be continuously refreshed (Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro, & Morciano, 2015). Ongoing learning enables employees to adapt to a changing work environment and improves employee performance, which leads to improved organizational performance (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). Although formal training programs can be an important means to provide ongoing learning, budget constraints, workload demands, and a dispersed workforce may limit the use of such training (Noe, Clarke, & Klein, 2014). This is one reason that organizations have turned to formal mentoring programs (Kram & Ragins, 2007). Mentoring programs can encourage learning (Allen, Smith, & Gavan, 2009; Jones, 2012) and are a critical method to transfer tacit knowledge. Importantly, both protégés and mentors can learn from participation in formal mentoring programs (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Jones, 2013). This makes mentoring an effective method of workplace learning and an important human resource development program.

Despite the importance of mentoring for employee learning, our understanding about how mentoring facilitates learning is limited, and there has been a call to examine how mentoring facilitates learning not only for protégés but also for mentors (Noe et al., 2014; Turban, Moake, Wu, & Cheung, 2017). The aim of this research is to help address this gap by examining factors that may enhance learning for both protégés and mentors. The research examined the relationship of affective trust and perceived organizational support with learning by both protégés and mentors who participated in a formal workplace mentoring program. Affective trust refers to trust based on the personal bond and sharing of positive affect between two people (Webber, 2008). Affective trust was examined in this study because it allows for a more confident relationship in which to develop knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Perceived organizational support is the extent to which employees believe that employers value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986).

When employees receive recognition and support from their employer, they try to reciprocate this support with actions that support the organization (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). Perceived organizational support was examined because employees supported by their employer may reciprocate this support by promoting learning in mentoring relationships.

This study examined learning for matched pairs of mentors from a mentoring programme of a leading healthcare company. Because matched pairs were utilized, the study was able to investigate the impact of the variables on both protégé and mentor learning. Specifically, the study was able to investigate how the affective trust and perceived organizational support of the mentor was related to learning by both the protégé and the mentor. Likewise, the study examined how the affective trust and perceived organizational support of the protégé was related to learning by both the protégé and the mentor in the mentoring relationship.

The paper begins with a literature review that provides a rationale for the hypotheses examined in the study. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology employed and a presentation of results. Finally, there is a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications, including limitations and future directions for research.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Affective trust and learning from a mentoring relationship

Affective trust is trust based on personal bonds and positive affect between two people (Webber, 2008) and is grounded in the belief that the partner cares about an individual and his or her welfare and will act positively toward that individual (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Affective trust develops over time based on socioemotional exchanges between individuals (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). This trust can encourage mentors or protégés to learn while in a mentoring relationship because it encourages higher levels of cooperation in the relationship (Bouquillon, Sosik, & Lee, 2005). When in a trusting relationship, an individual is more willing to exchange information and knowledge (Chowdhury, 2005). Trust encourages sharing and the willingness to express new ideas without being ridiculed (Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2014), and research indicates that affective trust has a positive relationship with the sharing of interpersonal knowledge (Swift & Hwang, 2013). Because affective trust encourages knowledge sharing and the expression of new ideas, it is posited that:

> H1: Mentor affective trust is positively related to protégé learning.

> H2: Protégé affective trust is positively related to mentor learning.

Mentor affective trust encourages the mentor to provide more mentoring (Wang, Tomlinson, & Noe, 2010), thus increasing the opportunity for interactive learning, which may help the mentor to gain the knowledge and receive the feedback needed to improve personal learning (Liu, Liu, Kwan, & Mao, 2009). Interacting with protégés can enhance mentor learning because protégés can share both technical expertise and ideas about their jobs (Mezias & Scandura, 2005). Because affective trust encourages mentors to provide more mentoring, and because time spent mentoring protégés can provide the mentor with new information, knowledge, and feedback, it is proposed that:

> H3: Mentor affective trust is positively related to mentor learning.

Protégé affective trust is important because it promotes collaboration (Ha, Park, & Cho, 2011), which may encourage mutual learning. In addition, research has shown that affective trust encourages the trusting individual to engage in organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs; Newman, Kiazad, Miao,

& Cooper, 2014; Zhu, Newman, Miao, & Hooke, 2013). OCBs are extra-role behaviours that are not required by one's job but that are beneficial to organizational effectiveness (Organ, 1988). One important type of OCB is self-development, which includes the actions taken by employees to improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities (George & Brief, 1992; Podaskoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Because affective trust encourages OCBs, including self-development, and self-development encompasses the improvement of knowledge, skills, and abilities, it is postulated that:

> H4: Protégé affective trust is positively related to protégé learning.

Perceived organizational support and learning from a mentoring relationship

Perceived organizational support is the degree to which employees believe that employers value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Perceived organizational support has a positive influence on beneficial employee behaviours, including OCBs, and retention (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2014). The positive relationship between perceived organizational support and organizationally beneficial behaviour is based on social exchange theory, which holds that employees provide commitment and effort in exchange for recognition and rewards (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). Employees who believe that their organizations value them are likely to have a high degree of perceived organizational support and to feel an obligation to help the organization (Blau, 1964; Kurtessis et al., 2015). Over time, employees try to achieve a balance between the support they receive from the organization and the support that they provide to the organization (Wayne et al., 1997) such that a high degree of perceived organizational support translates into behaviours that support the organization. Mentoring supports an organization by developing its people; thus, mentors with a high degree of perceived organizational support may balance their exchange relationships with the organization by encouraging protégés to learn new skills (Weinberg & Lankau, 2011). Similarly, protégés with a high degree of perceived organizational support may balance their exchange relationships with the organization by helping their mentors to learn. Accordingly, it is posited that:

> H5: Mentor perceived organizational support is positively related to protégé learning.

> H6: Protégé perceived organizational support is positively related to mentor learning.

Among the positive behaviours that perceived organizational support influences are OCBs (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2014). OCBs are extra-role behaviours that are beneficial to the organization (Organ, 1988). These behaviours include self-development or steps taken to improve knowledge and skills for the benefit of the organization (George & Brief, 1992; Podaskoff et al., 2000). Mentors with a high degree of perceived organizational support can use the mentoring relationship to gain knowledge of new trends in one's field and new career perspectives that, in turn, help to further develop their empathy and improve their managerial skills (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Lankau & Scandura, 2007; Ramaswami & Dreher, 2007). Similarly, protégés with a high degree of perceived organizational support can use the mentoring relationship to gain knowledge that promotes learning and skill development (Laiho & Brandt, 2012). Accordingly, it is postulated that:

> H7: Mentor perceived organizational support is positively related to mentor learning.

> H8: Protégé perceived organizational support is positively related to protégé learning.

Mentoring received and protégé learning

Kram (1985) argued that mentoring leads to protégé learning, as mentors convey important knowledge to their protégés. Hale (2000) explained that protégés can acquire knowledge, as mentors share views, experience, and information. Pan, Sun, and Chow (2011) demonstrated that

the amount of supervisory mentoring was positively related to subordinate personal learning, and Turban et al. (2016) have shown that mentoring received is positively related to organizational knowledge. Accordingly, it is proposed that:

H9: Mentoring received by protégés is positively related to protégé learning.

A summary of the independent variables that are hypothesized to be associated with protégé and mentoring learning is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables hypothesized to be associated with protégé and mentor learning

Protégé Learning	Mentor Learning
Mentor affective trust (H1)	Protégé affective trust (H2)
Protégé affective trust (H4)	Mentor affective trust (H3)
Mentor perceived organizational support (H5)	Protégé perceived organizational support (H6)
Protégé perceived organizational support (H8)	Mentor perceived organizational support (H7)
Mentoring received (H9)	

Method

The research was a quantitative study of a formal workplace mentoring programme conducted in the United States. Matched pairs of protégés and mentors were surveyed to assess their learning. Based on the use of a matched pairs design, the study was able to examine how the affective trust and perceived organizational support of the mentor was related to the learning by both the protégé and the mentor. Likewise, the study examined how the affective trust and perceived organizational support of the protégé was related to learning by both the mentor and the protégé. Additionally, the impact of mentoring received on protégé learning was assessed.

Participants

A healthcare company that is a leading producer of medical products participated in the research. A healthcare company was selected because healthcare is a knowledge-based industry in which mentoring can play an important role in knowledge transfer and employee development. A total of 143 pairs of mentors and protégés who were recent participants (within the last year) in a formal mentoring programme were invited to participate in the study, and 63 survey questionnaires from matched pairs were received and utilized, for an effective response rate of 44%. The mean age of the mentors in the study was 49.9 years, while that of the protégés was 33.8 years. Of the mentors, 68% were men, and 56% of the protégés were women. In terms of race/ethnicity, for the mentors, 78% were Caucasian, 14% were Asian, 3% were Hispanic, 2% were African American, and 3% chose not to identify their race/ethnicity. For the protégés, 62% were Caucasian, 25% were Asian, 5% were Hispanic, 3% were African American, and 5% chose not to identify their race/ethnicity.

Measures

Affective trust. A 5-item scale (McAllister, 1995) was used to assess affective trust. A sample item is, "I can talk freely to my mentor about difficulties I am having at work and know that he/she will want to listen." A 7-point Likert scale (1 = extremely low to 7 = extremely high), with higher scores' indicating greater trust, was used. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale that measured the affective trust for the mentors was .855, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale that measured the affective trust for the protégés was .892.

Mentoring learning. A 5-item scale (Allen, 2003) was used to assess mentoring learning. A sample item is, "I have learned a lot from my mentor (protégé)." A 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores' indicating greater learning, was used. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale that measured the learning for the mentors in this study was .892, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale that measured the learning for the protégés in the study was .881.

Mentoring received. An 18-item scale (Dreher & Ash, 1990) was used to assess mentoring received. A sample item is, "My mentor has given or recommended me for challenging assignments that present opportunities to learn new skills." A 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores' indicating greater mentoring received, was used. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was .925.

Perceived organizational support. Six items from the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (short form) were used to assess perceived organizational support (Items 1, 4, 9, 20, 23, and 27) (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). A sample item is, "The organization strongly considers my goals and values." A 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores' indicating greater perceived organizational support, was used. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale that measured the perceived organizational support for the mentors in this study was .779, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale that measured the perceived organizational support for the protégés in the study was .871.

Control variables. Demographic variables that have been shown to influence mentoring results were collected and used as controls. These included gender (0 = male, 1 = female), race/ethnicity (0 = Caucasian, 1 = all other races), and age (years) (Allen, 2003; Ragins & Cotton, 1993; Wang, Noe, Wang, & Greenberger, 2009).

Analysis

Multiple regression was used to assess the relationship of affective trust, perceived organizational support, and mentoring received with learning. Age, gender, and race were control variables.

Results

Tables 2 and 3 contain descriptive means, standard deviations, and correlations for all of the variables in the study. Protégé learning was positively correlated with protégé affective trust, protégé perceived organizational support, and mentoring received by the protégé. Mentor learning was positively correlated with mentor affective trust, protégé affective trust, and protégé perceived organizational support.

Table 2. Protégé learning correlations, means, and standard deviations (N = 63)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Protégé learning	5.55	1.05								
2. Mentor affective trust	4.79	1.26	.23							
3. Protégé affective trust	5.48	1.15	.76**	.21						
4. Mentor perceived organizational support	5.21	0.83	.14	.25	.24					
5. Protégé perceived organizational support	5.01	1.07	.28*	.01	.18	-.03				
6. Mentoring received	3.15	0.69	.76**	.18	.71**	.22	.29*			
7. Age	33.82	5.09	.06	.15	.08	.02	.02	-.06		
8. Gender	0.56	0.50	.06	.06	-.04	-.01	.13	.02	-.07	
9. Race	0.38	0.49	.04	.23	.19	-.13	-.02	.12	.01	-.10

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Regression results for the hypotheses are presented in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 provides a summary of the results for Hypotheses 1, 4, 5, 8, and 9, which concern the relationship of the independent variables and protégé learning. Table 5 presents a summary of the results of Hypotheses 2, 3, 6, and 7, which concern the relationship of the independent variables and mentor learning.

Table 3. Mentor learning correlations, means, and standard deviations (N = 63)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Mentor learning	4.95	1.07							
2. Mentor affective trust	4.79	1.26	.62**						
3. Protégé affective trust	5.48	1.15	.26*	.21					
4. Mentor perceived organizational support	5.21	0 .83	.11	.25	.24				
5. Protégé perceived organizational support	5.01	1.07	.33**	.01	.18	-.03			
6. Age	49.90	5.70	-.13	.02	-.09	.20	-.04		
7. Gender	0.32	0.47	.08	.16	-.09	-.01	.07	-.09	
8. Race	0.22	0.42	.13	.20	.03	-.04	.05	-.17	.13

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Protégé learning

Hypothesis 1 predicted that mentor affective trust would be positively associated with protégé learning. The coefficient for mentor affective trust was positive but not statistically significant, and, thus, this hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis 4 predicted that protégé affective trust would be positively associated with protégé learning. The coefficient for protégé affective trust was positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), offering support for this hypothesis. Hypothesis 5 predicted that mentor perceived organizational support would be positively associated with protégé learning.

The coefficient for mentor perceived organizational support was negative but not statistically significant. As such, this hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis 8 predicted that protégé perceived organizational support would be positively associated with protégé learning. The coefficient for protégé perceived organizational support was positive but not statistically significant; thus, this hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis 9 predicted that mentoring received by the protégé would be positively related to protégé learning. The coefficient for mentoring received was positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); therefore, this hypothesis was supported. Finally, none of the controls examined was statistically significant.

Mentor learning

Hypothesis 2 predicted that protégé affective trust would be positively associated with mentor learning. The coefficient for protégé affective trust was positive but not statistically significant. Accordingly, this hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis 3 predicted that mentor affective trust would be positively associated with mentor learning. The coefficient for mentor affective trust was positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); thus, this hypothesis was supported. Hypothesis 6 predicted that protégé perceived organizational support would be positively related to mentor learning. The coefficient for protégé perceived organizational support was positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). As such, this hypothesis was supported. Hypothesis 7 predicted that mentor perceived organizational would be positively associated with mentor learning. The coefficient for mentor perceived organizational support was negative but not statistically significant; therefore, this hypothesis was not supported. Finally, none of the controls examined was statistically significant.

Table 4. Regression results of relationships with protégé learning

Variable	Standardized Coefficient	*t*-value
Mentor affective trust	.095	1.147
Protégé affective trust	.489**	4.380
Mentor perceived organizational support	-.102	-1.262
Protégé perceived organizational support	.061	0.756
Mentoring received	.417**	3.772
Age	.036	0.458
Gender	.054	0.698
Race	-.137	0.098

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Table 5. Regression results of relationships with mentor learning

Variable	Standardized Coefficient	t-value
Mentor affective trust	.624**	5.820
Protégé affective trust	.091	0.872
Mentor perceived organizational support	-.076	-0.708
Protégé perceived organizational support	.242*	2.387
Age	-.120	-1.163
Gender	-.002	-0.024
Race	-.045	-0.438

*p < .05, **p < .01

Discussion

Theoretical implications

The study extends current theory on affective trust by demonstrating that, in a mentoring relationship, affective trust is positively related to learning by the trusting individual. Specifically, mentor affective trust was positively associated with mentor learning, and protégé affective trust was positively associated with protégé learning. From the mentor's perspective, affective trust encourages the mentor to provide mentoring support (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). By spending more time and interacting more fully with a protégé, the mentor can gain more insight from the protégé, which enhances the mentor's personal learning. From the protégé's perspective, affective trust can encourage OCBs, including self-development, and this will encourage a protégé to improve his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities (George & Brief, 1992; Podaskoff et al., 2000). Thus, affective trust encourages both mentors and protégés to behave in ways that enhance their personal learning.

The results of this study also confirmed that mentoring received by the protégé is positively associated with protégé learning. The study supports Kram's (1985) argument that mentoring leads to protégé learning and empirical research that has shown that protégés can acquire knowledge from mentors (Hale, 2000; Turban et al., 2017). A final contribution of the study is its extension of our understanding of the impact of perceived organizational support. The study found that protégé perceived organizational support was positively associated with mentor learning. Employees try to balance their exchange relationships with the organization (Wayne et al., 1997), and, in this study, protégés with a high degree of perceived organizational support appear to balance their exchange relationship with the organization by helping their mentors to learn.

The research did not support some of the hypotheses proposed in the study. Although affective trust was positively related to mentors' and protégés' personal learning, affective trust was not positively related to partner learning. Despite the fact that affective trust encourages knowledge sharing, it appears that factors other than affective trust, perhaps partner competence and expertise or time spent in the mentoring relationship, had more of an influence on partner learning than did affective trust.

Additionally, mentor perceived organizational support was not positively related to protégé learning. Despite the fact that mentor perceived organizational support encourages mentor effort, other

factors, including the quality of the mentoring, the capability of the protégé, and the fit of the mentor-protégé pairing, may have had more of an impact on the protégé learning process. Finally, the study did not show that perceived organizational support was related to personal learning, as mentor perceived organizational support was not positively related to mentor learning, and protégé perceived organizational support was not positively related to protégé learning. Although perceived organizational support encourages behaviours that benefit the organization, it appears that mentors and protégés use behaviours other than personal learning to achieve balance in their exchange relationships with the organization.

Managerial Implications

The findings have important implications for organizations and managers who sponsor formal mentoring programmes. Because affective trust encourages both mentors and protégés to behave in ways that enhance their personal learning, organizations may be able to enhance learning from formal mentoring programmes by increasing the affective trust of participants. Affective trust is based on personal bonds and positive affect, developed over time, based on exchanges between individuals (Colquitt et al., 2007; Webber, 2008). To build affective trust, sponsors of formal mentoring programmes should encourage participants to provide support and advice to their mentoring partners (Newman et al., 2014). Sponsors also should encourage mentors and protégés to spend more time together and to interact more frequently (McAllister, 1995) to develop personal bonds and affective trust (Swift & Hwang, 2013).

The results of the study also confirmed that mentoring received by the protégé was positively associated with protégé learning. Accordingly, mentors may be able to enhance protégé learning by increasing the amount of mentoring provided to their protégés. Mentoring to foster learning can include career support (sponsorship, exposure, and coaching), psychosocial support (counselling and friendship), and role modelling (Wang et al., 2010). Finally, the results confirmed that the level of protégé perceived organizational support was positively associated with mentor learning. To increase protégé perceived organizational support, organizations should focus on ensuring high levels of support from supervisors and co-workers in the protégé's day-to-day work (Ahmed, Nawaz, Ali, & Islam, 2015). In addition, emphasizing fairness, providing an opportunity to voice concerns, and offering development opportunities can increase protégé perceived organizational support (Ahmed et al., 2015; Krishhan & Mary, 2012).

Limitations and Future Directions

There are certain limitations to this study. The study was limited to one organization in the healthcare industry. Healthcare was selected because it is a knowledge-based industry for which mentoring can play an important role in knowledge transfer, training, and development. Future research should explore the variables studied in different industry settings. In addition, future research should examine other variables that mentoring programme sponsors can control to enhance learning. Of particular interest is how similarities and differences between the mentor and protégé, including race and gender, professional training, and similarity in values, may affect learning, as these similarities and differences can be used to better pair mentors and protégés to maximize the opportunity for learning and personal growth.

Conclusions

This research has important implications for organizations that utilize formal mentoring programmes. Formal mentoring can encourage learning by both protégés and mentors (Allen et al., 2009), and this can enhance both employee and organizational performance (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). The orientation and training of protégés and mentors can encourage behaviours that are positively associated with learning from a mentoring relationship. This study showed that affective trust was

positively associated with personal learning (mentor affective trust was associated with mentor learning, and protégé affective trust was associated with protégé learning). As such, organizations may be able to enhance learning by increasing the affective trust of mentoring programme participants. In addition, the level of protégé perceived organizational support was positively associated with mentor learning, so it is essential that protégés feel valued and appreciated by their organizations. Because participation in formal mentoring programmes can positively affect employee work-related attitudes (Egan & Song, 2008), organizations should emphasize that being selected to participate in a mentoring programme indicates that the organization values the protégé and is willing to invest important resources in the protégé's development. This should enhance protégé perceived organizational support and thereby encourage mentor learning. Finally, mentoring received by the protégé was positively associated with protégé learning; thus, organizations should emphasize to mentors that they may be able to enhance protégé learning by increasing the amount of mentoring provided to their protégés. By effectively preparing protégés and mentors for participation in a mentoring programme, organizations can increase the learning of participants and further enhance employee performance.

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