

Understanding Effective Pillars of Mentorship for Student Leader Protégés

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Abstract

We examined the mentor-protégé relationship and the foundational pillars that make the relationship effective. Through a phenomenological design, we conducted interviews with student leaders to discuss their relationship with their self-identified most significant mentor. Using leader-member exchange and mentor relationship theory as a lens, we used the protégé's perspective to find what was important for them as they were developed by a mentor. We found respect, trust, direct engagement and feedback, relationship maintenance, and shared values to be important components of effective mentoring. We used inductive analysis to develop a model that illustrates the qualities and phases that mentoring relationships go through, indicating which pillars should be present at each stage. We discuss implications of this for leader-member exchange theory and mentor relationship theory, as well as implications for practice in leadership education.

Introduction

The demand for leadership that understands, engages with, and solves complex systemic problems has heightened with the rapid development of a global society (Campbell et al., 2012). While the need for leadership continues to amplify, confidence and public perception of leaders across society has only modestly increased (Rosenthal et al., 2009). With an increased need for trustworthy didactic leaders, the responsibility has been placed on higher education to develop leaders who can navigate and solve complex systems and issues (Astin & Astin, 2000; Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2009; National Leadership Council, 2007). Interest in student leadership development and related opportunities has never been higher, with both formal and informal curriculum being embedded both inside and outside of classrooms (Shandley, 1989).

To answer this call, higher education institutions have created leadership development programs. The body of research illustrating the effectiveness of these programs is growing, but collected results show positive impacts mentoring relationships have on leadership gains (Brungardt, 1996; Brungardt et al., 2006; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Haber, 2006; Kezar, 2009; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). Many

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scholars contend that mentoring plays a key role in developing leadership capacity; however, there is uncertainty about exactly *how* mentoring relationships lead to this growth (Dugan, 2011). Many scholars in the agricultural realm have investigated mentoring, as it has emerged as an important, if not crucial, part of development for budding professionals (Denny & Hardman, 2020; Marabesi & Kelsey, 2020; Nesbitt et al., 2022; Tummons et al., 2016).

While research describing the difference between varying types of mentorship have added to theory, praxis, and overall understanding, few studies have been dedicated to the exploration of the different mentoring style influences on leadership development. Furthermore, as the need for skilled, purposeful, and trustworthy leaders increases, there is urgency to understand the role mentoring and mentorship styles have on student leaders.

This study investigated mentoring relationships across student leaders' experiences to provide a more nuanced understanding of student leaders' (protégés) experience with mentorship. Understanding which pillars of mentorship yield better overall development would greatly benefit student leadership development as intentional mentoring programs and mentor education could be created to specifically cultivate students' leadership capacities (Campbell et al., 2012). Understanding how specific qualities of mentoring affect the overall effectiveness of the relationships with student leaders can assist in meeting the demands of an ever evolving and complex society, eager for skilled, moral, and trustworthy leaders.

Literature Review

Mentoring is a process in which a more experienced individual, usually older, guides another individual's development by providing them with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge, and support (Byington, 2010; Johnson, 2016). The dyadic mentoring relationship can be established formally, in which a third-party facilitator pairs a mentor and protégé, or informally, in which the mentoring relationship organically emerges between the mentor and protégé (Dennis, 1993; Development Services Group, Inc., 2011). This study was driven by a conceptual framework combining mentor relationship theory (Kram, 1983, 1985, 1996) and leader-member exchange theory (Dansereau et al., 1975).

Mentor Relationship Theory

Mentor relationship theory asserts mentoring can exist in two basic functions: career (or vocational) development and psychosocial development (Kram, 1983). In either function, Kram (1983) identified four phases of the relationship. The first phase is initiation, which occurs in the first six to 12 months of the relationship. In this time, the protégé begins to feel supported and cared for by the mentor, while developing a positive fantasy of learning from a mentor. Additionally, this phase fosters the protégé's beginning emergence of respect and admiration for the mentor. Kram's second phase, cultivation, can last two to five years. This phase turns the fantasy and expectation from initiation into reality, developing strong characteristics of guidance and coaching. The protégé often perceives support, counseling, and protection from their mentor, but they can also feel challenged by the mentor in this phase. The cultivation phase indicates the period in which the protégé begins to imitate the mentor's modeled behavior.

The third phase of mentoring, separation, usually begins after a period of two to five years (Kram, 1983). Marked by the disruption of the cultivation phase, the protégé can experience turmoil, anxiety, and loss during separation. While separation may be structural (e.g., new job, different supervisor, etc.) or psychological (i.e., do not interact as regularly), the protégé is pushed to become more independent and both members of the dyad reassess the value of the mentoring relationship. The final phase indicated by Kram (1983) is redefinition. After the mentorship has expired, the mentor and protégé can redefine their relationship as an informal friendship with both individuals on equal ground as peers.

Leader-Member Exchange

Leader-member exchange (LMX) recognizes leadership as a dyadic relationship between a leader and a follower (Dansereau et al., 1975), with each relationship being unique to the pair (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen et al., 1982; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Liden & Graen, 1980). In 1998, Liden and Maslyn asserted LMX is multidimensional and indicated four dimensions of a multidimensional LMX (LMX-MDM) instrument, which describe the quality of the leader-follower relationship using (a) contribution, (b) affect, (c) loyalty, and (d) professional respect.

Contribution describes the perception of the amount and quality of work that both members of the dyad put toward organizational goals (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Liden and Maslyn (1998) investigated this dimension through understanding the extra efforts leaders and followers would go to reach above and beyond their normal job description. Affect describes “the mutual affection members of the dyad have for each other based primarily on interpersonal attraction rather than work or professional values” (Dienesch & Liden, 1986, p. 56). This dimension resembles genuine friendship and admiration outside the workplace (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Loyalty is the extent to which both leader and follower publicly support each other’s action and character (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). When a dyadic relationship has high-quality loyalty, leaders are more likely to ask members to take on tasks which may require independent judgment or responsibility (Scandura et al., 1986). Finally, professional respect was the fourth dimension added by Liden and Maslyn (1998), which describes the perception of the degree to which members of the dyad built a reputation of excellence in their line of work.

LMX transpires in three phases: stranger, acquaintance, and partnership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The stranger phase, which is transactional in nature, involves both members of the dyad investigating and testing their role in the relationship, with low levels of LMX. The acquaintance phase occurs when the relationship grows, and the leader gains limited influence over the follower with moderate LMX. In the partnership phase, the leader has unlimited influence over the follower, with a high level of LMX experienced by both members in the dyad.

Effective Mentoring Outcomes

Mentoring has been investigated as a predictor of positive protégé development outcomes (Marabesi & Kelsey, 2020; Tummons et al., 2016). Mentoring relationships can contribute to personal growth (Kram, 1985) and personal learning, especially in times of organizational policy or structural change (Kram, 1996). In vocational settings, mentoring often mimics the supervisor-subordinate relationship, which still allows space for greater relational job learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Mentors can also provide emotional support and counseling to their protégé and develop stronger resiliency outcomes for the protégé (Kao et al., 2014). Additionally, informal mentoring yields greater career development and psychosocial functions than formal mentoring (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Considering specific variables of effective mentoring, some scholars have examined both extrinsic and intrinsic factors that influence mentoring relationships. For example, Ewing et al. (2008) found women preferred to be mentored by other women. Additionally, women protégés with men as mentors had reported less social interaction than women in same-gendered mentoring relationships (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Gender is not always a definitive variable in understanding mentorship effectiveness, though. Gowdy et al. (2022) asserted race is a higher indicator than gender for youth who identify informal mentors. Other scholars have found mentoring is stronger in relationships where the mentor and protégé shared personality traits (Allen & Eby, 2003; Tummons et al., 2016), but they did not find significant difference in the quality of the mentorship based on gender similarity or difference (Allen & Eby, 2003). Protégés engaged in mentoring relationships often perceive more psychosocial benefits than vocational development, although men protégés have reported less psychosocial benefit than women counterparts (Noe, 1998).

Successful, effective mentoring should have a relationship built on trust, defined roles, goals, and a collaborative approach to problems (Byington, 2010). Straus et al. (2013) noted effective mentoring should also include characteristics of reciprocity, mutual respect, clear expectations, personal connection, and shared values. Conversely, unsuccessful or ineffective mentoring relationships can develop from overly dependent protégés, leading to mentors feeling drained, or from mentors who act in unethical, narcissistic, competitive, or estranged ways, putting pressure on the relationship and yielding a toxic mentoring environment (Smith-Jentsch et al., 2018). Mentoring requires regular meetings and stimulus for reflection (Denny & Hardman, 2020; Marabesi & Kelsey, 2020; Shellhouse et al., 2021), expectation and values congruency (Shellhouse et al., 2021; Tummons et al., 2016), though further exploration is needed to determine how to make this fit best in a mentoring relationship.

Mentoring in Leadership Development

Informal mentoring is important for learners of leadership, through development or education programs (McNeill, 2010). Successful and effective leadership development programming involves thoughtful planning, a view of the leadership which should fit with the audience, an analysis of the structural and pedagogical components needed to put theory into a coherent framework, and logistical attention (Ruben et al., 2018). However, leadership development has been acknowledged as important outside of formal education (Allen & Hartman, 2009). Mentoring, when added to formal leadership development programs, can aid in growing participants' leadership capacity long term (Lamm et al., 2017). Better relationship-building skills, an improved understanding of leadership, enhanced communication skills, and exposure to different leadership experiences were all reported outcomes from leadership development programming with an effective mentoring component (Strawn et al., 2017).

In traditional college-aged students, mentoring programs have fostered perceived growth in awareness, confidence, sense of purpose, career development, and interpersonal skills (Haber-Curran et al., 2017). Student leaders who mentor others experience higher levels of generativity (Hastings et al., 2015), but understanding how those student leaders' mentoring styles are shaped needs further understanding. Students can be motivated to serve in leadership positions for a variety of reasons, including networking, belief in a group's mission, opportunity and ability to create change, and leaving a legacy (Moore & Ginsburg, 2017). With networking, change, and legacy as motivators to become student leaders, it is important to understand how mentoring these individuals can yield more vocational and psychosocial growth to give the student leaders tools to affect change and leave a legacy. The purpose of this study was to describe effective mentoring from the perspective of student leader protégés. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which mentorship qualities are most salient for effective mentoring of student leaders?
2. What qualities of mentorship inhibit effectiveness for mentoring student leaders?

Methods

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to better understand the mentorship experiences of the participants. According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology first requires the researcher to identify a phenomenon, bracket their own experiences with the phenomenon which can help the reader understand bias in the interpretation of findings, and finally collect data from multiple participants.

A four-person research team led this study. The lead researcher oversaw recruiting participants, collecting data, and leading the data analysis. This researcher was a former member of the student organization being examined, several years removed, and previously served as a summer intern for its national headquarters. As a master's student, they wanted to better explore mentorship as a phenomenon based on the difference in quality of experience they had with previous mentors. They had mentoring experiences that were both positive and negative throughout their career. The second researcher helped with

the transcript verification and data verification components. As an assistant professor of leadership, they helped analyze and code transcripts to gather consensus with the lead researcher about theme clusters. They had little-to-no experience with the student organization, allowing their perspective to take a more objective approach when reaching consensus. The third and fourth researchers served as resources to develop the interview protocol and assisted after data analysis concluded to help verify the credibility of the findings and conclusions.

The review of the literature showed mentorship has been examined in a variety of contexts, from racial dimensions to first-generation college students, to organizational adult leaders. However, scant research has focused on student leaders. Therefore, the target population of this study was student leaders who recently served as an officer for the National FFA Organization, formerly Future Farmers of America. National FFA has been recognized for developing its members as leaders (Ahrens et al., 2015; Robertson, 2019). Through the organization, students are given “a path to achievement in premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (National FFA Organization, 2019b, para. 4).

Through National FFA, students are given opportunities at the local, state, and national levels to develop leadership. Six college-aged students are elected each year from around the United States to serve the organization as a national FFA officer in a term deemed a “year of service” (National FFA Organization, 2019a, para. 1). These student leaders receive extensive leadership development training, represent over 600,000 members at various meetings, deliver workshops focused on building leadership capacity to other students, give motivational keynote addresses, and serve as advocates for FFA and agriculture on a global scale (National FFA Organization, 2019a). The year of service is spent traveling more than 100,000 miles, meeting with other students, government officials, and agriculturalists, among others (Woodard, 2018). These student leaders were selected for this study because of the mentorship they receive from industry professionals to become better leaders, advocates, and agriculturalists. Student leaders whose year of service was between 2013 and 2018 were invited to participate ($N = 30$).

These years were selected to limit the amount of recall bias in the data, as data collection took place in 2019. Raphael (1987, p. 167) stated, “a potential for recall bias exists whenever historical self-report information is elicited from respondents,” which could reduce the credibility of the reported data. Out of the original 30, only 28 student leaders had current accessible contact information. Thirteen accepted the invitation to participate, but only 12 completed the data collection process with eight identifying as female (67%) and four as male (33%). At the time of the study, all 12 were either undergraduate students, graduate or professional students, or young professionals in the first three years of their career. Due to the select number of participants and the public attention that these student leaders are subject to, no other demographic information is reported to protect the participants. McCracken (1988) mentioned that selecting participants is one of the most important characteristics in qualitative research, and that often “less is more” (p. 17), going as far to say that eight participants is often adequate.

In-depth interviews, the most commonly used method in phenomenological investigation (Moustakas, 1994), were used for data collection. Interview questions were derived from the theoretical framework, and focused on the participants discussing their mentoring experience with the mentor who had the most profound or significant impact on their lives, although some participants still discussed multiple impactful mentors. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Decode transcription software. We then verified each transcript and added initial codes. Coded transcripts were sent to each respective participant as a method of member checking.

Data were analyzed using inductive phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher read each transcript several times, line by line, providing meaning units, or codes (Harding, 2013) until redundancy was reached (ten interviews). The remaining interviews were coded in the same way and used to verify the established meaning units. The verified transcript codes were then delimited and grouped to identify similar words and phrases. This resulted in more than 30 coded groups that were clustered into five major themes. During this phase, we focused on the processes and experiences which

related to how the student leader experienced mentorship according to our theoretical framework and beyond. Once themes emerged and agreed upon, a random selection of six student leader participants received the themes and explanations to verify their accuracy.

Member checking, triangulation of the data, interpretation among the research team, and multivocality of the data all provided measures of trustworthiness to enhance the quality, credibility, and dependability of the study (Tracy, 2010). Because this was a qualitative study, findings should not be generalized past the sample. Instead, transferability addresses the extent to which findings from a qualitative study relate to other groups (Ary et al., 2014). Although some threats to transferability existed in this study due to a sample of a small percentage of student leaders each year, the sample was intentionally selected to help foster transferability in other areas, such as college-aged individuals leading student organizations.

Findings

Using pseudonyms, this section outlines the five major themes which emerged from the interviews: (1) Trust emerges in shared vulnerability, (2) respect for the mentor is crucial, (3) conflicting identity and values can break mentorship, (4) regular relationship maintenance is required, and (5) direct feedback is welcomed. Because mentorship can exist in a vocational or psychosocial capacity, themes are often broken down into each dimension. Additionally, words placed in brackets give additional context. Otherwise, quotes are presented verbatim.

Trust Emerges in Shared Vulnerability

Trust emerged as a strong foundational component of effective mentoring, which exists whether the mentor-protégé relationship is vocational or psychosocial. Trust can be developed in a multitude of ways, but differences materialized in how trust developed in a personal versus professional relationship. Additionally, findings indicated a protégé shared vulnerable experiences or decisions once the protégé reached a point in the relationship in which they felt they could trust their mentor. However, trust was strengthened when the mentor acted vulnerably and shared their own personal struggles with the protégé.

Trust and Vulnerability in the Workplace

Gwen's formal relationship with her internship supervisor and mentor, Grant, was established when he was in a coaching-style position for Gwen. Her internship "was a little challenging at first because it was like I realized how much I didn't know [in my new role], so that was more of a personal thing." After the first training in her role, realizing how much she had to learn, Gwen said she approached her mentor directly:

I told Grant I'm just gonna be really vulnerable. I don't know as much as I thought but I'm willing to learn. I don't want to disappoint though...But I think because I responded in that way, he—it's not like he took it easier on me. He made it his personal mission, I guess, to kind of get me where I wanted to go.

Due to the professional, working nature of her relationship with Grant, Gwen trusted him. She was vulnerable in discussing weak performance areas so Grant could give her the guidance.

Brielle's relationship with her mentor, Brad, started as professional because it was appointed; Brad was Brielle's team leader. Even with this appointed professional mentorship, Brielle expressed how easy it was to be comfortable and vulnerable with her mentor because Brad approached their relationship as a peer rather than putting himself on a pedestal, and she trusted whatever she shared would be kept in confidence between the two of them:

This is so silly, but I was never afraid of Brad and I feel like a lot of—even now—in a lot of my work relationships, I am afraid of [my supervisor]. More so I really want to impress them and I want them to have the respect for me that I have for them, and I want to do well...It would be very easy, even now, to

text or call or sit down in a meeting with Brad and say, ‘Here’s what I’m struggling with,’ and I think it was the first mentor relationship where I ever actually did that...I was comfortable to be vulnerable in front of him because I knew it wouldn’t leave that space.

Additionally, Brielle’s mentorship with Brad continued beyond the formal year. She relocated to a new city for a job and remembered her mentor had also moved for a job before, so she called him to ask for guidance. She said he was able to share his personal experiences with relocating:

His experience was really great and him being vulnerable in that sense with me of what he experienced and me being able to say, you know, I’ve only been here a month, here’s what I’m already struggling with, here’s what I’m worried about in eight months, was really cool to get to just lean on him.

Brielle thought mentors could easily discuss successes from their past experiences, but she believed it was more personal when her mentors opened up about their past struggles or failures.

Trust in Psychosocial Mentoring

Leah discussed her relationship with her mentor, Lily, who originally served as Leah’s high school teacher, but their relationship continued past high school graduation. Leah explained how their relationship deepened beyond being “just a teacher” and turned into a trusted mentor after graduation. When Leah’s mentor opened up about her life, it created a space for Leah to share more personal stories, which allowed trust to blossom in their relationship.

Denise shared a story that occurred outside of her typical mentorship. Denise was exposed to true vulnerability with her mentor, Daisy, when she shared about the loss of a child:

To see Daisy break down about that [losing a child] and, at that point, I probably had only known her like four months or so, but then to see her perseverance of her faith in all of that—I’m like, one, only the Holy Spirit can produce that. Humans don’t have the resilience to overcome something like that on their own and that just was so profound to me, but more so her vulnerability and showing that emotion, trusting us...This contrast of like seeing someone incredibly strong, show me how okay it is to be weak...I think seeing this juxtaposition of like strength in the face of weakness is, was, will be incredibly profound to me as long as I know them.

The detail of the impact of vulnerability illustrated how Denise perceived her relationship with Daisy to be stripped back to a raw emotional state and created a foundation of faith and normalcy in fighting to overcome obstacles, which wouldn’t have existed without trust.

Respect for the Mentor is Crucial

Data indicated respect for the mentor was required for the protégé to consider the relationship effective. In the vocational or psychosocial dimension, the protégé needed to hold their mentor in high esteem to trust their mentor’s advice. For vocational mentoring, the protégé needed to respect their mentor in an occupational capacity, or feel that their mentor was competent, successful, and/or a role model for how someone in that position should work. In psychosocial mentoring, the protégé could respect how their mentor interacted with people, how they used their values to guide their life, how they supported and loved their friends and family, or even how they approached decision-making.

Professional Respect in Vocational Mentoring

Caleb had a vocational mentor who he largely respected, even going so far to say he “idolized” this person. Through years of watching the mentor successfully perform their job, Caleb viewed this person as extraordinary. Later, Caleb was elected to a student leadership position which formalized this mentoring relationship, and the professional respect continued to grow. Years later, Caleb and his mentor work together as colleagues. He still considers this person a mentor, but the nature of the relationship changed:

I believed that initially [when the mentoring first started], I didn't view him [my mentor] as a human. I viewed him as somebody that could do no wrong...I mean I knew that he would get angry and I knew that he would get frustrated, but I viewed it as justified and as righteous anger with us because it was on me, like I was the one that didn't meet his expectations...I would say now I don't idolize him as much. I still think he's a great person, but I just see that he is a human being and I think it's better now that I have seen that side of it, but before it was just this walking picture of success in a career.

The level of professional respect Caleb had for his mentor was so high he perceived the mentor as superhuman. This quality allowed Caleb to continuously trust the actions of his mentor, because he thought any wrongdoing was the fault of himself, rather than the fault of his mentor.

Other participants articulated high respect for their mentor as a professional even if they did not know them well personally. Tristan mentioned respecting his current mentor and boss, Tanner, based on the reputation Tanner created with other employees in the organization. The respect was profound enough for Tristan to consider Tanner a mentor after only ten weeks:

[Tanner's] been there [working in the office] for a while. So the people in the office know him and I know he has this expectation of good work and that he'll be encouraging for them. And so I think that that spreads to the folks that are newer and—everybody that I've told that I have Tanner as a boss, has been like 'Oh my gosh like you are so supported,' like 'that is awesome that you get to have him as a boss.' Yeah. Okay cool, like it's awesome to see—like hear that and then also experience like the cool stuff that he does as a boss that makes him a good boss.

Ralph acknowledged the respect felt in his mentoring relationship was not experienced in a unilateral way, where only the protégé respected the mentor. Instead, his mentors exuded respect for him as the protégé. When his mentors treated Ralph like an equal and trusted that he was capable to carry out the responsibilities for the position in which he was serving, Ralph felt mutual respect. His mentors treated him like a colleague instead of a subordinate, which allowed Ralph to reciprocate his trust and respect even more:

I think in all cases of my mentors, the key, or one of the common denominators, is respect, right? So respecting as—even within the mentor-mentee relationship, there's a respect of validity or equality or that sort of thing. In that, even when Rudy [my mentor] was giving me critique on workshop delivery or speech writing or whatever, giving me feedback on how I was doing my job as a national officer, that was being given in it—in an interesting way—peer-to-peer or colleague-to-colleague...My performance may have been what was in question but my capability was taken for granted, and I think that's a really important part of mentorship...all of my mentors have always treated me as someone who has good thoughts, someone who can be invested in, can be relied upon and that's from when I was, you know, 12, you know, when scoutmasters and teachers were investing in me, to now, when I've got people who are twice my age or more investing in me, even though I'm a young professional.

Respect in Psychosocial Mentoring

Individuals in a mentoring dyad focused on psychosocial development can still have an additional professional relationship. Abigail discussed one of her once-vocational mentors who was formally appointed, but she now goes to that mentor more for psychosocial development and advice. One example she discussed stemmed from the respect her mentor had in his romantic relationship, because she had recently gotten engaged:

I really respected him [my mentor] and his wife and their relationship that they have and was able to see, like even throughout [our formal mentorship], how he prioritized his family first, even in a job that's pretty, like 24-hour demanding and so, I kind of asked their advice on that.

Abigail's respect for her mentor developed after seeing him navigating his relationship and family, which allowed Abigail to trust this mentor's advice for navigating her own relationship while balancing a career, years after their formal mentorship concluded.

Denise also had a mentor in the psychosocial dimension, even though their relationship started due to a formally appointed, vocational mentoring relationship. She discussed one instance in which she had cursed in front of her mentor, Dustin, for whom she had a lot of respect. Cursing was not well received by Dustin, and he "called her out" and rebuked her:

I wasn't mad at him or anything, or I didn't feel like 'Oh my gosh, Dustin is so mean.' In those moments, I didn't need to [curse] and I don't want people to think that's how I talk because it's not. And all these emotions running through my head of, 'Oh my gosh, that's not the kind of person I am and I don't want people to think that.' So I was just disappointed in myself in those moments... If it would have been some random stranger who's like you shouldn't talk like that, I'd be like, 'Who are you and why are—like you don't know me!' But I think I just have the utmost respect for Dustin and the way that he calls people to like higher—higher expectations and so, I was like, 'Oh man, I feel like I need to improve here.'

Because Denise respected Dustin, his criticism of her language had value. She respected the way he held people to higher standard, and she felt pressure to act and speak in ways that emulated what she stood for as a person. This respect was crucial for the criticism to hold value. If a stranger, whom Denise didn't respect, gave the same criticism, she would have disregarded it.

Conflicting Identity and Values can Break Mentorship

College has served as a vessel for developing students' identity through dialogue with peers, curriculum, and student organization participation (Shalka et al., 2019). However, the participants in this study removed themselves from college for at least a year to fulfill their responsibilities as a leader for their student-run organization. With this distinct avenue to spend a year of their life, identity development and values clarification could have been achieved through other means, such as mentor engagement. The student leaders in this study noted several instances which illustrated how their mentors helped solidify their identity and values through positive or negative ways, explained in the following subsections.

Effective Mentors can Shape Protégés' Identity and Values

Shared interests helped create bonds between mentors and protégés, but shared values and identity created a stronger foundation and connection for the mentoring relationship's development. Nora explained how her values were clarified due to the engagement of her mentor, Nico, during her year of service:

I think my values were very different before I started national office and then like after national office it became so changed, because I think—when I entered national office...I thought the things I valued were...obviously people, being super spontaneous, being charismatic, like just being this big personality was something I valued because I thought people wanted that. But then when I met Nico it was like, something I should value is myself. Something I should value is having a good support system in my life, not pushing people out...My whole perspective on life just changed when I met Nico.

Nora acknowledged believing she understood herself and her values but rediscovered those components as she engaged with her mentor. Nora's mentor called her to a higher standard and pushed her to clarify characteristics she should value within herself and others.

Felicity was also heavily influenced by her mentor during her year of service as a student leader, stating this mentor "most influenced some of my core beliefs." She explained:

I think that they [my mentor] just lived out this really values-driven life and that was really cool to see. I think it was influence by example. I think that they are somebody who has shown consistent values throughout their life.

The example her mentor set helped Felicity realize how to model values for others. Consistent modeling of values was something also impactful for Tristan. He recognized that his mentor valued consistency, especially during his year of service, which is often a time of flux:

He [my mentor] is someone who is consistent both in what he says and what he does and I think that goes for more serious, more like workplace or professional responsibilities and activities in addition to personal, and that's something I definitely look up to. I think like the world needs more consistent people—people that have not just committed for one day or one week, but for a lifetime, and that was definitely seen throughout our year where a ton of change is happening, right? Like a ton of growth is happening.

Tristan's mentor emulated his values. Tristan not only respected his mentor for these values but allowed the mentorship to help shape who he aspired to be, personally and professionally.

Conflicting Values can Damage the Relationship

While having values and modeling them positively impacted many of the participants' experiences, others noted times when their values or identities conflicted with their mentor's. This perceived conflict damaged the mentoring relationship, sometimes profoundly.

After Felicity ended her year of service as a student leader, she identified a new mentor at her university. Unfortunately, Felicity's perspectives differed from her mentor's:

My mentor is in the camp like 'wasn't national office terrible?' And I was in the camp like 'national office was quite difficult but a very good growth opportunity and I got a very sizable scholarship.' So I'm thankful I got to do it. I think adjusting to those differences, I would placate my mentor... I think that adjustment was realizing I value the relationship rather than being, I guess honest. So I'm going to say what you want me to say so we can move past this... I wish that my mentor would be a bit more supportive in all aspects, but I think people are imperfect. So if [placating] is what it takes, yeah.

When her mentor would share disgruntled opinions about the experience Felicity had as a student leader, Felicity placated to avoid disagreement. In doing so, she jeopardized her own integrity, which caused a slight rift in the overall relationship she had built with her mentor.

Jace, on the other hand, uncovered a foundational disagreement with one of his mentors. The difference in values and identity caused Jace to completely lose respect for his formally-appointed mentor. Jace reflected on the relationship by stating, "I did not respect [my mentor] or really care about his opinion... They wanted to conform everyone to behave like them. Further, he pushed his values onto others quite frequently." Jace thought his mentor seemed to value faith, expecting Jace to pray before every meal, and came off as homophobic. Jace also noted he thought his mentor truly cared about him, but there were vast differences in the mentor's approach to mentoring and what Jace believed he needed to develop and grow, especially due to the mentor's values and Jace discovering his own identity as it pertained to his sexuality:

As flawed as he [my mentor] was as a person, I really do think that he had my best interest at heart, just the intention and execution were very different, at least from my standpoint... during that year, I think I kind of figured out, oh Jace likes boys, like that was when I like figured that out for myself... [my mentor] is also a straight white male from a rural community, so I think it was like just different perspectives in the way that we saw things.

Jace's discovery and clarification of his own sexuality and identity directly conflicted with values he perceived his mentor to have. Therefore, the mentoring relationship was damaged from its start, and Jace lost respect for his mentor, even though it was formally appointed.

Staci saw faith as a pivotal value in her life. She believed she was a servant of God and wanted to live out her Christian values in every aspect of life. This was also a common characteristic in the mentor Staci identified, because both seemed to have a strong connection to faith. However, Staci said as she has

developed and matured, some of her previous mentors have acted in ways which are difficult for Staci still consider them strong mentors today:

For a couple of [my previous mentors], I know they've really, really struggled this past year with their faith and having had such a strong example of what their faith was and how that kind of inspired me to continue to grow in my faith, but then see that take a different turn over this past year, that's probably been one thing that's been hard to watch or just like hard to connect with still. I feel like I'm on fire [in a good way] right now with some of the decisions I'm making and those types of things, and then having them take a step back and stop going to church every week or stop being in the Word every week, that's been one decision that I'm probably more wary on.

This change in how Staci's mentors view and practice their faith has impacted how Staci perceives her relationship with them today, especially because her mentors have consistently demonstrated how one's faith can be such a strong pillar of someone's life until now.

While having conflicting values can degrade a mentoring relationship, disagreement is still a normal component of mentorship. Caleb said professional disagreement actually helps foster better outcomes, but as other participants indicated, personal disagreement due to values or identity conflict was what threatened the mentoring relationship. Caleb discussed disagreements he has with his current mentor and boss, as it relates to their jobs developing students:

He's still my mentor as my boss, but also any boss-employee relationship, there's just going to be times where you just disagree on certain things and especially when it comes to sometimes managing [our student leaders]. Right before one of our conferences, the officers felt really—they were feeling really good. We had gone through some stuff to improve on and they were feeling great and then he [my mentor/boss] let them know right before they went to bed, these are the things you didn't meet my expectations for, and it was just one of those things where just kind of like, God, I just had them good. They were ready. I know there are things that I do that for [my mentor] that are probably about the same where he feels like he has [the students] ready somewhere else and I come in and just mess with everything.

This scenario helped Caleb understand ways in which he and his mentor approach their work in different ways, but the conflict is a professional disagreement they can easily work past. At the end of Caleb's interview, he made a point to reiterate how much respect he has for his mentor, and how impactful the relationship has been, even with professional disagreements: "My current boss [and mentor] is very important to me and I will defend him until—til the day I'm dead."

Regular Relationship Maintenance is Required

Participants explained setting explicit expectations with their mentors was important, but there was not a one-size-fits-all formula for the time or investment it takes for effective mentoring. Instead, participants discussed their relationships with mentors being regularly maintained. Although there was no evidence showing how often the maintenance should occur, the officers indicated the level and style of the maintenance should be unique to each mentoring dyad.

Tristan, for example, had a college mentor focus on faith development, meeting weekly. This allowed his mentor to regularly maintain and develop the relationship between the two:

We would meet up every Monday and I think a lot of it was more informal conversation around just like things I was struggling with or that I wanted to improve on. And then we went through a couple of different books and one of them was a book that kind of dug really into the book of Romans in the Bible...It stimulated a lot of good conversation around just like daily life, some habits that I was trying to break and some habits I was trying to form, that sort of thing.

Tristan found weekly meetings beneficial because they focused on the progress of the habits he was attempting to form and break, while also giving regular maintenance to his biblical teachings. Staci appreciated the maintenance she felt from her mentor, but because the year involved so much traveling, much of the relationship maintenance occurred remotely:

I talked to her [my mentor] pretty frequently or we would text back and forth throughout the year...like she would check in so many times because she did not want something to happen to me, especially when I was on the road...and that's when we started diving a little bit deeper with some spirituality-type of things. I was in [my mentor's city] more than I had ever imagined I would be that summer, so we would go to church together on Sundays and then I would normally hang out with their family that afternoon or something of that sort...Since then, we've stayed in really, really close contact. I've gotten to visit her a couple times. They're planning a trip to [visit me].

Even as Staci has moved into a different life stage following her year of service, where her mentor does not have such a high formal influence, the two have maintained their relationship well with regular phone calls, text messages, and occasional visits while living in different states.

Brielle said one of her mentors had such a significant impact on her life that they still keep in regular contact even though they have both moved on to different jobs and cities. For the pair, the relationship maintenance transcended their original, formal mentoring relationship:

Well, they're [my previous mentor] still, I'd say, a very active part of my life. You know, I think what's great about [him] is that I don't talk to him even monthly, but he makes sure to check in probably once every three or four months or even, you know, if we have the chance—I'll give you an example. His job now is headquartered in [a city] which is 45 minutes away from here. So he flew in here [a month or two ago], and so he flew into [my city] because he knew I was [living here] and then just drove down [to his job], which that's so kind of him to fly into a different city so that he can grab dinner with me and catch up.

Brielle recognized her relationship with her former mentor looks differently today, but she still goes to him for guidance about career changes, living in a new city, and other personal advice.

Conversely, Ralph said his relationship with one of his previous mentors has deteriorated. He still trusts that person and would feel comfortable going to him for advice, but Ralph recognized their relationship is not the same as it was a few years ago:

I'm not so closely connected with [my mentor] that any time I pick up the phone, he already knows the context of those conversations, right? Which, I would say for other mentors I have my life...they're more aware of what's going on in my life right now so that when I pick up the phone, I don't need to go, say, 'So I'm in [this city] now and here's the job I'm doing,' and all that sort of stuff. So there's a distinction there I think. While, yes, I would say I still count [him] as a mentor to some extent and certainly keep up with him, it's not the same as it was during that year, but I think it's probably pretty normal.

Ralph understood that time can allow a relationship to fade but recognized this as a normal component to mentorship as the protégé and mentor progress into different careers or life stages.

Direct Feedback is Welcomed

The opportunity for mentors to provide direct, critical feedback to the protégé is a product of trust and understanding developed through the relationship. The protégé must first realize the mentor has their best interests at heart and is delivering feedback directly so the protégé may grow and develop. This direct feedback, although welcomed in functional mentoring relationships, should not be given until trust has developed between the two.

Jace, for example, first met his most profound mentor while working on a project together. He said his mentor criticized his approach to the project, but since they had not yet developed trust, it was not well received and started their relationship off on a sour note:

I actually hated [my mentor] when I first met her, if I'm being honest. I actually really did not like her. She came in—I started on this project like a year and a half ago—she came into the project after I'd been here [at my company] about three or four months...I was in a meeting with her and I

was saying we need to do this and this and this and this and she pushed back hard. Rightfully so, she's very, very senior to me, right?...She was like I really don't think that works and so she pushed back a little bit in this meeting and I just was like, okay, you know what? I'm writing you off. I'm done dealing with you. A couple weeks went by and I actually realized her way was right and she just let me come to that conclusion on my own.

At first, when Jace and his mentor had not yet created trust in their relationship, critiques to his work lacked credibility and value. However, as the two grew closer, continued working together, and created trust and respect between each other, Jace now considers her to be both a mentor and friend. With this new identification of their relationship, Jace now expects direct criticism from Julia because he knows it will help him develop into a better technical professional in his field.

Denise verbalized the feedback style that one of her mentors gave:

He's [my mentor is] very sincere and direct in the way that he challenges people...I think too, like he's, you know, he's empathetic but also he is direct and he is very straightforward about things. And so I think that that just shows that he's an honest person and he's very loyal so he wants you to know any direct feedback that might sting a little bit comes from a place of deep care for you.

She trusted the criticism and advice her mentor gave, and so he was able to be direct. Because of this particular mentor's personality being honest and empathetic, Denise found herself more open to direct feedback which may be hard to digest at first because she knew it came from a place of genuine care. Additionally, feedback delivered in a direct way left no room for interpretation so the protégé knew exactly what she needed to do to improve.

Essence

With a phenomenological study, it is important to describe the essence of the explored experience (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the essence of the experience centers around the emergence of trust through shared vulnerability, fostering an environment of authenticity and emotional safety. Trust was the foundation upon which the entire mentoring relationship is built, allowing protégés to confide in their mentors, seek guidance, and pursue personal growth with a sense of security. Along with trust, the essence of mentoring is influenced by the crucial theme of respect for the mentor. When respect is present, it cultivates a supportive environment where protégés feel valued and validated, reinforcing the mentor-protégé bond.

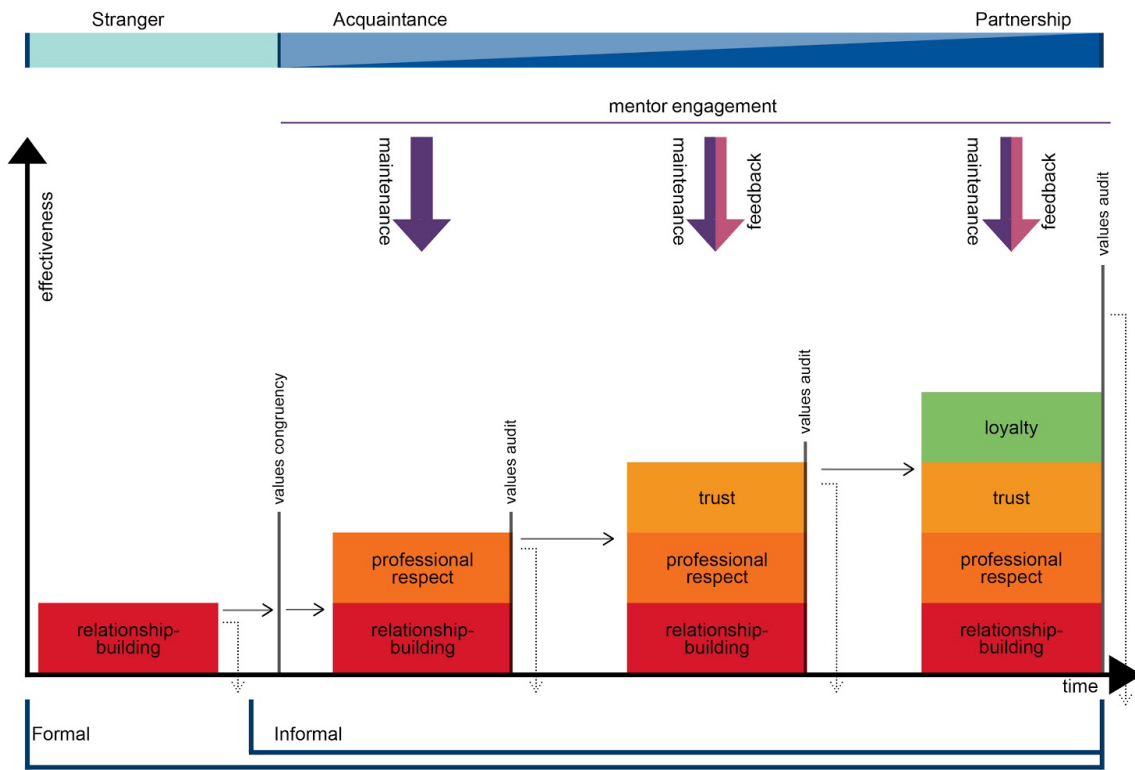
However, the essence also acknowledges challenges in the relationship. The theme of conflicting identity and values underscores the potential fragility of mentorship, as differing perspectives or incongruent values can strain understanding and perceived support. To sustain and enrich the mentoring experience, regular relationship maintenance becomes vital, adding to a sense of continuity and commitment. Additionally, the essence embraces significant, direct feedback, which fosters growth and strengthens the bond between mentors and protégés through honest and constructive communication. Understanding the essence of mentoring through these five themes offers valuable insights to cultivate effective mentorship programs that empower individuals to thrive and reach their full potential.

Conclusions & Discussion

Kram (1985) explained effective mentoring develops in stages, and paired with the inductive analysis of our interviews, allowed for the development of a new conceptual model for mentorship (Figure 1). Although Kram (1985) noted mentorship is typically focused in either vocational or psychosocial development, and mentors who also have a supervisory role over the protégé can indicate stronger mentoring outcomes (Kao et al., 2014), our exploratory findings found one model helped explain both facets of mentoring. The conceptual model was created with the y-axis representing effectiveness and the x-axis representing the time involved in the mentoring relationship. Additionally, formal and informal mentoring relationships are represented on two overlapping timelines. The following sections explain the components

of the model, moving from left to right. While LMX asserts relationships are dyadic, our study focused on exploring the relationship from the protégé’s perspective; therefore, our conclusions and implications focus more specifically on the protégé.

Figure 1.
Pillars of effective mentoring over time



Relationship-Building

The first stage pertains only to formal mentoring relationships, in which the pairings are assigned or facilitated by a third party, because informal mentoring relationships have already completed this stage organically. Fletcher and Mullen (2012) asserted mentorship is an intimate relationship between the protégé and mentor, therefore once a protégé is assigned to a mentor, relationship-building must occur. In this phase, the protégé and mentor get to know each other to better understand one another’s background, character, interests, values, skill sets, and areas of knowledge. This information gathering can come from direct engagement between the mentor and protégé or from outside sources. For example, the protégé could ask colleagues or other individuals who know the mentor to uncover the reputation and character of the mentor. As the mentor and protégé become better acquainted, there is an initial judgment made for both parties. Although it is important for mentorship to have clear expectations (Lamm et al., 2017; Straus et al., 2013), formal mentoring relationships imply a clear area of development, because the individuals are paired by a third party specifically for mentoring.

Professional Respect

The next phase in mentorship model also serves as the beginning for informal mentoring relationships. In informal mentoring, the protégé organically identifies and approaches an individual for mentorship. With informal mentoring relationships, it is important for the protégé to set clear expectations with their mentor before receiving guidance and advice, which is supported by Straus et al. (2013). Since

the relationship is not assigned by a third party, the protégé chooses someone they already know or have a relationship with, which allows quick development of an intimate relationship (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012). Lamm et al. (2017) asserted individuals are likely to take on a mentoring role when there was a previously developed relationship with the protégé, which is supported by the separate conception of mentorship in informal mentoring relationships. Our findings are consistent with Tummons et al. (2016), which indicated perceived similarity in attitudes, beliefs, values, and personality was the best predictor of effective mentoring. This coincides with the crucial first step of mentoring in our model.

Trust

Once respect has been established, the protégé can trust the mentor's ability to provide credible counsel and guidance. Trust is an important factor to consider when establishing a formal mentoring pair (Jones et al., 2014), but findings suggest trust can continue developing after the mentoring relationship has been established. In this capacity, trust pertains to the specific context (i.e., vocational or psychosocial) in which the protégé is seeking mentorship.

Vulnerability is a topic sparsely covered in previous mentoring literature but served as a benchmark in this study. Vulnerability allowed the protégé to recognize trust existed in their mentorship. When the protégé felt comfortable being vulnerable with their mentor to seek raw, authentic guidance about something with which they were struggling, they demonstrated trust in the mentor. However, when the mentor showed true vulnerability by discussing their struggles, the protégé realized the mentor trusted them. Vulnerability appeared in the mentoring relationship only after trust and professional respect were created.

Loyalty and Values

According to the participants, loyalty was something given to mentors in the highest-quality mentoring relationships. However, loyalty was not required for the mentoring relationship to be considered effective. The participants' mentoring experiences showed a significant amount of time is required for a protégé to be loyal to their mentor. A lack of loyalty could be attributed to several external factors outside of the mentorship, which is why we consider loyalty to be helpful, but not imperative for effective mentoring. Tensions of loyalty can create new issues in a mentoring relationship (McDonough, 2014), therefore we argue that loyalty should not be forced or pushed onto the protégé. This pillar of mentoring must occur organically, through consistent emulation of the values and actions the protégé respects in the mentor.

The cruciality of similar identity or values may be specific to the population examined in this study. Because the participants were between the ages of 18 and 28 when identifying mentors, values are still developing in the individuals. Fritz et al. (2005) asserted that people between the ages of 16 and 23 are still in a period where values are crystallizing. At this point, individuals are committing to their values, but they can still be influenced by family and friends close to them. Therefore, the incongruence in values may have a greater impact on the protégés from this study due to their age being in this crystallization window and the amount of influence they were experiencing. These findings support previous literature suggesting effective mentoring needs to consider similar personal values in members in the dyad (Tummons et al., 2016; Straus et al., 2013).

Maintenance

At each step of the process, regular maintenance from the mentor to the protégé is required. Consistent with findings from Denny and Hardman (2020) and Shellhouse et al., (2021), regular intentional feedback with time for reflection and advice is crucial. At any step in our model, if relationship maintenance by the mentor wanes, the protégé may deem the relationship no longer effective and exit the mentoring dyad. In a mentoring relationship, the protégé learns how to work and act from the example of their mentor

(Marabesi & Kelsey, 2020), so it is imperative the mentor give changes to model that behavior to the protégé.

Implications

Leadership practitioners and educators who wish to add a mentoring component to their programs should carefully select mentors for their protégés. It is imperative that leadership practitioners first define the specific context in which the protégés should be mentored. Then, they should identify mentors who have capacity to invest in the protégé's life and have life experience in the context for development. Before pairing mentors with protégés, leadership practitioners should also investigate important values to both members of the dyad. Our findings indicate conflicting values to play a crucial role in the downfall of a mentoring relationship, therefore we argue it is more important to examine the values of the mentors and protégés than other characteristics such as race or gender. The stranger phase, in the mentoring relationship, should be a time in which the mentor and protégé get to know each other without the fear or pressure of making the relationship work. If either party determines the mentoring will not be effective, leadership practitioners should be open to changes in their program, rather than forcing an ineffective mentoring relationship to continue. If the relationship continues and is cultivated into something effective, leadership practitioners should check in with their protégés regularly to ensure they are receiving regular engagement and help them navigate any conflicting values or obstacles to the development of respect and trust.

Effective mentors should take time to understand their protégés goals and needs to ensure they have the capacity to counsel and challenge them. Before accepting a mentoring role, the mentor should first take time to understand their own values. Although mentors' values do not need to be exactly congruent with their protégé's, they should not be in direct conflict. Secondly, it is imperative mentors recognize their expertise in each context and their possible influence on a protégé. As the mentoring relationship develops, mentors should watch for vulnerability from their protégé, which can indicate the protégé trusts the mentor. As trust develops, the mentor can engage the protégé with more direct feedback to guide their development and should provide consistent engagement to maintain the relationship.

Lastly, we found implications to become a more apt protégé. We argue protégés also need to take time to understand their values and set expectations with their mentor early in the relationship. Protégés should allow for time to develop respect and trust before expecting advice and guidance from the mentor. Our findings indicate mentors can feel more invested in the relationship if they see the protégé using the advice given, and the protégés are able to take direct criticism with grace. Finally, protégés should recognize they can and should excuse themselves from a mentoring relationship if it is not effective because their values are conflicting with their mentor, they lost respect for the mentor, or they can no longer trust the mentor.

Limitations

This study did not examine demographic characteristics of the individuals in the mentoring dyad, such as sex or race. Therefore, we cannot determine how our findings align or disconnect from previous literature investigating those facets of mentoring. Additionally, this qualitative research could have unforeseen bias in the interpretation of the results due to the researchers' prior experiences with mentoring and the National FFA Organization. Finally, the participants in this study were asked to self-identify mentors in their lives. This self-identification can be seen as a limitation because it did not have explicit criteria of who a mentor could be. Although participants were given a definition "mentor" before choosing one to focus on for this study, there is still room for interpretation about which role a mentor could play in the participants' lives.

Future Research

Our model was based on inductive qualitative analysis and should, therefore, be tested to ensure its credibility. Additionally, we did not examine a specific, definitive point in the mentoring relationship where the protégé deemed it “effective.” Future investigation from both the mentor and protégé perspective about when the relationship becomes effective could be an important indication of how the relationship develops from each vantage point in the dyad. There is a growing body of literature about the components of a mentoring dyad that assist in making the relationship effective, but there is scant literature on the definition of “effective” or the moment when a protégé or mentor deems the relationship effective. It would be helpful for direct guidance on this journey, similar to studies on self-efficacy and identity development, so there is clearer understanding on how members in a mentoring dyad can measure their effectiveness.

Finally, we did not examine specific pillars or benefits which were important from the mentor’s perspective. Future research should be conducted from the mentor’s vantage point to better understand what makes mentoring effective for those giving the advice and counsel. Previous studies have focused on both members of the mentoring dyad and determined congruency in perceived effectiveness. Because much of the mentoring guidance relies on the mentor’s efforts, we believe more research is needed to measure the mentor’s efforts in a direct relationship with their effectiveness (i.e., does their output equal outcomes for the protégé?). It is important to note, even as the body of literature on mentoring expands, that a mentoring dyad is an intimate and individualized relationship, and the approach to mentoring should be influenced by the growing literature and best practices, but should not be adopted as one-size-fits-all.

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