EMCC
European Mentoring & Coaching Council

EMCC Research Review

Issue 7: Mentoring and burnout

Introduction

Dear Reader,

In this issue of the EMCC Research Review, we will examine the role of mentoring in preventing stress. We often think of mentoring as a relation that fosters development, or a means to achieve something desirable. Yet in this issue we will take a different look at it, seeing instead how it may be used as a means to avoid something undesirable.

Burnout has been defined and measured in quite a few ways in the literature and is often used interchangeably with the term stress. However, consensus seems to be that stress or burnout is characterised by three elements: Exhaustion or persistent fatigue, cynicism and a lack of engagement at work, and doubt about one's ability to perform.

According to Statista, between 45 % and 66 % of people in Europe reported having experienced and been on the verge of burnout in 2021. Alarmingly, a 2018 report form Eurofond showed that 59 % of burnout cases also had depression and 58 % suffered from anxiety both of which are very serious diagnoses.

Before we move on to a short look at the papers in this volume, it is worth mentioning that burnout or stress is not only caused by work. Rather, it often emerges in situations where life in general puts exceedingly high demands on an individual. Work is often a factor but not the only cause.

We start out the review by looking at a classic paper by the grand old lady of mentoring research Kathy Kram and her co-author Douglas Hall. Their study was, to the best of my knowledge, the first to document the stress buffering effect of mentoring.

In the next study, Allen, McManus and Russell show that formal group-mentoring can assist newcomers' socialisation and reduce stress in that way. A particularly interesting aspect of their study is that the look at peer-mentoring, thereby rejecting the commonly held assumption that mentors need to be more senior than their mentees to be helpful.

We round of this issue of EMCC Research Review with a new study by Varghese, Rogers, Finkelstein and Barber. Their study shows the large positive impact formal mentors can have in curbing the tendency to burnout among individuals scoring high on trait neuroticism.

I hope you enjoy reading the current issue.

Sincerely

Content writer

Leo Smith, EMCC Denmark

Using mentors to cope with corporate trauma – a classic study

Study: Mentoring as an antidote to stress during corporate trauma

By: Kathy E. Kram & Douglas T. Hall

Published in: Human Resource Management, 1989, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 493-510

Introduction

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the role of mentoring in stress prevention.

The data used in the study was gathered during the 1980's, a period characterised by large systemic changes and the emergence of corporate downsizing as a fashionable management tool. Thus, even if the study was published nearly 35 years ago, there are certainly relevant contextual parallels to drawn to the current situation of many businesses facing cost cuttings and rapidly developing technological advances.

What did the researchers do?

The study was conducted in the engineering department of a large American manufacturing company going through a downsizing process. It followed a mixed methods approach to data-collection using both qualitative group interviews and quantitative individual surveys. The sample comprised 161 engineers, all of whom were male. Stress was measured using the validated Maslach scale, which is a self-assessment.

Main Findings

- Surprisingly, the more stressed the respondents were at work, the more their orientation to mentoring increased
- Specifically, when the level of frustration rose, the prospect of mentoring others was perceived as more appealing
- Also, more perceived work pressure was associated with an increased desire to mentor, and being mentored

- In addition, higher levels of stress were associated with a stronger orientation to raising the quality of mentoring in general
- Another interesting finding was that individuals that were mid-career (aged 40-50) were less inclined to mentor than those younger and older

Why is this interesting?

One thing that is particularly interesting about this study is the rather uplifting finding people seem to become helpful in times of crisis and uncertainty. One could of course argue that the motivation for mentoring others in high-stress times is more self-serving, given that it is also a means to build social capital and exposure. In any case, given the importance assigned to quality, offering a voluntary mentor training course would entail an insignificant investment with a large potential payoff.

Another interesting finding pertains to the fact that early career individuals were quite keen on mentoring others even in a crisis situation and despite their relative lack of experience. Again, one could speculate about their motivation but let us assume that the desire stems from helpfulness.

Finally, given the known, lasting negative effects on morale and increase in cynicism that follows in the wake of downsizings, mentorships may help mitigate the so-called "survivor syndrome", since they have established trusting relationships in the organisation.

How can you put this into practice?

The study shows that when an organisation faces a downsizing process or a crisis in general, investing in mentoring might in fact pay off. As argued by the authors, having a mentor or serving as a mentor may in fact curb some of the negative effects associated with major cut-backs.

It is also worth considering that being a mentor might be a means to keep younger individuals engaged. Therefor finding meaningful set-ups in which early career individuals act as mentors, say for newcomers or those being reboarded to their department, could be something worth investigating.

A final important point is that the respondents generally agreed that the quality of mentoring was important. This indicates that some level of formal mentor training is advisable.

Drawbacks

As mentioned by the authors in the method section of the paper, one potential drawback lies in the fact that all respondents were male. Therefore, it may be difficult generalise the findings to female engineers and other professions regardless of gender. Remember that the data was collected in the early 1980's when only 5,8 % of engineers were female according to the Congressional Joint Economic Committee.

Another drawback is that the study investigates informal mentorships, rather than the more institutionalised formal programs favoured by many HR departments today. It is therefore difficult to generalise the findings to a more formal setting. Luckily, the next study looks into this.

Using mentors to cope with stress during onboarding

Study: Newcomer socialization and stress: Formal peer relationships as a source of support

By: Tammy D. Allen, Stacy E. McManus & Joyce E. A. Russell

Published in: Journal of Vocational Behavior, 1999, vol. 54, pp. 453-470

Introduction

In this study, the mentoring set-up under investigation is quite different from the one above. First, mentor and mentees were part of a formalised program. And secondly, they were peers, more specifically mentee were 1st semester MBA students and mentors were 2nd year MBA students.

It is also worth noting that the MBA program in question was structured around working in teams of 5-6 people much like it is the case a most workplaces.

All mentors received some formal training and were assigned to teams rather than to individuals, although individual mentor sessions were done frequently.

The study illustrates what peers in an organisation can do for each other in tough times, provided there is a structure in place.

What did the researcher do?

The sample comprised 64 first-year students who participated as mentees in the mentor program. They were surveyed at the end of the academic year as part of the evaluation of the mentor programme.

Specifically, the authors measured the following:

- Mentoring function, describing which roles the mentors served: Psychosocial (mental support, affiliation, and friendship) and career-related (aimed at improving technical skills)

- Socialization, describing the degree to which mentees felt like member of the programme
- Stress measuring both level of stress and perceived help with stress

Main findings:

- Mentors provided more psychosocial than career-related mentoring
- Mentoring of both types were associated with higher levels of perceived socialization
- Mentoring did not reduce stress, but more mentoring were associated with an increase in perception of help
- Better socialization was associated with lower stress

Why is this interesting?

One of the more interesting aspects of the study is that it how peer mentoring can lead to positive outcomes. This goes some way in showing that mentors need not be situated at higher level than the mentee, as long as it is a genuine helping relationship.

Also, it was interesting to see mentoring as such did not reduce stress directly, but via increased socialisation and by offering help with stress. Thus, mentoring cannot change the fact that a situation is stressful, but it may equip mentees better to cope with the stress.

The fact that psychosocial mentoring predominated makes sense. As noted by the authors peers are unlikely to have the social capital needed to provide career-related mentoring, but they can certainly show empathy and support mentees in more relational ways.

How can you put this into practice?

The study is of particular relevance to companies running graduate programs, as it shows the potential of having second year graduates as mentors for first year graduates.

The study also shows that team-based mentoring can work if a structure and training is provided by mentor program managers. Using peers and team mentoring, inevitably reduces the costs of running mentoring program for newcomers. Moreover, the set-up allows for meaningful peer supervisory relationships, meaning the mentors participating in the program could form supervisory groups, giving them a forum in which the can air concerns and successes and help each other.

Drawbacks

It may be difficult to generalise the findings to more corporate contexts as the sample comprised MBA students. In a corporate setting one could expect to see more internal rivalry and politics between peers, which is unlikely to emerge in a student setting. However, the findings may generalise quite well to graduate program settings.

Another drawback is the cross-sectional nature of study and the lack of a control-group. We therefore cannot compare the mentored group to a non-mentored group, nor do we have any data to suggest how changes in stress levels were associated with mentoring. Therefore we cannot make any causal inferences about whether the program itself produced the positive outcome.

Using mentor to cope with high neuroticism

Study: Examining mentors as buffers of burnout for employees high in neuroticism

By: Lebena S. Varghese, Arielle P. Rogers, Lisa Finkelstein & Larissa K. Barber

Published in: Human Resource Development, 2020, vol. 31, pp. 281-300

Introduction

In this new study, the authors investigate the role of mentoring in curbing stress-risk in individuals scoring high on trait neuroticism. Neuroticism is a personality trait that is characterised by a tendency to experience negative emotions, and the potential negative consequences hereof are well-documented. One of the negative outcomes is an increased propensity to burnout.

This study is interesting because it is one of the few that investigates how we may help those scoring high on neuroticism. Moreover, the study distinguishes between the effect of psychosocial and career-related mentoring, showing how the contribute differently to the same end.

What did the researcher do?

The participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a system that allows for crowdsourcing of workers do to on-demand tasks or as it is the case here participate in research projects with a monetary compensation. This resulted in a diverse sample comprising 325 individuals. All participant answered self-report measures detailing their score on neuroticism and level of burnout on the three dimensions emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and cognitive weariness. In terms of mentoring they detailed if they had a mentor at all, the function of the mentor (psychosocial and career-related), and the type of mentoring (formal and informal).

Main findings:

- As expected, higher scores on neuroticism were associated with higher levels of burnout with neuroticism explaining 25 % of the variance in burnout
- However, having a formal mentor resulted in the association being non-significant
- Informal mentors had no significant attenuating effect
- Specifically, psychosocial mentoring mitigated the risk of emotional exhaustion
- Moreover, career-related mentoring mitigated the risk of cognitive weariness

Why is this interesting?

The study shows that having a mentor can curb the likelihood of burnout for individuals scoring high on neuroticism. This is a tremendously important finding that can greatly impact well-being at work for those who are most at risk.

It is also interesting to see that formal mentoring drastically outperformed informal mentoring.

Finally, it is important to remember that neuroticism is measured on a continuum and that it is not an illness. For instance, other studies have shown a correlation between perfectionism and neuroticism, and in some jobs perfectionism is a valuable strength. In these domains it may be particularly relevant to create formal mentor programs to attenuate stress.

How can you put this into practice?

The study shows that prioritising formal mentors for individuals scoring high on trait neuroticism is likely going to pay off.

In training the mentors, emphasis should be placed on both psychosocial mentoring skills and career-related mentoring skills as they attenuate different aspects of burnout.

Drawbacks

One of the drawbacks of the study is that is cross-sectional, and therefore we cannot say much about how mentors work as an intervention strategy in high stress situations.

Moreover, as the author also point out, it would be interesting to see how to use personality measures as a means to select mentors for mentees scoring high on neuroticism.

Finally, it would be interesting to see whether specific industry dynamics influence the effect of mentoring, but due to the varied sample used in the study, this is left open for further research.

Conclusion

Looking at the three studies above and more generally at the literature, it becomes clear that there is substantial evidence supporting the stress-buffering capacity of mentoring. Even more interestingly, we saw how higher levels of work pressure may increase the propensity of employees to engage in mentoring, perhaps indicating that most people are actually quite helpful, when need be.

We also saw that mentoring is particularly beneficial for people who are at higher risk of burnout, such as newcomers and people scoring high on trait neuroticism. Formal mentoring programs, in particular, seem to have a profound positive effect, even if done in a group setting. This is definitely something for HR departments to consider.

Another core finding is that the quality of mentoring matters. This points to the importance of matching mentors to mentees, training the mentors properly, and perhaps establishing more formal codes of conduct.

Beware, of course, that mentoring is not a quick fix. If your corporate culture is stress-inducing, no amount of mentoring is going to solve the problem. Likewise, if someone is going through a really rough and chaotic patch in life, a mentor can only do so much. Finally, it is important to remember that once we enter a clinical domain and we are dealing with psychiatric diagnoses such as depression and anxiety, it requires formal clinical training.