

Protégé Perception of Faculty Mentoring in India: An Exploratory Study

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This study looks at mentoring as a bottom-up approach by exploring who is the ideal mentor and what is the ideal mentoring process from the perspective of the student-protégé. From codes and categories elicited from semi-structured interviews, some significant themes emerged that add to the mentoring literature. A seemingly formal mentoring relationship is seen by some respondents as going beyond this, with an ideal mentor described as a father or even an idol. Some respondents say that a profound relationship could extend over many years beyond the role of professor and student. The ideal mentoring is said to have both formal and informal elements. The construct was seen to be fluid and evolving as per the situation.

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Higher Education Mentoring in India

With fierce competition and radical shifts in the job market landscape, brought in by trends such as disruptive technologies and artificial intelligence, it is becoming vital for higher education institutes (HEIs) to cultivate “job-capable graduates” (Munro, 2016). Student employability is increasingly being defined as going beyond mastering core technical skills to include practical intelligence such as the management of self and others (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Hill, Walkington & France, 2016).

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In this backdrop it is a matter of concern that according to a recent report by Aspire Minds, nearly 80 per cent of engineering graduates in India are said to be unemployable¹. To address this con-

¹(<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/80-of-engineers-inindia-unemployable-report/article8147656.ece>)

cern, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) recently initiated workshops for faculty at engineering colleges across the country to prepare students for life skills and soft skills, apart from technical knowledge. In other words, greater importance is being placed upon a range of employability skills for students, rather than simply securing employment for them (Scott, 2014).

At an institutional level, there are a few examples of HEIs in India that are imparting not only technical and theoretical training to students, but soft skills and ethical leadership enhancement too by means of mentorship programs. The IIT Bombay's Student Mentorship program is one such example in which senior students guide juniors with a vision to inculcate 'the right attitude right'.

Not just engineering colleges, but business schools in India too are realizing the importance of developing students beyond the mentoring outcomes of enhanced student psychological strength and well-being (Khan, 2013). A study on student mentoring as a pedagogy in 19 Business Schools in Karnataka suggests that mentoring leads to enhancement of certain job-capable qualities amongst students like taking greater responsibility, a better capacity to plan and also greater perseverance (George & Mampilly, 2012).

While HEIs in India are recognizing the need for mentoring programs as a means for enhancing the job-readiness of students, these programs largely continue to be introduced in a top-down manner

to fulfill certain mentoring objectives as defined by the educational institute. However, it is also important to look at the bottom-up approach, and explore what an ideal mentor and ideal mentoring process means for the student protégé. For example, one student at a business school in Bangalore said in an interview that while the mentoring program was apparently robust, it would have been more meaningful had the protégés been sensitized about how to get most from the mentor (Kurian & Padode, 2018).

It is hoped that this exploratory study, asking protégés for their views on the ideal mentor and the ideal mentoring process in order to find underlying common dimensions, will lead to the implementation of more robust mentoring processes at HEIs in India. This exploratory study is important not only in the current changing landscape, but in the context of the diverse Indian job market too, which consists of a large Gen Y population who are known to have unique skills, aspirations and work values too (Rani & Samuel, 2016).

Mentoring includes interdependent relationships that enable mutual learning and development.

Furthermore, delving into the protégé perspective is an appropriate fit to the current mentoring literature, which has seen a shift in the manner in which mentoring has been defined - from the traditional, hierarchical, top-down relationship-to more of a relational approach in which mentoring includes interdepen-

dent relationships that enable mutual learning and development (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007), as explained in the next section.

Mentoring as a Construct

The mentor is seen to be one who serves as a wise, responsible and trusted advisor who guides the protégé's development (Miller, 2004). Whether we refer to mentoring by faculty of students in the education sector, or of managers mentoring subordinates in the workplace, mentoring relationships are characterized by feedback, advice, guidance, counsel and support provided by the mentor for both the protégé's personal and professional development (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008).

What mentoring scholarship on the education sector and in the workplace also has in common is that mentoring has been posited as a process of socialization in which mentors control the "gates of social reproduction" (Margolis & Romero, 2001: 81). They differ, however, in terms of the goal of mentoring, in that in academia the predominant goal is to develop the protégé in terms of academic performance, better adjustment to college life (Jacobi, 1991) and also being better prepared for jobs; whereas in workplace mentoring a protégé's development is linked closely to organizational goals, such as better performance, and is thus uniquely embedded within the career context (Ragins & Kram, 2007; Kumar, 2018). The two sub-constructs of psychosocial and instrumental mentoring come up time and again in the literature, from

early research on academic mentoring of students (Chickering, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), to more mentoring of subordinates of by managers in the workplace (Hamlin & Sage, 2011).

Reciprocity, trust and empathy are said to be the bedrock of strong mentoring relationships.

However, the definition of mentoring in the workplace literature has recently evolved to also include the relational dimension in which reciprocity, trust and empathy are said to be the bedrock of strong mentoring relationships (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). Thus, mentoring has developed as a construct from a top-down relationship to one which is more dyadic in nature (Higgins & Kram, 2001), and which thus merits research on the protégé perspective too, given differences in roles and the power equation with the mentor (Eby et al., 2008).

Exploratory Study

It is the research question that primarily drives the choice of methods used and a qualitative study is seen to be appropriate for exploratory studies given that there is scant literature in this area (Creswell, 2013). Using a sample of 22 students derived from one university in north India (N=12), and one Business School in South India (N=10), semi structured interviews were conducted to gauge the context and the meaning of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research usually works with small groups of people, in which the samples are pur-

positive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). BML Munjal University (BMU) was set up in 2014 as a not-for-profit initiative offering undergraduate and post-graduate courses in management and engineering disciplines. In tune with the changing market conditions, BMU's vision is to nurture responsible leaders who are skilled, knowledgeable and have the life skills required for leading their organizations to success. BMU aims to achieve this by a pedagogy which focuses on experiential learning, and also by mentoring of student protégés by faculty mentors. The Institute of Finance and International Management (IFIM), Bangalore, is a business school founded in 1995. To achieve the Business School's vision to nurture socially responsible and employable graduates, a mentoring program was initiated in which corporate leaders and faculty mentors actively engaged with students who were about to graduate and enter the job market, for example by guiding them on suitable career options.

The two institutions differ slightly in their mentoring objective. While BMU's mentoring objective is for the student to make a smooth transition from the home environment, to university life, as an enabler for building up both technical and life skills, IFIM's mentoring program is more geared towards enabling students to make a transition from graduation to a working environment. At both places the mentors are paired with the students by the institutes.

In order to conduct a robust semi-structured interview after an appropriate

focus group was identified (Table 1), a set of questions was prepared and then as responses were received from the respondents, further laddering questions were asked to dig deeper into the conversation (Whiting, 2008; Longhurst, 2003). Respondents were assured of both the confidentiality and the non-judgmental nature of the interview.

The statements were meticulously recorded, transcribed, coded using a line-by-line analysis and subsequently categories were developed at a higher level of abstraction (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). There were two coders for this process and the inter-rater reliability, or concurrence of agreement between two coders, was 86 per cent (Krippendorff, 2004). The respondents were asked questions in three categories: about their ideal mentor, ideal mentoring process and ideal mentor-protégé pairing, as follows:

Ideal Mentor

- Q1) Who according to you is a mentor?
- Q2) What is your understanding of an ideal mentor?

Ideal Mentoring Process

- Q3) How do you perceive the mentor-mentee relationship to be?
- Q4) What are the various expectations from mentoring for personal and professional development?
- Q5) What type of mentor-mentee program should be used to gain maximum benefits at the University level?

| | |
|---|--|
| Ideal Pairing | choosing her/his mentor, the mentor choosing her/his mentee or the organization pairing them up? |
| Q6) What is your opinion on the mentoring – mentee pairing? | |
| Q7) Which option according to you is better way for pairing: Mentee | Q8) What should be the various factors that can be used to pair the mentors and the mentees? |

Table 1 Descriptive Details of Respondents

| | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Gender | Male (14) | Female (8) |
| Age Range | 18-22 (6) | 22-28 (16) |
| Student Type | Undergraduate (5) | Post Graduate (17) |
| Subjects | Tech and Engineering (5) | Management (17) |

Source: Authors' own

Results of the Study

The interviews of respondents from BMU and from IFIM elicited a total of 2306 statements. Interviewees made 981 statements in response to the questions on the Ideal Mentor. These statements were divided into 22 dimensions (Table 2), which were then grouped into 4 meta themes as follows: 1. Role modeling, 2. Psycho-social support, 3. Instrumental support and 4. Personality traits.

Respondents most often described the ideal mentor as one who was 1. An

aspirational guide, 2. Parent-like 3. A friend or companion 4. A guide 5. A good listener.

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The following dimensions and meta-themes were elicited from the interviews (Table 2).

Table 2 Protégé Perception of the Ideal Mentor

| Categories & Codes | Sample Statements | Frequency (number of mentions) |
|----------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Role Modeling | | |
| Shows Path | So basically, a mentor is a person who shows us some path.... but it depends on us whether you choose that path or not. Mentor can be a person who motivates you and who shows you the correct path. Because it is very difficult for a person to know everything so a mentor is somebody who is experienced in his field he can teach you the right way. A mentor is a person who is like a support to his mentee if they are not able to move ahead or if they do not have any idea if they are stuck or there is a road blockage. | 7 |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|----|
| Aspirational guide | I see my mentor as my role model and somebody to whom I can look up to. A mentor is somebody from whom you can learn things and somebody who you look up to. | 38 |
| Parent-like | The mentor is a person who is an idol for me and shows me my mistakes and corrects me wherever required. So according to me after my parents I see my mentor. It is more like a relationship that exists between a child and the parents. A mentor is like a guardian who deals with you in every way ... your objectives should be his objectives, hence I see my mentor as my guardian. | 18 |
| <hr/> | | |
| Psycho-Social Support | | |
| A buffer | You can be very cool with your mentor and share each and everything that you want. If I can properly convey my things and even using slang language in front of him then only I think I can say that he is my ideal mentor. There should not be any formal arrangements, but rather mentors and mentees ought to be able to share their views without any restrictions. | 5 |
| A friend or companion | A good mentor is like a friend that you can be cool with and share each and everything. A mentor is more than a friend according to me. | 41 |
| Encourages | A mentor to me is the one who always guides me to achieve something and who always encourages me to get there, and who polishes my capabilities. When I face certain problems regarding studies or extracurricular my mentor tells me to take it easy ... I really feel good after talking to her ... this is an ideal mentor. | 13 |
| Enhances soft skills | The mentor is the person to whom we look up to and who can help us with communication skills and overcome language barriers. | 9 |
| <hr/> | | |
| Instrumental support | | |
| Identifies talent | He should be able to identify my potential and accordingly lead me to the work which I can do the best. And, he should keep on motivating me from time to time to do that work. I want that where I am he or she should take me to the level higher and higher, and should be able to polish all my skills to help me realize my potential. | 7 |
| Guides to achieve goals | To me a mentor is the one who always guides me to achieve something and who always encourages me to get there, while constantly probing that I can increase the level of my performance and the capabilities. | 46 |
| Enhances performance | A mentor enhances my capabilities. My present mentor encourages me to do things which are required for my future growth. | 5 |
| Helps in planning | Helps him plan including future opportunities that a mentee will face in his life. | 8 |
| Aids personally and professionally | If I want to make my career in finance and if the mentor is a very knowledgeable person but in the field of marketing, then he can help in my personal development but he cannot help me in my professional goals. The most important thing is that if a mentor can help in professional and personal way and guide you, then it is good. | 12 |
| Shares Knowledge | A mentor is someone who guides and shares his knowledge and experience with the mentee. | 11 |
| Points out mistakes | A mentor should take care of me. He should be both cool and harsh both by pointing out mistakes. | 5 |
| Brings discipline | ..the mentor helps in bringing more stability and discipline in my approach and the way I go about things | 4 |

| Personality Traits | | |
|--------------------|---|----|
| Motivational | A mentor is a person who motivates us and who can show us some path. | 7 |
| Good Listener | We should be paired up with a mentor who is a good listener and can listen to all my doubts. | 10 |
| Empathetic | He should be empathetic and should understand what the person is going through. | 5 |
| Loyal | A mentor should be a person who is loyal to himself because if he is loyal to him self only then he can be loyal to me. | 5 |
| Probing | There are some students who are very shy. A mentor should be such who can probe and get the protégé out of the shell. | 5 |
| Pragmatic | He needs to have a very pragmatic approach in which he can tell us right and wrong. | 5 |
| Easy to approach | Also, there ought not be any formal courses of action for it and it ought to be where the two guides and mentees can share their perspectives with no confinements. | 9 |

Interviewees made 637 statements in response to the questions on the Ideal Mentoring Process. These statements were divided into 11 dimensions (Table 3), which were then grouped into 3 meta themes as follows: 1. Formal dimension of relationship 2. Informal dimension of relationship 3. Mentoring as a dynamic relationship.

Respondents most often described the ideal mentoring process as having 1. A Goal Direction 2. Regular Meetings 3. An informal dimension.

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Interviewees made 688 statements in response to the questions on the ideal mentor-protégé pairing process. These statements were divided into 5 dimensions (Table 4), which were then grouped into 2 meta themes as follows:

1. Different Pairing Possibilities 2. Multiple Mentors

Respondents most often described the ideal pairing system as one which involves 1. Students Choosing Their Mentors, 2. Specialization-based Pairing

The dimensions and meta-themes elicited from the interviews are presented in Table 4.

Discussion

So far studies have shown that a meaningful mentoring relationship at higher educational institutions has a positive relationship on students' satisfaction with college (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007), and leads to a psycho-social comfort that allows for a student to grow socially too regardless of the environment (Redmond, 1990).

This study confirms the findings of these earlier studies. This study also reiterates that protégé perceives mentoring to be providing both instrumental support and psycho-social support, the two

Table 3 Ideal Mentoring Process

| Unique Code | Quotes | Frequency |
|---|--|-----------|
| Formal dimension of relationship | | |
| Goal direction | He should improve the mentee's ability and should push him towards his goals. The mentor ought to enhance the mentee's capacity and should push him towards his objectives. | 14 |
| Regular meetings | Like we can have mentor and mentee meeting one in two weeks or once in a week. So, I will suggest keeping the mentor and mentee meeting at least once a week so that we can share each and everything with the mentor. | 29 |
| Individual guidance | He should take an individual approach to individual students. Even if the problem is the same for all the students then the environment leading to those problems is different. | 12 |
| Instills discipline | He instills discipline, which is one of the ways where you can learn from the other person. | 4 |
| Time Management | ...teaches time management I learnt how to manage time thanks to my mentor so I could do studies and other work as well. | 4 |
| Informal dimension of relationship | | |
| Informal | One needs to have informal discussions too. The mentor and mentee can decide whether they communicate on an email, text or phone call - it's their choice. | 27 |
| Mutual trust | There should be a respect for privacy, so if I am telling something to my mentor then the mentor should not share that information with other students. There should be confidentiality of information exchanged between a mentor and a mentee. As per my expectation from my mentor is that whenever I share my problem with my mentor so he should be very open with me as well. | 5 |
| Good rapport | A certain rapport needs to be developed while being in the mentoring process. | 5 |
| Mentoring as a dynamic process | | |
| Unrestricted exchange of information | The exchange of information between a mentor and mentee should be more and not just limited to mentor-mentee meeting. I think there should be no restrictions or boundaries in a mentor mentee relationship. | 13 |
| Multi-dimensional | And professionally of course, she tells me to take up different courses that I should do in the future and tells me to think about my professional career and plans that I have after my graduation. So, I get to view things in a multiple way. So, this program has molded me both personally and professionally. | 5 |
| Long-term | To me this relationship is very warm and very pure. I mean it is not only for the time that we are here on campus. It should be even after we graduate from the university in your life ahead as well. | 5 |

sub-constructs of the classical mentoring definition (Kram, 1985). The relational dimension of mentoring is also evident in this study, with the mentor often being described as a parent-fig-

ure or a buffer. Furthermore, this study makes it evident how important the mentor is as a role model for a protégé: A role model's attainability refers to the degree to which a role aspirant can see

Table 4 Protégé Perception of Ideal Mentor-Protégé Pairing

| Unique Code | Quotes | Frequency |
|--|---|-----------|
| Different pairing possibilities | | |
| Students choosing mentors | I do not think that the institution pairing the mentor and mentee is a good option because they may not know each student. So, it should be the mentees choosing their mentors. The mentees should be allowed to choose the mentors. Because if I choose a mentor with whom I am comfortable and like him more than I can share each and everything with him. It will be more beneficial for me in that way. The mentees should be asked to choose their mentors and after some time they should be given the chance to switch their mentors if they are not comfortable. | 16 |
| Specialization based pairing | The mentor's field of expertise and my specialization should always be same as it can give me a better understanding of the career path. Talking about the professional learning I believe I can leverage upon the vast experience that my mentor has in the industry and then learn not to repeat the same mistakes which he did or professionals generally do once they are in the arena. | 21 |
| Similar personality types | We can pair them based on their interest areas. Also based on the personality types for example a person is an introvert then he should be paired with a mentor who is also an introvert otherwise there will be a mismatch. The connection should be there both should be able to connect with each other. | 5 |
| Similar interests | The pairing should be done on the interest factors between the mentor and the mentees, which can be extracurricular, or even anything else. | 8 |
| Multiple Mentors | | |
| More than one mentor | It could be like that mentees can have more than one mentors. Like I have a finance teacher and I have a good understanding with her so I can have her as my mentor as well as another mentor. | 5 |

him or herself being like the role model in the future—the answer to the question “can I be like this person?” (Morgenroth et al., 2015: 472).

With regard to the ideal mentoring process, student-protégés envisage this to be a dynamic life-defining relationship that unfolds over time.

With regard to the ideal mentoring process, student-protégés envisage this to be a dynamic life-defining relationship that unfolds over time. The respondents also say that an ideal relationship is one,

which consists of both formal and informal hues, from regular formal meetings, to providing a safe space where the protégé feels the comfort to be able to talk about anything.

There are differences in opinion about the ideal pairing system, with some respondents vying for personality match, while others say the match ought to be according to subject specialization, and still others saying that they should be paired according to similar interests. In sync with more recent developments in the mentoring literature on a broader definition of mentoring as a developmental network with multiple mentors (Higgins

& Kram, 2001), instead of the traditional focus on single mentoring relationships, some respondents suggest that having more than one mentor would be ideal.

This study adds to the literature by suggesting that the ideal academic mentorship can be seen as going beyond a few boundary conditions as per existing mentoring literature:-

The ideal academic mentorship can be seen as going beyond a few boundary conditions.

1. Relationship Depth: Earlier studies imply that a mentor-protégé relationship is a very close one, with the mentor being compared to a surrogate parent (Clutterbuck, 1985). In this study, an ideal mentoring relationship is seen by some respondents as having more depth than a surrogate parent, with the ideal mentor being described in terms of epithets of endearment, such as a father, a parent, companion or even an idol. In fact there were 41 references to the mentor as a friend. Said one respondent: "He or she ought to be a companion as opposed to being a definitive identity. Since being a companion dependably drives you to accomplish increasingly and share more with them. You don't consider him to be an educator yet as a companion."

2. Relationship Duration: Up to now the literature has acknowledged that mentoring is a dynamic process which unfolds over time, the impact of which is said to increase with the passage of time (Garvey & Alred, 2003). The new find-

ing in this study is that some protégés refer to an ideal mentoring relationship as being almost timeless – as a profound relationship that could extend over many years beyond the role of professor and student. Said one respondent, "Even when you are married then also you should be in touch with your mentor."

3. Multidimensionality: The ideal mentoring relationship is said to have elements of both a formal structure of meetings at a particular time and space, but also informal elements of a chat between the pair in which the protégé is assured that this will not be judged or appraised (the informal dimension was mentioned 27 times in the interviews). Said one respondent, "Students are not very clear about the mentoring process, they think that it is only a meeting to discuss marks and other things. But it should not be a formal session it should be more informal where mentor and mentee can have a chit chat session and be what they are without any evaluation and restrictions."

"I don't think that there can be any one definition of an ideal mentor, rather it depends from situation to situation. Also, multiple people can be become ideal mentors in various ways."

4. Mentoring as a Construct: It was seen to be fluid and evolving as per the situation: Said one respondent, "I don't think that there can be any one definition of an ideal mentor, rather it depends from situation to situation. Also, multiple people can be become ideal mentors in various ways."

To conclude, in this study aspirational mentoring is on the whole seen by student protégés to be an affective relationship that may go beyond the formal pairing of a mentor and protégé in terms of time and depth. While the study was conducted on only two higher educational institutes in India, given the scarcity of literature in this area, this study breaks new ground by identifying themes that could be examined in greater depth in future studies. Furthermore, the perspective of protégés is worth taking into consideration by the leadership of HEIs of India who are planning to rollout or modify mentoring programs.

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