Mentoring and Its Influence on Career Development and Job Satisfaction

Indiana Law Enforcement Training Board-Master Instructor Committee

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the relationship between mentoring and its impact on positive career development. Career development and the dynamic between job satisfactions will also be explored. Conversely an extended examination will be made to compare and contrast those who did not identify with a mentor in their career path. Despite the specific differences in professions used as examples, there are universal truths that bridge the gap across all occupational genres. A qualitative study will reveal the nuances of the mentor/mentee relationship and its impact personally and professionally for both parties. The results will show the benefits of mentoring, notably within the police profession and how career satisfaction and development are enhanced.

Many can identify with some type of stress or stressors found on the job or in their respective profession. An ongoing problem within the medical community for example is burnout. Being overworked and understaffed creates notable issues that challenge the joy of making the drive or trip into work. Of the many job related stressors, fatigue on the job and burnout are serious concerns. How to manage those concerns and successfully navigate the human terrain is a paramount skill.

According to the FBI, approximately every 52 hours a police officer loses their life in the line of duty. This equates to well over a hundred plus annually. As grim as that statistic is, nearly 300 officers each year commit suicide (Lewis, 1995). There is scarce research that addresses the correlation between depression, suicide and professional stress within the police profession. A prevailing question is what changes occur during the first several years that leave officers so despondent and psychologically injured as to take their own life? It is the hope of this research to identify and validate the benefits of mentoring in other professional genres so a template of success might be applied and this little known dilemma facing the police profession can be averted.

An equally challenging problem is how to keep officers personally and professionally healthy after they are “burned” out. Within the police profession there exist data, both empirical and anecdotal that underscores the significance of stress and job related pressure. Officer candidates endure a rigorous selection process and must pass a psychological exam before acceptance into the profession. Furthermore, many must complete a fairly rigorous and exhausting recruit school to facilitation application of tactical skills to enhance safety and survival. But what about the emotional survival to the rigors of the job?

Ferreting out crime brings out additional considerations that can impact survival. Police officers typically train on the traditional aspects for officer safety. There seems to be little regard to the emotional survival of the officers tasked to go into harm’s way. There is limited research in this area and to correctly gauge the efficacy of a mentoring program requires an investigation of the benefits and how to implement a viable program. This opens the door to a relatively untapped area within policing. Numbers clearly show that the police profession is dangerous business. Officer survival courses attempt to address physical safety. Overall mental and emotional well-being is an area that has potential for extensive review.

**Mentoring as a Means for Development**

There is much in the way of research that proffers the benefit of mentoring and mentoring programs. For the purpose of this research and paper, the author shall identify mentoring as that process where an experienced individual shares with one who is less experienced, their knowledge and ability for the purposes of *overall* development. Notably the police profession provides multiple scenarios where the benefits of mentoring can be applied.

This “intentional nurturing process” (Dansky, 1996) is paramount in developing the necessary skills to matriculate through a very challenging and still rewarding profession. Two unique aspects of mentoring need to be identified to set the foundation for effective implementation of a viable mentoring program: 1) Instrumental functions; those that focus on skills related to career success and 2) Psychosocial functions; which focus on promoting a sense of competence, identity and role acquisition (Dansky, 1996).

To address the importance of these functions, it is helpful to clearly define objectives associated with each respectively. Job satisfaction can be a nebulous concept but in previous studies, salary level, promotion rate or promotability are clear factors that correlate to job satisfaction. (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). A less tangible measurement involves assessing commitment to the job, turnover and retention. Investment into these identifiable concerns, according to previous studies, enhances the development of the professional and personal “self” (Fletcher, 2007). A supportive environment through the medium of a solid mentoring program can assist in personal and professional growth. Self-Efficacy is another antecedent for personal and professional success. However within the police profession there is little in the way of research to test the notion or more importantly, application of this theoretical framework.

According to Fletcher, “mentoring cannot thrive in an organizational vacuum.” (2007). Mentoring programs must be imbedded within policy, the culture, and must permeate throughout the organization for its benefits to be realized. Many police departments institute a “Field Training Officer” (FTO) program that attempt to fill the role of a mentor. That is where the program stops however as the FTO’s are senior officers who are skilled at the operational level, but may fall short in the mentor and coaching qualities desired.

The research is succinct in that the attitudinal component greatly impacts an officer’s behavior (Miller, 2004). In absence of continual training, mentoring and coaching, the best intentioned screening process (for police officers) falls short in their ability to prepare candidates for life as a cop. Periodic wellness checks should be a regular part of standard operating procedures throughout an officer’s career (Miller, 2004).

Dr. Paul Whitesell offers a four step paradigm that can successfully bridge the gap between what scholars suggest and real world application. The four step process involves: 1) Modeling, 2) Mentoring, 3) Monitoring and 4) Motivating. (Whitesell, 1999).

Modeling involves showing the way or leading by example. It is a traditional method of exchange between coach-student at the earliest phase. It is here where much of the informal nuances are seen and shared. It is also a critical phase for the mentor/mentee dynamic. Mentoring within this model includes sharing responsibilities and allowing the understudy to become more involved in the learning process. This encompasses further explanation and exploration as a means to develop a greater understanding of the issue or topic. Monitoring is where there is an exchange between mentor and the understudy where the understudy assumes more of an active role and explains to the mentor their reasoning behind actions. This is where the mentor is truly invaluable. This is where mistakes are made and real learning occurs. The mentor can challenge the understudy to the extent that each mistake is an opportunity to improve and grow. Motivate is the last phase where the mentee is cut loose and the mentor encourages and inspires them to be a model for others. This is perhaps the most rewarding for the mentor. The mentor gets to watch their tremendous investment bear fruit as their understudy goes forward.

With the increased attention given to field training and mentoring, the benefits are realized following meta-analysis of the efficacy of mentoring within the medical profession. Despite the differences in occupation, there are parallels as it relates to stress, burnout and competencies.

Mentoring undergraduate medical students had two distinct qualities; 1) personal and 2) professional development. Though seemingly simple, personal development addresses the individual needs commonly associated with the need of acceptance in an exclusive environment. Professional development is defined as establishing key skill sets that augment core competencies. Core competencies are not enough in any profession or endeavor. The data clearly show undergraduate (medical) students benefit from mentors by learning those intangibles about the profession which includes ethics, values and implicit knowledge. A mentor impacts the mentee to the extent that implicit knowledge about the profession is shared (Stenford-Hayes, Kalen, Ponzer, Dahlgren, Hult, Hindbeck, 2010).

A differentiation must be established between the notion of teaching and mentoring and how those differences influence the mentor role. Taking what is known of the mentor’s role, it is important to go beyond formalized dogma to institute an approach that satisfies both the needs of the mentee *and* the mentor. Applying what has been taught or learned in formalized settings to real world application is the heart of what a mentor can do for his or her understudy.

In previous studies regarding mentoring, participants expressed the perception that mentorship attributed to their own personal and professional development; an additional consideration was the development of the mentor as well. The mentor(s) surveyed indicated that they had a sense of fulfillment and purpose as a result of their mentoring experience (Stenfors-Hayes, et al., 2010). This revelation should prompt further investigation involving formalized study and examination on how to prepare potential mentors.

The police profession is analogous to the military in many respects. Formal mentoring programs in military academies support what is suspected to be a critical component of professional development. One extensive study determined that formal mentoring programs correlated to less *stress* and significant *commitment* to their respective careers (Hu, Wang, Sun & Chen, 2008). Mentoring correlated to leadership potential and the increased potential to serve as mentors. This is noteworthy as organizations and other paramilitary organization strive to maximize their investments in officers and officer candidates for the future.

A longitudinal study supports the existing data as well. Three specific contributions were identified over more than a five year study of graduate students; 1) Self-efficacy, 2) Motivation and 3) Performance (Paglis, et al., 2006). Self-efficacy or the belief in one’s ability to accomplish specific tasks, correlates to positive performance and intrinsic motivation. These three were clearly ideal attributes found in successful graduate students. A mentoring program correlates to consistent value over an extended period of time which validates its worth both in the short and long term.

Implementation of a viable mentoring program or career development program can be daunting considering the generational gaps that are ubiquitous in all organizations. Those selected for mentoring others can sometimes encounter a vast age difference that can be problematic for fostering a positive relationship. Whitesell (1999) succinctly states the importance of the mentor/mentee relationship. It is important to get a sense of the mentee’s hopes and dreams, goals and ambitions, strengths and weaknesses. Failure to know the understudy will result in the mentor trying to create a younger version of themselves. This hamstrings the effort by limiting potential and perhaps in some instances holding them to an impossible standard. A good coach is the one who is skilled in maximizing his student’s potential; not simply showing their skill and ability.

Bridging generational gaps can be facilitated through shared experiences. One qualitative study revealed that despite age differences the mentoring process was successful based on the mentor’s ability to make their past experiences relevant. Their mentees were able to take past experiences and insert it into perspectives that they could relate with. This fostered a rich mentoring experience (Philip & Hendry, 2000).

**Local Research**

In an effort to determine future efficacy of a mentoring or career development program, this author conducted a survey of a select group of officers from the Fort Wayne (IN) Police Department. Twenty-nine surveys were distributed with a return of twenty-one questionnaires. Ninety-five percent of the responses indicated that the presence of a mentor early on in their respective careers had a positive impact. Follow-up interviews regarding this point revealed that having a safely “coach” kept them on track professionally and influenced their behaviors on and off the job.

Ninety percent of the respondents indicated that the absence of a mentor would have negatively impacted how their careers developed. Those respondents that stated that they did not have a mentor early in their career believe that having a mentor would have made a tremendous difference regarding the troubles they encountered on the job. During the qualitative interviews, participants cited recurring characteristics about their respective mentors. Many were described as “professional, approachable, enthusiastic, and willing to share and an example for others.” When asked why they identified them as mentors many stated it was by virtue of their mentors’ experience and reputation that compelled them to gravitate to them and learn as much as possible.

The subjects who elected to participate in this study stated that they were committed to sharing their mentor experience. Without exception, respondents indicated that they would be willing to serve as mentors for future officers if afforded the opportunity. Whether the mentoring program was formal or informal, many expressed a desire to “pay it forward.” The results of this study at the local level show promise in investing in a formalized mentoring program that goes beyond the FTO experience.

The success of any mentoring program must begin with a certain dedicated willingness on the part of the mentor. While reviewing some commonalities within the medical field, the notion that the mentor doctors felt their role was an “honor, privilege and “appealing” served as a predictor for successful mentoring. Many cite that had it not been rewarding they would not have engaged in the program ((Stenfors-Hayes, et al, 2010).

Mentoring is a process, whereas the overarching purpose is to give another specific life’s energy and experience for the purpose of development (Whitesell, 1999). According Whitesell, Ph.D., that is “asking a lot of a human being (1999). Many experienced in their respective profession earned much of what they have learned through trial, error, application of cognitive processes, effort *and* mistakes. To give it away requires setting aside personal agendas. If it is indeed a challenge for some to give freely, we must recognize that with every mentor or potential mentor there must be some pre-requisites. Simply because an individual is experienced or tenured, does not necessarily make them a potential mentor. It is a start, but by no stretch, all there is to consider.

**Conclusion**

The hazards of the police profession are well known. Officers train to be observant of their surroundings, recognize signs of danger and implement physical skills that bring police officers intimately close to their adversaries. Officers train and debrief incidents to learn and discuss ways to be successful on the street. However there are external forces that bog down the professional development and by default affects personal perspectives. Those who have sworn to serve and protect others receive little guidance or training on how to withstand the rigors of the profession. Unfortunately this leads to increased stress, burnout, recalcitrance, health issues or worse, compel officers to take their own life. Those responsible for training are remiss if they fail to implement a program that not only develops the officer, but the person. The author can remember early on, starting fresh as an officer that had it not been for the presence of a trusted mentor, disastrous outcomes may have resulted.

Agencies should be proactive in protecting their investment and take measure to ensure the most important capital-human capital is never given secondary consideration. A mentoring program, formal or informal has known benefits and value. The presence of a mentor can serve to develop and motivate their mentee. Motivated employees will be *better* employees and for the business of policing, safer.

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