

## Partners in learning: redefining mentorship for a learning organization

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Mentorship programmes are popular for the development of black managers in South Africa. In the literature, controversy surrounds attempts to institutionalize mentorship. In this article it is argued that the concept of a learning partnership should replace that of mentorship, particularly in what are seen to be learning organizations. Many mentorship programmes are predicated on the belief that a warm and caring relationship is a prerequisite for effective development of protégés. Redefining the desired relationship as a learning partnership removes this demand on the relationship and places it squarely in the confines of a normal business affiliation in which the focus is mutual learning. Essential to the process of black advancement is empowerment. There are a number of dimensions to empowerment. In this article three key dimensions are discussed in relation to the development of black managers, namely objective power, subjective power and empowerment in competence. Based on insights gained in the initial phases of a mentorship programme implemented in a leading information technology company, a number of principles are offered for implementing learning partnerships in a learning organization. These revolve around the need to use a new paradigm to interpret the learning experiences that constitute a developmental relationship between a young and promising employee and a more experienced and knowledgeable manager.

Mentorprogramme is 'n gewilde metode by bestuursontwikkelingsprogramme wat gerig is op swartbestuurders in Suid-Afrika. In die literatuur heers daar polemieke ten opsigte van pogings om mentorskap te institutionaliseer. In hierdie artikel word daar geredeneer dat die begrip leerverwantskap dié van mentorskap moet vervang veral in die sogenaamde leerinstellings ('learning organizations'). By baie mentorprogramme word daar beweer dat 'n hartlike, sorgsame verwantskap noodsaaklik is om protégés doeltreffend te ontwikkel. Die heromsnying van die verlangde verwantskap as 'n leerverwantskap verwyder hierdie vereiste en plaas dit geheel en al binne die grense van 'n normale sakeverhouding waar die klem op wedersydse ontwikkeling val. Magtiging is noodsaaklik in die swart ontwikkelingsproses. Dit sluit verskeie dimensies in. Drie kerndimensies word in die artikel bespreek met betrekking tot die ontwikkeling van swart bestuurders, naamlik objektiewe mag, subjektiewe mag en bekwaamheidsmagtiging. Gegronde op insigte ingewin tydens die eerste fases van 'n mentorprogram by 'n vooraanstaande inliggingstegnologiemaatskappy, word 'n paar beginsels aangebied ten opsigte van die implementering van 'n leerverwantskap binne 'n leerinstelling. Dit draai om die behoefte om 'n nuwe paradigma te gebruik om die leerondervinding wat 'n ontwikkelingsverwantskap tussen 'n onervare, veelbelowende werknemer en 'n ervare, goedingeligte bestuurder konstitueer, te interpreteer.

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Hofmeyr & Templer (1991: 3) point out that '... the black advancement track record in South African organisations is fairly unimpressive'. They report that only 2.2% of managers and fewer than 1% of senior managers in South Africa's top 100 companies are black. There can surely be no more important challenge in management development today than implementing effective ways of developing black managers.

Mentorship has been widely acknowledged as a key element in the development of most managers. This has been recognized in South Africa in the prominence given to mentorship in many programmes intended to develop black managers. But time and again formal mentorship programmes intended to promote affirmative action have failed to deliver as expected.

The redefinition of mentorship set out in this article arises from an opportunity the authors had in 1992 to participate in the design of a mentorship programme in a leading South African information technology company. The mentorship programme was initiated in the company's affirmative action office, and so was aimed at developing black managers. Well known for its progressive human resource development policies, and staffed by highly educated knowledge workers, this organization offered us the ideal context in which to develop and test an approach to mentorship which takes account of the special circumstances which apply in South Africa, and which builds on the concepts of the learning organization as put forward by authors like Senge

(1990a) and Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell (1991). Throughout the article reference will be made to how the redefined principles of mentorship were implemented in this organization.

The insights described in this article draw on two sources: the concept of the learning organization, and empowerment as an approach to employee development.

### Mentorship

The concept of mentorship can be traced back to Greek mythology. The original Mentor was a surrogate father appointed by King Odysseus, who entrusted the development of his son, Telemachus, to his trusted advisor Mentor. The dynamics of the relationship are clearly different from those of mentorship within organizations today. Classical mentorship entailed an arranged adult/child relationship at a time when the protégé was truly in a development stage.

In international management literature, mentorship is used to describe the spontaneous development of a relationship between an older and wiser manager and a young and promising person. The relationship is driven by respect and affection, or as the Woodlands Group expresses it, 'Caring is the core of this relationship' (Woodlands Group, 1980: 920).

It may have been the paternalistic connotations which made mentorship so popular with white managers as an apparent panacea for black advancement. It is also precisely this characteristic which makes it essential to redefine mentorship for the future in South Africa.

The next step in the evolution of the concept in South Africa arose from the urgent need to intervene in organizations to speed up the development of black managers. Time does not allow organizations to wait for mentorship with black protégés to occur spontaneously, and the barriers thrown up by Apartheid and the very small number of black managers would in any case have made such relationships unlikely. So organizations developed mentorship programmes which attempted to institutionalize the process (Hofmeyr, 1987). In these programmes the programme co-ordinator selects and matches mentors and protégés and directs the nature of their interaction. Institutionalizing mentorship, however, goes against the spirit of mentorship (Hofmeyr, 1987: 15). Hofmeyr emphasizes that

'mentorship implies a mutual and comprehensive relationship which tends to evolve informally between two people in an organization' (1987: 14).

This formal programme amounts to using the name of mentorship to describe something very different. The result of this change in the usage of the word is that a great deal of debate about mentorship has to do with the term used to describe the role that the 'mentor' plays — such as sponsor, coach, promoter and professional mentor (Pruett, 1991).

Observations of institutionalized mentorship suggest that several problems can arise, including lack of commitment from both mentor and protégé, leading to programme failure; unclear role definitions for mentor, protégé and line manager; frustrating and embarrassing pressure to create a warm friendship when the necessary ingredients are lacking; mismatches between mentor and protégé; disillusion with the process and questioning of the organization's commitment to employee development on the part of protégés, and disillusion and questioning of the protégés' commitment to the organization on the part of mentors.

Institutionalized mentorship can compete with existing management development processes in the company, and occur on the margins, without being part of the company's strategic thrust. Clarity is also lost as to who is responsible for making the process work — programme co-ordinator, mentor, protégé, line manager, or senior management. This weakens the programme.

Yet the basic need to which institutionalized mentorship programmes are a response, remains. An intervention is required to ensure that black managers are sufficiently developed. How can this need to speed things up be reconciled with the need to avoid problems associated with trying to fit mentorship into a programme of imposed relationships? To resolve this apparent paradox for the company in which this programme was developed, it was necessary to analyze the goal of the programme at a deeper level. It was necessary to understand that the goal was not to create a mentorship programme, but to develop people. Commitment to developing people needs to come before commitment to a particular programme, or even to the goal of developing a particular class of employees. There is no hope of creating effective mentorship in an organization which lacks commitment to developing people. Similarly it cannot be expected that black managers will be developed in an organization not committed to developing all kinds of people. Managers who have not themselves been developed cannot be expected to develop others. South African organizations in

general are not known for their capacity for developing people — South Africa was ranked last of fourteen developing countries in the availability and qualifications of human resources (World Competitiveness Report, 1992). A systemic perspective helps to place mentorship in the context of other factors at work within the organization. This interrelation of activities which develop people in the organization is a theme which runs through this article.

To encapsulate the change in focus from a programme called mentorship to a process of learning, this article refers to 'learning partnerships' rather than mentor relationships. The word mentorship has been retained for the sake of continuity with other literature, but the aim is to describe a process which is fundamentally different from what has usually been described as mentorship.

In keeping with the systemic perspective, ways were sought to link key decision makers in the organization, including human resource staff, into the programme, and to ensure that it was in line with the organization's strategic direction.

The concept of a learning partnership will be explained further in the next section in terms of the learning organization and of empowerment.

### Learning organization

The rate at which organizations learn may become the only sustainable source of competitive advantage (Ray Stata, cited in Senge, 1990b: 7).

Revans (1980) asserts that the essence of a learning organization is to ensure that the rate of learning exceeds the rate of change in the environment.

Senge (1990a: 4) states that a learning organization is 'an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future'. He draws attention to the role of the leader in building learning organizations. This role entails the performance of three functions: designer, teacher and steward (Senge, 1990b). These functions describe the essence of what should happen within a learning partnership. This is not to suggest that the mentor is the leader and the protégé the follower, but that between them these leadership functions should be evident in the learning partnership.

In the leadership role of *designer* the mentor works behind the scenes to help create the future governing ideas, purpose, vision and core values which build a learning organization. There are several implications of this for mentorship programmes.

Firstly, the person who drives the vision of the organization (usually the chief executive) should include employee development among the governing ideas of the organization. In other words, employee development needs to be one of the central themes that gives energy to the organization and indicates to members what is valued in the organization and expected of employees.

Secondly, mentorship must be seen in the context of a human resource development strategy. This in turn should be an integral part of the strategic thrust of the organization, which is informed by the vision. Mentorship will not succeed if it is a stand-alone programme which happens in a vacuum on the periphery of the main concerns of the organization.

Thirdly, the mentor needs to pay attention to the design both of the mentorship relationship and the wider organizational context in which protégés develop. Being a mentor is more than just offering good advice to a promising junior member of the organization; it entails taking co-responsibility for designing an organization in which promising members thrive.

As *teacher*, a major task of the leader is to define current reality, and to communicate this effectively to his or her followers. Senge (1990b) describes this as a coaching role. While the mentor is not a coach in the usual sense (this is the task of the person's immediate line manager) this role is still pertinent to mentors, because mentors can be seen as coaches of their protégés' thinking. This means that the mentor helps the protégé to surface his or her 'mental models' (Senge, 1990a: 174) and to make connections to the governing ideas of the organization. Mental models reflect the legitimate perspective of each person. They need to be brought to the surface in the discussion to ensure that the partners understand each other. The governing ideas of the organization, on the other hand, exist outside of the partnership. They describe the organization's 'mental model' of how to do business in the 'brain' of the organization (Morgan, 1986). The mentor has the task here of introducing the protégé to what the prevailing direction is in the organization. As the protégé's thinking coach, the mentor should also help the protégé to begin seeing events in systemic terms.

Working with mental models helps the parties to move beyond what Senge (1990b: 8) calls 'adaptive learning', which is a reactive form of learning, to 'generative learning' which leads to the capacity to create something new and consistent with the vision of the organization.

As *steward*, the leader is the custodian of the mission and of the talents of the people in the organization. This requires an attitude in which the leader sees himself or herself as a servant. This kind of leader *begins* with the desire to serve, and this takes him or her to the desire to lead (Greenleaf, 1977: 7-8). A servant leader is caught up with the idea of empowering his or her followers. Derek Keys captured this well when he described his role as chief executive of Gencor as being 'a loving, critical audience' (Keys, 1990).

Servant leadership is not characteristic of most South African managers; but it is essential for effective mentorship. If this concept could be lived out by mentors many of the difficulties experienced in mentorship programmes would be avoided. In matters concerning the protégé, the servant mentor moves out of the picture, allowing the protégé to take centre stage.

The thinking of people in a learning organization is radically different. To be able to follow and begin to generate such ideas, people developing in a learning organization need to be helped to think radically differently. Senge uses the Greek word '*metanoia*' to describe this fundamental shift of mind. Often this requires a change in vocabulary, such as is illustrated in this article by referring to mentorship relationships as 'learning partnerships'. The mental shift this represents is that a learning partnership entails a quest for learning from which both partners benefit, rather than a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from the mentor to the protégé.

Garvin (1993) cautions against taking too mystical an approach to describing the learning organization. His definition of a learning organization as

'an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights' (Garvin, 1993: 80)

emphasizes the importance of learning leading to changes in the way work gets done. Without such changes to actual performance, the full cycle of learning has not taken place. This provides a helpful clue as to how to measure learning: learning has happened when the learner (whether individual or organization) works more effectively than before. The test of effective mentorship is improved performance of the protégé.

### Empowerment

Empowerment has been used in many contexts to mean many different things. Some of these uses have been too limited, or have merely substituted a fashionable new term for some existing, and perfectly serviceable, old concept. For example, Thomas & Velthouse (1990: 667) have too limited an understanding of empowerment when they describe it as 'a nontraditional paradigm for motivation', although they are correct in placing importance on the cognitive variables which determine intrinsic task motivation among staff. Motivation is a perfectly acceptable term for what Thomas & Velthouse wish to describe, but empowerment in the South African context at least, needs to address somewhat more than just new ways to motivate staff.

Empowerment clearly has to do with power. Power operates at various levels — within a person, between people and between groups. An individual becomes more powerful (the essence of empowerment) when he or she grows in the subjective sense of *feeling able* to do things hitherto out of reach; when he or she develops the *ability* to do things which were not previously within his or her competence; and when doors of *opportunity*, which were previously closed, swing open to allow access to information, influence and opportunity. These three dimensions are respectively the dimensions of Objective Power, Subjective Power and Competence in what is referred to as the Development Cube (Cook, 1992). These three dimensions sum up what makes a person powerful.

Blumberg & Pringle (1982: 565) describe a model explaining employee performance, in which performance is a function of Ability, Motivation and Opportunity. Human (1991) and her associates (e.g. Bowmaker-Falconer, 1991: 189) use a similar model in suggesting that people need to be 'able', 'willing' and 'allowed' to perform and develop. The Development Cube goes beyond these models, chiefly, in the dimension of Inner Power, which is seen as more than motivation. An essential aspect of Inner Power is self efficacy. Inner Power is not determined by the context alone, but also by what the person does to him- or herself. In particular black South Africans need to be free of the psychological fetters imposed by the socio-political context, which has led to a diminished sense of their own capacity.

Khoza (1989: 12) uses the term 'race-bound psychological complexes' to describe the limitations to which both black and white managers are subject in different ways.

The Development Cube draws on and adds to Conger & Kanungo's (1988) description of empowerment. They noted that empowerment had hitherto been seen in relational terms — i.e. 'the perceived power or control that an individual actor or organizational sub-unit has over others' (1988: 472). They argued for it rather to be seen as a motivational construct:

'a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy, among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information' (1988: 474).

Both these constructs are important aspects of empowerment, but it is proposed that a third has to be added: the construct of competence. A protégé needs to develop along all three of these dimensions at the same time if real empowerment is to take place.

The three dimensions incorporate the following: *Objective Empowerment* describes the movement from oppression to influence and opportunity in organizational terms. Some of this is what would be seen as the concern of a person's sponsor. It includes gaining promotion in the organization, but must be seen as far more than that. People can be empowered objectively without being promoted, by being exposed to strategies such as those included under the umbrella term of participative management; by job enrichment; by being included in communications networks; by being offered appropriate reward systems which reinforce powerful behaviour; by being exposed to empowering leadership; and by belonging to a learning and affirming organization (adapted from Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

*Subjective Empowerment* is best summed up by Bandura's term 'self-efficacy' (Bandura, 1977; Gist 1987). This refers to the development of a sense of 'I can' within the person relative to a specific task or function. In addition to self-efficacy, and contributing to it, are included three other key aspects of subjective power: the various sources of motivation are clearly part of it (see Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), as is the sense of enjoying other people's high expectations of and confidence in one — the 'Pygmalion Effect' (Eden, 1984) and, finally, the crucial aspect of reliance on one's own initiative, or Inner Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966). In other words, people are empowered inwardly to the extent: (a) that they believe they can carry out the functions expected of them; (b) that they want to carry out these functions; (c) that they are expected to succeed in them; and (d) that they believe it is up to themselves and no one else to do whatever is required to achieve their goals.

*Empowerment in Competence* refers to the process of developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to carry out functions successfully. Clearly a person is powerless to perform without job competence. What is less often recognized is that people are powerless without interpersonal competence and competence in the management of themselves. Interpersonal competence becomes the crucial determining factor in career success as the person enters management — a manager is someone who gets work done

through others. So people are empowered to the extent that they develop the ability to do their job well, to manage relationships with colleagues and customers effectively, and to manage their own time, careers and health.

These three directions in empowerment need to be kept together because one or two without the others will lead to failure for the person and for the organization. A common combination in the bad old days of early black advancement schemes, for example, was the 'token': a person who was developed far along the opportunity axis (part of Objective Power), but who lagged behind in the Subjective Power and Competence axes. Such a person was not expected to make use of his or her nominal position of influence.

Another frequently encountered product of affirmative action programmes is the 'underachiever': someone who is recognized as having competence, and who is therefore promoted and so developed along the Objective Power axis, but who lacks Subjective Power. The consequence is that the person is immobilized, and frustrates his or her colleagues by not venturing out with initiative.

A tragic waste is the 'lost asset': someone who has competence, but lacks the confidence to express it (the Subjective Power dimension), and so lies unrecognized and is never developed along the Objective Power axis.

The 'outsider' has competence and knows it (Subjective Power), but is not recognized or given power by the organization (the Objective Power axis). This person will either leave the organization before long, or cause trouble if trapped in it. This situation is not infrequent in South African companies, and represents a considerable threat to the organization as well as the individual.

These examples illustrate the need to consider and balance all three dimensions in any programme such as mentorship which seeks to empower staff.

### Principles to guide mentorship in a learning organization

The following principles arise from the discussion of the three dimensions dealt with above, and are illustrated by the programme developed in the learning organization described at the beginning of the article.

#### Mentors and protégés need to form learning partnerships

The essence of successful mentorship is to have one member of the dyad clearly more senior and more experienced in the organization and its business than the other. This suggests a very unequal relationship. But the other side of the coin is that a successful mentorship relationship has to see the junior member of the partnership become steadily more powerful until the two people are relating as if they were equal. If both people are so convinced of the inequality of the relationship that they cannot imagine change happening to this status, then the relationship can have only limited effectiveness. Learning partnerships require a relative lack of authority-based leadership. Equality breeds creativity. But in South Africa pressures on our managers and the shortage of experienced managers tend to result in a lack of maturity in management, and a consequent dependence on position to bolster authority.

The fact that in formal South African mentorship programmes the mentor is very likely to be white and the protégé is probably black has tended to reinforce the inequality of the relationship. It is this very factor, however, which has in it the possibility of equalizing the relationship and making it into a mutually enriching experience. When the protégé is black, he or she has a wealth of life experience and access to a network of which the white manager often knows nothing. This is experience and exposure to which any effective South African manager should be very keen indeed to gain access.

A learning partnership is one in which both members learn. So when learning partnerships were introduced to the organization, both mentors and protégés were helped to think about the ways in which the mentors could benefit from the relationship. This could be called 'reverse mentorship', in which the protégé provides the mentor with a window into the world from which the protégé comes. This should enlarge the mentor's ability to manage effectively.

In fact, in this organization neither group needed to be persuaded that this was true. In answer to the question 'What are the benefits to the mentor?' the protégé group offered these ideas:

- A sense of fulfilment;
- An opportunity to influence thinking in the company and to have influence with managers on the fast track towards seniority;
- Access to the protégé's network and experience; and
- Opportunity for the mentor to clarify his/her own thinking.

The mentors also recognized the learning they would experience and the opportunity it would provide to gain diagnostic insight into problems employees encounter. Other benefits mentioned by the mentors were:

- Feeling of achievement when the protégé grows.
- Developing one's own skills, such as empathy. The skill of developing people is vital for management.
- Better understanding of why I do what I do.
- Personal growth — the spur to mentor oneself.

The concept of Learning Partnerships was introduced briefly in the initial workshops, held with the mentors and protégés separately, and then cemented in a joint workshop when the dyads (mentor and protégé) met and jointly drew up a *learning contract* (Prideaux & Ford, 1988: 60).

This is a written document drawn up jointly by both protégé and mentor at the beginning of the programme, and revised as required throughout the duration of the partnership. It details what each expects from the relationship and what each is prepared to put into it. It specifies that the initiative should belong to the protégé. It reflects a diagnosis of the learning needs and specifies learning objectives and learning plans. It sets measurable standards by which they would be able to keep themselves on track towards their learning goals, and lists some agreed rules they would seek to honour in their conversations.

To help in drawing up the learning contract, the partnership worked together to draw up a skills development matrix. They listed on one axis the key growth areas for the protégé, and on the other axis development experiences which could be used to develop the protégé in each area.

The matrix in turn provides material for drawing up an assessment schedule. By rating the protégé's position on each of the key dimensions identified for development at the start of the programme and again at predetermined intervals, it is possible to track the success of the learning partnerships. This approach to development can help to avoid the 'Crown prince syndrome', in which participants of black advancement programmes are promised promotion regardless of their own merits or those of other members of the organization, or of the needs of the organization. The true measure of success of a black advancement programme does *not* depend only on protégés being promoted. It is successful when the protégés have developed as planned. The protégés thus become more readily eligible for promotions as opportunities arise in the normal course of events.

The learning contract emphasizes that the goal of the relationship is for each of the partners to learn. This does not necessarily require a close social relationship. It is a mistake in South Africa to teach mentors and protégés that the success of their partnership rests on developing a warm, close friendship, with that special chemistry that marks the best parent-child relationships. That places an almost impossible burden on each member. When this special relationship fails to emerge after a few beers shared stiffly at a neutral venue, they may conclude that the programme is a failure. In a learning partnership, by contrast, they do not need to try to create a sense of closeness and affection. Their business is learning. If they grow to like each other in the process, that is a bonus. This is a normal business relationship. This would, incidentally, help to overcome some of the problems noted with respect to cross-gender mentorship. As with all business relationships, this does require a certain level of mutual respect and trust, which leads on to the next principle.

Learning occurs within a constellation of learning partnerships

Organizations constitute incredibly complex and subtle patterns of interacting forces. In systemic terms, each member of the learning partnership is also a member of many other systems, each of which holds meaning for and influences the individual. In South Africa there are peculiar forces which, if managed well, can be turned from strongly divisive and destructive forces into constructive energy for the programme. One of these is ethnic consciousness. Clearly this has been one of the most destructive ingredients in South Africa's history. Yet if black protégés band together and support one another out of an awareness of a common interest and determination to overcome disadvantage and offer mutual support, then this can provide energy for growth and organizational change, perhaps beyond anything else.

When we asked participants to list the forces in the organization that they believed would support the goals of the mentorship programme and those that would oppose them, the protégé group was very aware of the need to support one another in order to overcome the marginalization which can arise from being a minority in a powerful organization. On

the other hand some of the mentors were alarmed by this expressed need for group solidarity among the protégés.

A realistic mentorship programme should take account of such systemic forces at work in the organization, remembering that the systems which are at work within and outside an organization may well overlap, and protégés may find themselves to be members of different systems with competing demands.

A key systemic issue is that of the language used to communicate about the programme. For example, it may be a good idea to call the programme by a name other than a mentorship programme, because the name itself tempts those responsible for it to create something that fits their picture of what a mentorship programme should be, rather than something that fits the needs of the individuals to be developed. A successful mentorship programme develops people, not mentorship. This is a subtle but important distinction. In one South African electrical appliance company a successful peer mentorship arrangement was ruined when its success led to its being formalized and put under the leadership of the human resource manager and a consultant. There was nothing wrong with the programme they offered, but the focus had shifted from 'What can we do to advance our careers and improve our effectiveness?' to 'How can we run a mentorship programme?'

Too often organizational rewards go to those who can point to the achievement of impressive organizational structures, rather than real personal and organizational change. It is very tempting for the person responsible for the mentorship programme to do all the right things and forget the basic aim of his or her efforts — which is to provide a context for people to grow and develop.

A learning partnership entails reciprocal learning by two empowered individuals

It was clearly necessary to intervene to empower the role of the protégé in the relationship. The purpose of the intervention was to support the process of developing a partnership in which both parties, while not equal in status or organizational influence, could develop an equality of worth and contribution to the learning process. This was achieved firstly by repeating frequently to everyone involved that the development of a relationship of this nature was a key principle in the programme, and secondly, and more importantly, by ensuring that several aspects of the programme actually put the protégé in the driver's seat.

For example, protégés had to spend the first three weeks of the programme, before mentors and protégés had been matched, completing a workbook of exercises in which they could chart their own progress. Exercises included both written tasks and a number of interviews with their own managers and some of the managers whose names were on the list of potential mentors.

Once the learning partnerships had been formed, appointments to meet had to be made by the protégé. Regular reports to the co-ordinator were required. These reports had to be drawn up by both protégé and mentor, but submitted by the protégé.

Finally, the nature of the programme is not fixed (except in the timetable for its formal part, which lasts eighteen

months), and protégés will be asked as a group to participate in the design and implementation of the latter stages of the programme themselves, using concepts and frameworks offered to them.

There must be an element of self-selection in learning partnerships

As noted above, there is a basic paradox at the heart of attempts to use the concept of mentorship to achieve the development of black managers in South Africa. Some people (e.g. Hofmeyr, 1987) would argue that a formal mentorship programme cannot succeed at all, because the relationship between the mentor and protégé is something which has to grow spontaneously as two people get to know and trust each other. When a third party who is brought in to manage the mentorship process throws two strangers together and instructs one to mentor the other in a formal programme, then the foundation on which a successful mentorship relationship has to be built, is missing.

On the other hand, South African organizations are faced with the urgent need to accelerate the development of black managers. In this paradox lies the cause of many failed South African mentorship programmes.

Knowing that neither an unwilling protégé nor an unwilling mentor is likely to be of any use to the other, it was necessary to look for a way of facilitating a measure of self-selection within the constraints of a formal programme. This was achieved firstly by letting both parties choose whether or not they wanted to be part of the programme. Then mentors were invited to an initial workshop, and provided with exit points at which they could withdraw discretely without losing face. The final exit point for mentors was not being chosen by any protégé on the programme.

Protégés were given a rigorous test in the form of a workbook containing demanding tasks relating to career exploration and getting to know the organization, which had to be completed and submitted by a fixed deadline three weeks after their initial workshop. It was assumed that those who completed the task were committed to their own development through the programme, while those who failed to submit were unready, unwilling, or incapable of participating effectively. Having been exposed to a number of possible mentors, protégés were asked in the workbook to indicate whom they might like to have as a mentor. They were not promised that their choice would be accepted, but the programme co-ordinator then had a basis for putting partnerships together.

This was considered a more valid test of suitability for the programme and for management than context-free psychometric tests. It required candidates to show their ability to be proactive (and thus exhibit an inner locus of control) while meeting deadlines within the organization. Protégés who do not have time to complete the workbook do not have the time to manage a learning partnership. Similarly, an organization which does not create the conditions in which members will spend time on an activity such as completing the workbook will not be successful in creating a mentorship programme. The workbook is thus not just diagnostic of the individual, but also of the organization.



At the request of the participants, formal 'divorce proceedings' were drawn up, by which partnerships which did not work could be formally dissolved with a minimum of damage or embarrassment on either side. Regular reports to the co-ordinator were scheduled so that early indications of problems could lead to intervention.

**Learning partnerships require and contribute to a learning, empowered organization**

Learning partnerships blossom in a learning organization. The concept of a learning organization provides a motivating vision for participants in the programme, and describes what their organization could be if their influence spread. It is crucial at this point to maintain a positive picture and to portray this as something they should create themselves, rather than something they should expect to be created for them. The idea is to increase proactiveness in the participants and prevent them from waiting for the organization to be perfect before they could believe that their learning partnerships could progress. It was also impressed on mentors that they had a special responsibility to help the organization reflect as far as possible, the qualities of a learning organization.

But there is a very positive spin-off for the organization too. Empowered individuals create a learning organization. Effective learning partnerships portray to the rest of the organization what is possible for everyone. This select group of people become the learning pioneers. The programme becomes one way of institutionalizing learning. And empowered people nurtured in a learning organization contribute to the creation of a learning society which respects the empowerment of its citizens.

**Protégés need to feel that they are standing on a platform of organizational support**

One measure of the success of management's intention to create a learning organization is whether every protégé can state without reservation, 'My company is behind me in my development'. This ideal was given to the mentors and to management as a challenge, and then assessed by an instrument developed to measure the protégés' perception of being empowered. The instrument served the dual purpose of measuring progress towards the goals of the programme, while diagnosing areas in which the protégés feel relatively less empowered, and which therefore needed more attention.

Organizational commitment to the programme was sought by having the Chief Executive Officer attend key functions. It was seen to be important to have the programme recognized as a central strategic effort of the organization, and not as a fringe activity.

**Learning partnerships require metanoia on the part of all involved**

'Metanoia' means a shift of mind, a new paradigm through which experience is interpreted (Senge, 1990a). The model that has been described cannot emerge overnight. It requires considerable change in the habits of behaviour, thoughts and speech of those who participate. It also requires vigilance from those who manage the process to ensure that they do not fall back into unhelpful ways of thinking. One way of

challenging unhelpful old paradigms is through carefully chosen questions, so those responsible for running the programme submit regularly to the discipline of asking the question, 'Are we empowering the people identified as protégés to become more effective and successful?' A number of other systemic questions flow from this, such as:

- 'Who stands to benefit from what we are doing?'
- 'Whose power and influence will be enhanced by what we are doing?'
- 'Whose power and influence may be diminished by what we are doing?' (This helps to identify who is likely to resist the programme, and whose interests may need to be understood and addressed before the programme will succeed.)
- 'Does the programme support the strategic thrust of the organization?'
- 'Does the programme empower or disrupt the overall human resource strategy of the organization?' (See Adonisi, 1989 and 1991)
- 'Will what we are doing lead to meaningful change or just cosmetic change?' (If the programme works, there will be real shifts in power. This probably means changes which will be acutely uncomfortable for some. Organizations which embark on such a programme need to be prepared to cope with the consequences.)
- 'Does what we are doing add to the control protégés have over their work and careers, or does it actually diminish the extent of their control?' (The success of a mentorship programme can be measured by the extent to which protégés become proactive.)
- 'Who is in charge of the development of the protégés?'

If the answer to this last question is not 'The protégés themselves', then the programme must by definition fail.

## Conclusion

The questions raised above provide a starting point for thinking in fresh ways about programmes designed to develop managers. The concept of a learning partnership occurring within a learning organization offers organizations an approach to developing managers which avoids some of the pitfalls that have been experienced with institutionalized mentorship programmes. This is of particular importance in South Africa, given the current need to increase the number of black managers.

At the core of the approach is learning. For learning to happen it is not necessary to depend on a special quality in the relationship or on a highly structured programme. What is necessary is to ensure that the members of the partnership are empowered objectively, subjectively and with competence. The rules of designer, steward and teacher in a learning organization offer a helpful guide to what a mentor should do in a learning partnership.

For learning partnerships to succeed, the organization itself needs to have experienced a process of 'metanoia' in which learning and empowerment are regarded as central to the strategy of the organization and as a concern of each person.

Any change programme will cause some people to be uncomfortable. Whilst the programme described here avoids some of the problems created by unsuccessful mentorship

programmes, it should be expected that success will also bring problems of another sort. Solutions to today's problems become the problems or challenges of tomorrow. That is the process of learning.

Organizations seeking to empower their people and encourage learning should be aware of the powerful, sometimes disruptive, impact this will have on those who are comfortable with current ways. As Block warns,

'If you fundamentally believe that leadership, direction, and control are best exercised at the top of our institutions and our society, then just say no to empowerment' (1991: xv).

Block also makes the point that where there is a strong vision, 'the future is the cause of our current behaviour' (1991: 107). This liberating idea that people need not be controlled by their history is highly appropriate for today in South Africa. Companies can share in this liberation by building a passionate vision for empowerment.

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