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Mentoring Revisited: The African-American Woman's Experience

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Sustained cross-cultural contact occurs primarily in the workplace as most Americans still live in segregated communities with little social interaction across racial lines. Research in the area of career development has rarely focused on the dynamics of cross-cultural mentoring, specifically with African-American women.

The voices of African-American women's experiences in America is a complex task characterized by the intersection of race, gender, and social class (Etter-Lewis, 1991). As a result, the experiences and life history of black women projects a different perspective to that of white women. This, coupled with the fact that the literature doesn't fully address the needs, concerns, and achievements of African-American women, the stereotypical images and expectations of these women are still held by many.

A barrier that appears to limit the professional success of African-American women, thereby limiting the contributions of these women, is that of not securing a mentor. Related research indicates that mentoring has been widely used in many organizations and has been acknowledged as a valuable tool for retaining and promoting employees as well as being beneficial as an avenue to career success. It has been recognized that within the dominant male culture, mentoring has been shown as an important factor in encouraging their success (Murray, 1991; Blackwell, 1991; Howard-Vital and Morgan, 1993).

Since research on mentoring experiences of African -American women is lacking in the literature, the purpose of this study is to determine the role mentoring has played in the professional development of a select sample of African -American women.

The Essence Of Mentoring

In recent years, popular and academic literature have drawn attention to the benefits that mentoring relationships can offer to proteges, mentors and organizations. Having a mentor has been linked to career advancement, higher pay, and greater career satisfaction. Moreover, the mentoring relationship may be critical to the advancement of opportunity to make productive use of knowledge and expertise in middle age and to learn in new ways. The organization also benefits, as future leaders are prepared, and may also find that employees who are mentored are more satisfied and committed than those who are not. An understanding of these developmental

relationships becomes even more important given changes in demographic and labor market characteristics and competitive pressures (Dreher & Ash, 1990).

Not only does mentoring develop the profession; "...by not mentoring, we are wasting talent. We educate, and train, but don't nurture" (Wright and Wright 1987, p 207). The literature overwhelmingly points to benefits to the organization, the mentor, and the protégé. Mentoring is useful and powerful in understanding and advancing organizational culture, providing access to informal and formal networks of communication, and offering professional stimulation to both junior and senior faculty members. Mentoring is a continuation of one's development as defined by life cycle and human development theorists in terms of life sequences or stages, personality development, and the concept and value of care. (Erikson 1963 and Levinson et al 1978).

According to Thomas there is a strong need for examination of qualitative data on the effects of the mentor relationship with respect to minority groups (Thomas, 1990). Kalbfleisch and Davies (1991) study on the availability of mentors for black professionals indicated that race is significant in mentoring relationships involving blacks. They go on to conclude that race is the strongest predictor of pairing in mentor relationships. If same-race mentoring is as predominant as Kalbfleisch and Davies suggest, then blacks, and specifically black women, who are represented by very small numbers in positions of organizational power, may have several barriers in the progress toward advancement.

Methodology

For purposes of this study, qualitative inquiry was used, more specially in-depth interviews and literature analysis. The data were collected during taped, in depth, three to four-hour interviews with individual subjects. Questions for the interview were open ended but did focus on issues related to mentoring with regard to how the participants viewed the nature of work, career development, and how issues related to gender and ethnicity impacted them in the work force. After each interview, notes were made and the interview was transcribed verbatim.

At the onset of the study ten African-American women who were in professional positions in education and the non-profit sector were interviewed. A criteria in selecting the participants was that they hold, at minimum, a Bachelor's degree. As the study progressed it became apparent that this number needed to be expanded. During the interviews with the initial ten women, names of other individuals who were felt could provide additional and critical insights were shared. Consequently four additional women were interviewed for a total of 14 individuals. The inclusion of the additional participants is consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1994) discussion on the emergent design of the qualitative study., The interviews took place over a period of twelve months. Each person was contacted, informed about the purpose of the study, and asked for their permission to be interviewed. All interviews took place at the work site.

Because many African-American women use the term Black or African American, the terms "Black woman" and "African-American woman" will be used interchangeably throughout the study. The use of a critical friend was enlisted as recommended by Anderson,, Herr and Nihlen (1994) to help clarify and critique the data.

All fourteen African-American women interviewed indicated that mentoring was very important to their career development. They also indicated that it was difficult for them to obtain traditional mentoring in their organizations. The barriers these women faced in obtaining traditional mentoring in their organizations seemed to fall into two areas: (1) Stereotypes of African-American women; and, (2) Racism.

They also felt that the mentoring they received focused more on the career development aspects of their life and that they received much of the psychosocial support, also critical for career success, from groups they affiliated with throughout their lives.

Stereotypes Of African-American Women

Stereotypes of African-American women are compounded by stereotypes of women in general. When discussing the role of African-American women almost twenty years ago, Dumas states:

> The mass of black women in America are still at the bottom of the heap--among this country's underclass. And although increasing numbers of black women are beginning to occupy important positions of authority and prestige in organizations within and outside black communities, there are forces at work today as in the past that tax the physical and emotional stamina of these women, undermine their authority, compromise their competence, limit the power that they might conceivably exercise and thus limit their opportunities for rewards and mobility in the organization - not to mention the impact of these on job satisfaction (1979, p. 205)

Compounding the difficulty, according to Dumas, are the myths of the black matriarch which limit options and power in organizations by creating a one-dimensional image of the African-American women as a mother, loyal subordinate and pillar of strength for others in the organizations. Howard-Vital and Morgan in 1993 emphasiize that African-American women still face many of these same stereotypes in the workplace today (12th ed.).

> "The board that hired me and that I work with on a daily basis does not understand what it means to be black and female. For quite some time I was the only black employed by the organization. Not only was I the only paid employee but there were no blacks on the board. My mentor was my advocate for the job and quite frankly if I did not have her support for the first year, I don't think I could have survived it. There was never any overt prejudice but the conversation was very guarded. We really have come a long way. It just took them time because most of them had never had a professional experience with a black woman. (Executive, Non-profit Organization)

Gregory (1995) notes that Black women have shown tremendous resilience when confronted with the challenges of stereotyping. All of the women interviewed felt that one of the positive aspects of their mentor relationships has been the dismantling of the stereotypical notions of who

they are. As one participant stated: "I let go many of my stereotypes about white men and he learned a lot about black women."

Racism

Cox (1993) has noted that majority and minority group members often differ significantly as to how much racism has declined in recent years. He reported that a study of over two-thousand adults indicated that African-Americans were almost twice as likely to believe that racism has actually increased during the past several years. As one of the participants stated:

> "I didn't realize at the time how much my mentor shielded me from the racism present in the organization. When she left to take a position with another financial institution and her replacement was named, he called me into his office, closed the door and stated that he could not figure out how I got here or why I was here. Basically he said this was it and I should look for another job. At that very minute I realized what an ally my mentor had been. I decided to fight this new manager for awhile but finally wound up suing. I won and he left the organization. I was offered numerous jobs but decided to leave as well."
> (Bank Executive)

Many of the women in this study used the word subtle when referring to racism. As one participant stated: "There was no overt racism...just lots of subtle things that would occur. I was never invited to participate in any of the networking groups that were of an information nature."

While many debate whether racism is declining, what is apparent is that there is still a considerable amount of racism both in the workplace as well as society as a whole. These issues have important implications for organizations and their leadership. As Cox (1993) reminds us, leadership of the organization must be educated to be more aware of these subtle forms of racism. Where it is found to exist, it must be challenged and dealt with appropriately.

Group Mentoring

The African-American women in this study all agreed that their mentors played a significant role in their career development. Many also stated that they received limited psychosocial support. Ragins (1997) has noted that there is evidence that cross-cultural mentor relationships provide less psychosocial support than homogeneous relationships. Several of the women in this study pointed to the support they received from their churches.

> "My church was with me when I got into my doctoral program, encouraged me through the program and was there to celebrate with me when I graduated. They continue to be there for me." (University Administrator)

Gregory (1995) agrees and found that one of the greatest sources of strength for African -American women is the Black church which is also at the center of many in the Black community.

Another group that played a significant role in the psychosocial support of six of the women interviewed was a Black sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. It was founded in 1913 by 22 Black students at Howard University. Today there are 225 alumnae chapters. One of the goals of the sorority is to promote career development. As one women in the study commented, "Even though as members we are in a variety of professions, this sorority gives us the emotional

support that we do not get in the workplace." Another participant stated, "I did not go to a college that had a Black sororities. My mother, however, was a member of the Deltas and I saw what support she was given to get through some really difficult times."
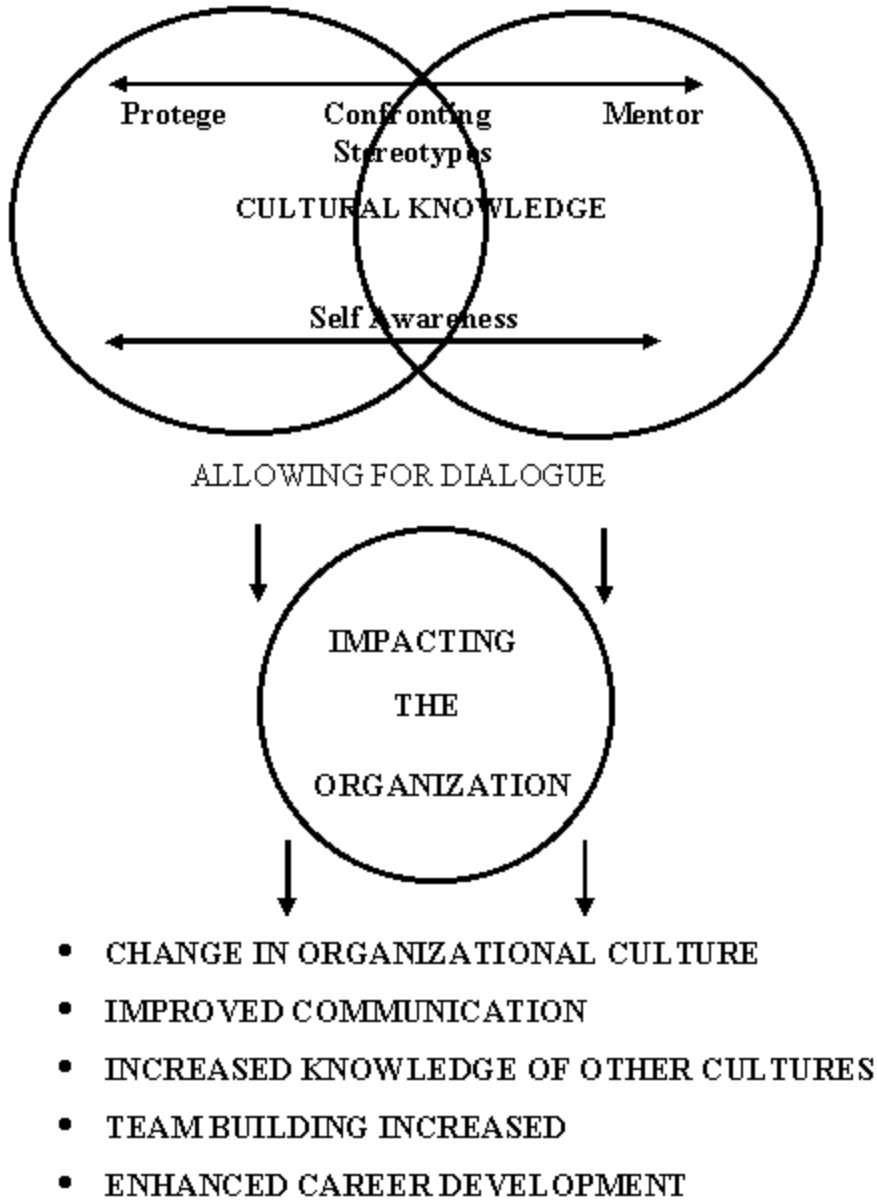
Dansky (1996) reports that groups may play a subtle but important role in the mentoring of their members. He goes on to report that groups serve their members better by nurturing more and teaching less. The notion of group mentoring is new and worthy of more investigating.

Discussion

The women who took part in this study all placed a high value on the mentor relationship and the positive affect it had on their career development. They also indicated that a great deal of learning took place on the part of both the mentor and the protégé. As one of the African-American women stated: "I learned a lot about white norms and he (mentor) also learned about me in the process."

Figure 1 shows some of what both the mentors and proteges indicated were the benefits of their cross-cultural mentor relationships and how these relationships benefited their organizations.

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│              FIGURE 1                         │
│   BENEFITS OF CROSS-CULTURAL MENTORING        │
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Protege ◄──────── Confronting ────────► Mentor
                  Stereotypes

        CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

        ◄──── Self Awareness ────►

ALLOWING FOR DIALOGUE

IMPACTING

THE

ORGANIZATION

- CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE
- IMPROVED COMMUNICATION
- INCREASED KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER CULTURES
- TEAM BUILDING INCREASED
- ENHANCED CAREER DEVELOPMENT

These relationships in the work place allow for a mutual testing of stereotypes and attributions regarding differences and also allow for the development of cross-cultural communication skills. These findings should also be useful in the development of formal mentoring programs.

This study also points out the need for further investigations of the notion of group mentoring. Professional and social groups have played an important part in the career development of their members. What needs further

investigation is the psychosocial support that these groups provide. Adult Education Associations at both the local, state and national levels have historically stood for the ideals of democracy and inclusion. Further studies of how they have assisted in the mentoring process of their members, especially those from under represented groups, would add to this body of literature.

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