The Stages of Mentoring Relationships

Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Boston University School of Management, Kathy Kram has written a number of publications on Mentoring. In her book, *Mentoring at Work*, Kram describes what she has found to be the four stages of a mentoring relationship.[1]

Kram identified these four stages of a mentoring relationship by interviewing eighteen pairs of managers who were involved in mentoring. She recognises that the mentoring relationship is not static, and can move back and forth between stages.

1. ‘Initiation’
   - This is a short period of time, defined by Kram as six months to one year in length, where the mentoring relationship starts out.
   - During this stage the relationship becomes of increasing importance to both client and mentor.
   - Original expectations of the relationship are realised.

2. ‘Cultivation’
   - This stage lasts approximately between two and five years.
   - Optimum benefit from the relationship is gained at this stage.
   - These benefits apply to both the client and the mentor.
   - There are increased opportunities to meet and the meetings become progressively useful.

3. ‘Separation’
   - Kram describes this stage as being reached when there is a big change to the structure of the relationship or to the emotional side of the relationship.
   - This phase is inevitable given that the client will begin to outgrow the relationship. Success will be realised when their learning objectives have been achieved and most of the learning has taken place. The client will be more confident and self-reliant.
   - If this occurs timely it should be a source of satisfaction for both the mentor and client.
   - If it occurs prematurely then feelings such as abandonment, anger or resentment may be experienced. Hostile feelings on either part will break down the original mentoring relationship.
   - A separation stage can last between six months and five years and is completed when both parties recognise that the relationship is no longer needed in its current form.

4. ‘Redefinition’
   - The relationship between client and mentor has now either come to a close, or has changed in nature to a friendship of equals. The ‘hierarchy’ between mentor and client no longer exists.
   - This stage will only be reached after the dust has settled post-separation. Both will need time to adjust to their new roles. If there have been any differences they will have been settled.
   - The original mentoring relationship has been made redundant.

Conclusion

These four stages can be seen in terms of an upward spiral, as both parties have the potential to grow and develop as a result of the relationship. Although the client primarily benefits from the mentoring, there are also opportunities for the mentor to learn. By helping others to analyse their behaviour, mentors too can create a new mindset for themselves, by examining their own skills and working practices and becoming more self-aware. Developing effective feedback and people development skills are another positive outcome of the relationship for the mentor. From a communications perspective, mentors also have the potential to find out about other parts of the organisation, and to gain an insight into the effect that senior management decisions have on the organisation.


Related Items
Related Resources

- Harold E Johnson: Strategic Mentoring