Fostering trust in mentoring relationships: an exploratory study

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Abstract

Purpose – Mentoring has been identified as a key strategy to career development and has been argued to be indispensable for women to advance to positions of power. For mentoring to succeed, it is imperative that mentors trust their protégés. However, recent research has suggested that male mentors trust their male protégés more so than their female protégés. Since women are frequently mentored by men, it is imperative that they gain the same level of trust as their male peers enjoy. According to an established model of trust, trust is shaped by the mentor’s perceptions of protégé ability, benevolence and integrity, as well as perceptions of the risk inherent to mentoring. This exploratory research aims to examine what influences these perceptions to shed light on how protégés can gain the trust of their mentors.

Design/methodology/approach – Because little research has been conducted in this area, an exploratory qualitative design was chosen. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman’s model of organizational trust is used as the theoretical framework.

Findings – This research sheds light on what predicts how trust is formed, fostered and lost in a mentoring context by examining factors that may influence perceptions of ability, benevolence, integrity and risk. Several protégé behaviors were identified that influenced perceptions of ability. Perceptions of benevolence were described as “feelings”. Perceptions of integrity were influenced by keeping confidences. Finally contextual factors, such as gender, were also identified as influencing the level of trust.

Research limitations/implications – The sample size was based on only 24 mentors; as a consequence, the findings are exploratory in nature and not generalizable.

Practical implications – Trust has been identified as a critical component of an effective mentoring relationship. As a consequence, mentoring programs must include activities that assist in establishing and fostering trust between mentor and protégé.

Social implications – Women are still under-represented in positions of power. Mentoring has been widely adopted as a mechanism to help women climb the corporate ladder. The lack of female mentors frequently means that female protégés have to be mentored by men. If women are to break the “glass ceiling,” it is imperative that male mentors trust their female protégés to the same extent as their male protégés and provide them with the same career advancing opportunities.

Originality/value – Very little research has examined the role of trust in mentoring, although trust has been identified as a critical element in other organizational activities, such as leadership, performance appraisal, labor-management relations, interpersonal cooperation, e-commerce transactions and self-managing work teams.

Keywords Gender, Mentoring

Paper type Research paper

Background

Research has consistently documented that women are disproportionately represented in upper management and in positions of power, and still continue to dominate traditionally “female” occupations, such as administrative support and service workers (Burke, 2002; Hsieh and Winslow, 2006; Jacobs, 1999; Leck, 2002; MacRae, 2005; Schein et al., 1996). Catalyst, a non-profit organization whose mission...
is to work with organizations to expand opportunities for women, reported that women are underrepresented as heads of the financial post 500 organizations (5.2 percent in Canada, 3 percent in the USA), board directors (13 percent in Canada, 15.2 percent in the USA) and corporate officers (16.9 percent in Canada, 15.7 percent in the USA), and generally in management occupations (39 percent in Canada, 50.8 percent in the USA) although they represent almost 47 percent of the labor force in both countries (Catalyst, 2009a, b). Canada’s 2010 Employment Equity Annual Report highlighted that in 2009, the representation of women declined and continued to be below availability in both the federally regulated public and private sectors. Further, the proportion of women hired or promoted over the past twenty years has decreased in the federally regulated private sector.

In a ten-year retrospective of women and work, MacRae (2005) examined issues such as work options, the glass ceiling and women entrepreneurs and concluded that concerted efforts need to be made to support women and to encourage them to grow in the workplace. Many organizations have responded to this need by adopting mentoring programs (Catalyst, 2009a, b), and formal mentorship programs are the most frequently cited organizational practice offered to address gender differences in advancement (Pinkelstein and Poteet, 2007; Orser, 2000).

Mentoring is generally thought of as a relationship between a younger, less experienced individual (i.e. the protégé) and an older, more experienced individual (i.e. the mentor). Mentors provide protégés with psychosocial support, such as friendship and acceptance, as well as career development support, such as helping the protégé advance in the organization, providing sponsorship and coaching, setting up challenging assignments, fostering positive visibility and protecting the protégé from adverse forces (Kram, 1983, 1985). A recent meta-analysis examining the career benefits associated with mentoring found that protégés who have been mentored reported greater career outcomes (specifically in the areas of compensation and number of promotions) than those who have not been mentored (Allen et al., 2004; Day and Allen, 2004). Further, they report that protégés are more likely to be satisfied with their careers, more likely to believe that they would advance in their careers and more committed to their careers than their non-mentored counterparts (Ehlich and Hansford, 1999). Mentored employees also have more favorable perceptions of their organization’s culture (Hale, 1995), specifically related to their stand on work-life balance (Day and Allen, 2004; Forret and de Janasz, 2005). Mentoring has also been found to have a wide range of favorable behavioral and attitudinal outcomes for non-workplace mentoring, such as mentoring in an academic setting and mentoring youth (Eby et al., 2008).

**Women and mentoring**

Schein et al. (1996) argue that mentoring, while important for men, may be indispensable for women. Mentoring enables women to overcome career obstacles, gain information and insight, seize power, understand organizational politics, obtain feedback and gain access to resources (Burke and McKeen, 1990; Collins, 1983, Hale, 1995; Headlam-Wells, 2004; Lineham and Walsh, 1999; Ragins, 1996; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Tharenou (2005), in a large scale, longitudinal study of mentorship in Australia, found that career related support was more important in helping women advance than it was for men.

Research has also demonstrated that mentoring is most effective for women when they are mentored by women. For instance, Cooper and Hingley (1983) argue that women need female mentors who can act as role models because female protégés may find it difficult to mirror the “male behaviors” exhibited by male mentors. Women with
female mentors report greater interpersonal comfort than do women with male mentors (Allen et al., 2005; Maccoby, 1990). Women mentored by women also receive more psychosocial support and career-development support than do women mentored by men (Fowler et al., 2007; Okurame, 2007; Ragins and McFarlin, 1990; Scandura, 1992; Scandura and Williams, 2001; Tharenou, 2005; Thomas, 1990). Career support of women by women is most useful, perhaps because “women protégés gain from being sponsored, challenged and coached by someone like themselves who has incurred the particular difficulties women can face” (Tharenou, 2005, p. 101).

In a meta-analysis investigating gender differences in mentoring, O’Brien et al. (2010) reported that men are more likely to serve as mentors than women. This finding, coupled with the lower number of women in key positions who could take on the role of mentor, means that female protégés are less likely to engage in same-gender mentoring than their male counterparts (Burke, 2002; Burke and McKeen, 1994; Fletcher and Ragins, 2007; Harden et al., 2009; Ragins, 1989). As a consequence, many aspiring young women must establish successful mentoring relationships with male mentors.

There are many issues inherent to cross-gender mentoring that present serious challenges to female protégés (see Young et al. (2006) for a comprehensive literature review). In the absence of formal mentoring programs where mentors and protégés are matched, women are first faced with the challenge of initiating a relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Women may be reluctant to initiate a relationship in case it is misconstrued as a sexual advance (Clawson and Kram, 1984; Ragins, 1996). Further, women also may be reluctant to approach male mentors as this may be perceived as “overly aggressive” and defying traditional gender-role expectations where women take on more passive roles (Ragins, 1996).

In both informal and formal mentoring scenarios, male mentors and female protégés may be reluctant to enter cross-gender mentoring relationships to avoid office gossip, perceived sexual involvement, accusations of sexual harassment, discrediting innuendoes, jealous spouses and resentful co-workers (Bowen, 1985; Clawson and Kram, 1984; Fitt and Newton, 1981; Hurley, 1996; Morgan and Davidson, 2008). In a critical review of the sexual dynamics in mentoring relationships, Morgan and Davidson (2008) argue that since what characterizes a good mentoring relationship comes dangerously close to what characterizes a romantic relationship, cross-gender mentorships should be avoided so as to limit the number of opportunities for the mentoring relationship to go wrong. For instance, in a study of graduate students, Harden et al. (2009) reported that cross-gender dyads were more likely to report negative experiences related to mentor seductiveness and difficulties in terminating the mentoring relationship.

Men may also be reluctant to mentor female protégés because a failure could negatively impact the male mentor’s career (Horgan and Simeon, 1990, 1991). Further, Ragins (1997) argues that because men and women possess differing levels of power within an organization, men are more likely to be targeted as potential protégés by male mentors. Finally, others argue that women have fewer informal and formal opportunities to access and interact with male mentors (Kram, 1985; Leck et al., 2012; Lunding et al., 1978; Ragins, 1996) and that men and women may differ in the type and availability of mentoring opportunities (e.g. men may be expected to engage in activities such as networking on the golf course) required to succeed in an organization (O’Brien et al., 2010; Wanberg et al., 2003).

Female protégés face other challenges. Research has found that gender-role stereotypes can either consciously or unconsciously cause male mentors to assume that their female protégés lack the skills to grasp complex problems; further, when women do
succeed, it is frequently attributed more to luck rather than competency (Deaux and Emswiller, 1974; Noe, 1988). Gender-role stereotypes may also prevent male mentors from getting too acquainted with their female protégés (Lankau et al., 2005). Different socialization practices can also cause dysfunction in the mentoring relationship; female protégés are socialized to use relationship practices (e.g. dependency, nurturing, accommodation), while male mentors are frequently over-protective and paternalistic (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988).

Elliott et al. (2007) suggest that trust between male mentors and female protégés may also be a challenge causing difficulties in the mentoring relationship. In their study, male CEOs who were actively involved in mentoring both male and female protégés were asked to discuss the quality of their relationship with their protégés and to suggest ways that their mentoring relationship could be made more effective and mutually satisfying. On several occasions, the mentors stated that if they had to choose one of their protégés for an important organizational project, they would likely choose their male protégés over their equally qualified female protégés. When asked why, mentors responded “I trust him more.” If male mentors do not trust their female protégés as much as their male protégés, it is not surprising that men favor men over women for important projects or promotions, and consequently, it is not surprising that women are limited in accessing positions of power as the statistics cited previously suggest.

Trust has been recognized to be important in many other management functions, such as leadership, performance appraisal, labor-management relations, interpersonal cooperation, e-commerce transactions and self-managing work teams (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995; McKnight et al., 2002; Wrightsman, 1991). Further Mayer et al. (1995) argue that current trends in demographics and changing management styles suggest that the importance of trust in organizational relationships is likely to increase. Yet surprisingly, research on the role of trust in mentoring relationships is in its infancy, even though trust has been shown to play a significant role in mutually beneficial and hence successful relationships in other contexts. Although it is unknown what influences mentors to trust their protégé, Erdem and Ozen Aytemur (2008) provide some initial insight into what influences protégés to trust their mentors. In a qualitative study based on a sample of 32 protégés in an academic setting, they reported that protégés’ trust in their mentors was influenced by mentor competency, consistency (i.e. predictability of behaviors), sharing of control, fairness, communication (e.g. openness and empathy) and showing interest.

More research on how trust is fostered in mentoring is clearly needed, especially if female protégés are to earn the same level of trust as their male counterparts and consequently reap the same career benefits.

Theoretical framework
To frame our research we use a recognized model of trust in organizational settings (Mayer et al., 1995) as illustrated in Figure 1.

Mayer et al. (1995) define trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party.” Initial trust is influenced by several factors such as the trustors’ propensity to trust (a stable personality trait) and their perception of the trustworthiness of the trustee. Trustee trustworthiness is influenced by three factors: the perceived ability or technical competence of the trustee; the perceived benevolence of the trustee toward the trustor; and the perceived integrity of the trustee.
The likelihood that the trustor will subsequently engage in a risky behavior (e.g. sharing a confidence) is a function of the initial trust, mediated by the trustor's perceived risk in engaging in the behavior. For example, if initial trust is high, and the perceived risk is low, the likelihood that the trustor will engage in a risky behavior (e.g. sharing a confidence) is high. The outcome of engaging in a risky behavior will impact the trustor's future perception of the trustworthiness of the trustee, and the decision to engage in further risky behaviors. For example, a positive outcome to a risky behavior (e.g. the trustee does not repeat a shared confidence) results in a more favorable perception of trustee trustworthiness and a greater willingness to engage in further “risky” behaviors. Conversely, negative outcomes would diminish the level of perceived trustee trustworthiness and reduce the willingness to engage in future risky behaviors.

In a mentoring context, the Mayer et al. (1995) model suggests that mentors’ initial trust in their protégés is influenced by their perceptions of their protégés’ ability, benevolence and integrity. This level of initial trust, mediated by the perceived risk associated with mentoring, will predict engaging in “risky” mentoring behaviors (e.g. sharing confidential information that may be revealed to others, assigning a task which may not be completed satisfactorily, giving advice which may turn out to be bad for the protégé, giving away secrets that may be used to usurp the mentor, etc.), thus setting the cycle of trust formation in action.

Therefore, trust is largely influenced by the mentor’s perception of four important dimensions: protégé ability, protégé benevolence, protégé integrity, and risk. But what influences these perceptions? Some research has examined the negative outcomes associated with mentoring which one could argue could influence the perceptions of risk, in that the more mentors are aware of these negative outcomes, the more they would perceive mentoring to be risky. For instance, based on Duck’s (1994) typology of close personal relationships, Scandura (1998) identified four categories of potential dysfunction in the mentoring relationship: negative relations (e.g. bullying, becoming enemies); sabotage (e.g. revenge, silent treatment, career damage); difficulty (e.g. conflict, not being able to end the relationship); and spoiling (e.g. betrayal, regret, mentor competence questioned). Further, when mentors are unable to exit a mentoring relationship, albeit dysfunctional, mentors can experience other negative
outcomes, such as increased stress, anxiety, jealousy and sense of betrayal (Scandura, 1998). Finally, as cited earlier, male mentors mentoring female protégés also face the risks associated with having their relationships misconstrued.

No research, however, has directly examined the question of what influences the perception of risk in mentoring. Furthermore, no research has examined what influences the mentor’s perception of the protégé’s ability, benevolence and integrity. Creating more favorable perceptions would accelerate the trust formation process. It is unknown, however, what protégés and mentors could do to establish these more favorable impressions, or how mentoring programs could be designed to foster favorable perceptions. For instance, if certain protégé behaviors resulted in increasing favorable perceptions of ability, integrity and benevolence, and/or lowering mentor perceptions of risk, then engaging in these behaviors would facilitate and accelerate trust formation. Identifying these behaviors and other actions would be especially important for women, as previous research has indicated that male mentors have learned to trust their male protégés more so than their female protégés, impeding career advancement for women (Elliott et al., 2007).

Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory research is to shed light on what influences mentor perceptions of the trustworthiness of their protégés (i.e. ability, integrity and benevolence) and the risk involved in mentoring.

**Research methodology**

**Procedure**

A qualitative exploratory design was chosen due to the general lack of knowledge in this area. Potential subjects were identified by the president of a Toronto-based consulting organization that specializes in developing and administering training programs for mentors and protégés. Subjects were first contacted by the president and asked if they would agree to participate in a study about trust in mentoring. Those who agreed were subsequently contacted by the research team to set up an interview time. During a semi-structured telephone interview, subjects were asked to think about their most recent protégé and to answer a series of open-ended questions. The questions germane to this paper included: In the context of your mentoring relationship, what does trust mean to you? How important would you say trust is to the learning process? How would you describe the depth of trust you have with your protégé? Can you think of a specific event or behavior in the past that helped build greater trust in your mentoring relationship? Can you think of a specific event or behavior in the past that was detrimental to the level of trust in your relationship? How has the level of trust in your mentoring relationship changed from the beginning of the relationship and why? and What do you think makes your protégé trustworthy? Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour. Answers were subsequently transcribed, categorized, summarized and analyzed by two of the investigators.

**Sample**

The sample was comprised of 13 male mentors and eleven female mentors. All had over 20 years of work experience and held senior level executive positions in both private and public sector organizations. All the mentors were currently participating in a formal mentoring program either voluntarily outside of their business or within a program within their organization. On average, mentors indicated that they had been mentoring for about ten years.
Results
First, four categories of responses were created and labeled: perceptions of ability; perceptions of integrity; perceptions of benevolence; and perceptions of risk. Then, in order to identify potential influencers, every respondent statement was evaluated, and placed in one of the categories using Mayer et al.'s (1995) definitions of ability, integrity, benevolence and risk as a guide (definitions presented below). Statements that were not relevant to any of the four categories were discarded. Each category was then examined separately. Statements that were similar were grouped together by common theme and labeled. Each category and its sub-themes are presented next, along with selected quotes to illustrate the themes. The reader is also referred to Appendix for a summary of the responses by question.

Perceptions of ability
Mayer et al. (1995) described ability as “[...] that group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain” (p. 717). In the domain of “mentoring,” this would include the skills, competencies and characteristics that would indicate to the mentor that the protégé is adopting the protégé role. Six behavioral themes were identified that provided evidence of “ability.”

1. Demonstrating a willingness to learn: mentors responded that protégés who appeared eager and demonstrated a genuine willingness on the part of the protégé made them trustworthy. “If you’re willing to learn, you’re going to absorb what other people are trying to tell you.”

2. Demonstrating openness: mentors indicated that they looked for openness on the part of their protégé and a genuine interest in improving themselves. “The best learning is experiential, you take what you experience and you apply it to what you need and you say, ‘Oh, that worked there, I can use it here,’ so protégés have to be open to letting experiences happen rather than saying, I’m going to make this happen, I’m going to go my way.”

3. Ability to set realistic goals: mentors indicated that it was critical that protégés were able to set realistic and attainable goals and objectives, and that these goals should be expressed and set at the beginning of the mentoring relationship. For instance, one mentor stated that if his protégé’s articulated goals that were attainable in his view, then he was more willing to “getting his protégé’s to where they wanted to go” and that if protégé’s expectations were unrealistic then “no amount of mentoring could possibly aid in the learning process.”

4. Seeking out the mentor: mentors indicated that not being sought out for advice led to lower trust. “[...] she did not take the initiative, did not seek me out even when I was offering my time and expertise. The relationship was never really established before it dissipated.”

5. Following advice: mentors stated that mentoring could not occur if protégés did not listen and regard their mentor’s advice. Mentors expressed a need to see evidence that their protégés had taken an action as discussed in their meetings, in order for them to feel that their protégés could be trusted. “If the protégé had not taken the specific steps toward the goals/objectives, as discussed in previous meetings, the protégé needed to have a good reason as to why not if I was to continue investing in the mentoring process.” “I don’t think you can mentor effectively if you don’t trust the person you’re mentoring to take the information and try to act on it.”

6. Being able to receive honest feedback: mentors indicated that the protégé’s ability to receive honest feedback was essential if trust was to grow and for mentoring to occur. In one extreme case one mentor even described himself as being known for
“tearing people apart” and “eating people alive and spitting them out.” Protégés who stand their ground eventually earn their mentor’s respect and trust.

Perceptions of benevolence
Mayer et al. (1995) described benevolence as “the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor […]” and suggested that it suggests a “specific attachment” to the trustor (p. 718). Although mentors did not describe specific protégé behaviors that led to this “attachment,” many articulated that “feelings” led to trust and investment in the mentoring relationship. Following are the themes that emerged.

1) Feeling safe: many mentors defined trust as a “feeling safe to open up and speak one’s mind.” It was described as an ability to share feelings and frustrations, knowing that they were safe sharing the information. There was a consensus that trust was a feeling, a way one felt with another, a knowing that one was safe with the other individual. “Trust means the person is in a safe place, means they’re able to open up and talk about things of importance to them, of concern, of value, and they’re free to express their opinions and ideas without fear of repercussion or anything like that.”

2) Feeling a natural chemistry: some mentors indicated that they immediately trusted their protégé. Mentors claimed that there was a natural “chemistry” they felt between themselves and their protégés. It was something that was “felt,” a “knowing that the person they were with could be trusted.” Two of the most emphatic responses were both from female mentors (one with a male protégé and the other with a female protégé) and they described their relationship in terms of a deep and mutual respect for one another, and one that evolved into a close friendship.

3) Feeling of connection: in general, mentors felt that trust building in mentoring relationships often had more to do with the “fit” between individual personalities. It was described as a feeling of being connected, where the mutual benefits of this connection was evident to both parties. “I think in the end it’s all just about human relationships and people learning to get along well […] it’s learning to be fair […] and be a good listener and show respect for the people you’re with.” In one failed mentoring relationship, the mentor said she still does not know why the relationship failed and while she experienced disappointment over it, she said that not every mentoring relationship is a “fit” between mentors and protégés.

4) Feeling a sense of love: one male mentor said that he felt he had “no choice” but to trust his protégés. He spoke compassionately of his protégés (all male), saying that he loved them and he genuinely loved helping them. “Actually, I don’t have any choice other than trust them. Because I should trust them, I should love them, when they’re coming to me and they’re people that didn’t have a job that was matched to their credentials and they need help.” Other responses reflected a genuine caring for the protégé, both professionally and personally. “Some of them, they’re so nice. They report to me, they go to their next job, they go home, they call me. It’s so nice to have a relationship with somebody, not based on business, I’ve enjoyed that a lot.”

Perceptions of integrity
Mayer et al. (1995) described integrity involving “[…] the trustor’s perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable” (p. 719). Two themes emerged.

1) Keeping a confidence: without exception, mentors indicated that the ability of their protégé to keep a confidence was the foundation upon which trust and the mentoring relationship was built. “Nothing destroys the trust in a mentoring
relationship faster than sharing a confidence outside the relationship.” Mentors also spoke of the importance of keeping their protégé’s confidences and that betraying confidences had a profound effect on the relationship, even leading to protégés opting to end the mentoring relationship and change mentors. This is illustrated by the following example:

We shared a lot of intimacies beyond what was just the original intent and one day in conversation with the person who had referred her to me, I betrayed a confidence. I hadn’t seen it as a confidence, but I told her something that I knew about the woman that I assumed was public knowledge, and she didn’t know it and this really did interfere with the trust level of the client because it got back to her, that’s how I found out about it, I was totally unconscious of it in the moment. And it changed the tenor of our relationship. We kept coaching for some months later, but I know that it was never the same again. And it was unfortunate, but a very valuable lesson for me to learn.

(2) Declaring a conflict of interest: one mentor described as situation where she had been asked what she thought of her protégé during a senior staff meeting where performance appraisals were being discussed. She said that she told the committee making the review that she felt it was a conflict of interest for her to comment. Later, she told her protégé what had had happened. She felt that this incident “solidified the reciprocal trust they shared” and strengthened her protégé’s willingness to keep confidences.

Perceived risk
Mayer et al. (1995) argues that assessing the risk inherent to engaging in a risky behavior involves the consideration of contextual factors. In the case of mentoring, four contextual factors were identified as helpful in evaluating risk and consequently fostering trust.

(1) Time: mentors indicated that trust was built over time. “I think it’s good, it builds up over time. The more time you spend, then the more proof points you have of trust being built and being reinforced. That just comes with time.”

(2) Creating personalized mentoring plans: in one instance, after the formality of being paired, (they were participants in a formal mentoring program within their company), the mentor and her protégé met offsite, entirely away from the building where they both worked. The mentor and protégé “scrapped” the formal mentoring outline given to them by their company in favor of inventing their own outline. The mentor described that this led to the development of a deep trusting relationship early on which lasted throughout the duration of their mentoring relationship.

(3) Working through a major event/crisis: surviving a major event or crisis together triggered a greater sense of trust. Two examples illustrate this theme. In the first example, the mentor shouted at her protégé “You did what?” upon hearing the terms of the agreement of a deal that he had negotiated. She saw the shock on her protégé’s face and realized she had reacted badly. The next day she apologized to her protégé and explained that the experience brought them closer together.

In the second example, the protégé, after working for 21 years in a hospital as a senior administrator, was now facing an uncertain future due to a re-organization within the hospital. The protégé was uncertain as to what steps to take and the mentor described this period for the protégé as a very difficult time. The mentor described that it was gratifying to help her protégé through this difficult period and that it deepened the relationship and solidified their trust in one another.

(4) Mentor/protégé gender: female mentors felt that female protégés with female mentors held more trusting relationships. This was frequently attributed to the network that men often share which excludes women. One mentor who was emphatic
about same gender mentoring and cited an example where she was in a meeting with one other woman and several men. With several points still left on the agenda, she noticed that the meeting was quickly coming to a close and at precisely 3:30 p.m., adjourned, at which point all the men hurried from the room. When she asked the other woman what the rush was all about, the other woman responded that Thursday afternoons the men played hockey after work.

One male mentor stated that due to physiological differences, males and females had differing needs. He felt that females were often more reactive and tended to be more emotional than men in the work environment. It was his opinion that this negatively impacted the trust between men and women co-workers. Based on his experience with emotive women in business, he felt less inclined to share confidences or be open in those relationships. In meetings, he said he would wait until the woman/women had left before speaking his mind on some issues.

Discussion and conclusion
According to Mayer et al. (1995), perceptions of ability, benevolence, integrity and risk impact levels of trust and influences mentoring behaviors. Understanding what influences these perceptions permits practitioners to design mentoring programs and training programs to maximize their effectiveness.

Perceptions of ability were influenced by behaviors, notably behaviors that signaled a willingness to learn, openness, ability to set realistic goals, seeking and following advice, and being able to take criticism. This suggests that protégés, especially female protégés, would benefit from training before they enter a mentoring relationship in order to learn that these behaviors are key to gaining trust and subsequently the benefits of mentoring. More research is also needed to examine if there are differences in how and how often both men and women engage in these behaviors, and how the form and frequency of these behaviors influences trust. Although not reported above, it is interesting to note that mentors felt that their own ability and successes would make them appear more trustworthy to their protégés. Further, some believed that their track records with previous protégés would provide evidence that they would be good mentors and trustworthy. This suggests that mentoring programs should ensure that both protégés and mentors are aware of each other’s successes to foster trust in the mentoring relationship.

Perceived protégé benevolence was predominantly influenced by “feelings,” notably feeling safe, feeling a natural chemistry and connection, and even feeling love. Mentors overwhelmingly emphasized feeling the need for a form of “attachment” with their suggesting that perceptions of protégé benevolence is an important factor influencing trust and mentoring behaviors. Mentors who felt these forms of “attachment” with their protégés indicated that they immediately or very quickly trusted their protégés. It is beneficial to the mentoring relationship for trust to form quickly, and so these findings suggest that influencing perceptions of benevolence may be very important when implementing mentoring programs. As a consequence, more research is needed to examine how feelings of “attachment” can be influenced. Further, because those mentors who indicated that they felt this “attachment” almost immediately were all women, more research is needed to examine gender differences in perceptions of benevolence.

All mentors indicated that the ability to keep a confidence was a key factor in establishing trust and noted that betraying a confidence destroys a relationship. This suggests that perceptions of integrity are also very important in establishing trust, and that perceptions of integrity will be quickly unfavorable if a confidence is shared.
Unfortunately, it is easier to discover that a confidence has been betrayed than to foresee that a confidence will be kept. Little was offered in this research to shed light on what influences favorable perceptions of integrity except for one example described above where a mentor told her protégé that she declared a conflict of interest during an employee appraisal meeting. This suggests that a way of influencing favorable perceptions of integrity may be by sharing examples of events where confidences could have been betrayed, but were not. This may establish a “track record” of integrity. Mentors should also be made aware that although sharing sensitive information may be risky, it can also lead to greater levels of trust in their protégés. Future research is needed to identify how perceptions of integrity could be influenced in a mentoring relationship.

Three contextual factors influencing perceived risk were identified, namely time, major events, and gender. Some mentors indicated that trust formed over time. This is in line with Kram’s (1983) four-stage model and Mayer et al.’s (1995) model that proposes that iterative risk taking increases trust. Spending time engaging in non-work activities (e.g., playing hockey on Thursdays) may also contribute to trust formation. As this is not always an option for women, especially for those who have family obligations or for those who fear that the relationship may be misconstrued, other mechanisms to increase “face-time” need to be developed. This could include sending mentor and protégé to common conferences, holding organizational sponsored events (e.g., golf tournaments) where mentor and protégé would be paired, or simply increasing the amount of time during work hours for mentor and protégé meetings. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how perceptions of ability, integrity, and benevolence also change over time. Because it is in the interest of mentoring relationships to minimize the time it takes to form a trusting relationship, more research is also needed to identify substitutes for time or developing more “quality” time.

One mentor attributed the success of her mentoring relationship with the fact that she and her protégé developed their own personalized mentoring contract in lieu of the organization’s formal outline. Perhaps physically “tearing up the contract” constituted a “major event” which was also offered as contextual factor influencing trust. Future research should examine the merits of customized programs instead of the “one size fits all” nature of formal mentoring contracts. It may be that personalizing the contract builds a stronger commitment between a male mentor and female protégé.

A major event was also identified as a trigger for increased trust. While it may not be possible or desirable to inject a real major event in the life of the mentor and protégé, other mechanisms may be substituted. For example, many organizations use leadership programs that provide participants with unusual and difficult situations; this would provide mentors and their protégés with a stressful and emotional experience. Future research should examine the role of training, especially training that provides the mentor/protégé dyad with a stressful situation, in fostering trust.

Finally, gender was also identified as a contextual factor. Female mentors felt that they trusted their female protégés more because they were often excluded from male networks. Interviews (see Table AI) also revealed that male mentors were uncomfortable sharing information with emotive women. Women spoke of mentoring as a two-way learning process, while male mentors viewed it as one-way. Women were more inclined than men to rely on “chemistry” and trust immediately while men cited relying on evidence and past successes. As this research was exploratory in nature, more research is needed to examine gender differences in order to best match mentors and protégés as well as to develop mentoring training that is tailored to the needs of the gender profile of the dyad.
There were limitations to this research. First, although the sample size of qualitative projects is generally small, it would have been more desirable to have a greater representation of gender mentor/protégé dyads (i.e. male/male, female/female, male/female, female/male) to flush out gender differences. Further, face-to-face interviews instead of telephone interviews could have resulted in richer data to analyze. Finally, the results provided are exploratory in nature and are intended to guide future research and are not to be generalized to all mentoring relationships.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on what predicts how trust is formed, fostered and lost in a mentoring context. Further, the initial findings support the Mayer et al. (1995) model of trust suggesting that this model is a suitable platform for future research. Trust was identified as an essential element of effective mentoring and therefore more research is needed to examine how mentoring programs can be best designed to ensure that trust is established between mentors and protégés. This research also suggests that gender may impact trust formation and consequently more research is needed to examine differences between same-gender and cross-gender mentoring dyads and specifically trust formation of male mentor/female protégé dyads.

References


Further reading


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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response summaries</th>
<th>Potential gender differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. In the context of a mentoring relationship, what does trust mean to you?</td>
<td>Integrity (ability to keep a confidence) Benevolence (safe to share information without fear of repercussion)</td>
<td>Women hold more trusting relationships because they are often excluded from male networks Men less inclined to share information with emotive women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. How important would you say trust is to the learning process?</td>
<td>Critical/essential/very important Trust is important only if the protégé's goals are realistic Satisfactory to strong in most cases Trust is either built over time or immediate due to a &quot;feeling&quot; Trust declines if mentor's advice isn't followed or sought The &quot;fit&quot; between mentor and protégé affects trust</td>
<td>Women spoke of their own “learning process” while men did not Women were more inclined to rely on “chemistry” and trust immediately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. How would you describe the depth of trust you have with your protégé?</td>
<td>Satisfactory to strong in most cases Trust is either built over time or immediate due to a “feeling”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. Can you think of a specific event or behavior in the past that helped build greater trust in your mentoring relationship?</td>
<td>Trust is built over time and facilitated by the program's structure (e.g. number of meetings per week) Events demonstrating integrity (e.g. sincere apology after making a mistake, honest, straightforward answers) Events demonstrating benevolence (e.g. helping the protégé through a difficult time)</td>
<td>Only women offered specific examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. Can you think of a specific event or behavior in the past that was detrimental to the level of trust in your relationship?</td>
<td>Events displaying a lack of integrity (e.g. betraying a confidence)</td>
<td>None noted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6. How has the level of trust in your mentoring relationship changed from the beginning of the relationship?</td>
<td>Most claim it grows over time; few claim it was instantaneous and remains unchanged</td>
<td>None noted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7. What do you think makes your protégé trustworthy?</td>
<td>Openness, willingness to learn, desire to improve themselves Evidence that protégés followed the advice given A “feeling”</td>
<td>Only men cited relying on evidence while only women cited relying on a “feeling”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table AL. Summary of responses and potential gender differences