Staff mentoring in community colleges

William J. Pearch
Barbara M. Craig
Eileen Willits

Dr. Pearch is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Ms. Craig is Director of Academic Services at Lake Michigan College in Benton Harbor, Michigan.

Ms. Willits is Vice President of Patient Care and Chief Nurse Executive at Lakeland Regional Health System in St. Joseph, Michigan.

Over the next ten years, retirements will bring a leadership crisis in community colleges. One way to combat the impending crisis is to develop formal mentoring programs which nurture future leaders. One way to ensure the mentoring program achieves its objective is by using a framework to assess leadership strengths and weaknesses. Mentors who are strong in particular skills may be paired with the mentored who need to develop the skills.

Introduction

"Community colleges are facing an impending leadership crisis," reported Charles Schults in 2001. With about four-fifths of incumbent community college presidents planning to retire within 10 years (Weisman & Vaughan, 2002), leadership development is now an essential focus for community colleges. Successful colleges of the future will be the ones that today are cultivating new generations of leaders at all administrative levels (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2001). Amey and VanDerLinden's 2000 survey revealed that only 22% of presidents were promoted to the presidency from within their institution. Many respondents also indicated they have acted or currently act as mentors. When these leaders retire, colleges lose their knowledge, expertise, and mentoring, too. Organized and well-planned mentoring programs are crucial to the future of community colleges.

Several scholars have surveyed the state of current leadership training initiatives within the community college (Anderson, 1997; Duvall, 2003; Watts & Hammons, 2002) and have concluded that the skills new leaders require are much different from the traditional ones in the past. Senior leadership must concern itself with many issues that require solid business skills as well as skill working with legislators and foundations; lobbying; managing elections for bonds, tax rate, and tuition increases; handling collective bargaining; and litigation (Duvall, 2003). Twombly and Amey (1991) believe that current presidents are identifying their own agenda for the twenty-first century, by "creating institutional effectiveness and distinctiveness, establishing over-arching purpose, building communities on- and off-campus, working with and serving diversified populations, acting affirmatively, and many variations on organizational renewal and institutional leadership" (p. 395).

Developing peak performers

Recognizing the need to attract peak performers, Zeiss (2004) suggests that colleges ask themselves whether they have an effective supply chain of new employees. If they hope to maintain their relevance as community service providers, community colleges must learn how to increase the performance of their employees. The three keys to developing peak performers are training, motivating, and supporting. All three of these fundamental strategies can be combined efficiently in a mentoring program. Further, the most commonly cited reasons for leaving one's job at a community college include "little or no recognition" and the "perception of being undervalued" (Zeiss, 2004). Both of these reasons apply when talent is not recognized or fostered.

Professionals embark upon careers in the not-for-profit sector, not to acquire great wealth, but out of care and concern for fellow humans and because of a desire to make a difference. As a result it is important to make sure employees feel a sense of respect and recognition. A formalized mentoring program can help develop an environment of vision and stability. Staff members with leadership potential can inject energy and experience into meeting the challenges facing today's community college.

Mentoring

Mentoring embraces a philosophy about people and how important they are to educational institutions. Luna & Cullen (2000) believe "mentoring is useful and powerful in understanding and advancing organizational culture, providing access to informal and formal networks of communication, and offering professional stimulation" (p. 5). It is culturally significant that leaders of tribal colleges "believe it is their responsibility to actively encourage and train the next generation of educational leaders" (Stein & Eagleeye, 1993, p. 33) for higher

education institutions serving Native Americans and other tribal groups. Formalized mentoring is a proven method to foster diversity and multicultural perspectives in leadership.

Amey (2004) points out that conversing with a mentor is not just gathering information from one who is more experienced, but engaging in pointed discussions and critical dialogue about deep issues and subconscious perspectives (McDade, 2003). Active reflection is seen not so much as a luxury, but as a critical aspect of everyday leadership activity. Leadership development is never so much finished as it is an evolving process. Educators need to understand the value of learning from others in order to continue on their own professional development journeys.

Mentoring programs are clearly a useful way of helping newly appointed leaders adjust to new assignments. Whether it is administrative leadership that is new, or simply the acclimation to a new campus, assistance from a well-respected mentor can be invaluable in providing supportive guidance and constructive criticism.

The American Council on Education (ACE) Fellows program is an established yearlong program accommodating approximately 30 senior college faculty and midlevel administrators that have a minimum of five years of college-level experience from all types of institutions, including community colleges. Participants attend seminars and workshops; visit campuses; and meet national leaders from government, research organizations, trade associations, foundations, and others to investigate topics of concern to higher education leaders and to prepare publishable-quality papers. Participants also undergo a yearlong internship with a college president and other senior administrators who serve as mentors to the fellows. The president mentor relationship lasts the entire academic year, with fellows receiving assistance in planning their year, reviewing their progress throughout the term, and studying firsthand higher education administration, leadership, decision making, and governance. Full access to the decision–making process is provided to the fellows at their host campuses (Pierce, Mahoney, & Kee, 1996).

Goals in a mentoring program

When developing mentoring programs, organizations should set both short and long term goals which clearly spell out how a mentoring program will benefit not only the organization, but also the mentor and mentee. Organizationally, mentoring programs can enhance productivity, ensure a diverse workforce at all levels, build trust between business units, and enhance communication (Lindenberger & Zachary, 2004). Benefits for the mentor may include:

1. satisfaction in assisting in the development of a colleague

2. enhancement of administrative leadership quality

3. recruitment and retention of talented leadership.

For the mentee, benefits may include:

1. networking

2. developing an awareness and understanding of policies and procedures that are relevant to their role assignment

3. developing visibility and prominence within the profession

4. providing constructive criticism and encouragement, and compliments on achievements

5. achieving career advancement.

For a mentoring program to succeed, a person should be assigned as the point person to coordinate all activities. The person should serve as the champion of the program and focus on program evaluation and process improvement. The point person should chair an advisory team, which assists in evaluating the program against the stated goals. Additional consultants should be included only if they are very familiar with the organization and its culture. Lindenberger and Zachary (2004) recommend that the formal program start with a few participants and move forward slowly. They do not recommend "assigning" mentoring pairs, rather, they suggest the mentee seek out a trusted advisor and establish the mentorship relationship one on one.

Once the relationship is established, the team should develop clear learning outcomes and provide training and coaching to both parties to ensure success. Even the most senior executive will not necessarily understand how to be a good mentor. Executives at every level will need education and training to be successful. At a minimum, the pairs should meet formally on a monthly basis whether at the workplace or off site.

The goals of the mentoring program are simple. According to Management Mentors (2004), "mentoring pairs talented, experienced professionals (mentors) with promising, less experienced professionals (mentees). Over time, working one-on-one, the mentor - mentee – and the organization – all benefit" (p. 1). Successful mentors help protégés expand skills in the areas of strategy and knowledge about a particular job through observation of the mentor and by consulting with other leaders in the organization. An effective mentoring relationship may not be apparent or have immediate results, which may cause frustration for the mentor. According to Elijah West Jr., with mentoring "rewards come back at different times and in different ways" (NFIE, 1999, p.16). In other words, the role of the mentor must be one that is undertaken without a need to have immediate reward, since the long term effect of mentoring is what matters in the development of people and the organization.

A mentoring model

The mentoring program developed by the Association of California Community Colleges was modeled after the ACE Fellows program and provides one year of mentoring experiences between veteran administrators and administrative staff who aspire to leadership positions (Valeau, 1999). Begun under the auspices of a three-year Ford Foundation grant, the program has the following basic objectives:

1. enhance knowledge directly applicable to career success

2. identify skills needed for upward mobility

3. develop a network of professionals in California

4. assist and offer training so that participants can become viable role models on campus

5. provide participants with an introduction to a visible network for career opportunities

6. develop strategies that contribute to a successful working relationship in a culturally pluralistic, diverse society

7. encourage and provide support for those working within the academic structure.

During a yearlong program, participants interact with veteran administrators in the system who are noted for possessing skills and knowledge that would be useful to the participants. During the year, the mentor and protégé participate in orientation sessions, special sessions with the state chancellor for community colleges, retreats, workshops, and sessions arranged by the program coordinator. "Learning contracts" developed between the mentor and protégé may range in scope from completing research projects that design more efficient managerial systems in specific areas of college operations to crafting a career development program for the protégé (Valeau, 1999). Through a committee of presidents and former mentors, applicants are screened to determine mutual interests, skills, and expected needs. Each mentor-protégé team works closely throughout the year, adhering to the components of the mutually designed learning contract. When surveyed, 91% of the protégés rated their experiences as being somewhat or very positive. Their most valuable experiences were working with the mentor (43%) and attending workshops, conferences, and retreats (25%). They stated they developed most in increasing openness to new experiences, strengthening people skills, and learning about leadership styles. Aspiring leaders were matched with mentors who were chancellors-superintendents, presidents, or chief academic officers. Only half of the survey respondents indicated that the quality of the mentoring they received was excellent or very good. The quality of the mentoring was in their opinion most influenced by (a) the type of person their mentors were and (b) their relationship with their mentor (Valeau, 1999).

Selecting mentoring pairs

The respective personalities of the mentoring pair are crucial to the success of a collaborative mentoring program. Burns (1979) states, "To understand the nature of leadership requires understanding of the essence of power, for leadership is a special form of power" (p. 12). When leaders become mentors, there should be a concrete distinction between how much or how little power to exert over the mentee. Clark (1997) describes leadership as a process in which a person influences others to accomplish a mission or a task. Of two predominant leadership styles identified by Burns (1979), the first is *transactional* leadership, which is defined as an event that occurs when one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things. *Transformational* leadership—the second style—occurs when people engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. In a mentoring situation, both types of leadership may be used depending on the skill set and level of experience of the mentee. According to Bolman & Deal (1991), evidence shows a leader who is people-centered (transformational) is more successful than one who is more task-centered (transactional) in the long run.

When selecting mentoring pairs, it is important that the mentee respects and wants to learn from the mentor. Clark (1997) states that people—mentees—want to be guided by a mentor whom they respect and one who has a clear sense of direction. A newly appointed professional may need to have a mentor who uses a transactional style, at least until the professional is confident in his or her leadership ability. The mentor may begin to nurture the newcomer by providing supportive guidance and constructive criticism. A mentor with a transformational style may not be the best for a novice, and a mentor with transactional style may not be best for developing a successor to a high level position when it is clear the successor candidate is highly motivated and already has strong leadership skills.

The Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid

While effective leaders demonstrate concern for their staff, they must also model concern for the work to be done. A primary question is how much attention do they pay to one or the other? As a way to determine what sort of leadership skills might be needed to mentor a person, both the mentor and the mentee may want to consult the Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Blake and Mouton suggest that effective leadership is characterized by the combination of high concern for production with high concern for people. These concerns are classified on a grid where the concern for people is measured along the vertical axis, and concern for production is measured along the horizontal axis (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Key positions on Blake and Mouton's grid
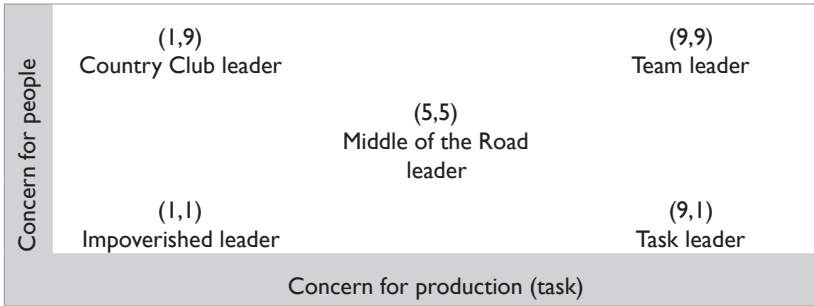
The grid demonstrates how leaders can modify their own leadership/management style to become more effective personally and to develop the synergy inherent in their teams. Figure 2 identifies some of the defining positions on the grid and Figure 1 explains the main characteristics of each. The managerial grid, intended as a tool for leadership development, effectively assists a mentor in determining how much or how little the mentee exhibits concerns for people versus concern for task completion. It recognizes that leadership requires a balance between concern for the task and concern for people, and that there is no necessary correlation (positive or negative) between the two. However, it assumes that high concern for both is possible simultaneously — a combination which produces the most effective leadership style.

Figure 2 Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid
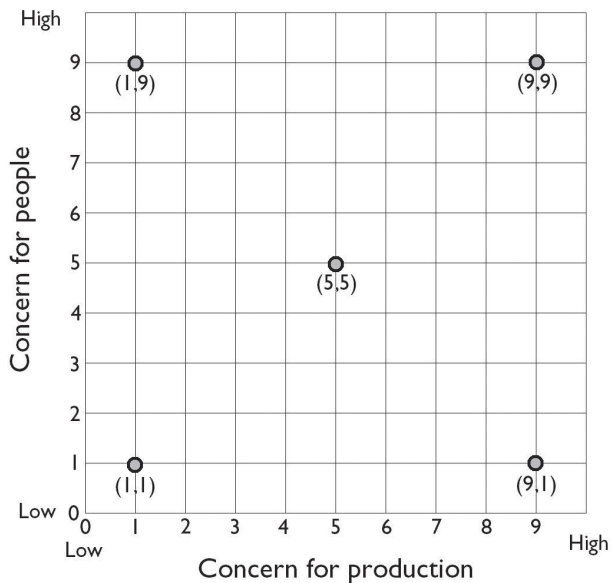
Leaders with a high concern for people and a low concern for production are identified as "Country Club Leaders" (grid position 1,9). They have a tendency to give thoughtful attention to the needs of the people involved in the organization and in creating a comfortable, friendly atmosphere. Those who operate at the other extreme are identified as "Task Leaders" (grid position 9,1). These managers primarily focus on productivity with little concern for individuals. They focus on streamlining operations so that human resources interfere as little as possible with the other resources. These leaders may be commonly referred to as "tyrants" or "slave-drivers." Blake and Mouton (1961) believe that they get the work done but to the detriment of the human resources.

The "Impoverished Leader" (grid position 1,1) tends to focus on doing no more than the absolute minimum to get the required work done. He or she has little concern for either the human element or the production level of the team. Impoverished Leaders don't last long in responsible organizations.

The 5,5 leader is categorized as the "Middle-of-the-Road Leader," one who constantly tries to balance concerns of the workforce and concerns with getting out the work. He or she tries to reach a compromise between the two competing forces, keeping morale reasonable but not excellent and production close to expectations without significantly exceeding them. "Middle-of-the-Road Leaders" tend to burn out rapidly since they keep both elements neither happy nor unhappy (Blake, Mouton, & McCanse, 1989).

A 9,9 style is seen as the one most likely to lead to organizational effectiveness. Staff are fully involved and committed, trust exists between leaders and staff, and productivity is high. The leadership system is well-designed to produce effectiveness with a goal-oriented, team-based approach. Both concern for task and people are high. Staff motivation and productivity are likewise high.

Different situations create the need for different types of leaders and leadership styles. During a crisis, the task master may be the best person to have at the helm, but during other times—for example when a community college wants to increase student enrollment or develop a more entrepreneurial culture —a team leader would be best. The mentoring pairs should first assess their own individual styles and then develop their action plans so the mentees become better leaders. Using such a framework for personal development will also help the mentor to grow. The results will lead to a win-win-win situation for the mentee, the mentor, and the community college.

Conclusion

Mentoring programs established now and formalized in the long term can help address the crisis of leadership in community colleges. A formal program can help protégés understand the organizational culture and feel that their role makes a difference in the college. Mentoring programs are an exciting form of leadership development that could attract the best and brightest talent who would infuse the college with energy and new ideas.

The programs which have met with success at the American Council on Education level are yearlong experiences which pair talented professionals with community college presidents and provide a range of experiences including those available at trade associations and conferences. Learning objectives developed at the beginning of the year lead to evaluations of progress at regular intervals.

Developing mentoring pairs based on an assessment of skill levels in both the mentor and the mentee allows appropriate pairing and makes it much easier for the pair to agree on common goals and objectives. Such a tool can also be a useful reference for evaluating the mentoring program altogether. When a mentor and mentee have reached shared objectives, it may be time to foster a new relationship, which can help the mentee develop a higher level of leadership within the community college. Not all mentors will be successful at every level. Some mentors are better paired with a novice, some are better paired with a higher-level leader; but a formal mentoring program will be successful when appropriate pairings are developed, and clear goals and objectives have been agreed to by both parties.

Well-crafted induction programs provide a positive transition from novice leader to longer-term career development by assigning an experienced colleague as a mentor. Supervision of entry-level leaders by mentors can not only help to retain bright, promising new leaders by providing a support system, but also help to ensure that those novices develop into competent, enthusiastic practitioners who realize their full potential and can respond to the needs of the community college in the twenty-first century.

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