

**SPECIFICATION OF EFFECTIVE MENTORING BEHAVIORS FOR CAREER
SUCCESS OUTCOMES:
WHAT DO GOOD MENTORS DO?ⁱ**

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Abstract

Although much research has been done in the past few decades to link mentors' enactment of mentoring functions (e.g., career support, psychosocial support) to career success outcomes for mentees, there has been virtually little systematic examination of the most appropriate mentoring behaviors underlying these functions. This lack of understanding of what good mentoring looks like at a specific behavioral level has been a limitation to both our understanding of the mentoring process and our ability to choose and/or train mentors. Here, we conduct a thorough literature review of the mentoring research, describe the extent to which behaviors have been specified in the scholarly literature, and extract key themes from the mentoring literature. A total of 530 unique behaviors were identified, many of which could be clustered these into one of the two higher-order mentoring functions, "career-related" and "psychosocial support." Key themes and example behaviors are provided.

Key Words: mentoring, mentor functions, career-related functions, psychosocial functions, literature review.

Mentoring is a frequently-used leadership development tool. Mentoring refers to a developmental relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced

organizational member referred to as a mentee or protégé. Mentoring relationships may be both formal and informal. Formal mentoring relationships are implemented by organizations. While program characteristics can vary widely, formal mentoring programs are typically characterized by assigned relationships, program goals, participant training, monitoring, and evaluation [1]. Informal mentoring relationships develop naturally, based on common work or personal characteristics between the mentor and mentee. Whether formally or informally initiated, mentoring relationships can be adapted to multiple organizational contexts and developmental needs.

Several recent meta-analyses have indicated that mentoring produces positive effects on mentee career outcomes [2, 3], as well as on other behavioral, attitudinal, health-related, relational, and motivational outcomes [4]. Typically, mentoring programs are evaluated in terms of outcomes such as mentees' career progress or career satisfaction, using both subjective and objective success measures [5]. Less is known about the effects of mentoring on mentee performance [6], although some studies show positive effects [7, 8, 9]. One problem with evaluating performance outcomes is that the intervention focus is usually specific to the mentor-mentee dyad (e.g., one dyad focuses on mentee leadership skills, another focuses on mentee time management), making it difficult to identify performance criteria consistent across dyads. However, as mentoring can be considered a form of instruction in an ill-defined performance domain, it is appropriate to propose that enhanced mentee performance *may be* a benefit of mentoring, when a substantive portion of the dyad experience is spent on work-related content. In general, we propose that effective mentoring leads to mentee competency development, which in turn leads to multiple outcomes of interest to organizations, including mentee performance and career success.

While there is growing evidence that mentoring leads to beneficial outcomes, an important question is what is it specifically about mentoring that accounts for its success? The short answer is that we do not know [10]. The more complete answer is that much of the research on mentoring processes has focused on 'mentor functions.'

There are decades of evidence showing relationships between key mentor functions and mentee and mentor outcomes. As we discuss below, as a profession, we know little about how mentor functions are executed or carried out? What do good mentors do? This is the 'black-box' of mentoring research [11], and the focus of our research.

A mentor function is a broad set of inter-related behaviors that have an impact on mentee effectiveness. As an analogy, consider manager functions. Examples of some common manager functions are planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. Under each of those functions may be any number of specific behaviors by which the manager carries out the function.

The most commonly referenced taxonomy of mentor functions is from Kram, who proposed two key broad functions: career-related and psychosocial [12]. Career-related functions are those things a mentor does that directly help to advance a mentee's career. Examples of career-related functions are providing visibility, protection, and coaching. Examples of psychosocial functions are helping the mentee develop a sense of competence and effectiveness through counseling and friendship. When most prior research studies have purported to look at mentoring processes, they are most often looking at the level of mentor functions, not mentor behaviors [e.g., 13]. To be clear, we distinguish between a mentoring function and mentoring behaviors. A mentor function includes both a goal – provide support – and a broad set of measurable behaviors. Mentor behaviors are more specific (in the moment) and may vary depending on characteristics of the mentor, the mentee, and the context. One may know that providing support leads to a positive mentor-mentee relationship, but know nothing about *how* to provide that support.

The devotion of mentoring researchers to mentoring functions as a key predictor has been criticized of late [14, 15, 16]. For example, Scandura and Pellegrini (2007) and Pellegrini and Scandura (2005) suggested that relying on the standard measures of mentoring functions may be obscuring distinctions between satisfying and dissatisfying relationships. Wanberg et al. (2003) questioned the appropriateness of the functions

model and measurement for application to formal (organizationally-sponsored) mentoring relationships as it was derived from informal, naturally occurring relationships. The lack of clarity of what precisely constitutes mentoring may have consequences for the overall impact of a mentoring program within an organization.

The central critique for our purposes lies in the idea that even if we have evidence that there is some empirical relationship between ratings of mentor functions and mentee outcomes, we still don't really have a clear understanding of what is *actually happening* in these relationships -- what the process looks like. Additionally, we know little about how the frequency and effectiveness of particular mentor behaviors vary depending on characteristics of the mentor, characteristics of the mentee, or contextual factors.

To elaborate on the distinction between functions and behaviors, consider the common item appearing on a mentor function scale: "my mentor placed me in challenging assignments," to which a mentee must respond on a 1-5 strongly disagree to strongly agree scale. Responses to that item tell us very little about the series of behaviors that were involved. What did the mentor do, specifically, in one or more specific mentoring episodes, or in preparation or follow-up to the episode? What assignment did the mentor choose? How did the mentor communicate this assignment to the mentee? If you were a new mentor approaching a new mentoring relationship and were informed that placing mentees into challenging assignments has been shown to have positive outcomes for the mentee, would you know *specifically* what to do and how to behave to enact this function well? Clear descriptions at the behavioral level could have significant utility for selecting and training mentors and for increasing mentor efficacy.

In sum, although work on mentoring functions has proved fruitful, it is still limited in depth of representing what really happens in mentoring relationships. Although recent work is aiming toward combining functions and modeling processes, *what is not known is how these functions are enacted, or, more specifically what*

actually occurs between mentor and mentee, and whether there are specific behaviors that particularly distinguish maximally effective mentors from marginally or even ineffective or harmful mentors. This is the central goal of our work.

Current Investigation

As the first step in our research program, we conducted an extensive literature review on mentor behaviors to inform later research decisions. Specifically, we first reviewed the extant research on mentoring to uncover, aggregate, and classify existing mentor behaviors. While we believe that *detailed and descriptive* behaviors are rarely discussed in the literature, we recognize that mentor behaviors might *occasionally* be mentioned, either in the scientific or in the professional literature. For example, a thorough examination of the development of measures of mentor functions [e.g., 17] may result in either specific suggestions for mentor behaviors to be pursued during interviews or additional behaviors to augment what is uncovered in those interviews. Accordingly, we reviewed both the scientific and professional (i.e., popular or business) literature for all known resources on effective mentoring and attempted to extract, summarize, and categorize effective mentor behaviors.

Rather than narratively reviewing literature in which mentor behaviors –in one form or another - are described or measured, we found it more useful to approach this as an archival study of the behavioral items and statements found in the literature. Our objectives were to identify and compile unique behavioral items (from quantitative work) and descriptors (from qualitative work), and then classify these behaviors with regard to their level of behavioral specificity. In essence, we classified how close each statement was to what we have deemed truly descriptive mentoring behaviors for the purpose of our research.

Method

Overview

The objectives for this part of the project were to find any article or resource that could provide examples of specific mentor behaviors, extract those behaviors, code elicited behavioral statements for their level of behavioral specificity, and then come up with some meaningful initial grouping of statements.

We reviewed all identifiable articles in the mentoring literature that, on the surface, appeared to have discussed specific behaviors. Potential resources were identified in the general mentoring, coaching, counseling, educational, leadership, and social capital literature. Because few prior mentoring articles discuss specific behaviors, we anticipated that very few, if any, authors would provide specific, detailed mentor behaviors. However, many may allude to or mention behaviors in order to achieve some other goal. For example, scales of mentor functions may use behavior-like statements as items (e.g., “My mentor encourages me to confide in him/her”). Alternatively, professional books on mentoring often give direct advice to readers, advice that can sound like a fairly specific behavior (e.g., “Assures the mentee that he/she has what it takes to succeed in their position”). As described below, once all known sources were identified, the third author extracted all possible behaviors into a spreadsheet. The first and second authors then reviewed and rated all behaviors, first independently, and then jointly, on behavioral specificity. All potential behaviors were coded as (a) not a behavior, (b) Level 1: references a behavior imprecisely or ambiguously, or (c) Level 2: references a behavior in a way that is somewhat unambiguous or easily visualized. More specifically, “not a behavior” referred to statements which, while they appear on behavioral measures, are not an actual action on the part of the mentor done in pursuit of mentoring. Examples are items that refer to behaviors of the mentee or refer to traits of the mentor. Level 1 behaviors referred to statements which have an action verb and are actions done in pursuit of mentoring, but they are vague in the sense that it is (a) not

clear how the action is completed, and/or (b) not clear what the purpose of the action is. Level 2 behaviors referred to statements which are closer to our desired level of specificity for behaviors in that there was some description of the way that they are carried out and their purpose is clear.

Literature Search. First, we conducted a computerized search of the PsycINFO and Business Source Complete databases for documents from 2006 and 2013 containing all derivations of the words *mentor, coach, or leader* crossed with *function or behavior*. Then, we sent e-mails to experts in coaching and therapeutic relationships requesting recommendations for research articles, popular publications, or technical resources that dealt with specifics at a "how to" behavioral level (e.g., to "how to coach"). Finally, we reviewed the reference lists of relevant meta-analyses and literature reviews to locate additional sources that were not previously identified.

Criteria for Inclusion. The third author gathered each resource identified in the previous step and reviewed them for examples of behaviors performed by a mentor, coach, therapist, or leader. Resources that contained behavioral examples at any level of specificity were summarized by the third author. Each summary included an example of behaviors listed in the article. Once the resources were summarized, the authors independently read through the prepared summaries in order to narrow down the articles to those most relevant to the current study. We then compared our nominations and discussed any points of disagreement. For agreed upon articles, the reader took every behavioral example from the article and transferred it to a spreadsheet for further coding. We erred on the side of including any behavioral example in the spreadsheet, regardless of the level of specificity.

Development of a Coding System. The first and second authors reviewed the master list of behavioral statements together several times and discussed potential criteria for classifying the statements in such a way to determine how closely they corresponded with our mutual understanding of a specific behavior. After several

iterations through the behaviors, we derived the scale of behavioral specificity described above.

Coding. After the coding system was created the first two authors coded several behaviors together and discussed disagreements and refinements to the coding scheme. Next, they each independently coded the entire list of behavioral statements. Once these independent codes were completed, the third author compiled the two lists of codes and highlighted those with disagreements. Each coder then reviewed this list independently to see if they could find a pattern to the disagreements and to see if each was willing to reconsider their original code. After this process was complete and some codes were adjusted, the first two authors reviewed the remaining list and talked out their disagreements on interpretation of the coding system. Agreement was reached at that point on all items.

Results and Discussion

On our initial phase of extraction, we compiled 714 individual statements from 36 sources. We then eliminated statements that either exact repeats (word for word) from prior statements or deemed "not a behavior," yielding 391 vague behaviors (Level 1) and 139 more specific behaviors (Level 2). To get a sense of the types of behaviors emerging and to provide some organizational structure to this compilation, we preliminarily clustered these into one of the two higher-order mentoring functions, "career-related" and "psychosocial", with the addition of a "general" category where they did not seem to neatly fit into one or the other.

There are some lessons that can be gleaned from this pursuit at present. These are discussed below. Specifically, initial themes emerged for the behaviors in the career-related and psychosocial functions. Examining Level 1 and Level 2 statements within the same function helps to elucidate the qualities of statements that make them more explicit.

Emergent Themes

Career-related function themes. Within the career-related function, there are some themes emerging among the behaviors that occur in both the vague and the more specific behaviors. One of these is providing specific declarative knowledge – be it about the organization, the career, or something else – such that the mentor is conveying to the mentee something they need to know. Procedural knowledge is also an emergent theme – teaching or guiding the mentee how to do something necessary to expand their skillset. For example, assigning tasks to the mentees for completion between meetings is a frequently mentioned behavior which may increase procedural knowledge. Feedback is another important theme that emerged relative to career-related mentoring. Some items mention giving feedback in general, and others mention giving more specific and critical feedback. Moreover, providing perspective on issues the mentee is facing in his/her career was another emergent career-related theme. Providing perspective may just be a different point of view, or may involve engaging the mentee in conversations in which different viewpoints are visualized and evaluated. Importantly, we found that some of the career-related behaviors the mentors engage in do not happen precisely in meetings with the mentee, but in between. For example, mentors may speak to others about the mentee or on his/her behalf, promote the mentee's skills and potential to key people, or find other people who may be able to offer assistance to the mentee in a way that they cannot.

Example career-related behaviors include:

1. Asks the mentee how he/she is spending her time (priorities), and then helps the mentee see what percentage of time is actually being spent on goals.
2. Challenge protégé to think through possible solutions to problems and decide on solutions instead of merely telling them what to do.
3. Communicates with others in the mentee's network to see if they can work together to help the mentee on an issue, without ever divulging any confidential information.
4. Publicly supports or actively nominates me for desirable work assignments that

allow me to have contact with higher level managers.

5. Encouraged protégé to take a risk - do a risky profit-sharing deal.
6. Gave protégé a challenging assignment (e.g., negotiate an agreement), offered to be available, but expressed confidence that protégé could do it.
7. Giving a protégé a serious work challenge as a test: protégé was challenged to manage both a growth period as well as a downsizing period in a short period of time.
8. Help protégé think through a problem, considering various dimensions of the problem and anticipating issues and concerns likely to appear in the future.
9. Helping protégé see complex problems from multiple perspectives with multiple interpretations.
10. Invites the mentee to shadow the mentor on assignments and then follows up by reviewing the experience and explaining why he/she behaved as he/she did.

Psychosocial-related function themes. In the psychosocial realm, the term “sounding board” is a frequently appearing theme, though there is still not clarity in how this is effectively performed by the mentor (or if it even is a specific behavior, or set of responses). It seems to imply listening openly, with expressed empathy, and without judgment. A second theme is simply making time for or meeting regularly with the mentee. These might include regular calls, weekly lunches, or attending non-work functions together. A third theme was being emotionally supportive of the mentee, being empathetic, boosting their self-confidence, and so forth. Other psychosocial behaviors relate to maintenance behaviors one would find in any type of solid relationship, such as monitoring for issues, appropriate self-disclosure, and being positive.

Example psychosocial-related behaviors include:

1. Allow mentees to verbalize their issues/goals and giving them small amounts of feedback to help them clarify it with themselves.

2. At the start of the relationship, clearly reviews mutual expectations about how the relationship will go, and what the boundaries will be.
3. Communicates clear times he/she is available to the mentee, and then honors those times.
4. Confronts the mentee's ideas to help further reflection, in cases where mentee's beliefs and attitudes or habits are getting in his way.
5. Discloses personal stories that demonstrate to the mentee that they have certain things in common that should help them connect.
6. Have mentee summarize the session at close of interaction and record what has been learn and ask for clarification.
7. Listens carefully to mentee's emotional struggles and reacts calmly and with empathy.
8. Mentor gave protégé the flexibility to fail: she told protégé that development is about failure - you will have to be willing to fail.
9. Revisit expectations as the relationships unfolds and conduct ongoing evaluations of the health and value of the mentorship.
10. Use appropriate self-disclosure as a way of offering protégés a model for coping with imperfection.

Qualities of Explicit Behavioral Statements

Generally, the themes identified within the main functions were consistent with the expectations we had based on an initial, more selective review of the literature. The total number of behavioral statements we located was more than we expected to find, but they were often repetitive and were largely at a level too general to guide research or practice on good mentoring. Some statements were more explicit and descriptive than others. Below, we describe the qualities we saw in the more explicit behavioral statements; in doing so, we provide guidance for ourselves as to the types of behavioral

statements to be distilled from our qualitative interviews that will be maximally useful for describing exactly what effective mentors do.

As an example of a behavioral statement that is too general, let us take the Level 1 (vague) career-related item “Advises me about promotional opportunities.” This statement certainly reflects a behavior relevant to career guidance, but note that it is impossible to know exactly what the mentor is doing. How does he/she learn what the mentee wants/needs? How does he/she seek out the information? In what manner is the information provided, and what is the mentee expected to do with the information? One can visualize a mentor doing this behavior in a very effective way, but one can also see the same behavior done haphazardly and without much insight, research, clarity, and/or follow-through. If this statement is used “as is” on a survey of mentor behaviors, a satisfied mentee who had a mentor carry this out thoughtfully is likely to strongly endorse this. However, a dissatisfied mentee who also received advice about promotional opportunities, but not particularly thoughtful or effective advice, may still strongly endorse such an item, but the mentee’s outcomes are likely to differ. Additionally, even if the statement is endorsed by satisfied or successful mentees, it does not provide guidance to other mentors as to what specifically he/she should do to help a mentee.

A similar but more explicit statement is found in our Level 2 (clearer) categorization: “When talking to protégés about their career, [the mentor] asks them what is the next job they are thinking of, and tells them to think two jobs out because every move ought to be a step to the next move; tells them to think it through if they haven’t.” While this statement refers to a different activity than the previous statement, it is still in the realm of supporting promotional opportunities for the mentee. Indeed, it could possibly be a first step toward better being able to help the mentee identify the best promotional opportunities for them. It also shows a new, more strategic way of thinking about the future. It shows that they are not only probing for more information

about the desires of the mentee, but also encourages the mentee to think differently, and states why.

This statement, however, still lacks some clarity as written. For example, if this statement was provided to a mentor as an example of something to say during a mentoring meeting, Mentor A may say it, but say it in a way that is off-putting and disrespectful to the mentee (e.g., as if they are stupid for not having thought of that on their own), whereas Mentor B could present this idea in a manner that is both challenging and encouraging to the mentee. The statement could be improved by having a specific action verb (perhaps with adjectives or descriptors that allow for clear visualization of the behavior) and by specifying any contingent factors influencing the action.

Limitations and Next Steps

There are some limitations to our review and coding of existing behaviors. First, although we attempted an exhaustive review of sources from multiple literatures that purported to be studying mentoring behaviors (or similar), it is possible that some were missed, perhaps due to unclear key words. We also limited the search to the last five years to make it more manageable and most current. Many of the sources that appeared within these boundary conditions were updates of earlier works. Additionally, we did not do a full search for unpublished documents.

Second, although some of the statements come from quantitative measures and are stated in a more general fashion for any type of mentoring relationship, some were derived for very specific realms (e.g., graduate school mentoring, theater profession); as such, some behaviors as stated may be less applicable to general mentoring situations. Moreover, when we derived statements from more qualitative sources, such as professional books or case studies, the original descriptions were often long and not written in statement form (as one would see in a behavioral statement that is part of a quantitative measure). Often times, to extract a behavioral statement, we had to work from examples and paraphrase the original text to get to the essence of the behavior.

Third, the coding process that we created to determine behavioral specificity was based on our judgment calls. At this point in the project we are comfortable with the procedure we used throughout this process, independently scoring the statements using our scheme, and ultimately determining agreement to a full 100%. We were not haphazard, yet we realize the shared mental model we created to judge these behaviors could be idiosyncratic to our perspective on the current project. Moreover, we were more confident in some judgments than others.

Despite these limitations, our review and the coding we did leads us to the conclusion that most of the current descriptions of mentor behaviors in the literature lack a level of precision that would be maximally informative for practice and research. A better understanding of not only what effective mentors do but when and how they do it should facilitate the development of mentoring competencies that practitioners can use to select and train effective mentors. Moreover, increasing the level of descriptive precision should improve prediction models in mentoring research by creating more variance in measurement. We do know that mentoring makes a difference in the workplace; with further investigation into the precise behaviors of our most effective mentors, we can help improve this process.

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