Reflections on Mentoring

The benefits of a positive mentoring experience are rewarding both for the mentor and mentee. Several models or approaches to mentoring are discussed in the literature, ranging from the more traditional perspective to newer alternative forms of mentoring (Higgins & Kram, 2009). One of the fundamental aspects that contributes to the success of mentoring is the “fit” or focus of the model or approach in a given environment. Well-intentioned efforts at mentoring may be thwarted by failing to reflect the specific focus of an approach and the expectations of both mentor and mentee; “one size fits all” mentoring does not work. Appreciating the emphasis of various mentoring approaches will provide insight into using one that best fits the situation and mentor/mentee relationship.

Traditionally, mentoring involves a seasoned or experienced individual (mentor), usually older, working with a less experienced, younger junior individual (mentee). This perspective, often found in an academic setting, is focused on assisting the mentee with career development and successful progression in the academic setting. According to Speed (2016), this type of mentoring, referred to as the instrumental view, reflects a unidirectional process, with the exchange of information going from the mentor to the mentee. Speed (2016) also discusses the developmental view, wherein the focus of the mentor is on the personal growth and development of the mentee while at the same time addressing the mentee’s career trajectory and ultimate career goals. Both views involve a structured process with an assigned or selected mentor for a period of time. Speed (2016) notes that either of these views by themselves is limiting. He suggests that mentoring should be mutually beneficial and growth producing for both mentor and mentee and that this relationship moves along the continuum of an “instrumental-developmental perspective” (Speed, 2016, p. 20) according to the professional needs and goals of the mentee. The traditional perspective reflects a hierarchical approach to mentoring within a system or organization and is useful where it is a recognized, accepted model.

Chichester and Denne (2010) note that not all mentoring relationships need to be hierarchical. Other valuable forms of mentoring exist such as peer-to-peer mentoring, in which equally experienced individuals, such as staff nurses, with differing sets of experiences and skills share their expertise to support each
other in professional growth. In addition, a group mentoring format that uses an experienced mentor to work with a team of less experienced individuals is an effective and efficient way to foster professional development as well as interprofessional development.

Clearly, the nursing literature reflects the need to support nurses in the workforce environment through a variety of mentoring initiatives (Dyer, 2008; Thomka, 2009). One such successful online mentoring program offered mentorship for nurses at an acute care medical center (O’Keefe & Forrester, 2009) and led to improved recruitment, retention, and an organizational culture of engagement. Johnson, Billingsley, Crichlow, and Ferrell (2011) discussed the collaborative effort between a university and hospital system to develop the leadership abilities of nurses through a voluntary peer-to-peer mentoring program. They determined that this program improved job satisfaction, cost containment, and patient outcomes. In addition, it created a “culture of mentoring” needed in today’s complex hospital environment. Similarly, Latham, Hogan, and Ringl (2008) detailed the benefits of establishing an academic–hospital partnership for RN mentors and an advocacy program to improve both the work environment and patient outcomes. The partnership involved mentor–mentee teamwork and resulted in improved job satisfaction and patient outcomes, and a culture of mutual support and respect within the organization.

So, what is considered effective mentorship? According to Strauss, Johnson, Marquez, and Feldman (2013), effective mentors offer career guidance, emotional support, and a perspective on work/life balance; have good communication skills; and act as a guide as opposed to a manager. Mentors also provide possible opportunities for mentee growth and caution mentees about possible obstacles. Nash and Scammell (2010) discuss some helpful skills to ensure success in mentoring in the workplace. Whatever the approach, they indicate that mentoring involves “facilitating learning” (Nash & Scammell, 2010, p. 17). Essential to this process is active listening, good communication and interpersonal skills, providing constructive feedback, knowledge, experience, and mutual accountability.

Mentoring provides an opportunity to make a difference in the life of a mentee in whatever workforce setting. Schrubbe (2004) noted that mentors are individuals who often see much more in a mentee than the mentee can see and devote time and energy to inspire the mentee to see his/her potential for professional growth. In addition, effective mentors demonstrate competence, confidence, and commitment by building on the strengths of the mentee and allowing him/her to develop according to his/her career goals and sharing. In the context of the mentor–mentee relationship, experiences are shared, knowledge is exchanged, and a plan for professional growth is outlined. The literature clearly reflects that having a very capable and inspiring mentor is essential for success. As one reflects on the tremendous value of mentoring, the challenge for the nursing profession is this: instead of continuing to participate in the practice of “eating the young” often ascribed to nursing, how about “mentoring the young?”

REFERENCES


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