



The Gift of Mentorship

A Qualitative Study of a Statewide Mentoring Program



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Background

Mentoring has been acknowledged as an effective process to support the development of nurses at all levels and can be a positive force in a nurse leader's career trajectory (Bartlett, 2017; Elmajian, 2017). Developing and maintaining formal mentorship programs to address the developmental needs of nurse leaders should be a priority for nursing but can be challenging to sustain. A Statewide Mentorship Program (MP) was developed by the Organization of Nurse Leaders New Jersey (ONL NJ) to provide an opportunity for nurses throughout the state to be mentored by experienced nursing colleagues and has evolved to include formal interactive educational sessions and enhancements to the structure of the program. The program has received accolades from the American Organization of Nurse Leaders at its national conference in recognition of the development and implementation of this program.

Although the value of the mentorship program has been acknowledged by the greater nursing community, the organization authorized qualitative studies to be performed to more fully understand the experience of the mentors and mentees and to make improvements to the program based on the perceptions and feedback of program participants. This paper presents the results of a follow-up qualitative study conducted after improvements to the program were implemented in 2015-2016.

References

Bartlett, R. (2017). Mentoring and being mentored: Both are empowering. *Sigma Theta Tau International, Nursing Society.org* (7/11/2017).
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Purpose

The objective of the study was to describe participants' perception of a formal statewide mentorship program, with a focus on its impact on professional growth and to identify opportunities to strengthen formal mentoring programs.

Methods

- Qualitative descriptive design
- Focus Group and Individual Interviews of mentors and mentees
- Purposive Sample: 13 Mentors and 14 Mentees who participated in 2 cohorts of the MP program
- IRB approval and informed consent obtained
- Court reporters recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim
- Mentors and mentee focus groups conducted separately
- 5 Question Interview Guide used

Interview Questions:

1. What was your role in the mentor/mentee relationship?
2. Tell me about your experience overall.
3. What did you learn from the mentor/mentee experience?
4. What would you have liked to experience differently?
5. What are your thoughts about continuing the program for future mentor/mentee pairs?

Sample Demographics

	Mentees (n=14)	Mentors (n=13)	Total (N=27)
Gender			
Female	13 (93%)	13 (100%)	26 (96%)
Male	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Age Range			
20-30	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
31-40	4 (29%)	0 (0%)	4 (15%)
41-50	3 (21%)	2 (15%)	5 (19%)
51-60	5 (36%)	8 (62%)	13 (48%)
>60	1 (7%)	3 (23%)	4 (15%)
Years in Nursing Range (mean)	5-32 (20)	30-50 (33)	30-50 (26)
Years in Current Position Range (mean)	0-10 (3)	0-45 (24)	0-45 (19)
Nursing Degree MSN or >	12 (86%)	10 (77%)	23 (85%)
Highest Degree Masters or >	12 (86%)	13 (100%)	25 (93%)
Certification	12 (86%)	13 (100%)	25 (93%)
Work Setting			
Acute Care	12 (86%)	12 (92%)	24 (89%)
Outpatient/acute	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Other setting	1 (7%)	1 (8%)	2 (7%)

Findings

7 Mentor Themes

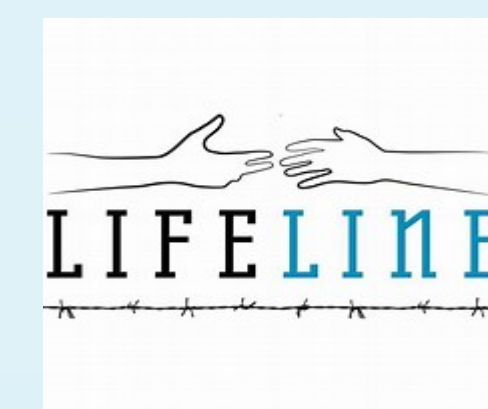
- Giving Back
- Rewarding and Energizing
- Concrete Guidance
- Not Always a Good Fit
- Sources of Conflict
- Goal Setting
- Nourishing the Mentee.

4 Mentee Themes identified:

- Mentorship program as a lifeline for the mentee
- Moving from reluctance to reliance
- Instilled courage
- Gaining confidence

Joint Theme:

- **Connected for Life a Mentor/Mentee**



Mentor Themes

Giving Back

Mentors felt that this was a way to *give back* to the nursing profession, and a way to "give away the gifts" that have taken a life time to accumulate. The role of mentorship was considered "something bigger than yourself."

Rewarding and Energizing

Most mentors expressed good feelings when helping others. The experience was described as invigorating and many seemed surprised that, although their stated purpose was to help and support leadership in others, they actually felt rewarded by the experience. I "got much more than I gave," and "she [my mentee] lights up my office when she shows up."

Concrete Guidance

Many mentees requested help and mentors provided tangible assistance with specific tasks such as navigating a new system, understanding organizational culture, conflict resolution, and budget and finance. Tasks included: "how to run a meeting...really nitty gritty stuff." Another mentor found her mentee to be: "very directed...[what] she was struggling most was with work-life balance"

Not Always a Good Fit

At times, the focus of discussion was more personal, which for some mentors, was uncomfortable and for which they felt unprepared. "I just really struggled with that personal piece." Some mentees needed assistance selecting the correct or appropriate position which might not have been the right fit.

Sources of Conflict

Some issues presented an area for which the mentor was not prepared and beyond the comfort zone of the mentor: "I felt like a psychiatrist." Geographical distance was also perceived to be a challenge.

Goal Setting

The setting of short-term and long-term career goals was an important activity for the mentors. Mentors supported and encouraged the mentees to continuously evolve when they asked, "What is next?" Goals evolved and were mutually shaped.

Nourishing the Mentee

Mentors identified potential in the mentees and saw the opportunity to encourage self-awareness in the mentee. If the mentee was in a new role as a nurse manager, or aspired to be promoted in a new role, the mentee sometimes had a need for positive reinforcement. Sometimes the mentee asked for validation related to the way a challenging situation was addressed.

Joint Theme

Connected for Life

Although the "official" mentorship was ending, the dyads would be connected for the rest of their careers. The mentees felt that they would call the mentors for advice in the future and they would continue to enjoy lifelong friendship.

"It's not something that just ends, it continues and is so wonderful."

Mentee Themes

Mentorship program as a lifeline for the mentee

Many mentees related their feelings of vulnerability. Some were new leaders who felt unprepared for their role while others, were dealing with increasing ambiguity and areas of conflict causing self-doubt and lack of confidence. The mentorship program was like a lifeline for these mentees. The mentees had an impartial and knowledgeable resource to count on for advice without the fear of appearing unprepared or incompetent in their roles. "instilled in me...confidence that what I am doing is right and that I have something important to offer"

Moving from reluctance to reliance

The mentees came to rely on the wisdom of the mentors to be able to share experiences and struggles. Mentors provided them with tools that the mentees could use throughout their careers. One mentee described the experience as having a "professional mom" who provided her with "the opportunity to bounce ideas off of someone who was totally objective and wise."

Instilled courage

The mentors provided a safe and non-judgmental environment which "instilled courage" to take risks. By instilling this sense of courage, the mentees felt empowered to stand up for what they believed, to go to the next level, or reach for yet another milestone. Sometimes, mentees had the courage to decline new positions that were not the right fit. "Courage is instilled in us because we have someone that we can talk to and enter our feelings with that is non-judgmental and it's safe."

Gaining confidence

Over the course of the mentorship, mentees gained confidence in their roles and in their decisions. Understanding that the mentors experienced similar challenges and being able to talk through situations or role play different scenarios helped them to move forward with confidence.

"...confidence to act, to speak, to share, to go outside my comfort zone"

Summary

The nurse mentorship program created and implemented by ONL NJ leaders provided an effective mechanism to link novice and experience nurses. This study provided insight to perspectives of both mentors and mentees with regard to value of the mentor relationship.

Conclusions

The mentorship program provided a springboard for building life-long relationships between many of the mentorship pairs. There were exceptions and rarely mentee/mentor pairs were not the best fit. Overall comments were positive and tangible benefits were expressed by both mentees and mentors. Thus, the ONL NJ mentorship program provides a framework for successful mentoring.

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THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE ARE THE CONNECTIONS YOU MAKE WITH OTHERS - TOM FORD

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