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Project 1 report

The *Mentoring at a Distance Program* was conducted by Margaret Collins, District Director of Midlands Education District in Perth, Western Australia, 2005-6. This project was one of nine leadership and cultural change projects created by WA Directors of Education within the *Executive Women Leading Women* project, led by the WA combined universities Centre for Research for Women (WACRW).

Mentoring at a Distance.

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"Mentoring is a critical tool in the career development of women … Studies have noted that the most significant barrier to women executives' advancement is lack of access to mentoring." (Blake-Beard, S. (2005) The inextricable link between mentoring and leadership, in Coughlin, L., Wingard, E. & Hollihan, K. (Eds.) *Enlightened Power*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass)

The Midlands Education District of Western Australia is a rural area, situated between the conurbation of the west coast of the state and the goldfields to the east. It is spread over an area of 78 000 square kilometres and comprises many small, scattered agricultural communities with three major regional centres. The District Director has overall responsibility for all 50 Government schools in the district, supported by an Area Director. Nevertheless, the Director's role takes her out of the District Office on four days out of every five as she visits the schools on her list; she can spend as much as five hours a day travelling. Currently, half the principals in the district are women, and both directors are women.

The District Director has overall responsibility as line manager for every principal and school in the district. She also has a smaller group of schools which she looks after personally. In a formal sense, it is her responsibility to conduct the biennial performance reviews of the school in her care. School reviews focus on accountability and quality assurance, and reports are produced based on eight specified outcome areas. This aspect of the Director's role includes performance management of principals. As well as the biennial school reviews, twice-yearly reports are prepared for the Education Department's Executive on the effectiveness of schools across the district (DET 2006). During this process the director is able to build up a detailed knowledge of the schools and the principals. However the focus on managerial aspects of the role means that there is limited amount of time

available to focus on broader dimensions of the Director's role, in particular those aspects of the job that involve mentoring of principals. There are many tensions present in effectively maintaining and developing these potentially competing roles of managing and mentoring the principals, many of whom work in professionally isolated contexts. These tensions provide the context for this case sketch.

The mentoring context

There is evidence that access to professional mentoring is particularly important for women in senior administrative and management positions (Blake-Beard, 2005; Scutt, 1996). While it is suggested that men tend to be mentored more often than women, particularly those in senior roles (Scutt, 1996; Smit, 2003; Wales, 2003), the impact of a female mentor on her female protégées can be profound, with a lack of access to mentoring providing a significant barrier to women's advancement (Blake-Beard, 2005). At a senior level, there are more male mentors than female, presumably because there are fewer women operating in senior management positions (Scutt, 1996; Wales, 2003). The support provided by senior women for their junior protégées is therefore particularly significant (Cullen and Luna, in Smit, 2003; Scutt, 2006). A noteworthy feature of the case sketch presented here is that its focus is on a woman mentor in a senior management position, whose goal is to provide improved mentoring support for other senior women in her organisation.

The nature of the relationship between mentor and mentee is a crucial factor influencing the success of mentoring relationships. Informal mentoring arrangements that arise spontaneously and are self-directed, unlike the more institutionalised formal mentoring arrangements, can be more beneficial for mentees than formal arrangements (Mullen, 2005; Samier, 2000). Effective models of mentoring highlight the importance of the mentor's interpersonal qualities, and stress the importance of caring, nurturing, mutuality and friendship in productive mentoring relationships (Mullen, 2005; Samier, 2000). This can be compared with the perspective that mentoring relationships when mentor and mentee are too hierarchically distant in an organisation, in terms of experience and expertise, tend to be less successful than those where there is the possibility for a more equal relationship (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Mullen, 2005; Stephenson, 2005). Similarly, it is suggested that mentoring is much more successful when mentees have easy, close access to their mentor in order for productive relationships to develop and effective learning to take place (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Samier, 2000).

The mentoring context discussed in this case sketch is untypical in several ways. The relationship is ostensibly a formal professional one, since the mentor is also in the position of line manager to protégées and her mentoring role is formally part of the management role. Despite this, many of the protégées involved have come to value the possibilities for quick, informal "catch up chats" more typical of an informal relationship. The potential for informality and spontaneity is advanced by the warmth of the interpersonal relationships that the mentor has established with those people she knows best in her group of protégées. Her role as line manager has not prevented the development over time of close, familiar relationships with her protégées. Even though she is also in a hierarchically unequal position within the organisation, she is committed to the development of close, familiar and supportive relationships of trust with protégées. Finally, the easy, immediate access to a mentor who is physically located alongside a mentee, and that is so supportive of mentees' learning, is not possible in this particular mentoring context. With many protégées working several hours' drive away from their mentor's workplace, other means had to be found to develop and maintain close relationships. This is the key focus of the project.

Project goals and aims

A burning issue for the Director at the start of the project was to quantify how much everyone gets of her time. She is conscious that time is a crucial factor in developing successful mentoring relationships. Because she feels she 'gels' better with some than with others she is aware of the need to work at making connections with some people. When time is limited, people who are harder to connect with get less time; she admitted that she struggles sometimes to develop a relationship with people. Sometimes she feels she is not satisfying anyone's needs; sometimes she just doesn't know what people want. These concerns are exacerbated by the geographical distance that exists between the Director and the majority of principals in the District, which makes it difficult to identify the specific needs of the women principals and deputies in the district. Given these concerns, the need to map out strategies to provide for the future needs of the district is pressing. However, from the Director's perspective there is evidence to suggest that her practices are successful (even though mysterious to her).

> When someone says, "You were so inspiring" I am sometimes unsure where this kind of comment comes from. "What did I do?" So it's interesting how someone else sees the mentor relationship with you.

The research project was therefore an opportunity for the Director to gain a better understanding of her own role as a mentor and of the impact of her practices, through reflection assisted by the researcher in her role as a 'sounding board'.

Baseline data

To ascertain what was happening in mentoring relationships the Director asked:

- What are protégées' experiences of working with a mentor at a distance?
- Can working with a mentor at a distance work?
- Who does it work for and who doesn't it work for?
- What might a good, strong and powerful female mentor look like for the female principals and female administrators in the district?
- What existing skills do I use and what kind of a job am I doing?
- What is required in the District in the future?
- What support can I provide myself, and what can I facilitate?

Table 1 summarises the Director's perceptions of both what she valued in a mentoring relationship and what she believed she offered to protégées.

Interpersonal qualities	*Mentoring practices*	*Professional expertise*
• A mentor should be honest. • A good mentor must be someone you can respect • A good mentor is explicitly supportive of her protégées – she wants to see people succeed • A warm personality is important: having a good sense of humour, being approachable and being easy to talk to	• A mentor should be available simply as a sounding board • A good mentor should be prepared to find support from others if needed • Mentoring may take place when the mentor provides a strong role model. • A formal mentoring relationship is not necessary for a person to have an impact	• A good mentor has wisdom • A good mentor has experience in the 'system' • A good mentor should be knowledgeable enough to conduct conversations that go beyond general 'chitchat' It is helpful to work with a mentor with a similar career experience to mine

Table 1: Successful mentoring: Director's perceptions

Evidence collected

This baseline data was used to construct the first part of a written questionnaire. Further questions were added which asked respondents to identify occasions when they felt supported by the director and when they did not feel supported. Finally, respondents were asked to suggest how they saw their mentoring relationship with the Director better providing for their needs. These final questions were designed to provide the Director with a better understanding of her the impact of her mentoring practices and of what people are looking for, to enable her to shape a future direction for the mentoring work in the District. The questionnaire was sent to 35 female principals, deputy principals and administrators in the Midlands Education district, who were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously. Replies were received from 28 people (an 80% response) and analysed by the independent researcher.

Respondents' answers to the questions were then matched against the Director's perceptions. It was noteworthy that there was a close match between those qualities identified by Margaret as being important in a mentor and those identified by the respondents.

Responses

Most respondents (61%) thought it was not difficult to maintain a relationship with someone they rarely see. This compares with 39% of respondents who thought it was difficult. Additional clarification from those replying that it was not difficult suggests the need to be proactive (on both sides) in maintaining a geographically distant relationship with your mentor: "You have to believe in the relationship and actively seek out mentors" and "[I]t's easy to stay in touch with phone, emails, but it must be both ways". Thus geographical distance is not necessarily a barrier to effective mentoring, but it a factor that must be acknowledged and appropriate strategies must be used to overcome the distance.

Personal such as approachability, being easy to talk to and being honest were particularly desirable qualities in a mentor. Professional experience and expertise were also essential; this included having experience in the 'system' and being a strong role model. Linked with professional qualities was the importance of a person who is respected and has 'wisdom'.

These personal qualities were reported most frequently and are listed in order of importance.

- Having a good sense of humour
- Being experienced in the 'system'
- Being a strong role model
- Having my respect
- Giving honest feedback
- Being easy to talk to and approachable
- Showing wisdom
- Being supportive of my success

The value placed on professional experience and expertise was interesting and may be a particularly important feature for people such as principals who are already well advanced in their profession.

Respondents were then asked to provide one example of an occasion when they felt they had received valuable mentoring support from the Director. Instances involving the resolution of parental concerns or complaints were most often mentioned. Other significant occasions were the provision of career advice or direction, the provision of support when dealing with difficulties with

staff members and help in coping with personal problems. Advice on communication with the wider school community and constructive feedback on performance were further examples of valued mentoring support. Analysis of the examples reported indicated that aspects of mentoring support that were most valued could be broken down into three broad areas: the mentor's use of practical strategies for resolving issues, the mentor's affective strategies and the mentor's personal qualities. These are shown in Table 2.

Responses to this question also provided information about how protégés sought advice, who initiated the provision of advice, and the circumstances in which advice was given. In the majority of cases the respondent actively sought advice, but often the mentor provided input without it being sought. Support also sometimes occurred naturally, as the result of an ongoing or well-established relationship. Advice seeking was occasionally opportunistic, occurring by chance during conversation or meeting about something else. This evidence highlights the significance of a well-established and comfortable relationship in which protégées are able to seek advice according to their needs. It also shows the opportunistic nature of much of the mentoring support experienced.

Practical Strategies	*Affective strategies*	*Personal qualities*
• Suggesting ideas • Providing positive feedback • Intervening • Giving advice • Providing clarification • Collaborating	• Being "always there" • Listening • Sharing herself - being empathic • Recognising strengths • Providing affirmation	• Approachability • Fairness, honesty • Calmness • Confidence • Realism • Experience • Wisdom • Objectivity

Table 2. Successful mentoring: Respondents' perceptions

Respondents were also asked to provide one example of an occasion when they felt they had not been well supported by the Director. Only 25% of respondents replied to this item, indicating overall positive experiences of mentoring. Of these responses, the need for the mentor to be more proactive in providing feedback was most commonly mentioned as an example of inadequate support. Other respondents mentioned their need for fuller or more direct answers to questions, the need for a more empathic response and the need for greater affirmation or recognition.
Overall the survey provided clear evidence of the effectiveness of the Director's mentoring approach. There was warm support for her practices, approach and personal style, particularly among those who know her well. People who knew her less well appeared unsure or unclear about her role and its boundaries.

Respondents were finally asked how they saw their mentoring relationship with the Director better providing for their needs. Responses focused largely on the need for more of the Director's time and on the wish to develop a closer relationship with her. Particular needs expressed included the need for a more comfortable relationship, the need for more direct feedback, the need for more frequent, brief 'catch up' contact and a desire for more modelling of career pathways and career advice.

Impact of evidence-gathering exercise

Based on this evidence, new approaches to the provision of mentoring support in the District have been put in place. Strategies are based on the need, expressed by all respondents, for more of the Director's time (the need for which she is well aware). While her time is not elastic, strategies are now in place that will enable the Director to use her time more effectively.

The Director had not been aware of the need for more incidental or informal feedback. Although unexpected, this feedback provided useful evidence that successful mentoring can and often does take place informally, in unplanned or unexpected situations. The evidence suggests that protégées who need support are finding it when it's useful to them. With a greater awareness of the need to make full use of any opportunity that exists to provide mentoring support, the Director now has strategies in place that will enable her to make fuller use of opportunities for incidental or informal feedback. Three opportunities exist that enable the director to embed her mentoring work into her existing routine.

The first maximises the potential of a new system, introduced in the District in 2006, to strengthen the provision of formal Performance Management feedback to principals. The Director plans to develop her own 'feedback' cards, to enable her to give informal, incidental feedback alongside the formal feedback required after each Performance Management visit. The second opportunity arises from the geographical circumstances that the Director works in. She already spends four out of five days travelling between schools. She now intends to use the opportunities provided by long journeys to talk to people by phone, aiming to catch up with three different people each journey. Conferences and briefing days for principals at District Office provide the third opportunity for the Director to mingle, listen and have quiet chats with people who need her time. By making full use of these opportunities the Director plans to be more accessible to protégées who need her time.

Such opportunistic strategies work best when a mentor/protégée relationship is already established. It was clear from respondents' feedback that some principals who were new to the District did not have knowledge of the positive mentoring support offered by the Director. In these cases it appeared that assumptions based on understandings of the Director's role have taken shape before they are replaced by knowledge of the Director as a person. A particular barrier to the development of close personal relationships (agreed by respondents and the Director herself as essential for the development of sound mentoring relationships) was the perceived blurring of the two roles of line manager and mentor. In particular, protégées need to understand the dual role of a line manager/mentor and have confidence in the mentor's ability to know which role to play. Similarly, the line manager/mentor needs to be explicit about which role is in play, and when.

The Director has realised that it is possible for her to fulfil both roles, and recognises that the people who know her best also realise this. To help protégées address this blurring of roles, the first principals' meeting of the year focused on clarifying role demarcations and sharing beliefs about the goals of mentoring and what makes a successful mentoring relationship. Protégées are now encouraged to be proactive in identifying mentoring strategies that work for them, and to opt into the mentoring relationship when they need to.
A final strategy is in response to requests for opportunities to be part of a collegiate women's group. This strategy involves setting up a new mentoring support group, run by a small group of the more senior women principals. The group will meet once a term, each time in a different location, to make it easier for people to attend. The group will provide more opportunities for protégées to receive more mentoring support while also giving other senior women in the District professional development opportunities to develop as mentors in their own right. By involving other women in the mentoring process the Director will be able to establish a sustainable system for mentoring in the

District, so that the mentoring role does not just revolve around her. It also means that the group is sustainable if she happens to leave the District.

Conclusion

The impact of this evidence gathering process is that future mentoring of women in the Midlands District can be informed by the generic principles identified. Further, sustainable mentoring practices are being put in place, including the coaching of female principals in mentoring skills.

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