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Protégé selection by mentors: Contributing individual and organizational factors

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Abstract

Protégé selection was examined in a laboratory experiment and a field study of experienced mentors. The results from both studies indicated that protégé willingness to learn was a critical component of protégé selection. Results of the field study also revealed that organizational rewards for developing others related to the influence protégé ability and willingness to learn had on protégé selection. Finally, the field study indicated that mentor motives for mentoring others differentially related to the importance protégé ability and willingness to learn had on protégé selection. Specifically, mentors motivated by self-enhancement were more likely to indicate that protégé ability was important in their selection of protégé, whereas mentors motivated by intrinsic satisfaction were more likely to indicate that protégé willingness to learn was important in their selection of protégé.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring relationships continue to be recognized as an important aspect of individual career development. Indeed, career management advice offered to those in early career commonly includes the encouragement to seek the guidance and support of a mentor (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000). Despite knowledge of the benefits of mentoring, surprisingly little research has examined characteristics important to mentors when selecting a protégé. This type of research seems vital as

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mentors typically have substantial latitude concerning their choice of protégé. Moreover, not everyone who desires a mentor may have access to one. This is especially true in organizations today where restructuring and downsizing have reduced the number of individuals in management capable of assuming a mentoring role (Kram & Hall, 1996).

To address this gap in the literature, two studies, a lab experiment and a field study, were conducted. In Study 1, an experimental within-subjects design was used to examine the effect of protégé gender, ability, and willingness to learn on ratings and rankings of potential protégés. In Study 2, individuals with actual experience as a mentor reported their preference for protégés with high ability versus high willingness to learn and the degree that those characteristics influenced their most recent choice of protégé. Moreover, the influence of mentor motives and organizational rewards for developing others on protégé selection was examined.

1.1. Theory development

Social exchange theory has been one conceptual foundation for research investigating protégé selection (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 2000; Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993). Exchange theory is a model of human behavior that views an interaction between two people as an exchange where the cost of participation in the relationship is compared to the perceived benefits (e.g., Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The basic premise of social exchange theory is that when an individual perceives that a relationship will provide greater rewards than costs, he or she will be more inclined to develop the relationship (Blau, 1964). Social exchange theory applied to mentorships suggests that mentors will favor protégés believed to bring desirable attributes and competencies to the mentorship that will result in a mutually satisfying relationship. Extant research has been consistent with this line of thought. For example, Kram's qualitative research indicated mentors prefer high performing protégés (Kram, 1985). Olian et al. (1993) found that individuals were more willing to mentor high performing protégés than average performing protégés. Similarly, Allen et al. (2000) found mentors were more interested in mentoring high ability protégés than in mentoring protégés in need of help. Green and Bauer (1995) examined the influence of protégé (student) potential on the use of mentoring functions. The authors found that students who showed greater potential received more mentoring from their advisor than students demonstrating less potential. Mentors may prefer high ability protégés because of concerns that selecting a poor protégé may reflect negatively on how others perceive their judgment and competency (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1994, 1999).

Despite the focus on protégé ability, research suggests that there are other characteristics valued by mentors. In a qualitative study, interviewed mentors reported that not only were ability or specific skills desirable in a protégé, but that high motivation and a learning orientation were also important (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). The significance of willingness to learn was underscored by mentors who stated that even very high ability protégés will be difficult to mentor if they lack a desire or willingness to learn. Kram (1985) advocated that senior managers focus "on those

who want to learn and grow. . .” (p. 44). Recently, Young and Perrewe (2000) found that mentors were more satisfied with relationships where protégé were open to advisement and coaching. However, no quantitative study to date has directly tested willingness to learn as a factor in the protégé selection process. This seems important in that willingness to learn is an attribute that feasibly any individual desiring of a mentor could demonstrate.

Hypothesis 1. Mentors are more willing to mentor higher ability protégés than lower ability protégés.

Hypothesis 2. Mentors are more willing to mentor higher willingness to learn protégés than lower willingness to learn protégés.

Although it makes intuitive and theoretical sense that mentors would prefer high ability to low ability protégés, as well as protégés high in willingness to learn to low in willingness to learn, it also seems likely that these two factors may interact. Social exchange theory and extant research seem to suggest that protégé ability would be the most compelling factor in initially attracting a mentor. It is possible that willingness to learn will only be important if the protégé is also of high ability. That is, a high level of willingness to learn may not compensate for a low level of ability.

Hypothesis 3. There is an interaction between protégé willingness to learn and protégé ability that relates to willingness to mentor.

Gender is another factor that may play a part in protégé selection. Researchers have hypothesized that mentors and protégés prefer partners of the same gender due to the perceived difficulties associated with cross-gender mentoring such as the likelihood of sexual innuendoes and rumors (Hurley & Fagenson-Eland, 1996) and the possibility that men may fall back on gender stereotypes (Kram, 1985). Most of the research regarding gender preferences has been conducted from the perspective of the protégé (see Ragins, 1999). There has been little empirical research examining mentor gender preferences regarding protégés. Olian et al. (1993) failed to find a significant same-gender preference among individuals asked to assume the role of a mentor. Similarly, in a study of experienced mentors, Allen, Poteet, and Russell (1998) found that the majority of respondents reported they had no preference regarding protégé gender; however, those who did indicate a preference typically preferred a same gender protégé. It should be noted that the Olian et al. study was a between-subjects design. Likewise, in Allen et al., participants were merely asked about their preferences as opposed to making an actual protégé selection decision. The within-subjects design of the present study should provide a strong test of whether or not gender-based preferences do exist for mentors.

Hypothesis 4. Individuals are more willing to mentor same gender protégés than cross-gender protégés.

2. Study 1-Lab study

2.1. Participants

Participants were 194 undergraduate psychology students at a large university. Of those responding, the participants included 61 men and 131 women ranging in age from 18 to 56 years ($M = 23.68$, $SD = 6.56$). Their racial backgrounds were: Caucasian/White (67.4%), African-American/Black (11.6%), Hispanic (9.5%), Asian (6.3%), and 5.3% were of other racial background. The majority were currently employed (75.8%) and 44.3% indicated that they had supervisory or management experience.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were told that the purpose of the research was to collect pilot-study data that would be used to help develop, design, and administer a mentoring program between the university and local high schools. The stated purpose of the mentoring program was to match psychology majors with high school students interested in psychology. Participants were told that their responses would be used to help develop the program. Participants were given a booklet of materials that included an overview and directions, 10 fictional protégé profiles, and sections for rating and ranking each protégé. The last section requested participant background information.

2.3. Stimulus materials and design

The study was a 2 (protégé gender; male vs. female) \times 2 (ability; low vs. high) \times 2 (willingness to learn; low vs. high) within-subjects design. Testing of Hypothesis 4 also necessitated the use of participant gender as a between-subjects variable. Every participant reviewed and rated 10 protégé profiles. Eight of the profiles corresponded to the eight experimental conditions. To help mask the experimental conditions, the two additional profiles were designed to portray an average level of ability and willingness to learn. Each profile included the applicant's gender, grade-point average (GPA), indication of willingness to learn, high school counselor ratings, and a brief personal statement. *Protégé gender* was manipulated by designating applicant gender as either male or female. *Ability* was manipulated by modifying the reported GPA (low: 2.3–2.5; high: 3.7–3.9 based on a 4-point rating system) and by the high school counselor's graphic rating (weak; strong). *Willingness to learn* was manipulated within the applicant's personal statement (e.g., low: "Joining the Mentor-Match Program sounds like a good way to meet new people who are in college."; high: "I really hope I get chosen for this program. Psychology is fascinating and I am hoping to learn much more about this field.") and by the high school counselor's graphic rating (weak; strong). To increase realism, the personal statement also contained information regarding the applicant's hobbies or outside interests. Although complete counterbalancing was not feasible given the number of profiles involved, to help control for order effects and to vary hobbies associated with specific manipulations, the presentation of the profiles was randomly changed across 12 different sets of materials.

2.4. Measures

2.4.1. Protégé selection

Protégé selection was assessed by both ratings and rankings. Participants rated each of potential protégé on three 5-point items (e.g., “Indicate the degree you would be willing to mentor this applicant.”). These three items were averaged to form a protégé *rating*. Higher scores represented a greater willingness to select that particular protégé. Internal consistency reliability estimates were computed for the 3-item scale for each of the eight profiles that corresponded to the experimental conditions. Coefficient α ranged from .79 to .92 with an average of .84. After participants rated each protégé, they *ranked* the protégés in the order that they would be most willing to mentor each. Lower rankings indicated greater willingness to mentor.

3. Results

Hypotheses were tested with repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA). Results are shown in Table 1. Hypothesis 1 stated mentors would be more willing to mentor protégés higher in ability than protégés lower in ability. Protégé ability had a significant main effect on ratings ($F(1, 189) = 113.12, p < .001$). Low ability protégés were rated lower ($M = 3.44$) than were high ability protégés ($M = 3.96$). Protégé ability also had a significant main effect on rankings ($F(1, 171) = 31.87, p < .001$). Protégés depicted as low in ability were ranked less favorably ($M = 6.03$) than were protégés depicted as high in ability ($M = 4.92$).

Hypotheses 2 stated that mentors would be more willing to mentor protégés higher in willingness to learn than protégés lower in willingness to learn. Willingness to learn had a significant main effect on ratings ($F(1, 189) = 326.88, p < .001$). Protégés depicted as low in willingness to learn were rated lower ($M = 3.16$) than were protégés depicted as high in willingness to learn ($M = 4.28$). Willingness to learn also

Table 1
MANOVA results for protégé ratings and rankings—lab study

Variable	Ratings		Rankings	
	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>
Ability	1	113.12***	1	31.87***
Learning	1	326.68***	1	166.00***
Protégé gender	1	1.18	1	1.56
Mentor gender	1	<1.0	1	<1.0
PG \times MG	1	2.06	1	1.13
Ability \times Learning	1	3.87*	1	<1.0
Error	189		177	

PG, protégé gender.

MG, mentor gender.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

had a main effect on rankings ($F(1, 177) = 166.00, p < .001$). Specifically, protégés depicted as low in willingness to learn were ranked less favorably ($M = 6.82$) than were protégés depicted as high in willingness to learn ($M = 4.12$).

Hypothesis 3 posed an interaction between protégé ability and willingness to learn. A significant interaction was found for protégé ratings ($F(1, 189) = 3.87, p = .05$). Not surprisingly, the lowest rated protégés were those low in ability and low in willingness to learn ($M = 2.83$) and the highest rated protégés were those high in ability and high in willingness to learn ($M = 4.51$). Protégés high in willingness to learn and low in ability were rated higher ($M = 4.05$) than were protégés low in willingness to learn and high in ability ($M = 3.48$). Results suggest that protégé willingness to learn can help compensate for a lack of ability. That is, mentors reported a willingness to mentor protégés high in willingness to learn regardless of protégés' level of ability (means greater than 4.0). No interaction was found for protégé rankings ($F(1, 179) \leq 1.0, ns$). Hypothesis 4 proposed an interaction between participant gender and protégé gender. No significant interaction was detected for ratings ($F(1, 189) = 2.06, ns$) or for rankings ($F(1, 177) = 1.13, ns$). Thus, individuals did not prefer potential protégés of their own gender.

4. Discussion

Several key findings emerged from Study 1. First, through both a rating and ranking process the results indicated mentors were more willing to mentor protégés characterized as high in ability and high in willingness to learn than protégés low in ability or low in willingness to learn. More interesting, however, was the interaction found for protégé ratings indicating that willingness to learn could help compensate for lack of ability. Previous research had not distinguished between protégé ability and willingness to learn. Although both are desired, the results demonstrate that of the two, willingness to learn may be the most critical characteristic needed to secure a mentor.

The data did not support the hypothesis that individuals would prefer to mentor same gender protégés. Research to date from the perspective of the mentor provides little evidence of a same gender preference (Allen et al., 1998; Olian et al., 1993). These findings are interesting in light of the fact that most mentorships are same gender (cf., Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Although mentors may not express a gender preference, they appear more likely to be involved in same gender mentorships.

A significant strength of Study 1 is that the experimental design afforded the opportunity to manipulate factors not easily controlled in the field, such as protégé ability and willingness to learn. Additionally, the within-subjects design facilitated a comparison of the effect of protégé gender, ability, and willingness to learn on ratings and rankings across multiple potential protégés. Despite these positive study attributes, the contrived nature of the study is a limitation. In an effort to provide a realistic context, participants they were told that their responses would be an important aid to the design of the program. However, it is recognized that this situation

differs from the organizational environment where individuals make actual choices regarding protégés. External validity concerns prompted a second study conducted in the field.

5. Study 2—Field study

One purpose of Study 2 was to replicate, to the extent possible, the results from Study 1 using reports from experienced mentors. Unlike the lab, the field setting is not easily amenable to a contrasting of high versus low protégé attributes. Accordingly, mentors were presented with a list of protégé attributes associated with ability and willingness to learn and were asked to indicate the extent each attribute influenced their decision to mentor their most current protégé. Thus, Study 2 provided the opportunity to assess the generalizability of Study 1 results to actual mentorships.

Hypothesis 5. Protégé willingness to learn has a greater influence on protégé selection than does protégé ability.

The second purpose of Study 2 was to extend Study 1 results. Specifically, the field study afforded the chance to examine additional factors related to mentor protégé preferences. The factors examined were organizational rewards for developing others and motives for mentoring. Several authors have asserted that the organization's environment can facilitate mentoring relationships. Specifically, consistent with the tenets of social exchange theory, Kram (1985) noted that when recognition and rewards are linked to mentoring efforts, individuals are more likely to mentor others. Likewise, mentors interviewed by Allen et al. (1997) reported organizational support for employee learning and development was a key factor that facilitated mentoring. Aryee, Chay, and Chew (1996) found a positive relation between organization rewards for developing others and willingness to mentor others. However, no studies have examined how the organizational context relates to protégé selection. If mentoring others is tied to extrinsic rewards, mentors may be more motivated to select high ability and willingness to learn protégés because linking mentoring with organizational rewards is likely to increase the visibility of mentorships. Hence, mentors may expect their competence will be subjected to greater scrutiny and therefore feel the need for further assurance that their selected protégés will be successful.

Hypothesis 6. Rewards for developing others relates positively to mentor preferences for protégés high in ability and to mentor preferences for protégés high in willingness to learn.

Mentors may have different motives underlying their reasons for mentoring others. Allen et al. (1997) asked experienced mentors why they chose to mentor others. Responses were classified into two factors labeled as *other-focused* and *self-focused*. Other-focused motives included the desire to help others and the desire build a com-

petent workforce, whereas self-focused motives included the desire to enhance one's reputation and to feel a sense of self-satisfaction. More recently, Allen (2003) reported that motives for mentoring others related to the type of mentoring provided. It also seems likely that the motives that underlie an individual's reason for mentoring may relate to the type of protégé selected. For example, mentors motivated for self-enhancement purposes may demonstrate a strong preference for protégés high in ability.

Hypothesis 7. Motives for mentoring others differentially relates to mentor protégé preferences.

6. Method

6.1. Participants

Participants included 391 individuals employed in a variety of settings. The sample was drawn from two sources, members of a professional association for women in accounting and members of a professional association for engineers. Of the 301 participants, 249 reported having served as a mentor. Only the 249 experienced mentors were used in the statistical analyses. Of those responding to the demographic questions, the mentor group consisted of 162 males whose average age was 47.88 ($SD = 10.95$). Most of the mentors were White ($N = 229$) and the median level of education obtained was a four-year college degree. Average organizational tenure was 11.16 ($SD = 8.91$) years and average job tenure was 5.97 ($SD = 5.81$) years.

6.2. Procedure

A total of 138 of the participants were members of a professional women's business association employed in accounting-related occupations. The majority of respondents were employed as accountants, but other job titles (e.g., bursar, bookkeeper) were also represented. Surveys were mailed directly to the business address of 600 members. Completed surveys were returned in business-reply envelopes. Seven surveys were returned as undeliverable by the post office for a final response rate of 23%. Seventy-one of the participants reported experience as a mentor. The remaining 253 participants were members of a professional association for engineers. Surveys were mailed to the business address of 2000 members across all regions of the United States. Eight surveys were returned by the post office. A total of 259 surveys were returned for a response rate of 13%. One hundred and seventy-eight participants reported experience as a mentor.

6.3. Measures

6.3.1. Experience as a mentor

Of interest were participants with experience as a mentor. To screen for this qualification, participants responded yes or no to the following question: "During your

career, has there been an individual who you have taken a personal interest in; who you have guided, sponsored, or otherwise had a positive and significant influence on their professional career development? In other words, have you ever been a mentor?"

6.3.2. *Preferences for protégé ability and desire to learn*

Mentors were provided with a list of eight protégé characteristics and asked to indicate the extent each was important to them in selecting their protégé. The qualitative responses provided by mentors as reported in Allen et al. (1997) were used as a content guide in constructing the items. Mentors who had mentored more than one individual were asked to respond based on their current or most recent mentorship. Four of the items were designed to reflect protégé ability (had high ability, complemented your own skills, had skills similar to your own, was an effective communicator) ($\alpha = .70$) and four were designed to reflect desire to learn (was open and willing to learn, was open and willing to accept constructive feedback, was highly motivated to achieve, had a strong work ethic) ($\alpha = .76$). Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from (1 = not at all important) to (5 = extremely important). To assess discriminant validity I conducted a principal axis analysis followed by oblique rotation on the eight items. Two factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted. The first factor explained 31.2% of the variance. The four items intended to measure ability loaded on this factor. The second factor consisted of the four items intended to measure willingness to learn and explained 12.7% of the variance. All loadings were .47 and greater with minimum cross-loadings.

6.3.3. *Rewards linked to employee development*

Four items were written to assess the extent employees perceived their efforts to develop others were rewarded in the organization (e.g., "Efforts to develop other employees are rewarded in this organization."). Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from (1 = strongly disagree) to (5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicated greater employee development rewards. Coefficient α was .88.

6.3.4. *Mentor motives*

The 11-item measure described by Allen (2003) was used to assess motives for mentoring others. Participants rated the extent each item motivated or influenced their decision to become a mentor on a 5-point scale ranging from (1 = no extent) to (5 = great extent). Higher scores indicated the factor was a stronger motivator. Allen (2003) provided factor-analytic evidence supporting a three-factor structure. The first subscale (4 items; $\alpha = .82$) represents a motive related to mentor self-enhancement (e.g., "To enhance your visibility within the organization"). The second (3 items; $\alpha = .81$) consists of items related intrinsic satisfaction of the mentor (e.g., "The personal pride that mentoring someone brings"). The third subscale (4 items; $\alpha = .66$) represents a motive to benefit the organization and others in the organization (e.g., "A desire to help others succeed in the organization").

7. Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations appear in Table 2. Hypothesis 5 proposed mentors would report that willingness to learn had a greater influence on protégé selection than did ability. Results from a paired *t* test indicated mentors were more likely to report they selected protégés based on protégé willingness to learn ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .65$) than based on protégé ability ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .76$) ($t = 22.16(243)$, $p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to test Hypotheses 6 and 7. Specifically, in Step 1 of the equation, protégé gender (0 = male, 1 = female), mentor gender (0 = male, 1 = female), mentor race (0 = nonminority, 1 = minority), and protégé race (0 = nonminority, 1 = minority) were entered as controls. Rewards for developing others and mentor motives were entered in Step 2. The dependent variables were protégé ability and protégé willingness to learn. Results are shown in Table 3. Consistent with Hypothesis 6, results indicated that organizational rewards for developing others related to the extent protégé willingness to learn influenced selection ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$) and marginally related to the extent protégé ability influenced selection ($\beta = .13$, $p = .055$). Hypothesis 7 suggested that mentor motives would differentially relate to mentor protégé preferences. Inspection of the β weights associated mentor motives provides support for this hypothesis. Specifically, the self-enhancement motive significantly related to the importance of protégé ability ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$), but not to the importance of protégé willingness to learn ($\beta = .04$, ns). By contrast, intrinsic satisfaction related to the importance of protégé willingness to learn ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), but not to the importance of protégé ability ($\beta = .05$, ns). The benefit others motive related to both protégé willingness to learn ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$) and to protégé ability ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$). It should be noted that the regression results provide stronger support for this hypothesis than do the zero-order correlation results. The different results are because the β weights represent the unique contribution of each independent variable after controlling for variance shared with the other independent variables.

8. General discussion

Consistent with social exchange theory, which suggests mentors will desire protégés thought to bring important competencies to the relationship, both studies indicated protégé ability and willingness to learn were important to mentors. However, protégé willingness to learn appears to be the more critical component to protégé selection. In line with Study 1, in Study 2, mentors indicated willingness to learn was a more important consideration in their choice of protégé than was ability. This finding is consequential in that the limited research concerning protégé selection has focused on protégé ability. Attribution theory may help explain the importance of willingness to learn (Heider, 1958). Perhaps mentors view willingness to learn as an indicator of effort and thus more controllable than other factors such as ability. Research on supervisor–subordinate relationships has found that coercive

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, correlations—field study

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Protégé ability	—									
2. Protégé willingness to learn	.36 **	—								
3. Organizational rewards	.16*	.19**	—							
4. Self-enhancement	.24**	.17*	-.01	—						
5. Intrinsic satisfaction	.14*	.31**	-.05	.36**	—					
6. Benefit others	.23**	.24**	.33**	.22**	.13*	—				
7. Mentor gender	.01	.11	-.17**	-.03	.08	-.22**	—			
8. Protégé gender	.00	-.02	-.23**	-.02	.08	-.24**	.67**	—		
9. Mentor race	.05	.17**	.11	.06	.10	.09	-.05	.00	—	
10. Protégé race	-.03	.14*	.04	-.04	-.03	-.05	.09	.02	.25**	—
Mean	2.95	4.09	3.16	2.03	3.47	3.94	NA	NA	NA	NA
SD	.76	.65	.86	.88	.91	.70	NA	NA	NA	NA

N ranges from 240 to 247.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Multiple regression results—field study

Predictor	Ability	Willingness to Learn
	β	β
Step 1		
Mentor gender	.06	.23**
Protégé gender	.02	-.12
Mentor race	.02	.10
Protégé race	-.03	.10
$R^2\Delta$	(.01)	(.07)
Step 2		
Rewards	.13 [†]	.14*
Self-enhancement	.29**	.04
Intrinsic satisfaction	.05	.27***
Benefit others	.15*	.16*
$R^2\Delta$	(.10)***	(.15)***
R^2 Total	.11	.22
Overall F	3.48***	7.73***

β s are standardized regression weights from the final equation.[†] $p = .055$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

or corrective actions are seen as appropriate if a subordinate's failure is determined as due to a lack effort (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Mitchell, Green, & Wood, 1981). On the other hand, failure attributed to factors outside of the subordinate's control, do not merit immediate corrective action (Pence, Pendleton, Dobbins, & Sgro, 1982). Accordingly, within the context of a mentoring relationship, mentors may be less receptive to a potential protégé who appears to lack a controllable factor such as willingness to learn.

Although recommendations for practice should be tentative based on the results of this research alone, the findings have potential implications for individuals seeking a mentor. As noted by Turban and Dougherty (1994), individuals interested in obtaining a mentor may need to engage in proactive behaviors. Although researchers have examined barriers to finding a mentor, particularly for women and minorities (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Thomas, 1990), little research exists on the effectiveness of different strategies for obtaining mentors and when and how these strategies may work. The results of the present study suggest that individuals can increase their chances of being selected by providing clear evidence to prospective mentors of their willingness to learn. This may be an important career management skill for individuals to cultivate.

The results of the field study suggest that offering rewards for mentoring others may be a double-edged sword for organizations. Although research indicates that such rewards relate positively to individuals' willingness to mentor others (e.g., Aryee et al., 1996), the field study results also imply that offering rewards may increase the

extent that only the most talented and motivated individuals will be selected as protégés. In essence, individuals who stand to gain the most from a mentorship may find it the most difficult to secure one. Organizations that want to insure all employees have ample access to mentors may need to communicate that all efforts to develop employees are valued. The results underscore the need for further research to determine the impact that reward systems play on mentorship dynamics.

This study also linked mentor motives with mentor protégé preferences. The results suggest that mentors motivated by different factors may select different protégés. For example, mentors reporting greater motivation to mentor for self-enhancement reasons were more likely to report protégé ability was important in their choice of protégé. On the other hand, mentors motivated by intrinsic satisfaction were more likely to report that protégé willingness to learn was important. One explanation for these results may be that mentors motivated by a desire to enhance their standing in the organization may view mentoring a high ability protégé as a path to advancing their own careers. Protégés willing to learn may be thought to be easier to grow and develop which may be appealing to mentors motivated by the intrinsic satisfaction that mentoring others brings. The results also revealed that both protégé willingness to learn and ability were important to mentors motivated by the desire to benefit others. This makes sense when considering that the other-focused mentor desires to help the organization and the individual achieve success. This may best be accomplished by mentoring protégés who are strong in both of these characteristics.

In concert the results of the field study indicate that a combination of mentor characteristics, protégé characteristics, and the organizational environment play a part in protégé selection. Other organizational and individual factors should be examined in the future. For example, organizational climates that promote learning and development may attract mentors who desire the challenge of mentoring a protégé lacking strong skills. Research is also needed to examine individual differences such as mentor self-confidence and empathy that may influence protégé selection. For example, mentors with less self-confidence may be less willing to select high ability protégés because they may be viewed as a threat. Moreover, empathetic individuals may be more likely to mentor protégés lacking strong skills because of a desire to nurture others (Allen et al., 1997).

8.1. Limitations

The intent of conducting both a lab and a field study was to help address the limitations inherent in the use of any single research design. The lab study lacks contextual realism, but provides for control over variables and manipulations (protégé characteristics). The field study provided realism at the expense of control. Taken together, the results provide a clearer picture of the protégé selection process (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Still, limitations should be considered. Concerning Study 2, there is no firm basis from which to argue that objective indicators of ability and willingness to learn rather than mentor perceptions influenced protégé selection. Mentors were asked to make post hoc judgments concerning protégé characteristics after selection.

On the other hand, the experimental nature of Study 1 allows for cause and effect inferences concerning the variables influencing protégé evaluation. Since the data in Study 2 were based on self-reports, common method bias is a possibility. However, similar findings were observed across both studies, rendering common method bias a less likely explanation for the results. Data from Study 2 were collected from individuals employed in accounting or engineering occupations. Future research is needed to assess the extent the results generalize to mentors employed in other occupations.

Mentoring should be recognized as a two-step process that consists of selecting a protégé and then the provision of mentoring functions. To date, most research has focused on variation associated with the provision of mentoring with little attention given to what relates to the initial selection of protégés. The present study clarifies why certain individuals are chosen as protégés over others. Future research along these lines is needed to better understand all aspects of the mentoring process.

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