
Public relations practitioners' use of reverse mentoring in the development of powerful professional relationships

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Abstract

In the quest to create powerful professional relationships, the new, non-traditional disbursement of knowledge is causing complications. While the value of reverse mentoring has been acknowledged in other disciplines, there is almost a complete absence of any scientific studies addressing mentoring or related issues in the public relations workplace. This survey of practitioners was undertaken to bridge that gap in the literature. Findings show that public relations practitioners of all experience levels, working in a variety of different workplace environments, are mostly ignorant about reverse mentoring. Among respondents who had personally participated in reverse mentoring, however, most classified it as 'very successful' or 'successful'. Ideas for best practices and future directions for reverse mentoring are offered.

Introduction

Public relations has always been a dynamic industry, but the virtually unlimited number of communications channels and social media platforms now available has set the stage for fast-paced change. The ability to manage and use change effectively is separating those with power from those who do not have power, both at the individual and corporate level. At the crux of the issue is the creation of powerful professional relationships. Those who are adept rise to the top, and those who are not stay in the abyss of mediocrity.

Further complicating the creation of professional relationships is the new, non-traditional disbursement of knowledge. In the past, older or more seasoned workers held the most expertise. Younger or less experienced colleagues relied on their 'elders' to pass on information needed to increase individual and collective power. Today, knowledge is found at all levels of the workplace, and those who learn from both more and less experienced co-workers are better positioned to accomplish personal, client, and corporate goals. This learning from colleagues comes about through traditional and 'reverse' mentoring.

Reverse mentoring has been applied and studied in the business community for years (Scandura & Viator, 1994), but little research has been done with respect to the field of public relations, even amidst the seemingly obvious 'perfect storm' of professional challenges that would seemingly make reverse mentoring essential for industry success. While there is recognition that public relations professionals use reverse mentoring (Guiniven, 2008), little is known about its use and success rate. This study was undertaken to broaden our knowledge about the use of reverse mentoring, as well as document its use in support of individual and collective power relationships in the public relations workplace.

Literature review

The importance of building and maintaining powerful relationships at work cannot be underestimated. Today's competitive business environment demands that people "feel powerful, in control, and be willing to help carry the organization toward greater

competitiveness,” (Denton, 2011, p. 15). The importance of building and maintaining powerful relationships has been addressed in a variety of ways in the public relations literature as well as in the literature of other disciplines. This section will review related relevant literature.

Individual and collective power

Workers who actively engage with each other through clear, direct communication are likely to develop strong interpersonal relationships that lead to effective use of power (Wigington, 2008). This is especially true for less experienced employees who are often early in their careers (McCormack, 2010). Senior staff members also must communicate well so they can build relationships with workers who are above or below them in the hierarchy (Gentry & Shanock, 2008). Senior staff members who hope to create a workplace where people trust each other and use power effectively must seek the opinions of junior staff “and then act on those suggestions” (Denton, 2011, p. 16).

Relationships among peers are also valuable at work (Peroune, 2007). Peer relationships give workers feedback about work performance and career options. Relationships between peers are more lateral in nature, and therefore perceived as safer for information exchange (Peroune, 2007).

The effective use of power at work is, at some level, more about networking and development of personal relationships than about being good at your job. Many ineffectual business executives still make dramatic advancements in stature and salary. This is because, as *The Economist* notes, “There are plenty of things that matter more than competence, such as the ability to project drive and self-confidence” (The will to power, 2010, p. 80).

On a collective level, the organisation must have “a foundation of effective communication practices” (Gillis, 2007, p. 28) that employees agree upon and share. Capable leadership must be in place, and that leadership must appropriately share resources (Tavernier, 1980). In addition to using their power to serve the common good on behalf of

the organisation, the most capable leaders use their power to strengthen and enrich their less powerful subordinates (Hall, 1988). This helps the organisation grow while lessening opportunities for supervisors to bully or take advantage of those who report to them (Roscigno, Lopez, & Hodson, 2009).

Social order

A strong argument can be made for examining issues related to individual and workplace power through the framework of social order. Social order is both a contributor to and a construct of power in the workplace because it represents predictability and coordinated action. A socially ordered workplace manifests itself through a division of labour, an establishment of trust among people, a regulation of power for decision-making, and a set of systems through which social activity is made legitimate (Cowan, 1997; Eisenstadt, 1992). Social order is demonstrated directly and indirectly through culture, or “an organized set of meaningfully understood symbolic patterns” (Alexander, 1992, p. 295). Social order is established and maintained through written and unwritten rules about appropriate conduct – including the use and sharing of power (Edgerton, 1985).

An acceptance of social order as a guiding construct in the workplace tells us nothing happens by accident. Every choice that professionals make about their work conduct communicates something about the social order of their workplace. The ideal socially ordered environment is one where people share power responsibly, communicate clearly, and work productively together – no matter what economic or technological uncertainties may exist.

Mentoring

Workplace mentoring can help establish and maintain the power relationships that allow for a socially ordered workplace. Mentoring has been defined as a situation in which a mentor “helps a protégé or mentee become more professionally competent” (Cotugna & Vickery, 1998, p. 1166). This increase in competence can involve improvement in specific skills or knowledge, or acquisition of general understandings about workplace norms and culture.

Mentoring can involve a relationship between senior and subordinate workers. It can also involve relationships between peers, friends, or members of professional groups (Chandler, 2010). Mentoring has been shown to extend from personal relationships, such as instances in which spouses would give each other guidance on their career options and decisions (Corney & du Plessis, 2010).

Mentoring can help employees learn specific skills and knowledge, along with the ability to put new learning in an appropriate workplace context (Clark, 1992). Mentoring can educate employees about critical ethical issues (Rhodes, Liang, & Spencer, 2009). Mentoring can help reduce workplace role ambiguity (Viator, 2001) and reduce employee turnover (Hall & Smith, 2009).

The literature has documented many workplace benefits resulting from mentoring. Mentoring allows for the sharing of information that might not be communicated between co-workers (Guiniven, 2008). Mentoring can help executives get new perspectives that will allow them to better manage change (Carter, 2004). Mentoring builds “personal influence” between leaders and subordinates (White, Vane, & Stafford, 2010, p. 79). Mentoring can help an organisation be more in tune with the needs of its customers (Parekh, 2007), making the organisation less likely to find itself in a situation where customers know more than employees do about a product or service (Dozier, 2002).

Reverse mentoring

Reverse mentoring is a concept initially introduced by former General Electric CEO Jack Welch (Greengard, 2002). Upon finding that many GE executives were not as technologically savvy as they needed to be, Welch mandated that executives engage in a mentoring programme with younger workers. More than 600 executives participated (Piktialis, 2009).

The type of structured workplace relationship that reverse mentoring brings about between senior staff members and younger or less experienced workers allows for knowledge transfer that would not likely

happen any other way. Although technology is frequently the subject focus (Parekh, 2007; Pyle, 2005) it is not always the key issue. At Proctor & Gamble, a dozen scientists taught top managers about the ethical implications of biotechnology (Solomon, 2001). At Dell, male senior executives were mentored by female middle managers to offer “an insight into the challenges that women face in the workplace” (Phillips, 2009, Abstract).

Public relations and reverse mentoring

The public relations field is undergoing monumental change as a result of technological advancement, a new and powerful social media landscape, and shifts in client expectations. In public relations, job security now means ability to “actively engage in social media in a pragmatic, controlled and open manner” (Cahill, 2009, p. 26). This necessitates that public relations professionals not only understand the power of new and emerging media, but also have the ability to use media tools in ways that were formerly more closely associated with marketing than with public relations.

The change faced by the profession is exemplified by the recent reinvention of one of the world’s leading public relations firms. In early 2011, GolinHarris radically restructured itself and abolished its seniority-based hierarchy. Many see GolinHarris as the model of the agency of the future (Barrett, 2011).

In this new public relations model, a lack of understanding about the impact of social media – or a slow response to crisis events that incubate through social media – can be devastating. There have been numerous examples of this in recent years, including the much-publicised Domino’s Pizza case in which the company reacted too slowly to distasteful YouTube videos (Jacques, 2009).

Some public relations professionals have acknowledged the value of reverse mentoring as a means of developing the knowledge and skills needed to stay current in this new workplace (Perry, 2009; Brown, 2007). But there is almost a complete absence of any scientific studies addressing mentoring or issues related to it in the public relations

workplace. This study was undertaken to bridge that gap in the literature.

Methodology

In order to begin to understand reverse mentoring and its impact on power relationships in the public relations workplace, we needed to obtain relevant information from practitioners in a variety of work settings. This section describes the methods used to identify and contact practitioners, the survey procedures, and time frame for the study.

Sample

Although there has been one small, preliminary study of the use of reverse mentoring in public relations (Hays & Swanson, 2011), there has been no large-scale assessment of the extent to which reverse mentoring is applied throughout the profession and in a variety of workplaces. Since the Public Relations Society of America is recognised as the pre-eminent professional organisation within the discipline in North America, it was decided to survey PRSA members. The PRSA has a membership of more than 21,000 (Advancing the profession and the professional, 2011) and one would expect these professionals to have a high level of knowledge and experience within the field.

At the same time, not all public relations practitioners are PRSA members. Therefore, it was decided to additionally survey practitioners identified in the *O'Dwyer's Magazine* directory. *O'Dwyer's* (www.odwyerpr.com) is recognised as a pre-eminent industry publication. It has been published for 25 years, has a monthly paid circulation of 2,000 copies and estimated monthly readership of 10,000 professionals (*O'Dwyer's*, 2011).

Procedures

The PRSA prohibits direct solicitation of the membership for involvement in research projects, and approval was required from the PRSA Research Committee to access the membership directory. After review of the project, the association requested to act as an intermediary and send survey invitations to a

random sample of PRSA members. The *O'Dwyer's* public relations Firms Database was accessible online with no restrictions.

On April 14, 2011 an invitation was sent by PRSA to a randomly selected list of 4,995 member email addresses. On that same date, the researchers sent an identical email invitation to all 530 personal (individual) email addresses listed in the *O'Dwyer's* database. All invitations linked to a single online questionnaire. Within two weeks, the PRSA sent a reminder invitation and the researchers sent an identical reminder invitation to the addresses from the *O'Dwyer's* database. In total, 5,225 invitations were sent. A total of 92 were returned as undeliverable.

In total, 306 respondents accessed the survey instrument within a six-week time frame. Of those respondents who accessed the instrument, 274 completed it. This reflects a response rate of 6% and a response completion rate of 89.5%. This reflects a confidence level of +/- 7% for the results.

Measures

The researchers created an online questionnaire to address the study's three guiding research questions. The instrument was adapted from a set of questions used in a small pilot test in which practitioners were interviewed by telephone about their experience with reverse mentoring (Hays & Swanson, 2011). Faculty colleagues provided informal review of the instrument. This was followed by formal review and approval by a university human subjects committee and by the PRSA's Research Committee.

The questionnaire contained 19 items. An initial seven questions collected information about respondents' demographics, professional experience, and employer. Nine questions dealt specifically with respondents' experiences with, and perceptions about, reverse mentoring in the workplace. Response options involved multiple-choice or ranking. A final set of three questions solicited comment about workplace experiences relating to reverse mentoring.

Results

Most respondents were female (213, or 73%). Almost all were working within the United

States (282, or 97%). Respondents identified with a wide variety of workplaces, including a public relations firm or agency (68, or 24%), nonprofit organisation (57, or 20%), educational institution (42, or 14%), for-profit corporation (41, or 14%), government agency or municipality (37, or 13%), independent public relations practice (25, or 8%), and hospital or medical institution (13, or 4%).

A large percentage of respondents reported working in an organisation that was more than 11 years old (238, or 82%) and a majority of respondents reported more than 11 years of professional experience in public relations or a closely aligned field (167, or 57%). The vast majority of respondents (271, or 93%) were PRSA members.

RQ1: To what extent do public relations professionals recognise and make use of the benefits of reverse mentoring for the sharing of knowledge and skills?

Most respondents indicated that they had not heard of reverse mentoring (170, or 59%) and that it was not utilised in their workplace (158, or 55%). Among those who were familiar with the concept, 51 (18%) reported past service as a mentor, and 37 (13%) had been mentored by someone else. Figure 1 shows the areas in which respondents indicated reverse mentoring is utilised where they work. The most prevalent subject areas were social media technology and website development.

Figure 1: Areas in which reverse mentoring is used in respondents' workplaces (n=52)

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Social media technology	47	90%
Website development	31	59%
Communications (writing and design)	26	50%
Event planning	19	36%
Strategic planning	17	32%
Account management	13	25%

As far as how reverse mentoring comes about within a workplace, formal matching was the most common practice among respondents who answered this question (36, or 69%). Other strategies for conducting reverse mentoring included hiring student interns and learning from them (17, or 33%) and hiring less experienced public relations professionals and learning from them (6, or 31%).

Once reverse mentors and mentees are paired together, most respondents indicated mentorship participants were allowed to decide on their own how to prepare for their work together (37, or 71%). Smaller percentages of respondents indicated that their organisation provided structured training for mentors (8, or

16%); that there was structured training for mentees (6, or 12%); or that there was an unstructured and informal training programme in place (6, or 12%).

RQ2: In what ways are public relations professionals evaluating the success of reverse mentoring in the workplace?

Respondents were asked to describe how the results of reverse mentoring were documented within their workplace. Among those who acknowledged that reverse mentoring was used, most indicated there was no documentation of results (35, or 67%), or if there was documentation they weren't aware of it (7, or 13%). Likewise, most respondents (18, or 36%)

indicated there was no formal assessment plan in place for reverse mentoring, or if there was a plan they were not aware of it (7, or 14%).

Despite widespread lack of documentation and assessment, many respondents expressed

the belief that reverse mentoring was successful in their workplace. Figure 2 shows how respondents categorise success of the effort collectively and individually.

Figure 2: Respondents’ characterisation of reverse mentoring success individually and organisationally, by subject area

Respondents characterising <i>their personal experience</i> in reverse mentoring in this subject area as “very successful” or “successful”. (n = 48)	n	
Social media technology	39	81%
Website development	26	57%
Communications (writing and design)	25	56%
Event planning	15	34%
Strategic planning	13	30%
Account management	6	14%
Respondents characterising reverse mentoring <i>within their organisation</i> in this subject area as “very successful” or “successful”. (n = 52)	n	
Social media technology	44	86%
Website development	31	66%
Communications (writing and design)	29	58%
Event planning	19	42%
Strategic planning	18	40%
Account management	9	20%

RQ3: How would public relations practitioners describe a ‘best practices’ model for implementing a reverse mentoring programme in a public relations workplace?

Through their open-ended responses, respondents highlighted several categories of what might lead to the development of ‘best practices’ regarding reverse mentoring in public relations. Crucial elements included the

willingness of mentors and mentees to learn from each other; the setting of specific goals in order to measure success; a respect for and trust of the younger colleague (mentor); the mentor’s demonstration of patience toward the mentee; and a knowledgeable and enthusiastic mentor. Figure 3 includes respondent suggestions for best practices, grouped by subject area.

Figure 3: 'Best practices' as identified through respondent comments: Selected direct quotes from a total of 82, grouped by topic focus.

<p>Overall perception of reverse mentoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep an open mind and get your hands dirty. You have to practice public relations in any form to get better at it. • Those I have reverse mentored to have given me more insight into their area of expertise than I had before. That knowledge has helped me stay current with what is happening today. The individuals have walked away with a better understanding of their own capabilities and have gone on to do great things that they themselves said was all due to the working relationship. • The results come mostly in the improvement of techniques already practiced at the firm. One of the biggest improvements is in time efficiency. <p>Knowledge and skill development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The person being mentored has to have the foundational technology skills to learn what they are being mentored for, i.e. understand how to use the Internet before trying to teach how to use social media. • Seeking feedback from both sides of the interaction would be helpful in improving the experience for the next person. <p>Interpersonal relationship issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Especially with senior execs, you have to mentor them on their turf (ex: their office) and in private so they do not feel inadequate among their peers. • Our observation was that that 'mentoring' should be done in office. At events it should be no mentoring, but a volunteer /assist relationship. Even if what is being done is wrong, at least event 'looks' to be going smoothly. <p>Outcomes evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can't manage what you don't measure. • Developing a baseline and setting goals at the outset helps months later, when you attempt to evaluate the results. 	<p>Strategy and planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor: offer to help in a non-threatening way: "It seems you're curious about X. Would you like me to show you my approach?" Mentee: Express curiosity and willingness to learn new skills. • Your job, as a manager, is not to do the work of your subordinates but to let them do the work for you, then see how you can package their capabilities for clients. • A stand over the shoulder approach and let the mentee 'do' the work with guidance and advice along the way. • To be honest, I warn my clients on reverse mentoring unless they have a structured programme where all moves by the intern are evaluated as you go. I have found, in my experience, a classroom type workshop setting (or what I call my sessions, seminars) will achieve the same purpose as reverse mentoring. In this setting not only can they both learn from each other, but when it is time for the work experience part of the programme it will be brief, controlled and structured. <p>Participants' attitude and expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can others teach you and what can you teach to others? • You have to be open to asking others for assistance. Experience doesn't always equal knowledge. • Having a positive, win-win attitude toward the endeavour. • A public relations strategist should always be open to learning and changing. In account management I have learned what's most important in a staff member is trust and loyalty. • I find it takes many years before either a staff (past or present) or former intern is able to report back the result of such a programme. Therefore it is important that a 'good' relationship is developed during that programme.
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Discussion

Findings show that public relations practitioners of all experience levels, working in a variety of different workplace environments, are mostly ignorant about reverse mentoring and its role in powerful professional relationships. Almost 60% of public relations professionals indicated unfamiliarity with the reverse mentoring concept, and almost 70% reported they had never been involved in any way with reverse mentoring. Even though the vast majority of respondents were working within the United States, we have no reason to believe that respondents' experience with reverse mentoring would be any different from that of public relations professionals working elsewhere in the world.

Among the smaller percentage of respondents who indicated that reverse mentoring was practiced in their workplace, reverse mentoring was not restricted to technological applications, as is often the case. Respondents were offered a selection of six common public relations task areas, of which only two were clearly within the realm of technological skill application. No fewer than 25% of respondents identified reverse mentoring at work in each of the skill areas. This suggests that in public relations workplaces where these respondents are involved in or witnessing reverse mentoring, it is being used in an effort to develop a variety of skills that would potentially have widespread impact both individually and collectively within the organisation.

Respondents were asked about how reverse mentoring comes about in the workplace. This question was asked because past studies have reached the conclusion that mentoring works best when it is planned carefully (Epstein, 2011; Greengard, 2002) and is "informed by theoretical analysis and empirical evidence" (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011, p. 54). Many informally developed mentoring programmes eventually fail (Solomon, 2001). Realistically, it would seem that any initiative in the public relations workplace – especially one so critical to the development of individual and collective power – ought to be planned strategically,

because the risk of failure of any new initiative is always great.

Results suggest, however, that more often than not, reverse mentoring in the public relations workplace does not result from a thoughtful plan, a strategy essential to the powerful professional. Among respondents who indicated their reverse mentoring is used in their workplace more than two-thirds indicated absence of an "established programme". This suggests that, for many public relations practitioners, reverse mentoring comes reactively rather than proactively, and is initiated by subordinates rather than leaders. This is probably not the best use of an important tool that has the potential to increase workplace power.

Past research has affirmed that it is critical to document the success of reverse mentoring (Leh, 2005). Among survey respondents involved in reverse mentoring, however, the vast majority indicated that assessment of success is either informal, at the discretion of the participants, or nonexistent. Again, this is inconsistent with effective professional practice in a discipline where future actions are based on past benchmarks of success.

Respondents who had personally participated in reverse mentoring were asked to characterise the results of that experience. Many of those comments reflected issues of power. At least half of all respondents indicated that reverse mentoring was "very successful" or "successful" both within their workplace and from their personal perspective as a participant. However, those characterisations should be viewed with caution. Since the majority of respondents had already noted that their workplace reverse mentoring programme was not subject to any formal assessment, we must assume that the characterisations of success are, for the most part, anecdotal rather than evidence-based.

Overall, the results reflect that reverse mentoring is frequently misunderstood and/or not utilised by public relations practitioners. When used, it seldom results from any kind of structured programme, and its results are usually not tracked in a scientific way. As a result, public relations professionals are not

maximising opportunities to build their power by using easily accessed resources in a concrete way.

Limitations

It is always difficult to involve working professionals in studies about their work. This is especially true for public relations professionals who may be overloaded with responsibilities in a time of great workplace change (A dynamic industry in a turbulent economy, 2001). Online surveys allow for an expedient collection of data on the respondents' own time frame, but the trade-off is that response rates are often lower than hoped for. This is especially true when no rewards for participation are offered, as was the case with this research.

Other variables affecting response rates include survey topic, length, and sponsorship (Shih & Fan, 2009). While online surveys are increasingly common, at least one researcher found that email response rates actually dropped as technology use expanded in the workplace. In part, this is because increased technology use has resulted in a proliferation of online surveys (Sheehan, 2001).

It is encouraging that 15% of the initial 4,995 invitations sent to PRSA members were received and opened. At the same time, it is difficult to speculate why these recipients did not proceed to the survey. Perhaps some recipients had no experience with the topic. Perhaps some recipients lacked the technological skill to feel comfortable answering a survey that, likely, would ask them about their technological skill. This has previously been identified as a research concern (Porter, 2004). It would have been ideal to have more respondents from outside the U.S., but survey invitations were sent at random and we made no effort to institute controls for recipients' country of origin. It could also be argued that regardless of where public relations professionals live, their work is likely to be international.

Research shows it is important to include ethnic minority group members in mentoring programmes, to further the minority group members' advancement and career

development (Ragins, 1997). It would have been ideal to gather information from survey respondents about their ethnic background. The researchers chose not to do so because they did not want to extend an already lengthy questionnaire, and because previous research suggested that reverse mentoring was a topic that a majority of respondents would not be familiar with anyway. Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents reported working within the United States. There is no way to tell if this has any bearing on respondents' experiences with reverse mentoring. The literature in this subject area is not sufficiently advanced to make a judgment.

Conclusion

The public relations profession is undergoing unprecedented change, and the balance of power in the profession is shifting on a number of levels. Public relations firms such as GolinHarris are restructuring corporate hierarchy to be less bureaucratic and more responsive to client needs (Barrett, 2011).

International public relations is experiencing explosive growth. Nations such as South Korea and China are emerging as world communications leaders. The result is an increased worldwide competitiveness and new challenges to long-held beliefs about appropriate ethical practice (Jeong, 2011; Zhu, 2011).

New creative expectations are forcing public relations professionals to "completely rethink their entire approach — from pitching to listening, from measuring eyeballs to measuring engagement, from speaking in terms of PR-speak [to] speaking the language of business" (Paine, 2009. p. 23). Some futurists believe the weakening of journalistic institutions and the rise of social media will make public relations the primary conduit for information dissemination to the world community (Sullivan, 2011).

In today's public relations workplace, less-experienced workers often know more about key tactical and tool issues than senior-level executives. Because critical knowledge is now present at all levels of the hierarchy, public relations professionals need to be more

strategically minded about locating and sharing that information to maximise individual and organisational power. Reverse mentoring is an ideal way to make this happen (See Hays & Swanson, 2012). But the results of the present study suggest that today's practitioners are far less proactive than they ought to be in understanding and utilising reverse mentoring – for their own good, as well as for the good of their clients.

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