

Article Review

Tonjala Eaton

EAD 802 Building a Learning Organization

Michigan State University

Title of Article: KM Formal and Informal Mentoring, An Empirical Investigation in Lebanese Banks

Authors: Silva Karkoulian, Leila A. Halawi and Richard McCarthy

Source: The Learning Organization, Vol. 15 No.5, 2008

Summary

The belief that effective KM can lead to an organization establishing a competitive edge is the guiding principle in *KM Formal and Informal Mentoring, An Empirical Investigation in Lebanese Banks* written by Silva Karkoulian, Leila Halawi, and Richard McCarthy. The purpose of the study was to examine how formal and informal mentoring programs contributed to Lebanese banking system employees' willingness to share and utilize information. The exodus of skilled individuals from the workforce and the need to retain information within the organization are factors that lead the development of the research project. KM (KM) according to this article is characterized as the process of creating, transporting, storing and distributing knowledge (Karkoulian, Halawi, & McCarthy, 2008, p. 409). According to KM, members of an organization are responsible for generating ideas and new insight that aid the organization in securing market share.

In order to study the impact of mentoring programs, researchers distributed 600 surveys to Lebanese banking professionals and received 499 responses (Karkoulian, Halawi, & McCarthy, 2008, p. 413). A five point Likert scale was applied to the 20 item questionnaire about informal and formal mentoring. The results of the data showed a favorable relationship between informal mentoring and participants willing to share

information, but a non-favorable relationship between formal mentoring. Researchers concluded that leaders and management should foster an environment that enables informal mentoring and relationships to flourish.

In this paper, I will give a critical review of the article and reflect on the concepts of informal and formal mentoring, the importance of knowledge preservation, and personal mastery.

Analysis

In order for an organization to perform at its maximum potential, it is important to consider how KM is defined in day-to-day application. To demonstrate the concept of KM, it would have been helpful if the authors mentioned a few activities that could be defined as KM related responsibilities. For instance, is updating members of a department about a new financial system an act of KM? Giving examples of KM related responsibilities would have illustrated a stronger connection between KM and mentoring.

It is inferred from the questionnaire that KM can be synonymous with having information readily available to staff members. In terms of the information retrieval process, respondents were asked about whether they were able to access information electronically or through paper documents.

While these items are important, it is equally important to identify activities that can be characterized as knowledge building. In order to move beyond theory to practice, it is necessary to have a framework of the activities related to knowledge building. Mentoring was offered as a solution to retaining information within the organization, but the results suggest that formal mentoring is ineffective. Yet, formal mentoring is easier to monitor from a management perspective. Ensuring that informal mentoring will occur

will take effort to organize, but perhaps it is doable. In terms of further analysis, the setting of the research project presented opportunities for learning.

Although this research project had an international scope, the authors failed to give readers insight to the Lebanese banking system and culture. It was stated, “banks in Lebanon were chosen because mentoring plays an important role in their everyday work” (p. 413). Readers were not informed how mentoring affects the daily work of banking professionals. More information about the banking system would have framed a richer context for understanding the social and corporate environment in which the study occurred. Also, the authors did not elaborate on how the respondents used the knowledge gained through informal mentoring in their professional roles. The article was positioned to make a significant contribution to enhancing international perspectives on mentoring, which it did not do.

However, the article did provide scientific evidence to measure the usefulness and validity of mentoring programs to build organizational learning. The types of mentoring programs, formal and informal were the independent variables of the study and knowledge sharing, knowledge preserving and knowledge utilization were the dependent variables. Because of a low alpha score, the knowledge preserving variable was omitted from the study.

Yet, knowledge preserving is one of the key aspects of organizational learning and KM. Mentoring is a transfer of ideas and information pertaining to an unlimited realm of topics, including the organization, profession or external environment. The overarching challenge is to develop a system of documenting and reviewing knowledge so that members can access it at a later time. Mentoring can be classified as one of the

techniques to begin KM, but ultimately organizations have to discover a means of collecting and storing insight and lessons learned from members. In an environment where people rotate through employment options faster than ever before, it is necessary for organizations to document learning to pass on to incoming leaders. KM has to go beyond formulating systems for members to interact and broaden the conversation to include more strategies for knowledge preservation.

Reflection

For profit organizations are not the only structures to benefit from KM and building organizational capacity. Students in the Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education (HALE) Master's Program recognized the need to develop a formal organization focused on fostering relationships among students and alumni. As a result, the HALE Master's Student Association (HMSA) was formed and five executive committee members and an advisor lead it. Building HMSA is a process of sharing, building and collaborating. Although we as the executive committee are to benefit from a shared experience, the difficulty arises from the need to document our activity for the next executive committee and organizational leaders. While we do not necessarily mentor each other, we do generate knowledge and ideas as a group that has to be communicated to the next group for the organization to grow.

As this example demonstrates, changes in leadership create a legitimate need for knowledge to be generated, documented, and transferred. Knowledge management is most effective when knowledge is documented and able to be retrieved at a later time. Once the insight is generated among members of the organization, it has to be left with the organization for others to reflect upon and utilize in the future.

The results of the data suggest that informal mentoring is a supportive mechanism for KM. However, informal mentoring does not guarantee that mentoring will occur. If informal mentoring is truly more effective than formal mentoring, then should organizations abandon formal mentoring initiatives? I do not think abolishing formal mentoring programs in the workplace is the answer, but more research is necessary to develop various mentoring models. For example, assigning mentors to new individuals could prove to be problematic and less fruitful compared to giving all new hires six months to a year to find a mentor within the organization. Once the mentoring relationship is identified then the organization could provide resources such as time and space for two individuals to continue developing the relationship. There were not many reasons stated in the article that lead members to value informal mentoring over formal mentoring. Therefore, it is assumed that workers just naturally gravitated towards self-identified mentors and mentees.

This article allows readers to contemplate over strategies to implement informal mentoring programs in organizations. One aspect of organizational learning is to create opportunities for members to find teachable moments in their work. The article gives us information that we already know about the ways in which workers learn which is through informal conversation, but it challenges leaders to create an organizational culture that promotes relationships and connecting in ways that lead to mentoring.

Leaders of organizations then must visualize what a supportive environment of informal mentoring entails. The mentoring environment should encourage an openness to give and receive positive and constructive feedback on behalf of both mentors and mentees. Just as members of the organization are open to inquiry of each other, members

of the organization at all levels should be able to access organizational information. For instance not withholding financial records is an indication of an open environment. Making information that is traditionally held as sacred and able for viewing by a limited group open to everyone at all organizational levels may demonstrate a commitment to organizational awareness and build loyalty among members.

Furthermore, organizations that advocate a culture of informal mentoring have to be committed to equipping members with interpersonal and leadership skills. In order to build each member's capacity and ability to serve as mentor, there has to be required training to develop mentoring skills among all members. Promoting mentoring skills among individuals seems to intersect with the concept of personal mastery, which enables individuals to create personal visions for their futures and relate their individual vision to that of the organization (Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts & Kleiner, 1994). The purpose of mentoring is to help mentees transition through an introductory period, become indoctrinated into the organization, provide guidance on one's career or on a particular project. One of the goals of mentoring is to help individuals perform at their best level, which facilitates organizational growth. Similarly to personal mastery, ideally mentoring allows individuals to obtain opportunities for learning in the workplace that leads to the development of new ideas, display new ways of being and experience growth alongside the organization. Organizations that demonstrate characteristics of organizational learning may find ease in implementing informal mentoring programs geared to improving KM.

The results from the current article, confirms other scholars opinion that workers learn a substantial amount from each other. In the article, *How do Workers Learn in*

Their Work, Gerber agrees that a considerable amount of individual learning occurs as a result of interaction between members in the organization (1998). Both articles reiterate that increased interaction leads to knowledge transfer. In that regard, managers and leaders are charged with creating productive environments for interaction to occur.

References

- Gerber, R. (1998). How do workers learn in their work? *The Learning Organization*, (5)4,168-175
- Karkouliau, S., Halawi, L., & McCarthy, R., (2008). KM formal and informal mentoring, an empirical investigation in lebanese banks. *The Learning Organization*, 15(5), 409-420.
- Senge, P., Ross, R., Smith, B., Roberts, C., Kleiner, A. (1994). *The fifth discipline Fieldbook*. New York: Doubleday.