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Book Review

Kathy Laboard Brown

On Being a Mentor: A Guide for Higher Education Faculty

W. Brad Johnson (2007). On Being a Mentor: A Guide for Higher Education Faculty. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. 234 pages. ISBN 0-8058-4896-7.

W. Brad Johnson set out to prepare a systematic guide for establishing good mentoring relationships in any higher education context. The guide is a framework for differentiating developmental concerns and the fundamental qualities and behaviors of excellent mentors from initiation through redefinition. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) report that those involved in mentoring for the 21st century are looking at a vital window of opportunity to recreate the profession.

Overview and Themes

Johnson makes a case for the importance of intentional, deliberate mentoring. His premise—the benefits of mentoring are the catalysts for ensuring that current intellect flourishes in future generations. Jacob reports that mentoring is the “forgotten fourth leg in the academic stool” that emphasizes how incomplete research, teaching, and service are if developing student-faculty relationships are not nurtured.

Johnson designs a four-part guidebook on mentoring. In Part I, he defines mentoring, differentiates mentoring and other relationship forms, and describes exemplars of mentoring in varied contexts. In Part II, he profiles the traits and qualities of the successful mentor and explores the phases of mentorship. In Part III, he unpacks the issues related to successfully mentoring undergraduate, graduate, and junior faculty and provides answers. In Part IV, Johnson reviews the outcomes of mentoring and makes recommendations for managing dysfunctional mentorships.

Johnson posits in Chapter 1–3 that intentional student-faculty relations generate greater benefits than advising, supervising, or informal relationships. Compared to non-mentored individuals, protégés with mentors tend

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to be more satisfied with their careers, enjoy more promotions and higher income, report greater commitment to the organization or profession, and are more likely to mentor others in turn. In Chapters 2–3, Johnson distills the findings of recurring themes in mentor relationships into a summative list of characteristics and provides descriptive vignettes to show competent mentors at work. Danielson (2002) found mentoring initiates deeper reflection about practice, supports ongoing growth, and increases job satisfaction to move through more mature career stages. Johnson closes the chapter by sharing the benefits of mentoring and the requisite obstacles faced in achieving those benefits.

Chapters 4–8 focus on ethics and phases of mentoring. Johnson investigates the intricacies of mentoring by identifying, selecting, and designing mentoring structures. Chapter 4 focuses on three mentoring functions—career and psychosocial functions and role modeling. French invited protégés to come to her undergraduate classes and watch her teach, attend university meetings as her special guest to watch her lead or contribute to committees, co-author and co-present articles so protégés could see how she prepared for conferences and how she attacked writing projects. Johnson concludes the chapter with vignettes that show mentoring functions in practice.

Johnson uses Chapter 5 to demonstrate the balance that must co-exist through the deep integrated structure evident in the triangular model of mentor competence (abilities, competencies, and virtues). Mentor competence demands a practical grasp of what a specific student of a specific race, gender, age, developmental stage, skill level, and station in academe might require. The assumption is that character virtues serve as the foundation of a mentor's behavior in relation to students. Johnson closes the chapter by suggesting mentoring constellations because one mentor cannot address all psychosocial and career development needs.

Mentoring is not arbitrary, so in Chapter 6 Johnson focuses on the attributes that the protégé must possess. Like the mentor, the protégé must have positive personality characteristics, emotional intelligence, motivation, competency, coachability, and initiating behaviors. Together the mentor and protégé must track the protégé's progress and avoid misconceptions and conflicts about student and faculty roles, clarify mutual expectations, and elaborate student academic and career goals early in the process.

When the protégé-mentor relationship is formed, it progresses through several phases before the protégé becomes independent. In Chapter 7, Johnson calls the first stage initiation—a mutual process of auditioning and screening. The next phase is cultivation where the protégé gains self-confidence, professional identity, and optimism regarding future careers. Phases 3 and 4 respectively, separation and redefinition, prepare the protégé for reduced dependence, and the relationship changes intensity from frequent interaction to awkwardness or collaboration. In Chapter 8, Platt describes the relationship as fiduciary; the faculty member accepts the trust and confidence of the protégé and acts in good faith for her benefit. Part II provides salient information about the essence of the mentor-protégé relationship.

The phases and structures of mentoring must correlate with the experiences and expertise of the protégé. In Chapters 9–13, Johnson investigates the unique demographic needs of protégés. Undergraduates struggle with identity development and autonomy. Therefore, in Chapter 9 the mentor must recognize that the protégé's struggle is to separate psychologically and socially from the family of origin.

In contrast, Chapters 10–13, compare the concerns shared by graduate students and junior faculty members, including gender and race. Both grapple with psychological stress associated with developing a professional or occupational identity. Like the graduate student, junior faculty harbor self-doubt about being exposed as a fake in a community of genuine scholars. The scrutiny of minority faculty, women, and cross-sex protégés seems to cause the fishbowl effect—tokenism and an implicit devaluing of socialization into the academic culture. Johnson closes the chapter by cautioning mentors to be sensitive to issues of biological sex, gender socialization, and sexual orientation, but not to focus on them as salient predictors of mentoring needs.

Part IV, “Managing Mentorships,” places the technical aspects of implementing mentoring programs into perspective. Despite the plethora of benefits from mentoring, many relationships are dysfunctional and do not yield the results reflected in this guide. However, Johnson provides remedies in chapters 14–16. He sees recognition of the dysfunction type and strategic intervention as solutions for dysfunction and suggests consideration be given to the Advisor Working Alliance Inventory, the Mentoring Functions Questionnaire, the Relational Health Indices-Mentor Scale, the Advisor Functions Scale, or the Academic Mentoring Behaviors Survey.

Johnson suggests that to impact future generations, a systematic culture of mentoring must be devised. Frestedt and the University of Michigan found that the system must be infused into written program policy statements, budget allocations, and promotion and tenure decisions.

Discussion

Johnson has written a guide for academe that shows the importance of recruiting and selecting mentors and protégés, of establishing structures for

cultivating productive career functions and personal development, and of personalizing those structures to the organization. He offers a wonderful template on how systematic mentoring should look, processes that are essential for establishing a mentoring culture, and a wide range of vignettes as models which personalize effective strategies. Johnson prescribed in the preface:

Because few of us receive any sort of training in the art of the mentorship, and because good mentoring holds such profound potential in the landscape of student development, a brief guide to this crucial professional territory seems in order (p. x).

However, as effective as the vignettes are for describing the power of mentoring in situations, there is no method for amalgamating the competencies and skills into a professional growth model for training in the art of mentorship. Therefore, organizations are left with a body of research that is not compiled or packaged for immediate use.

Conclusion

Although this is not a guide that can be readily implemented, it provides a prototype for the reciprocal relationships that transpire between a mentor and a protégé. I strongly recommend this guide for mentors because the role functions for career and personal development are explicit and the mentoring phases are systematic and descriptive.

References

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