

# The Impact of Mentoring on the Careers of African Americans

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## Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on the mentoring experiences of ten African Americans who worked for Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies. This study was extracted from a larger study that focused on the career development of African Americans in the fields of training and organizational development. However, the participants placed significant importance to the salience of mentoring in their career development. Therefore in the follow-up data analysis, the authors decided to focus attention on the phenomenon of mentoring.

The purposeful sample of ten African Americans consisted of six women and four men. Their corporate positions ranged from first line managers to human resource directors, with their educational levels ranging from undergraduate to terminal degrees. The participants were employed by Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies located in the Southeastern United States. The research focused primarily on the structural, attitudinal, and personal factors that affect career development.

## Introduction

Researchers have identified several factors that have conspired to thwart the efforts of African Americans and other minorities to achieve their fullest potentials in organizations (Hackett & Byers 1996; Palmer & Johnson-Bailey, 2005). Researchers contend that African American women are more disadvantaged than African American men in the career development process (Cox & Blake 1991; Cox, 1993). While both are confronted with racism, African American women must deal with the added layer of sexism. Experts and scholars believe that various barriers (discrimination, prejudice, structural variables, lack of skills, etc.) have prevented African Americans from achieving their full potentials in the workplace (Carnevale &

Stone 1995).

The purpose of this study was to analyze the career development of African American managers in the areas of training and organizational development. The researchers wanted to identify the factors that influence the career development and career aspirations of African Americans working in the fields of training and organizational development.

Although the primary focus of the study was on the overall career development of African Americans in training and development, early in the study, mentoring emerged as a significant factor impacting the career aspirations of the respondents. The data revealed several factors that contrived to impact the career development of the respondents, including: lack of diversity, prejudice, stereotypes, education and training, career succession programs, networking and mentoring. Mentoring emerged as one of the more salient factors and therefore decided on the extraction.

## Mentoring and Career Development

The general definition of a mentor is someone in a position of power who can guide the career of a junior employee (Bierema 1996; Mullen 2000; Thomas, 2001). Studies have indicated that mentoring relationships can significantly affect an individual's career development and advancement, with both the mentor and the person being mentored (protégé) benefiting from the relationship (Scandura 1992). The studies acknowledged that protégés might benefit from the mentoring process through higher promotion rate, greater compensation, or overall higher morale and satisfaction with their career. Kram (1985) contends that individuals, who are mentors, benefit from increased competence, increased feelings of confidence in their own abilities, and higher esteem. Mentors are usually individuals at middle or advanced levels in their ca-

reers with significant experience, knowledge, and skills that can be beneficial to the protégé.

The mentoring process can be an effective management tool that can be beneficial to the careers of the mentor and the protégé, while assisting the organization to achieve its mission (Cox, 1993; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). Mentors are senior level management and executive members of the organization who can facilitate and nurture the careers of the protégé. Kram (1985) asserts that mentoring helps protégés by providing inside information and access to the informal organization. Good mentoring helps the protégé to reach their full potential. Collins (1983) believes the good mentor should be able to:

- Listen patiently
- Build a relationship with protégé
- Nurture self-sufficiency
- Establish protected time
- Share himself or herself
- Be constructive.

## Mentoring and Minorities

While several studies acknowledged the mentoring process provides minorities with vital information and access to the informal network, the process can be thwarted with problems. Cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-gender mentoring sometimes ignites irrational fears and speculations, precipitated by existing race and sex taboos (Bova, 2000; Day, 1974; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). Thomas (1989) contends sex taboos between White males and African American females sometimes cause tension in this type of mentoring relationship. Nevertheless, African American women and other women can benefit from being mentored by White males. Kovel (1970) contends the historical tension between Whites and African Americans tends to

impact the mentoring process across racial barriers.

Several studies have indicated that in the mentoring process, the relationship works to the advantage of those with similar backgrounds, values, and cultural beliefs (Bowers, 1984; Dreher & Cox 1996). Consequently, the relationship between a mentor and protégé works best when both share similar experiences and cultural background. The reality, however, is that White males are usually the power brokers and decision makers in organizations, and must therefore be trained on how to mentor across cultural, ethnic, and gender lines.

Although minorities may have legitimate power as a result of their official management functions, being on the periphery of corporate elitism, with little access to the inner sanctum, diminishes or marginalizes their referent power. From this perspective, minorities may not necessarily be effective mentors (Cox, 1993). Their ineffectiveness can stem not from being incapable or ineptness but rather from the structural and attitudinal barriers preventing them from being fully accepted into the inner sanctum of the organization (Cox, 1993). On the contrary, minorities can be excellent mentors when not limited by structural, attitudinal, or personal barriers.

When used ethically, and morally, mentoring can be effective and beneficial to the mentor, protégé, and the organization in general. The mentor can facilitate the type of learning and insight that will reap substantial benefits for the protégé.

### Methodology

Because this study was attempting to understand factors that impact the career development of African Americans in the areas of training and organizational development, a qualitative research methodology was chosen. The qualitative research format allowed the researchers to analyze documents (resumes), and synthesized the personal experiences, emotions, behaviors, and attitudes of the African Americans who participated in the research. The primary method of data collection for this research study was interviews. However, data was also collected through analyzing the resumes, bios, and job

descriptions of the participants.

### The Sample

This purposeful sample consist of ten African Americans who work in the areas of training and organizational development and who met the predetermined criteria: (1) The participants were African Americans and in fact self-identified as either African American or Black; (2) participants had a college education, some had completed graduate degrees; (3) participants are older than thirty years; (4) participants had more than five years experience in the field of training and organizational development; (5) participants have spent at least two years with their current employer; and (6) participants included both male and female. The interviews ranged between one and one half hours.

While all the participants were African Americans, consistent with the focus of the research, there was some diversity within the group. There were four males and six females, ranging between the ages of 37 and 62. They were employed in a wide range of industries and held positions from instructors to directors of training and organizational development. Educational attainments ranged from the undergraduate level to some doctoral studies. The participants chose their pseudonyms.

### Findings

The findings around mentoring center on the formal and informal mentoring experiences in the workplace. In addition, the issues of cross-cultural mentoring and cross-gender mentoring are examined by exploring the relationships of White male mentors and Black women protégée and by analyzing the Black male protégée and the White woman mentor as the most typical mentoring relationships in the corporate setting.

#### Formal and Informal Mentoring

The participants were unanimous on the significance of mentoring to their career development and advancement. The participants agreed the mentor provides guidance, support, and counseling for the professional development of junior level employees. They concluded that mentoring is an effective manage-

ment strategy that benefits both the mentor and the protégé. Mentoring is the relationship between an experienced employee (mentor) and a lesser-experienced employee (protégé). While the participants acknowledged the mentor may or may not be employed by the same organization, they believed that if available internally, the mentor might be more advantageous to the development of their careers because of proximity and accessibility.

Carl is a forty-three year old African American male who has worked for his company for twenty years. He has spent the last six and a half years delivering training and development to all levels of employees, including senior level management. He is employed by a major international company. Carl's summation of the importance of mentoring to career development is characteristic of the other participants' views on the topic:

Mentoring is absolutely essential, because the mentor is the person who understands the culture, the business, and the climate of the organization. They understand what is required of a position. They are the ones that have the power to place people, to pull people up as I alluded to earlier as well as to help promote their careers even further in the organization. So the mentors are extremely important, especially the higher one moves within the organization. I believe you must have people, someone continuously pulling you through, sponsoring your career. If I had the consistent mentoring, I believe my career would have been further advanced. Earlier in my career, I was very focused, very pro company, very interested in looking for ways in which to discover the wealth of opportunities in the organization and how could capitalize on those possibilities. And even with my high performance it was not happening. So I believe my career would have been tremendously enhanced and would be further along if I had consistent mentoring throughout.

The participants declared that mentoring helps the protégé by providing: inside information and access to the informal organization. They believe mentoring is one way of piercing through the proverbial glass ceiling. They re-

peatedly articulated the significance of having someone with insight and power sponsoring the careers of minorities. The mentor is needed from the early stage of one's career. Ms. Jackson, a fifty five year old corporate director at a major U.S. airline, is the most senior participant in terms of rank and title. Mentoring figured prominently on her list of career succession initiatives. Ms. Jackson accredited much of her success to being mentored by the right people:

Upon leaving graduate school, I had sixteen job offers and because I couldn't decide, having had no coaching, no mentoring, and not having a planned career path, I don't think I chose my job wisely. So after graduate school, I went back to what I was doing and that was to work for E\_\_\_\_\_.

I had a twenty-four year career with them, and all those years were in human resources and organizational development. I worked in compensations, benefits, training and development, organizational procedures; the whole gamut of HROD. If I had a mentor who could have guided me, I could have accomplished more professionally.

With twenty years working for the same company, Carl is convinced that he could have accomplished more and achieved greater professional success had he been mentored. He believes that the management of the company is cognizant of the organizational benefits to be derived from the mentoring process:

And I think the company now realizes they have to invest in its human capital. And they have to invest in people and now they are playing catch-up. But mentoring is absolutely critical in the development of one's career. You could be the best employee, you could have the best work ethics, job performance, but if you don't have somebody at the next level to sponsor you, who feel comfortable with you, you are not going to make it.

But it wasn't until late in my career, that I fully understood that I needed to have a sponsor and a mentor, if I was going to continue to progress in this organization.

Other participants also believed that if they had received consistent mentoring, their careers would have been further advanced. Jeff another participant

is a thirty-seven year old African American male who has worked in the field of HROD for the past eleven years. Jeff works for a large Fortune 500 Company and is based in a large southeastern city. He is the Manager of Organizational Development (OD) for the division. Although Jeff has garnished some degree of professional success, he is convinced he could have been further ahead had he received more consistent nurturing. Jeff's story supports this point:

I think that if I had a person that we have now in charge of this division, who would have taken me under their wings, and provided some mentoring, I would definitely be in senior management at this stage of my career, probably at the vice-president level. But when I encountered people that could have mentored me, they were usually standoffish. They thought I was aggressive and was trying to get their job, when all I was doing was trying to do a good Job, and trying to advance my career. So if I had had a mentor to latch onto, it's just no telling how far along I could have been at this stage in my career.

Tracy believes that even though she did have the desire to move into middle management, her career would have been further advanced if she had consistent mentoring. Tracy is a thirty-nine year old African American female. She is a program manager with responsibilities for instructional design at a Fortune 500 company. According to Tracy:

I had some very good managers. One in particular was Lucille. She provided valuable insight on what I needed to do to get to the next level. She was a good coach who took the time to assist me when I needed the help. Had there been a formal mentoring program available throughout the company, I would have benefited from it.

The mentor understands the internal politics, fully knows the business, and has the power and political savvy to strategically position the protégé to achieve professional development. The mentor has the insight and experience to direct the protégé towards the appropriate position. The mentor becomes a counselor to the protégée, helping them to avoid pitfalls in their careers. Another participant, Mary, is an African American female who is probably in her

mid-forties. She did not want to reveal her age. She is the Director of Training for a global company located in a city in the southeast. Mary described her mentoring experience:

One particular mentor that I am thinking about gave me enough information that I knew I should take the job. He connected me with people who worked at the company, and allowed me to tour the company. He gave me enough information so that I know I should take it. But also the mentor gave me opportunities to learn, to try and do things beyond what any other interns were doing, so that was kind of pre-work mentoring. Despite the overwhelming claims regarding the importance of mentoring on career development, only a few of the participants had access to formal mentoring, others had no form of mentoring. Those who have received some form of mentoring have done so through mutual cooperation between themselves and others inside or outside the organization.

Ricky is a forty-one year old African American male. He is employed as a Human Resource Manager at a prominent multi-national corporation. Ricky concurred with some of the sentiments expressed by the other participants:

We actually just started a mentoring program in this division last month. Formal mentoring in this division, even though we know how valuable mentoring is to the professional development of an individual. You know, the classic one on one mentoring I think is even obsolete now, because it is more like a mentoring network, where you have multiple mentors in different arenas and with different agendas, different races, different areas, different functions. So you can get a global or a broader perspective to prepare you for greater professional advancement.

While Mary has received mentoring from some of her managers, no formal mentoring program exists in her company. However, as articulated by Mary, the mentor need not be in the same organization as the protégée. She enlisted what she refers to as "mentor on call." About this kind of mentoring, Mary concluded:

I made a contact with a woman down in F———, through a conference we attended, just prior to me getting into training, and she was a training manager. I have contacted her on a number of occasions to ask her different things, because there is so much information out there on training, and getting it narrowed down to what you want can be a challenge. So she is like an on-called mentor. I don't talk to her very often, but when she finds things that she thinks are of interest, she sends them to me. If I have a question, I can shoot it to her and at least be sent in the right direction.

While there was unanimity by the participants on the importance of mentoring on their professional development, they also acknowledged that White males tend to have a greater impact on their career development than any other group in the workplace. This data is supported by other research and can be attributed to the fact that White males' control power in the corporate world (Bierema, 1996).

### Mentoring — White Males and African American Females.

Mentoring is seen as pivotal to the career development of women (Burke & McKeen 1990; Ragins, 1999). The study revealed much of the mentoring occurs between the African American female participants and White males. In the work environment, there appeared to be greater comfort between African American females and White males, a factor that is supported by the literature (Dreher & Cox, 1996). This finding has been supported by previous research on mentoring between the sexes in corporate America. This was corroborated by another of the participant. Sharon is a forty-six year old African American female who is a director of training for the southeastern division of a large corporation. The response of Sharon was typical of the female respondents, and she summed it up as follows:

I think White male mentors are very far and few in between, especially in this organization, and I dare say it is because some of them don't want to do it. I also feel that a lot of them are uncomfortable doing it. They are certainly more comfortable around

other White males. I guess I am somewhat naive to think that it's nothing personal. They really don't understand me, although in my particular case currently, my boss, who is a vice president, is an excellent mentor to me.

The ranks of management in corporate America remain largely homogeneous, White and male. This poses a dilemma for developing mentoring relationships for African Americans and other minorities. Although research suggests that mentoring relationships are most effective when they are informal and involve people with similar backgrounds such as race, ethnicity, and gender, this is difficult to achieve when those with power, who are in the positions to effectively mentor, do not share similarities with the potential protégées. Notwithstanding this irony, White males can be effective mentors to people who are dissimilar to them, given their rank and power in organizations.

The female participants appeared to have benefited most from being mentored by White males. However, cross-gender mentoring has been found to suffer from the anxiety that may develop in the relationship between White males and females — the likelihood of physical attraction, intimacy and a romantic involvement (Burke & McKeen, 1990). Even when physical attraction is absent in cross-gender mentoring relationships, problems may arise based on public image and the perception that others have about the relationship between the White male mentor and the female protégé. Cross-gender mentoring may suffer negatively from the mere perception of romantic involvement between the mentor (White males) and the protégé (African American females), (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002).

Sharon reports to a White male vice-president. Throughout the interview, she raved about the positive relationship between her and her boss. Referring to the mentoring she has received, Sharon uttered similar sentiments regarding cross-gender mentoring as reported in the literature:

I think it takes special efforts on both the mentor and the protégé whenever the mentoring goes across racial or ethnic or gender lines. If people don't say I will do this because this is something I really need to do, that type of men-

toring does not happen. I believe mentoring happens automatically and in an unstructured manner between White males. Some people may be inclined to make comments about the mentoring relationship, when it goes across gender and racial lines. You have to solicit help for your career wherever you can get that support.

In spite of the differences, some of the participants believe they have benefited from being mentored by both White males and White females. Sharon is one such individual who benefited from being mentored by a White male. Here she described the experience of being groomed to hopefully take her manager's position. Sharon continues:

Since I came to this position, the person who hired me has been my mentor. He is the vice president for the division and is a White male. The things I have learned from that person are more from the informal perspectives as opposed to the formal perspectives; how to get things done in the organization; understanding of the politics within the system; who are the key people to know; and how to approach certain people. So I think that part of the mentoring has been very valuable to me than anything else. I do feel that anybody in an organization, need someone to sponsor his or her career.

Acknowledging the differences between her and her White male manager, Ms. Jackson believes the professional advice and insight she has received were invaluable and has greatly augmented her professional development. Ms. Jackson concurred with Sharon regarding the benefits of being mentored by White males. She agrees that White males can be effective mentors:

There must be a mentor who is in the position to support you and sponsor your career and I have been fortunate to have several. They have all been White males. There were several mentors who were instrumental in the development of my career. Those White men really helped focused my career in the right direction. I got constructive advice and support from them.

Tracy has also received favorable support, encouragement and professional support from her White male manager. Here Tracy described the

mentoring relationship between herself and her manager:

You know, he is always there for me whenever I needed some support. In fact he has given me a great deal of autonomy to do my job. Most of the time, I am working from home. Because of that, I am able to spend much more time with my two young boys. I have learned a lot from my current boss. I must also add that my previous manager was a black female and she was an excellent mentor to us. She was also instrumental in my career development by providing much needed support.

### Mentoring – White Females to African Americans

While the African American men in the study have not reported being mentored by White males, some relayed stories about the positive effects of being mentored by White females. Jeff's story underscored this point:

All that I have achieved thus far in this corporation is attributable to the wisdom and insight of my manager who was a big haired Texan, and I say this in a positive way. She was fair, honest, supportive, and pushed me every step of the way. She recruited me into the company, and when she was promoted to a vice president, for another division, she brought me along. The things I have done that caused me to excel were as a result of the inside information she shared with me. I had another opportunity to go with another company and probably could be making more money, but the experience of working with her was invaluable. She is an excellent mentor and a very good person.

Carl believed that for twenty years he did not get the type of support that could have exponentially advanced his career. He believed that the last year has been different in a positive way for everyone in the department. His most recent manager, a White female, has been supportive of his career development by providing the appropriate advice and resources. Thus, in this conversation, Carl talked about the support being received from his current manager, who happens to be a White female:

It was not until late in my career,

within the last year. This person was brought into the organization from outside. But she has given us a fresh insight, a fresh perspective, with an emphasis on growth and development of the talent of the people. And that is something I have not encountered here before. She is someone who is very down to earth, someone who was very approachable, and someone who can relate directly to the obstacles, barriers, and other critical success factors that I was encountering. She is someone who wants to take a chance, and is willing to take the risk by giving me opportunities, by giving me exposure, while at the same time giving me an equal opportunity not only to succeed but also to fail. But not to fail in order to be devastated, but an opportunity to fail, so as to use that failure as a learning experience. She is someone who is open, honest and is able to give and receive honest feedback and criticisms.

The African American female respondents also commented on the positive support and mentoring given by White females. Folashade had positive feelings about the relationship between her and her former and current managers. Folashade is an African American woman who I think is in her mid fifties; she did not wish to disclose her age. Folashade works for a major retail chain. Here she described the support received from her former boss:

My former boss, the lady who fought so hard to get me in the training department, is from a small town in Georgia, but she is about being fair. She is a role model to me. She is on the outside as soft as butter, but inside she is very steely and she gets things done. She has a way of getting things done that you don't see how heavy-handed she can be. She campaigned for at least a year to get me into that department and when I left my old company, she actually cried, because she said she had already started the paperwork for me to become a director of the training department. I wish she had informed me about her intention prior to being interviewed for the new position. I might have stayed. Another thing the job as director there was comparable to this job (Regional Training Manager), it just had a big title. She

was a fine lady and a good mentor.

I should just send her some flowers for the sake of it (LAUGH).

The data supports what other researchers have concluded. Researchers and practitioners agree that a proven way to break through barriers is by pairing minorities with mentors who are capable of sponsoring and advancing their careers (Cox, 1993; Morrison, 1992; Palmer & Watkins, 2000). Thus a formal mentoring program, authorized by the organization and endorsed by top-level management, can assist minorities in breaking through barriers, thereby advancing their careers.

Issues specific to the mentoring of African Americans include a lack of available African American mentors, and problems associated with cross-gender and cross-race mentoring relationships. Open discussions in the workplace regarding the benefits and opportunities to the mentor, protégé, and organization resulting from mentoring relationships should be encouraged. Organizations wishing to establish formal mentoring to facilitate the career development of African Americans and other minorities should provide the necessary training to appropriately educate both mentors and protégées regarding issues and problems unique to cross-gender and cross-race mentoring.

When used ethically, and morally, mentoring can be effective and beneficial to the mentor, protégé, and the organization in general. The mentor can facilitate the type of learning and insight that will reap substantial benefits, thus allowing the protégé to optimize his/her potentials.

### Recommendations

The lack of formal mentoring emerged as a career-defying barrier. Participants complained about the lack of access to someone with organizational power, resources, and influence that could positively impact their career development. This was probably the single issue on which there was complete agreement by the respondents. The study revealed that all of the participants believed their careers could have been further advanced if they had received the appropriate guidance through an organizationally sponsored mentoring program. Mentoring is typically de-

defined as a relationship between an experienced and a less experienced person in which the mentor provides guidance, advice, support, and feedback to the protégé. Hence, the significance of mentoring in the career development process as outlined by Bierema (1996), Fagenson (1989), Kram (1985), and Thomas (2001), emerged as a factor that could have tremendous impact on the professional development of the participants if they had been exposed to formal mentoring in their respective organizations. Participants such as Sharon, Jeff, and Ms. Jackson, who appear to have achieved greater career advancement and successes than the other participants, have received informal mentoring from powerful White males throughout their careers. All three have declared mentoring was pivotal in their professional development.

A comprehensive career succession program would include mentoring as an integral part of the program. The participants concurred that race is a factor in their career development and that race plays a role in the mentoring relationships, particularly when the mentor is a White male or a white female. As articulated by Thomas (2001) and confirmed by the findings from this study, race is a factor in the mentoring process as African Americans and minorities are less likely to be chosen to be mentored by White males or White females. Thus, most of the participants were exposed to limited mentoring in their respective organizations. The mentoring was usually informal, and occurred through mutual cooperation between the participant and someone they had befriended, usually a manager. Despite the limitation, those participants who have advanced credited much of their successes to being mentored.

The participants attributed several reasons for limited access to mentoring, including: the non-existence of career succession programs that would have included career development and sensitivity training, a lack of understanding and communication between cultural lines, and perceived problems associated with cross-gender and cross-race mentoring, resulting from the lack of diversity training. While the literature highlighted several problems associated with cross-gender and cross-race men-

ting, those participants who benefited most from the mentoring process appeared not to be plagued by the problems documented in the literature regarding cross-gender and cross-race mentoring (Burke & Mckeen, 1990; 1984; Cox 1993; Dreher & Cox, 1996). The female respondents benefited more from the limited mentoring experience than their male counterparts. While White males did much of the mentoring, successfully mentoring relationships were developed between some to the African American females, White females, and Black males. This finding is consistent with the literature that purports that White males tend to be better mentors to African American females than they do African American males (Cox 1993; Morrison, 1992). There appears to be greater comfort in the mentoring process between African American females and White males than between African American males and White males.

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