

OMNI-DIRECTIONAL MENTORSHIP: REDEFINING MENTORSHIP AS A RECIPROCAL PROCESS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

When one thinks of mentorship, what often comes to mind is the vision of a wizened field leader sharing knowledge and expertise with a less experienced protégé. This traditional approach to mentorship customarily involves the counsel of a young mentee by a more senior mentor. While such an approach to mentorship can be applied to great effect, the top-down nature of these relationships emphasize a power dynamic that overlooks the potential to tap the knowledge and expertise of an organization's diverse constituents, deviant voices, and emerging talent.

This theoretical paper problematizes traditional top-down approaches to mentorship and argues for more reciprocal models that incorporate the knowledge and expertise of multiple colleagues and stakeholders within one's workplace or professional sphere. This paper first recognizes that mentoring relationships are by nature directional before making the case for a new mentoring framework: Omni-Directional Mentorship. The primary focus of Omni-Directional Mentorship is to fuse traditional top-down mentorship with "mentoring-up," and "lateral mentorship" experiences to help replace steep institutional hierarchies with more constructive webs of teaching and learning.

Introduction and Background

Upon hearing the word "mentorship," the first thing many of us envision is the traditional notion of a wizened *mentor*—a seasoned professional in a particular industry or area of study—extending his/her knowledge, expertise, and experiential insight to a less experienced though promising protégé, or *mentee*. Despite the popularity of this traditional definition of mentorship, in our multi-generational, increasingly diversified, and cumulatively more complex workplace, it is fair to call into question the limitations of mentoring relationships that rely on a strictly top-down flow of knowledge and expertise.

This paper aims to make a conceptual case for a new approach to mentorship that, in effect, turns traditional notions of mentor → mentee relationships on their heads. By first acknowledging, then challenging, and ultimately restructuring the directionality of mentoring relationships, the theory of Omni-Directional Mentorship, as presented herein, transforms the power dynamics inherent in traditional top-down mentorship into balanced exchanges of knowledge and expertise that form a web of teaching and learning across mentoring stakeholders—wherein all leaders are learners, and all learners are leaders (Clapp, 2010; Clapp & Gregg, 2010).

Posing a New Approach to Mentorship

Based on a pilot study of the workplace needs of emerging arts leaders (Clapp, 2010; Clapp & Gregg, 2010), the theory of Omni-Directional Mentorship combines the concepts of mentoring-up and lateral mentorship with more traditional notions of top-down mentorship. The

result of this reframing of mentoring relationships is a multi-directional, reciprocal approach to mentorship that capitalizes upon the diverse knowledge banks that frequently go untapped within one's workplace or professional sphere. This theoretical framework is founded upon three core principles: the *directionality* of the mentoring relationships, the *reciprocity* of the mentoring relationships, and the *distributed cognition* that results from the broad exchange of knowledge and expertise.

The Directionality of the Mentoring Relationship

In the most traditional sense, mentorship involves the top-down flow of knowledge and expertise from a more experienced (and usually older) professional, to a less experienced (usually younger) protégé.¹ Inherent in this relationship is the directionality of an informational exchange. Knowledge and expertise flow from the mentor (top) downwards towards the mentee (below). While Omni-Directional Mentorship challenges the one-way nature of this interaction, the theory does not refute the fact that all mentoring relationships are in some way directional. While the directionality of mentoring relationships may be reframed in theory (and re-engineered in practice) to be multi-directional and reciprocal, the very nature of a mentoring relationship relies on knowledge and expertise flowing from one individual to another (from source to recipient) in a manner that is indeed directional.

The Reciprocity of the Mentoring Relationship

The directionality governing traditional mentoring relationships suggests that all benefits of the relationship accrue to the mentee, the individual receiving counsel from his/her more wizened mentor. In this sense, traditional mentorship is not only top-down and directional, it is limited by being directional in only one-way. While a mentor may inherently benefit from counseling a protégé (Yamamoto, 1988), there is no explicit benefit to the mentor—nor an explicit incentive for a potential mentor to engage in the work of nurturing a protégé. Reframing mentoring relationships as being explicitly reciprocal exchanges attends to this dilemma. “It reaffirms the basic plot of mentoring stories, the focus on the contribution of the mentor and the benefits to the protégé, but at the same time it names and acknowledges the experience of the mentor” (McGowan, 2001, p. 3). Considering mentoring relationships as reciprocal exchanges also problematizes who is the “wizened” participant in the relationship. If both parties in a mentoring dyad possess knowledge and expertise to share with the other for the equal benefit of both individuals, then indeed both parties hold a sort of wisdom that is of use to the other.

Distributed Cognition: Knowledge Situated within Broader Social Systems

The third core principle of Omni-Directional Mentorship is the psychological framework of distributed cognition. Popularized in the 1990s, theorists who support the concept of distributed cognition argue that cognition does not take place within the head of any one or another individual, but rather, cognition as it happens “in the wild” (Perkins, 1993) is a distributed process involving the cumulative knowledge and expertise of many individuals engaging with one another on assorted levels (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Dror & Harnand, 2008; Hatch & Gardner, 1993; Hutchins, 1991; Moll, et al. 1993; Perkins, 1993; Rogers & Eillis, 1994; Salomon, 1993). Omni-Directional Mentorship suggests that it requires multiple inputs to bring

¹ See any number of popular and/or academic discussions of the character of Mentor in Homer's *Odyssey* for a deeper understanding of the common usage of the word “Mentor” as being a wizened counselor, especially an elder, engaging a younger individual.

about a collective output. In this sense, the multi-directional nature of Omni-Directional Mentorship is less concerned with the growth of isolated individuals, and more concerned with the growth of individuals contributing to greater systems.

The distributed cognition positioning of Omni-Directional Mentorship inclines the theory towards what psychologist R. Keith Sawyer (2005) describes as *social emergence*: “the processes whereby the global behavior of a system results from the actions and interactions of agents” (p. 2) within that system. Sawyer’s concept of social emergence argues that high-level “global behaviors” (functions, processes, activities, experiences, etc.) “emerge” from the interactions of individuals and groups within a system but cannot be reduced to the actions of any one individual or group within that system. Insofar as Omni-Directional Mentorship incorporates the knowledge and expertise of multiple individual stakeholders contributing to greater group learning, it opens the door to new innovations and productive practice to emerge from the generative interactions of multiple agents.

Omni-Directional Mentorship

As noted above, Omni-Directional Mentorship involves not one, but three uniquely distinct forms of mentoring relationships. These diverse mentoring relationships go beyond the boundaries of widely understood one-on-one mentorship exchanges in that they consist of multiple stakeholders, each bringing a different set of knowledge and expertise to the exchange. These three different forms of mentoring relationships can be described as *traditional top-down mentorship*—wherein knowledge and expertise flow *down* a hierarchical chain; *mentoring-up*—wherein knowledge and expertise flow *up* a hierarchical chain, and; *lateral mentorship*—wherein knowledge and expertise flow *across* individuals at comparable levels of practice.

Traditional Top-Down Mentorship

As has been articulated here and across the mentorship literature, the traditional approach to mentorship involves the dissemination of knowledge and expertise from a person of experience to a lesser-experienced person exhibiting great promise (see Figure 1). The benefits of this relationship are obvious. The experienced mentor has accumulated a wealth of knowledge and expertise throughout his/her engagement in a particular industry or area of study, and the protégé is interested in absorbing this knowledge to further develop him-/herself as a professional in a comparable capacity.

Instilling a practice of top-down mentorship is important for organizations interested in passing down institutional knowledge and building the capacity of their rising talent, but such mentorship practices are also limited in that (a) the knowledge and expertise that is being transmitted is dated, it comes from a particular time and place, (b) the one-way nature of this relationship does little to expand the capacity of the experienced mentor, and (c) the top-down emphasis of this model reinforces traditional hierarchies and limited power structures.

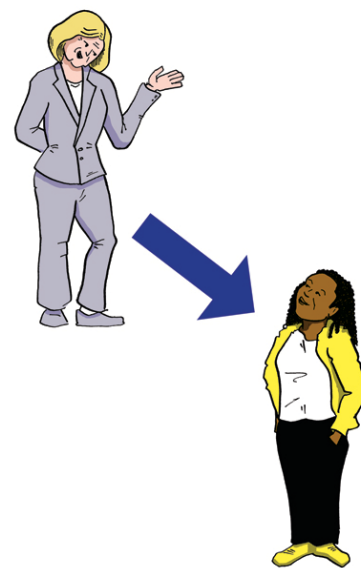


Figure 1: Traditional top-down mentorship.

Mentoring-Up

Different from traditional top-down approaches to mentorship, mentoring-up suggests the transmission of knowledge and expertise from individuals who are lower in position on a hierarchical chain, to those who are higher up in position on such a chain. In this sense, knowledge and expertise flow up (see Figure 2). In their pilot research working with young arts leaders, Clapp & Gregg (2010) found that emerging leaders in their study (individuals in their 20s and 30s) felt that they possessed generational specific knowledge and expertise that went largely ignored at their institutions. As a result, the institutions where these individuals worked missed opportunities to connect with younger audiences and capitalize on contemporary cultural trends. These individuals suggested that a process of mentoring up—or in this instance, younger people informing their senior leaders—would have greatly benefitted their institutions.



Figure 2: Mentoring-up.

Though mentoring-up sounds similar to the popular notion of “managing up,” the two differ in that managing up can be described as minding the practice of one’s superior to keep him/her on task, whereas mentoring-up entails the explicit passage of knowledge and expertise from a person on the lower rungs of an institutional ladder, to an individual on a higher rung of an institutional ladder. In a sense, during a mentoring-up exchange the role of mentor and mentee are seemingly flipped. The individual traditionally positioned in the role of mentee becomes the mentor by educating the individual traditionally positioned as the mentor—who now plays the role of the mentee.

Lateral Mentorship

In today’s increasingly more globalized world, individuals from multiple cultures, industries, and professional backgrounds—each possessing a broad array of knowledge and expertise—are professionally engaging with one another in manners previously unimaginable only decades ago. Because of the increase in diversity in traditional and non-traditional workplace environments, the advent of new technologies, and heightened cross-sector/-discipline collaborations, there has been a renewed emphasis placed on learning from others in order to increase one’s own capacity—as well as to build the institutional capacity of the broader systems in which individuals participate. Lateral mentorship, then, can be described as the exchange of knowledge and expertise across individuals operating at comparable levels of practice (see Figure 3). What these individuals have to gain

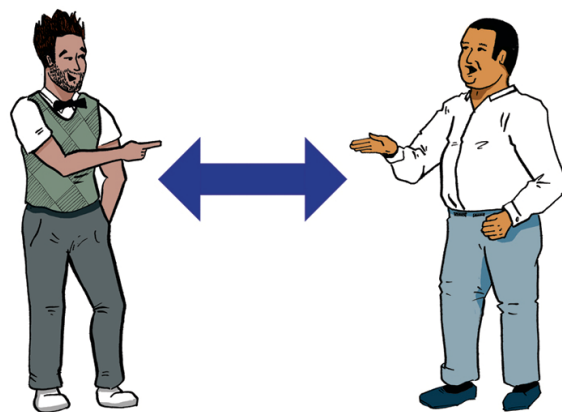


Figure 3: Lateral mentorship.

from one another is twofold. First, lateral mentorships allows one to see how his/her work is done differently in other settings, and (2) lateral mentorship opens one up to new insights and perspectives, helping to expand his/her worldview.

Operationalizing a Multi-Directional Mentoring Relationship

Omni-Directional Mentorship (see Figure 4) begins when traditional top-down mentorship is combined with mentoring-up experiences. Over the course of this engagement, seasoned professionals exchange their time-honored expertise with less-experienced emerging talents eager to learn from their superiors, while at the same time these junior professionals offer the knowledge and expertise inherent in their unique generational perspectives. The result of this interaction is that the junior professional “learns the ropes” while the senior professional becomes increasingly more tapped into developing trends, contemporary culture, new technologies, and the habits of mind of younger audiences.

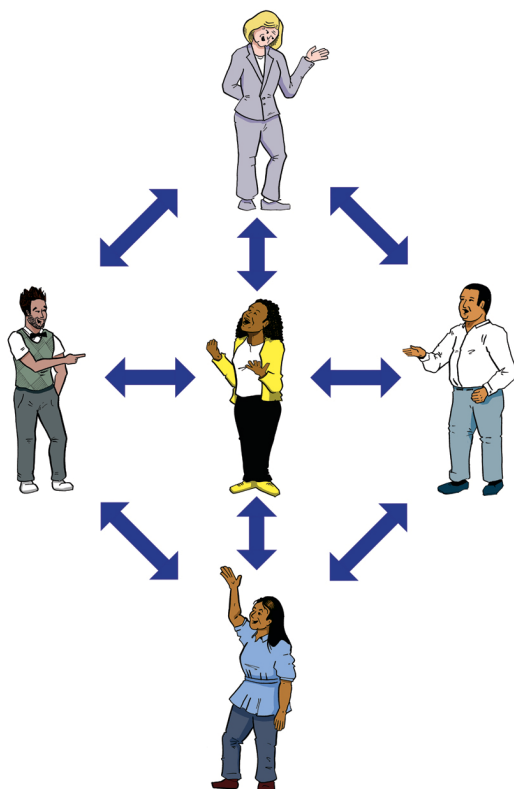


Figure 4: Omni-Directional Mentorship.

When practices of lateral mentorship are added to the top-down ↔ mentoring-up exchange, the opportunity to expand one’s worldview and broaden his/her perspective is added to the benefits of the relationship. This, in turn, leads all parties to have a greater understanding of their colleagues and their constituents and the increased ability to see multiple ways to address a problem based on the expertise of others.

While one-on-one relationships are embedded within the practice of Omni-Directional Mentorship, this theoretical approach to knowledge sharing and the exchange of expertise is geared more towards developing complex webs of teaching and learning. As opposed to the traditional hierarchical structures that top-down mentoring relationships reinforce, taking an Omni-Directional approach to mentorship encourages more flattened hierarchies by positioning all learners as leaders, and all leaders as learners.

Concluding Discussion

In many ways, suggesting that mentoring relationships can be reciprocal relationships where all parties have equal knowledge and expertise to gain and share may “appear to be mentoring turned inside/out and upside/down” (McGowan, 2001, p. 2). In fact, many people will question, whether such arrangements even qualify as mentorship experiences at all. Despite the skepticism that may arise when reframing mentorship as a multi-directional directional web of teaching and learning that consists not solely of a single dyad, but of an array of relationships amongst multiple stakeholders, what Omni-Directional Mentorship proposes is not entirely new. Elizabeth

Collins (2008) suggests the term 360° Mentoring: “today, with org charts flatter and expectations of managerial know-how greater, your ideal mentor may actually be a network of mentors that includes peers and even subordinates” (p.1). Like Collins’s 360° Mentorship, Omni-Directional Mentorship removes the focus of mentoring relationships from looking upwards to the top for insight and wisdom. Instead, fostering a network of mentors acknowledges that there is insight and wisdom all around us.

By fusing top-down, mentoring-up, and lateral mentorship, Omni-Directional Mentorship is designed to take a systems approach to mentorship that naturally builds on the greater know-how of a larger web of professionals. In doing so, Omni-Directional Mentorship does not deny the directionality of traditional mentorship, it simply turns one-way mentoring into reciprocal multi-way exchanges that are beneficial to all stakeholders. Seen through the lens of distributed cognition, Omni-Directional Mentorship mechanizes the diverse attributes that multiple professionals bring to a group environment, and provides a framework to harness a group’s collective energy, knowledge, and expertise.

Like any collaborative process, putting an Omni-Directional Mentorship program into practice is not without its challenges. The power structures of established hierarchies are often difficult—if not impossible—to break. Taking an Omni-Directional approach to mentorship will require senior professionals to make themselves vulnerable as learners and humble themselves when being mentored by their junior colleagues. On the flip-side, Omni-Directional Mentorship requires junior professionals to assert themselves and act on their agency in manners that may be unfamiliar to them—or even out of synch with their ways of knowing. While learning from one’s partners in a lateral mentorship fashion may seem more intuitive than bucking the hierarchical flow of knowledge and expertise, this practice also requires individuals to be more deliberate about seeking out colleagues who truly challenge their own (potentially deep-set) worldviews and ways of knowing.

At its core, Omni-Directional Mentorship is a cultural practice. It involves instilling an atmosphere that inclines all persons working within a collective unit to have a genuine curiosity for the other, to seek out colleagues working at all rungs on the institutional ladder—and beyond—for the purpose of establishing meaningful and engaging teaching and learning exchanges.

NOTE: All illustrations by Paul Kuttner: www.kuttnerdesigns.com

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