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From the ordinary to the extraordinary: High-quality mentoring relationships at work[☆]



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The mantras that “Everyone who makes it has a mentor,” “Good managers are good mentors,” and “Mentor for excellence!” permeate the workplace. Mentoring relationships are expected to deliver exceptional outcomes that develop employees, improve their performance, and propel their careers. However, like other relationships, mentoring relationships fall along a continuum, with the majority reflecting average quality. Yet average relationships are unlikely to produce the exceptional performance and personal growth outcomes that are often expected by organizations and employees.

Extraordinary outcomes require extraordinary relationships, so how do we move mentoring from the ordinary to the extraordinary? Although mentoring scholars have produced volumes of research over the past 30 years, most of this research, and what we know about mentoring, is based on average quality relationships. Our traditional models of mentoring, which have guided practitioners and researchers over the years, explain the most common mentoring experiences, but fail to capture the remarkable experiences and unique dynamics of high-quality relationships. This narrow perspective restricts our ability to understand and achieve the best mentoring has to offer. Mentoring can be one of the most fulfilling and transformative relationships we experience at work, but we need to broaden our lens to find the path to these high-quality relationships.

Relational mentoring illuminates the path for creating high-quality mentoring relationships at work. Emerging from the positive organizational scholarship and positive relationships at work literatures, relational mentoring is a theory

that focuses on the high end of the quality continuum and explains the antecedents, processes, and behaviors of high-quality mentoring relationships. High-quality mentoring relationships are close relationships characterized by trust, disclosure, vulnerability, and commitment. These relationships offer exceptional opportunities for personal learning, growth and discovery for both mentors and protégés. By illuminating the dynamics in high-quality mentoring, relational mentoring helps us visualize and ultimately move our mentoring relationships from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Relational mentoring takes us well beyond traditional approaches that cast mentors as coaches, advisors, or teachers. In high-quality mentoring relationships, both members are transformed and changed in ways that reflect an entirely different set of psychological processes, norms, and behaviors. As we will discover, high-quality mentoring relationships also offer more than just instrumental outcomes relating to advancement or promotion. They provide safe havens that accept us for who we are, giving us the freedom to find our best and authentic selves. Their reach extends well beyond the workplace, as they can give us the courage to forge new career paths and identities. As we will see, they also offer important and unique benefits for a diverse workforce and afford opportunities to learn about diversity within and outside the workplace.

Here is the roadmap for this article. We’ll start by looking at some foundational definitions of mentoring and high-quality relationships at work. Then we’ll compare traditional and relational approaches to mentoring and examine the assumptions that can prevent us from achieving high-quality mentoring relationships at work. We’ll go on to explore how high-quality mentoring relationships develop. We’ll consider their unique dynamics and outcomes, and the important benefits for those in diverse relationships. We’ll gain insights on how to create high-quality mentoring relationships and strategies for improving the quality of our own mentoring relationships.

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We'll conclude with some practical tips for organizations that seek to promote high-quality mentoring relationships at work.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: DEFINING MENTORING AND HIGH-QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK

What are mentoring relationships? Traditionally, mentoring is defined as a relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced protégé for the purpose of helping and developing the protégé's career. Mentors and protégés may or may not be in supervisory relationships or even employed at the same organization. Some mentoring relationships develop informally, while others are assigned as part of a formal mentoring program. Mentoring relationships exist within a constellation of relationships that can include formal mentors, informal mentors, supervisory mentors, peer mentors and other developmental relationships within and outside the workplace.

A distinguishing feature of mentoring relationships is their focus on learning and development within the career context. Because mentoring relationships involve a more experienced mentor paired with a less experienced protégé, they are traditionally viewed as hierarchical relationships where one person has more influence over the other. However, differences in work experience do not necessarily mean that the relationship has to be a one-way learning experience. As described later, mentoring relationships can involve mutual learning and development, and this mutuality can be a key determinant of high-quality relationships.

What are high-quality relationships? Like diamonds, relationships are multifaceted with multiple indicators of quality. Relational quality can reflect behaviors, processes, norms, affective experiences, and outcomes of the relationship. Most relationship scholars agree that high-quality relationships involve mutual experiences of closeness, connection, trust, responsiveness, and vulnerability, and that people in high-quality relationships usually report being satisfied with their relationship. Members often experience a strong sense of emotional attachment, both to each other and their relationship. Harry Reis and colleagues note that these close relationships involve *partner responsiveness*, which is the experience of being understood, valued, cared for, and supported by one's relational partner. Focusing on workplace interactions, Jane Dutton and Emily Heaphy explain that high-quality connections are resilient to strain, and are characterized by experiences of vitality, positive energy, openness to new ideas, and the ability to express both positive and negative emotions in the relationship. Bill Kahn goes on to explain that high-quality work relationships involve the ability to give and receive care, particularly in times of stress. High-quality relationships offer safe spaces that accept and validate members' experiences, while providing them with enabling perspectives that help them make sense of confusing or upsetting experiences at work.

A key characteristic of high-quality relationships is that they meet the needs of their members. As pointed out by Bill Kahn and other scholars, high-quality work relationships reflect a high level of *needs-based fit*, which is the extent to which the relationship is able to meet the personal, career,

and developmental needs of its members. These scholars point out that relationships are also unlikely to last unless they meet the needs of their members.

Integrating these perspectives, high-quality mentoring relationships can be defined as a mutually beneficial relationship that meets members' needs while providing experiences of relational closeness (i.e., care, concern, responsiveness, vulnerability, emotional connection and commitment). Meeting needs and experiences of relational closeness are closely connected. People are more likely to express their needs in close relationships, and, as we discover later, close relationships are more likely to have norms that fill their members' needs. It's important to remember that needs are not static, but change as people grow and develop. Needs also emerge in response to changing demands within and outside the workplace. As we see next, changing needs place new demands and potential strains on mentoring relationships that can create transitions in relational quality.

UNDERSTANDING HIGH-QUALITY MENTORING: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO MENTORING

Relational States and the Quality Continuum

Mentoring relationships vary in quality. At their best, they can be transformative relationships that enrich our lives and enliven our careers. At their worst, they can be dysfunctional relationships that are toxic and destructive. The quality of the relationship is not static, but shifts as the relationship evolves. As described by Belle Ragins and Amy Verbos, people in mentoring relationships can experience three *relational states* that reflect high (relational), medium (traditional) and low (dysfunctional) levels of quality. As illustrated in Fig. 1, these relational states fall along a continuum of quality, with most relationships falling in the middle, reflecting relational states of average quality. High-quality relational states yield experiences of close mentoring bonds, which reflect strong emotional attachment, as well as high levels of mutual learning, growth, generativity, and empowerment. As described later, traditional or average relationships differ not only in the level of these experiences, but also in the norms, processes, and behaviors exhibited in the relationship. Although this article focuses on high-quality mentoring relationships, it should be noted that some mentoring relationships experience dysfunctional states, which involve exploitation, jealousy, and other negative processes. Fortunately, dysfunctional states occur relatively infrequently in mentoring relationships.

Like other types of relationships, mentoring relationships are dynamic and can transition across this continuum of quality. For instance, relationships may shift from average to high-quality, or may backslide to average or even dysfunctional states. Shifts in quality may be driven by changes in the dynamics of the relationship, the behaviors displayed in the relationship, or the demands and resources experienced by its members. For example, broken trust, increased job demands, and non-work shocks may create more stress on the relationship than it can handle, moving it toward a negative state of quality. As we will see, relationships can also move toward positive states of quality through experiences that build trust and commitment in the relationship.

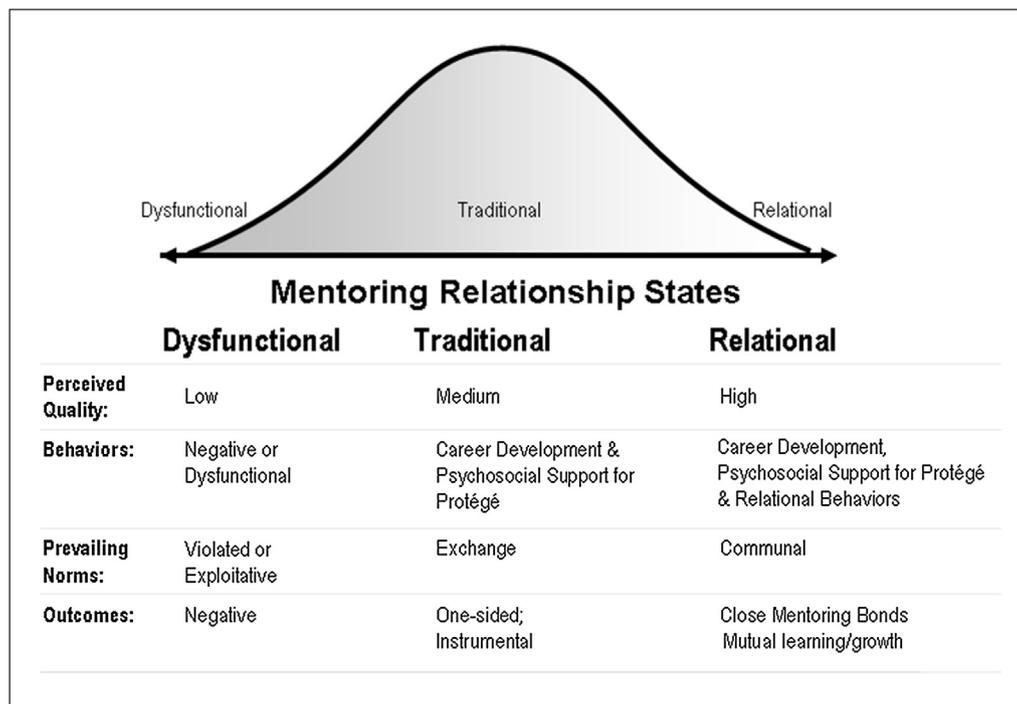


Figure 1 Reproduced from Ragins, B. R. & Verbos, A. K. (2007) Positive relationships in action: Relational mentoring and mentoring schemas in the workplace. In Dutton, J. & Ragins, B. R. (Eds.) *Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation* (page 98) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates

Sometimes high-quality mentoring relationships experience “rough patches,” where members temporarily experience lower states of relational quality. As described later, the unique norms and dynamics in high-quality mentoring relationships increase their resiliency and ability to overcome these temporary setbacks.

Changing needs and demands play a role in moving mentoring relationships across the continuum of quality. Some relationships are unable to meet the changing needs of their members and move down the quality continuum, while others are flexible and can adjust to new demands in ways that maintain their level of quality, or even improve it. The resilience of high-quality mentoring relationships can create a positive cycle whereby new demands create new opportunities for increased closeness in the relationship. Average relationships can also improve quality by meeting their members’ needs, but since average relationships have less relational resources and resiliency to begin with, increased demands pose more of a challenge for these relationships.

Let us now examine how mentoring relationships can increase their quality, and the assumptions that prevent them from realizing their true potential.

What is Relational Mentoring?

Relational mentoring is a theoretical perspective that explains how and why mentoring relationships become high-quality mentoring relationships. The theory identifies the unique antecedents, processes, and behaviors in high-quality mentoring relationships, and offers an expanded set of outcomes for these relationships. Relational mentoring

helps us understand the dynamics of high-quality mentoring, and in so doing, offers a set of strategies for developing high-quality mentoring relationships.

A relational perspective does not dismiss traditional approaches to mentoring. As described below, traditional approaches and theories explain the most common type of mentoring relationship (i.e., the average mentoring relationship), but don’t explain or capture the different dynamics and outcomes of high-quality relationships. Traditional approaches also reinforce a set of assumptions that reflect average relationships. Our research and measures have relied on these assumptions, which limits our knowledge about high-quality mentoring and our ability to create these remarkable relationships.

In this section, I distinguish high-quality from average mentoring relationships, illustrate the hallmarks of relational mentoring, and articulate the assumptions that can prevent us from developing high-quality mentoring relationships. [Tables 1 and 2](#) offer examples that illustrate some of the differences between the relational and traditional approaches described below.

Beyond Godfathers and Yodas: Relational Mentoring Recognizes Mutual Learning and Rejects Traditional “Teacher–Student” Roles

The first hallmark of relational mentoring is that it acknowledges that mentors can also learn and grow from the relationship. This shift in focus challenges the assumption that mentoring should mimic traditional student–teacher relationships, which as we see, limits the capacity and potential of mentoring relationships.

Table 1 The Mentor’s Perspective

Traditional mentor	Relational mentor
<p>“As a mentor, I see myself primarily as a teacher, expert, coach and role model. I get personal satisfaction from volunteering my time to help my protégé, but I really don’t expect to learn from her. My job is to help my protégé’s career and to share my knowledge with her.”</p>	<p>“I see mentoring as a two-way street: I have more work experience than my protégé, but my experience does not extend to all aspects of life. I enjoy learning from my protégé and often get inspired by our interactions. She has taught me to think ‘outside the box’ and has given me other perspectives on life.”</p>
<p>“My protégé and I have a very professional work relationship. I give her career advice, but we rarely talk about issues outside of the workplace. My protégé doesn’t bring them up, and I think they may be a bit too off-task to talk about at work.”</p>	<p>“I would say we have a very close relationship. We feel comfortable talking about work-life challenges and even issues related to race and gender at work. I can think of few topics that are off limits in our relationship.”</p>
<p>“I rarely if ever discuss my personal life or challenges I face at work with my protégé. I can’t see how sharing these things would help her.”</p>	<p>“I feel comfortable sharing my personal challenges and struggles with my protégé. How can I expect her to share her challenges if I am not willing to share mine? I think it takes our relationship to a deeper level where we can talk about things that really matter: who we are and what we do.”</p>
<p>“Our mentoring relationship has helped my protégé’s career and professional development.”</p>	<p>“I think this relationship has helped both of us learn and grow – personally and professionally. I am a better person because of this relationship.”</p>
<p>“As a manager, mentoring is an important part of my job. It’s my way to help the company and my employees.”</p>	<p>“Mentoring is not just what I do – it’s who I am. I will always be a mentor.”</p>

Table 2 The Protégé’s Perspective

Traditional protégé	Relational protégé
<p>“I look up to my mentor, but wouldn’t want her to see my weaknesses. I always try to put my best foot forward in our relationship.”</p>	<p>“I feel like I can be myself with my mentor, and I’m comfortable sharing my fears and weaknesses with her. My mentor accepts me for who I am, not who I pretend to be. My mentor is totally real with me too – we can be ourselves in our relationship. It’s a safe place.”</p>
<p>“I am indebted to my mentor for taking the time to help me and for opening doors to my advancement. I will always be grateful for what my mentor has done for me.”</p>	<p>“We don’t keep score of who gives and who gets in our relationship – we are both there for each other and we have each other’s back. I don’t feel like I ‘owe’ my mentor, but I do plan to be a mentor someday.”</p>
<p>“My mentor has really helped my career and my professional development.”</p>	<p>“My mentor has helped my career, but it doesn’t end there. I have learned so much about myself from this relationship. My mentor and I bring out the best in each other. I guess you could say that we help each other find our best selves.”</p>
<p>“As a woman of color, I face challenges at work that I’m just not comfortable sharing with my mentor.”</p>	<p>“My mentor and I can talk about diversity and my experiences at work. My mentor has helped me figure out a way to be authentic at work. I think my mentor has learned quite a bit about diversity from our conversations.”</p>

A shift in focus. Relational mentoring calls for a significant shift in our view of mentors and their role in the relationship. Traditionally, when we think about mentoring relationships, we often visualize a wise old mentor teaching and guiding a young, inexperienced protégé. This image has ancient roots; in fact the term “mentor” originated from Greek Mythology. A character in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Mentor was a guardian and teacher to Odysseus’ son, Telemachus. Mentor was entrusted to protect, counsel, and teach Telemachus while Odysseus sailed off to war.

Traditional models of mentoring reflect this archetype by focusing nearly exclusively on the protégé. Mentors are viewed primarily, and often solely, in terms of what they can do to help their protégés. In traditional approaches, mentors are expected to sponsor their protégés, give them advice, open doors, and offer them protection. Some mentoring relationships adopt the “Godfather Model of Mentoring”, where the all-powerful mentor doles out favors, pulls strings and protects his protégé, who in turn is expected to be a loyal soldier to the mentor.

In average quality relationships the mentor helps and support the protégé, but there is little expectation of reciprocity in learning or growth. The mentor may gain status, prestige, loyalty, and a sense of satisfaction, but both members view the relationship primarily as a “one-way street” that focuses on the protégé.

In contrast, high-quality mentoring relationships are a “two-way street” where both mentors and protégés actively learn and grow from each other. Two-way relationships are more likely to meet both members’ needs. As discussed earlier, meeting both members’ needs is an important characteristic of high-quality relationships. Achieving this high-quality state is not easy, and in fact requires a fundamental “mindset” shift that questions assumptions and dismantles the hierarchical roles that are often prescribed for the relationship. This mindset shift can move the relationship from average relationships that offer one-way learning, to high-quality relationships that generate personal learning and growth for both mentors and protégés.

Dismantling the teacher–student approach to mentoring. Traditional mentoring assumes hierarchical student–teacher roles. Applying traditional models of teaching, mentors are viewed as a repository of knowledge, and their experience and power take center stage in the relationship. This can lead to the “Yoda Mentor”, where the mentor assumes the role of the wise and benevolent teacher who perches on a pedestal of power, doling out tidbits of advice and gems of knowledge to the protégé. The protégé takes the role of a student with little to offer other than obedience, loyalty, and gratitude. As the source of all knowledge, the Yoda Mentor is not expected to learn from the protégé, and the protégé has little influence on the mentor. The mentor remains emotionally aloof – secure and safe in her powerful role. She experiences little personal growth, because growth requires vulnerability, which requires a shift in the power and roles in the relationship.

This hierarchical approach creates emotional distance and rigid roles that limit the quality and capacity of the relationship. The protégé is approached as an empty vessel that is filled with the mentor’s expertise, knowledge, and advice. The relationship is static and becomes dispensable; once the protégé is “filled”, she can easily move on to the next mentoring relationship. The relationship is valued for what it can do, rather than for it can be: an extraordinary setting for learning and growth. The mentor and protégé never connect in ways that foster healthy interdependence and personal growth. The roots of their relationship are never intertwined, and this limits the quality of the relationship and its capacity for resilience and adaptation.

In contrast, a relational approach to mentoring recognizes that benefits can accrue to both mentors and protégés if both members have the relational skills, desire, and ability to move beyond traditional hierarchical roles. This is a challenge because mentors have more experience than their protégés and often hold influential positions in the organization. However, members of high-quality relationships recognize that although mentors have more work experience, this experience does not extend to all aspects of their lives. For example, protégés may offer expertise that reflects their recent educational training, and have life experiences that can be a source of inspiration and learning for the mentor. The mentor may learn the latest in computer technology

from her protégé, or she may gain new insights from her protégé’s different life experiences, generational values, and perspectives.

In high-quality mentoring relationships, interactions become places for mutual discovery and learning, and influence shifts from hierarchical states of “power over” to collaborative states of “power with.” Expertise is seen as fluid and based on ability and knowledge, rather than on hierarchical position. Mentors actively seek and appreciate their protégé’s knowledge and experiences, which empowers the protégé. By relinquishing traditional hierarchical roles, the relationship becomes a vehicle for mutual learning, growth, and discovery.

The mentor’s role. Because mentors usually have more power than protégés, they need to initiate this shift in roles. This requires psychological security and maturity on the part of the mentor. Even though she may have more experience than her protégé, the mentor does not allow herself to slip into the ego-stroking role of the all powerful, all knowing Yoda mentor. Instead, she steps down from her pedestal of power and approaches the relationship from a position of vulnerability and mutuality.

This role shift fundamentally changes the dynamics of the relationship. The protégé moves from a state of dependence to a state of interdependence. The mentor is no longer viewed as a “career savior” who is expected to do it all. The mentor’s ability to be vulnerable creates psychological safety and helps make the relationship a “safe space.” As described later, this safe space allows both mentors and protégés to be authentic in their relationship, which further facilitates their mutual learning and growth.

Relinquishing the hierarchical teacher role also allows the mentor to be more effective and move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” approach to sharing knowledge. Mentors who adhere to traditional teacher models may have a fixed “lesson plan” of advice they want to give to their protégés. This advice may be worthwhile, but it may not meet their protégé’s needs, as the mentor is not engaging in ways that allow the protégé to share or clarify her needs. As discussed later, the trust, closeness, and active listening in high-quality relationships allows members to share their weaknesses and needs. These high-quality interactions may help mentors realize that their “lesson plan” may not be working for their protégé. Instead of giving advice, the mentor may engage in active listening and serve as a sounding board for their protégé. This moves them from a static, role-based expertise approach (“My role is to teach you, and here is what I have to offer”) to a flexible, needs-based approach (“What do you need and how can I help?”). This role shift also moves the protégé from passive recipient (“Tell me what to do”) to a state of mutuality (“Let’s figure this out together”) and empowerment (“Wow, you went through this too? Maybe I can do this!”).

A “No-Strings” Approach: Relational Mentoring Uses Communal Rather than Exchange Norms

The second hallmark of relational mentoring is that it recognizes that high-quality mentoring relationships may use different relational norms. Relational norms determine the behaviors and interactions in a relationship, and are therefore an important determinant of the relationship quality.

Communal and exchange norms. Most work relationships rely on exchange norms. Exchange norms use an economic approach, which holds that people are driven by self-interest and that they use a cost-benefit analysis when forming and maintaining their relationships. Relationships are viewed as transactions, and people are motivated to give in relationships when they expect to get something in return.

Like other work relationships, the average mentoring relationship uses exchange norms. This means that when one member of the relationship gives, the other experiences a sense of debt, or felt obligation to reciprocate. Although the relationship may not always use a strict *quid pro quo* orientation (i.e., “tit-for-tat”), self-interest is the primary motivating factor, and giving is nearly always accompanied by the expectation of some form of repayment. It’s important to keep in mind that exchange relationships focus on repayment rather than meeting the needs of its members. So people are expected to reciprocate, but the reciprocation may not meet the needs of its members, which in turn constrains the quality of the relationship.

However, not all relationships are motivated by self-interest. Margaret Clark and Judson Mills point out that many close relationships use *communal norms*, where members give to each other based on need, without the expectation of repayment. Communal norms frequently characterize close relationships, such as those involving family and close friends. In these relationships, members give because they care for the well being of their partner, not because they expect something in return. These relationships are likely to be high-quality because members’ needs are likely to be met. They also promote high levels of trust and disclosure, which as described later, are key processes in high-quality mentoring relationships.

Relational mentoring theory holds that the use of communal norms is a key marker that distinguishes high-quality from average mentoring relationships. In high-quality mentoring relationships, both mentors and protégés may approach the relationship as a way to meet each other’s needs. Their motivation for maintaining the relationship is driven by their care and concern for their partner.

Why do people embrace communal norms? Although skeptics may view communal norms as a “pie in the sky” example of altruism or selflessness, people who are in close relationships may undergo psychological changes in their identities that reward and reinforce them for using communal norms in their relationships.

Psychologists Aron and Aron point out that close relationships allow people to expand their sense of selves, and this self-expansion motive underlies their development of close personal relationships. Self-expansion involves incorporating the other into ourselves (i.e., we are no longer two – but one.) This process is not entirely selfless, as assimilating aspects of our partner’s identity can increase our self-efficacy and our ability to get the social and material resources needed to attain our goals.

These concepts help us understand why some people are able to use communal norms in their mentoring relationships. Members can give without expecting repayment not only because they have a deep sense of connection and caring for their partner, but also because their relationship changes their identity. As described later, they can develop mentoring

identities, where they view themselves in terms of their mentoring relationship.

These processes build on each another in ways that move mentoring relationships from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Relationships that use communal norms are better able to meet each other’s needs and also lead to relational processes involving trust, intimacy, disclosure and high-quality connections. These relational processes, in turn, change how we view ourselves in ways that further reinforce the use of communal norms in the relationship. For example, our feelings of closeness and connection in the relationship, which Ragins and Verbos call close mentoring bonds, can facilitate mentoring identities. This creates a dynamic iterative cycle that pushes relationships along the quality continuum to high-quality relationships.

Some caveats: The role of shared norms, context, time and individual differences. There are four caveats that need to be considered when looking at communal norms in mentoring relationships. First, both members need to share a communal norm approach for the relationship to be high-quality. If the relationship involves incongruent norms (i.e., one gives without expecting repayment while the other uses an exchange approach), the quality of the relationship will suffer. The relationship may become an average or even a marginal relationship that barely meets the needs of either member. *Communal norm congruency* is therefore a key prerequisite to the development of high-quality mentoring relationships.

Second, not all mentoring relationships can embrace communal norms. Communal norms reflect a level of closeness, connection, and caring that is not frequently found, or even accepted, in many workplaces. The culture of the organization and work group can play a role in the adoption of communal norms in mentoring relationships. While some organizations have supportive cultures that may accept and reinforce communal norms (e.g., “We are family!”), others have more competitive and formal cultures (e.g., “Cream rises to the top”) that may not support, or even ridicule, the use of communal norms in work relationships. Similarly, communal norms may be more likely to be found and supported in teams that work closely together (e.g., firefighters) than teams that are independent, competitive, or exist in virtual space.

Third, communal norms do not happen overnight. It takes time for members to build the trust and commitment necessary to adopt communal norms in their relationship. Some relationships can achieve closeness quickly, but trust takes time to develop. Due to the contracted shortness of most formal mentoring relationships, it may be particularly challenging to develop communal norms in formally assigned relationships.

Fourth, individual differences play a role in these relationships. Some people may be more likely to embrace communal norms in their relationships than others. For example, those who are prosocial, emotionally mature, and empathic by nature should be more likely to embrace communal norms than those lacking these attributes. People also differ on other attributes that allow them to develop close relationships. For example, some people have interdependent self-construals, which means that they are oriented toward relationships and tend to define themselves in terms of their relationships. People may also have formative experiences as

children that determine their attachment styles and ability to develop close relationships with others. People's past experiences with communal norms in high-quality relationships could also make them more receptive to using these norms in future relationships. Overall, we need to remember that not everyone has the capacity or ability to meet their partner's needs; even if they want to adopt communal norms they may have difficulty effectively establishing these norms in their work relationships.

Life Does Not Begin or End at the Workplace Door: Relational Mentoring Creates Change Beyond the Workplace

The third hallmark of relational mentoring is its recognition of the reach and potential of high-quality mentoring relationships. While traditional perspectives focus primarily on workplace outcomes, relational mentoring recognizes the permeability of the boundary between work and non-work domains. As described below, this holistic perspective allows for a different and larger array of possible outcomes that extend well beyond the workplace, such as life satisfaction, personal growth, and work-life balance.

You can take it with you: A holistic approach to mentoring. Relational mentoring incorporates a *holistic approach*, which holds that employees can be changed by a myriad of experiences, including relationships, and that these transformations and changes are carried with them across their life domains.

High-quality mentoring relationships are transformative in their effects, which can transcend organizational boundaries. These relationships offer a safe space where people can craft new career aspirations and identities, hone skills related to personal and professional growth, and learn to be authentic and emotionally present in their other work relationships.

High-quality mentoring relationships also help people develop skills that are critical for building effective relationships, such as empathic and active listening, perspective taking, and the ability to give feedback, manage conflict, and communicate effectively. These skills are called *relational caches* as they are transportable across relationships and life domains. This means that the set of skills developed in one relationship can be carried over to benefit other current and future relationships. For example, a mentor may help a protégé develop her perspective taking and listening skills. The protégé can then bring these skills to her other work and non-work relationships, which builds the quality of these relationships. Since high-quality relationships involves learning from one's partner, the protégé could pass this skill along to her other partners over time, who may in turn share these skills in their developmental networks. If this happens frequently enough in an organization, it could have a domino effect that creates and reinforces networks of high-quality relationships and mentoring cultures in organizations.

In short, relational mentoring recognizes the capacity of high-quality relationships to create change across life domains. In contrast, by focusing on average relationships, traditional perspectives fail to capture the full reach of mentoring relationships for creating change in the individual

and their constellation of relationships within and outside the workplace. Instead of taking a segmented view of workers that views them only in terms of their work role, relational mentoring uses a holistic lens and recognizes that high-quality mentoring can transcend the job and even the organization. High-quality mentoring relationships can meet members' needs that extend beyond the workplace. In a nutshell, while average relationships may help members "do their jobs," high-quality relationships help them "live their lives." This perspective yields a different and wider array of behaviors and outcomes for the mentoring relationship.

Relational behaviors. As described in Kathy Kram's groundbreaking 1985 book, mentors are traditionally viewed as providing two types of behaviors or "functions" in their relationships. First, they can provide *career development functions* that help their protégés learn the ropes and advance in the organization. Career development behaviors include coaching and sponsorship, providing visibility and exposure, protecting the protégé, and giving them challenging assignments. These behaviors are measured by asking protégés to respond to such statements as: "My mentor helps me attain desirable positions", "My mentor helps me learn about other parts of the organization", "My mentor protects me from those who are out to get me" and "My mentor helps me be more visible in organizations."

Second, mentors can provide *psychosocial functions* that help protégés develop into their professional role. Psychosocial behaviors include offering support, acceptance, counseling, friendship and serving as a role model for their protégés. These behaviors are measured with such questions as: "My mentor guides my personal development", "My mentor is someone I can confide in", "My mentor serves as a role model for me", "My mentor represents who I want to be", and "My mentor thinks highly of me."

Although these functions may be important indicators of relational quality, they may not capture the full range of behaviors or processes that can be exhibited in high-quality mentoring relationships. Because these functions were first identified over 30 years ago, they do not reflect current knowledge about the processes and behaviors in high-quality relationships. Emerging research has revealed new insights about the role of learning, psychological safety, authenticity, and identity processes in close relationships that can help us better understand the types of behaviors and processes that may be displayed in high-quality mentoring relationships. In addition, although Kathy Kram's original theory acknowledged the importance of mutuality, the career development and psychosocial functions reflected only the mentor's behaviors. Our measures and research inherited this limitation by focusing nearly exclusively on the mentor's behaviors in the relationship. This approach not only failed to capture the protégé's behaviors and the behaviors that build the quality of the relationship, but also reinforced the assumption that mentoring is a one-way street that benefits only the protégé.

Relational mentoring theory tries to address these issues by offering a set of *relational functions* that reflect current knowledge about behaviors and processes found in close interpersonal relationships. Relational functions include behaviors reflecting personal learning and growth, inspiration, and the affirmation of ideal, best, and authentic selves. Examples of questions reflecting relational behaviors include: "My partner is helping me become the person I

aspire to be,” “I am often inspired about my partner,” “My partner helps me learn more about myself,” “My partner accepts me for who I am,” and “My partner seems to bring out the best in me.” Relational functions also measure processes and behaviors that build and reflect the quality of the relationship, such as reliance on communal norms, shared influence, mutual respect, trust and commitment (e.g., “We give to each other without expecting repayment,” “There is mutual respect and influence in our relationship,” and “My partner and I trust each other and we are committed to the relationship.”). These functions not only explicitly recognize the mutuality in the relationship, but also offer insights into behaviors that can move mentoring relationships across the quality continuum.

Relational functions do not replace traditional functions, but rather offer an *additional* set of behaviors that can be found in high-quality relationships. So a high-quality mentoring relationship may provide not only career development and psychosocial functions that help the protégé, but also an expanded set of relational functions that benefit both parties and the relationship. As described below, these functions can yield a richer range of outcomes that extend well beyond the workplace.

While a wider range of behaviors are likely to be found in high-quality relationships, more behaviors do not always mean higher quality relationships. As described earlier, high-quality relationships meet the needs of their members, but not everyone has the same needs. For example, some people may look to their relationship to help them find work-life balance or cope with stressful experiences at work, while others may be interested primarily in advancement. In addition, since people have a constellation of work relationships, they can “mix and match” to meet different needs from different relationships. As described earlier, there are multiple indicators of relational quality, and it’s important to consider the fit between the individual’s needs and expectations and what the relationship actually provides. So we need to be careful about assuming that the more behaviors exhibited, the higher the quality of the relationship. Even so, by casting a wider net and recognizing a wider range of behaviors, we can better understand the different types of behaviors that are enacted in high-quality relationships and the impact of these behaviors on the relationship. This perspective also helps us think more broadly about our own behaviors and as illustrated in [Tables 1 and 2](#), opens new possibilities for improving the quality of our own mentoring relationships.

Relational outcomes. High-quality mentoring relationships may yield a richer range of outcomes than those found in average relationships. Mentoring relationships have been found to predict traditional indicators of career success, such as the protégé’s job and career satisfaction, advancement and compensation. These outcomes are important, but may not capture the reach of high-quality mentorships. High-quality mentoring may yield an additional and much larger set of outcomes. For example, drawing on the positive organizational scholarship literature, high-quality mentorships could increase members’ self-confidence, hope, optimism and resiliency, as well as their vitality, energy, flourishing and creativity. High-quality relationships can be particularly effective in facilitating personal and professional growth, learning, and development for both mentors and protégés. The effects of high-quality relationships can also

spill over to affect non-work outcomes. For example, they may improve members’ life satisfaction, work-life balance, and their experiences of meaningfulness, purpose and connection. As discussed later, high-quality relationships can also help members develop authentic identities, which is particularly important for those with stigmatized social identities.

High-quality mentoring relationships may also offer safe havens that buffer employees from negative and stressful workplace experiences. For example, in our research we found that high-quality mentoring buffered protégés from the negative effects of witnessing racial discrimination at work. Employees who were exposed to racial discrimination experienced physical symptoms of stress, insomnia, stress-related absenteeism and lower organizational commitment, but those in high-quality mentoring relationships experienced less of these negative outcomes than those lacking a high-quality mentoring relationship. High-quality mentoring relationships were safe harbors that anchored employees to their workplace and buffered them from negative and stressful workplace experiences. Moreover, mentoring was found to be singularly effective in this regard, as high-quality supervisory and coworker relationships did not buffer employees from the adverse effects of a discriminatory workplace.

As we can see, a relational perspective identifies unique outcomes that may be overlooked when using traditional approaches to mentoring. This has important implications for evaluating the effectiveness of the relationship. For example, a high-quality mentoring relationship may meet a protégés’ needs for achieving balance or a sense of harmony in her life, but may not predict her compensation or advancement. Researchers using traditional indicators of objective career success may therefore erroneously conclude that the relationship was not very effective, when in fact it was highly effective for meeting the specific needs of the protégé. Our knowledge about mentoring is constrained to a relatively narrow set of traditional outcomes associated with average relationships, failing to capture or describe the best mentoring has to offer. This narrows our vision and expectations of our own mentoring relationships, which ultimately restricts their potential.

Now that we have distinguished relational and traditional perspectives, let us now examine how high-quality mentoring relationships develop and the psychological processes that enable people to create and maintain high-quality mentoring in the workplace.

HOW DO HIGH-QUALITY MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOP?

Tippling Points and Relational Mentoring Episodes

High-quality mentoring relationships do not spring to life immediately, but rather develop over time via *mentoring episodes*. Fletcher and Ragins defined mentoring episodes as short-term developmental interactions. They point out that while all mentoring relationships involve mentoring episodes, employees can experience a mentoring episode without necessarily being in a mentoring relationship. For example, a senior manager may offer career advice to a new employee,

and while both may agree that the manager is engaging in a mentoring behavior, neither may see the relationship as a mentoring relationship. However, if their mentoring episodes continue and increase in frequency, duration and intensity, they may reach a “*tipping point*” where they come to view themselves as in a mentoring relationship.

Like mentoring relationships, mentoring episodes range along a continuum of quality. Relational mentoring episodes are growth-fostering interactions characterized by mutual experiences of care, concern, authenticity and engagement. These episodes generate a sense of affirmation, acceptance, responsiveness, positive energy, vitality, and mutual empowerment. Members experience positive emotions, feelings of well-being, self-efficacy and psychological safety. Those who have frequent, high-quality mentoring episodes should be more likely to define their work relationship as a mentoring relationship and experience their relationship as high-quality, compared to those who have infrequent episodes that are of mixed quality. Of course those experiencing low quality mentoring episodes are unlikely to view their relationship as a mentoring relationship.

Psychological Processes in the Individual: the 3 Self-Structures of Mentoring

There are three psychological processes that can affect our ability to develop high-quality mentoring relationships: mentoring schemas, mentoring identities and mentoring as possible selves. These processes guide and shape our expectations, experiences, and behaviors in mentoring relationships. By understanding these processes, we are better able to understand our own mentoring relationships and move them across the continuum to high-quality relationships.

1: Mentoring schemas: What are we supposed to do? We develop expectations or “mental maps” of the roles, functions, behaviors, and outcomes of mentoring relationships. Ragins and Verbos call these mental maps of mentoring “*mentoring schemas*” and explain that they shape mentors and protégés’ expectations, motivations, perceptions and behaviors in their mentoring relationships. Mentoring schemas are formed by our personal experiences and are shaped by the norms and culture of our organization. Mentoring schemas tell us what the mentoring relationship “looks like” and create “mentoring scripts” that guide our perceptions of our roles and behaviors in the relationship. Mentoring schemas are held by both mentors and protégés, and reflect their perceptions of their roles as well as their partner’s roles in the relationship.

We are better able to develop high-quality relationships when we have schemas that use a relational perspective. For example, the relational mentoring schema, “Mentors and protégés learn from each other,” should be more likely to lead to a high-quality relationship than the traditional schema, “Mentors know best and protégés should always follow their advice.” Examples of mentoring schemas are reflected in the narratives presented in [Tables 1 and 2](#). Because both mentors and protégés hold schemas, high-quality relationships are more likely to

develop when the members share congruent schemas about their roles and the expected outcomes of the relationship.

2: Mentoring identities: Who am I? High-quality mentoring relationships are also more likely to develop when we incorporate mentoring into our identity. Identity answers the question “Who am I?” We can incorporate mentoring into our identity by defining ourselves in terms of our general role in the mentoring relationship (e.g., Who am I? I am a mentor!) or our specific relationship (e.g., I am Pat’s mentor).

Mentoring identities can be held by both mentors and protégés and can range from positive to negative. Positive mentoring identities are affirming and reflect a sense of positive self-efficacy in their general role as a mentor (e.g., I am a caring and compassionate mentor) or their role in a specific relationship (e.g., I am a great mentor to Pat). Sometimes people can develop a negative mentoring identity that arises from negative mentoring experiences (e.g., I am a lousy mentor). However, those with limited or marginal experiences generally should not incorporate mentoring into their identity structures; mentoring has no role in their self-view.

Those with positive mentoring identities should be more motivated to enter and develop a high-quality mentoring relationship than those lacking a mentoring identity or those with a negative mentoring identity. As described earlier, identity processes may drive and reinforce the development of communal norms in the mentoring relationship. Positive mentoring identities can also be a key driver in the mentor’s decision to initiate a mentoring relationship. Mentors who incorporate the relationship into their identity and who view themselves as a good mentor should be more invested in their relationship and more likely to seek out future relationships than mentors who do not hold these self-views.

3: Mentoring as possible selves: Who can I be? The third psychological process affecting our ability to develop high-quality relationships involves a somewhat different aspect of identity. Identity involves not only who we are, but also who we wish to become. Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius call this self-vision our possible selves, and explain that it reflects the self we want to become as well as the self we fear becoming. Some people view themselves in terms of their future role as a mentor or protégé, while others do not. The possible selves of mentoring can also range from positive (I can see myself as an effective mentor) to negative (I would be a terrible mentor!) Those who hold positive self-visions of mentoring should be more motivated to enter and develop high-quality relationships than those who hold negative self-visions or those who are unable to envision themselves in a mentoring relationship. Those with positive self-visions should also have clear mentoring schemas that effectively guide their behaviors once they enter the relationship.

How do we develop these positive self-structures of mentoring? One primary way to develop positive self-structures is through our direct experience in mentoring relationships. Having positive past experience in high-quality relationships, either as a mentor or a protégé, helps us

develop and refine our mentoring schemas and mentoring identities. We can also develop positive self-structures by talking to and learning from those who are in high-quality mentoring relationships. As described later, the organization may also play a role in shaping and clarifying our expectations about the relationship by providing training that helps us develop clear and reasonable expectations of the relationship and by promoting a mentoring culture that helps us assimilate our mentoring relationship into our identity.

These three self-structures of mentoring (schemas, identities and possible selves) do not operate independently – they build upon and reinforce one another. For example, a mentor who has a strong positive mentoring identity should value and focus on her mentoring relationships, and this increased focus should help her clarify and develop her mentoring schemas. Having a clear road map of her role in the relationship can in turn reinforce her identification with her role as a mentor. The self-structures of mentoring therefore build on one another to create and maintain high-quality mentoring relationships.

The cycle of high-quality mentoring. We can develop and refine our self-structures while we are in our mentoring relationship, which can reinforce other processes that contribute to the quality of the relationship. This represents an upward spiral that unfolds over time. As described below, trust and disclosure builds the quality of our relationships over time. As the quality of our relationship improves, we begin to see ourselves in terms of our mentoring roles. As described earlier, this identification helps us develop communal norms in our relationship, where we give based on need rather than repayment. Communal norms build the quality of the relationship by meeting members' needs, and by promoting even more trust and disclosure in the relationship. The experience of being in a high-quality relationship may also help us refine and develop our relational mentoring schemas. We begin to have clear visions about what high-quality relationships “look like” and the behaviors that lead to high-quality episodes. These schemas help us further build the quality of our relationship by providing clear expectations of the roles, behaviors, and outcomes of high-quality mentoring relationships.

Where does this cycle start? The first place to look is the past experience of members. People learn and grow from relationships, and these changes are brought with them into their future relationships. Those who had high-quality relationships in the past should be more likely to develop positive self-structures that help them create high-quality relationships in the future. However, this process is not totally driven by the individual; there are also processes in the relationship that can determine the quality of our relationships.

Processes in the Relationship: Trust, Disclosure, and Authenticity

Relationships are dynamic and organic. They are in a constant state of change that mirrors changes in the individuals, their interactions in the relationship, and the context. Mentoring is a unique relationship that can foster exceptional levels of personal growth, learning, and discovery. However, this requires a relational safe space where we can share our fears, weaknesses, and true selves. Relationships that are

nonjudgmental and affirming offer this sense of psychological safety. These relationships can help us better understand ourselves and give us a different perspective on our lives. The processes described below can determine whether our mentoring relationships are marginal or magnificent.

Trust and disclosure. Like other relationships, the foundation for building a high-quality mentoring relationship is trust. Trust involves the willingness to be vulnerable and develops over time in the relationship. Mentors and protégés develop trust by engaging in mentoring episodes that challenge their relationships in ways that test and strengthen their commitment to the relationship and each other.

Trust can be developed through personal disclosures that allow members to be vulnerable with one another. Disclosure involves sharing our fears, personal beliefs, struggles, aspirations, background, and experiences. Disclosure involves risk, but the greater the risk the greater the opportunity for building trust – if disclosure is met with acceptance rather than rejection. Confidentiality is of course critical for developing trust in our mentoring relationships.

Trust and disclosure grow alongside and reinforce one another in mentoring episodes. Successful disclosure in one mentoring episode can create trust that facilitates disclosure in future episodes. As described earlier, high-quality mentoring relationships are characterized by mutuality, which means that mentors also need to disclose to their protégés. This can be a real challenge for mentors who approach their relationship from a hierarchical teacher–student perspective. However, the mentor's ability and willingness to be vulnerable is key for creating the trust needed to create a high-quality relationship.

Trust and disclosure are also more likely to occur in mentoring relationships that are perceived as responsive. In responsive relationships we feel that our partners truly understand, appreciate, value, and care about us as individuals. The process becomes mutual; the responsiveness of our partner makes us more responsive to them, which ultimately increases the trust, disclosure, closeness and commitment in the relationship.

Relational authenticity: bringing our full selves to the relationship. Trust and disclosure can lead to experiences of authenticity in our mentoring and other work relationships. The experience of authenticity is an important feature and outcome of high-quality relationships. Authenticity refers to the alignment between our private and public selves. As Michael Kernis and Brian Goldman point out, *relational authenticity* is the ability to be authentic in one's relationships. We are able to bring our full selves to authentic relationships; we can be true to ourselves without having to hide who we are or pretend to be someone we're not.

What motivates people to be authentic in their mentoring relationships? William Swann explains that people are generally motivated to seek a psychological state of self-verification, which is the consistency between their self-views and how others see them. Simply put, we want others to see us as we see ourselves. This motivation can prompt the disclosure of personal information in our work relationships.

Relational authenticity is important as it gives us the freedom to develop new identities and the self-confidence needed to be authentic within and outside the workplace. As pointed out by Fletcher and Ragins, authenticity is a skill we

can bring to the relationship as well as a process that creates high-quality mentoring relationships.

Authenticity evolves in our mentoring relationships over time. The relational behaviors provided in high-quality relationships build trust and the disclosure needed to support relational authenticity. In turn, the experience of relational authenticity solidifies trust, facilitates more disclosure, and reinforces the display of relational behaviors in our relationship. These behaviors continue to build the level of relational authenticity in the relationship. As you can see, this is not a linear process, but rather reflects a cyclical process that evolves over time in the relationship.

Perceived similarity plays a key role in facilitating trust and authenticity in our mentoring relationships. Generally, we like and trust those who we see as similar to ourselves. We see similar others as “known quantities,” which gives us a sense of control and psychological safety in the relationship. We experience less risk and vulnerability when we interact with similar others, which facilitates disclosure of personal information that builds trust and authenticity. Perceived similarity may or may not reflect actual similarity, but it can drive disclosure, which ultimately builds trust and authenticity in our relationships.

Creating relational safe havens: acceptance, validation, and empathy. High-quality mentoring creates *relational safe havens* where members feel accepted, supported and validated. Members need to trust that their disclosures will be held in confidence and that their experiences will be heard and not judged. These relational safe havens offer the experience of psychological safety; they buffer employees from workplace stressors and offer them a safe space from which to explore and develop their professional identities.

How do mentors and protégés create safe havens? To start, both need to be effective communicators who can engage in active and empathic listening. Active listening is the ability to listen and reflect on what the other person is saying without interrupting or jumping into a “problem-solving mode.” Empathic listening involves recognizing the emotions underlying the communication. This requires emotional intelligence and our ability to understand non-verbal cues. These communication skills are particularly important for mentors, who need to move from giving advice to listening and asking non-judgmental, open-ended questions that encourage their protégés to explore their options, feelings, and reactions.

Empathy and perspective taking are key interpersonal skills that can create safe havens and build the quality and effectiveness of our mentoring relationships. Empathy involves the ability to understand how the other person feels, while perspective taking includes an understanding of the other person’s position and the ability to see the world through their eyes. Perspective taking involves more than just putting yourself in the shoes of someone else; it involves understanding their perspective and how they feel, rather than thinking about how you would feel if you were in their position. This distinction is particularly important for high performing mentors, as they need to recognize that the tasks that may be easy for them can be challenging for their protégé. Similarly, perspective taking may help the protégé understand the level of pressure, responsibility, and visibility faced by their mentor, as the protégé’s behavior can be a

public reflection of their mentor’s competence, abilities and integrity.

How do mentors and protégés develop these skills? As described later, organizations can provide training to help employees develop effective communication and perspective taking skills. Mentors and protégés can also develop these relational skills through their own experiences in high-quality relationships. Since these skills are transportable across relationships, non-work relationships can also be a valuable resource for developing listening and perspective taking skills in the workplace.

A summary of the strategies for creating high-quality mentoring relationships is presented in [Table 3](#).

Now that we have illuminated the path to high-quality mentoring relationships, let us explore the unique benefits of these relationships for diverse employees and for organizations that seek to promote and develop a diverse workforce.

DIVERSITY AND HIGH-QUALITY MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

While high-quality mentoring relationships are important for everyone, they are particularly critical for employees who are in the numerical minority and those who are members of stigmatized groups. Stigmas are social identities that are devalued in a particular social context. Employees may be stigmatized because of visible differences (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age, weight, and observable forms of disability) or because of differences that are not readily observable (e.g., sexual orientation, religion, social class, and some disabilities.) Stigmatized groups face challenges ranging from marginalization and exclusion to discrimination and harassment. These experiences can have adverse effects on their advancement, mobility, and careers. The stress associated with these experiences may also prompt them to leave their organization and even their profession. High-quality mentoring offers three distinct benefits for stigmatized employees and their organizations.

Benefit #1: High-Quality Mentoring Offers a Safe Haven for Developing Authentic Identities at Work

Developing a professional identity can be particularly daunting for those who are members of stigmatized groups. These employees may experience identity stress from the pressure to both assimilate and preserve their group identities, and may also feel the need to walk a fine line in the behaviors they display at work. For example, Black employees may receive negative reactions from their White supervisors for acting “too Black,” while simultaneously receiving criticism from their Black coworkers for acting “too White.” Women in male-dominated positions may be penalized for being either too feminine or not feminine enough, and may feel like they are “walking a gender tight rope” in balancing their masculine and feminine leadership styles. Employees with invisible stigmas face additional identity challenges. For example, gay, lesbian and transgender employees may need to decide whether to “come out” and disclose their identity, which leaves them vulnerable to social isolation, subtle discrimination and harassment at work, or conceal their identity, which

Table 3 Strategies for Developing High-Quality Mentoring Relationships**Clarify expectations and create positive visions of the relationship**

- Be aware of your expectations: What do you expect from your partner? Yourself?
- Share your expectations with your partner – are your expectations realistic?
- Think about the big picture: Create a mental map or vision of a high-quality mentoring relationship using your past experiences or learning from other high-quality relationships.
- What do these high-quality relationships look like and how can you transform your relationship to get to that place?

Know yourself

- Know your needs, strengths and limitations and share them with your partner.
- Understand how your “blind-spots” or shortcomings could affect your relationship.
- Think broadly about what you can offer your partner – both in terms of work and life experiences.

Build trust

- Maintain absolute confidentiality.
- Take off the armor: Be willing to be vulnerable and disclose in your relationship.
- Take off the mask, too: Be genuine in your relationship.

Create a safe space relationship

- Accept, validate and respect your partner’s feelings (even if you don’t understand them.)
Put your judgments on hold and just listen.
- Be responsive to your partner: Show them that you understand, value, appreciate and care about them.
- Be here now: Give your partner your undivided attention and make sure they know you are listening.
- Be fully engaged and committed to your relationship.
- Show your commitment – take the time to develop your relationship.

Create positive norms

- Reject student–teacher models: Create norms of co-learning, shared influence and fluid expertise.
- Develop communal norms: Don’t be a taker – think about your partner’s needs and what you can give in your relationship.
- Focus on filling each other’s needs: Be open to a range of work and non-work topics.
- No need to put on a happy face: Accept the expression of positive and negative emotions.
- Support and value authenticity in your relationship.
- Put the relationship first and be willing to forgive.

Develop effective communication and relationship skills

- Engage in empathic and active listening: Don’t jump into problem solving mode.
- Be a sounding board and let your partner know that you truly hear them.
- Build your emotional intelligence: Pay attention to underlying emotions and non-verbal cues.
- Practice perspective taking and empathy: Try to understand your partner’s perspective and how they are feeling.

leaves them vulnerable to the stress associated with hiding their true identity and the risk that they may be “outed” by others at work.

Employees from stigmatized groups face stereotypes that further undermine their ability to develop authentic and positive professional identities at work. For example, stereotyping may prompt coworkers to question their competency and abilities in ways that undermine self-confidence and self-efficacy. Because their minority status puts them in the spotlight, their actions, dress and behaviors may be closely scrutinized. They may not be seen as individuals, but rather as representatives of their group, and their performance and interactions may be viewed through the lens of stereotypes. They may face social isolation from peers who are uncomfortable with them, and they may be excluded from the informal networks where professional identities are developed and refined. They may lack role models and peers who can help them overcome these challenges to developing an authentic identity at work.

High-quality mentoring may offer a safe space where stigmatized employees can share and process their experiences and receive the support needed to cultivate positive and authentic professional and career identities. Employees

can know that even if their identity is not valued in the organization, it is valued in their mentoring relationship. The acceptance, affirmation and empathy provided might not only help them develop an authentic identity, but can also buffer them from the negative effects of a discriminatory workplace.

Benefit #2: High-Quality Mentoring Offers Thriving and Surviving Strategies

Stigmatized employees need to learn how to deflect the macro and micro aggressions stemming from stereotyping, attributions and assumptions. Micro aggressions are everyday verbal and nonverbal insults, dismissals and slights that degrade and devalue a group. While macro aggressions are overt and obvious, the insidious and subversive nature of micro aggressions makes them particularly dangerous. For example, stigmatized employees may find their competence questioned because of their group membership, and they may need to prove themselves in ways that are not required of their non-stigmatized counterparts. Their ideas may be discounted or hijacked, and their success attributed to luck or affirmative action.

Much like “death from a thousand paper cuts,” these everyday micro aggressions can erode self-esteem and the ability to be effective at work. The career strategies that work for majority group members may be ineffective or even backfire for those in the minority. A female employee who assertively asks for a raise or promotion, for instance, may violate gender role stereotypes that prescribe her to be passive and submissive, and she may consequently face negative reactions and backlash as a result.

High-quality mentoring relationships can help stigmatized employees develop strategies that not only address these challenges but also help them flourish at work. For example, a high-quality mentor may help a female protégé dismiss the self-doubts stemming from a sexist workplace. The mentor may even help her get the perspective and courage needed to find a new job that values her talents and allows her to flourish.

The demographic composition of the mentoring relationship plays a role in the types of strategies and resources offered in the relationship. Homogeneous mentoring relationships involve mentors and protégés who share group memberships (e.g., a female mentor and a female protégé), while diversified relationships involve those who come from different groups (e.g., a male mentor and a female protégé). Members who share a similar background or identity may have a deeper appreciation of the challenges faced by their partners, and may be able to offer “tried and true” strategies for surviving and thriving in the workplace. Homogeneous relationships are not, however, automatically better than diverse relationships. For instance, a White male mentor, while not sharing the same background or experiences as his Black female protégé, may be able to share information from the “old boy’s network” that helps his protégé learn the unwritten norms, expectations and information needed to navigate the organization’s political and promotional systems. Majority mentors also often have more power and influence than minority mentors, which can be used to protect and help the protégé.

Benefit #3: High-Quality Mentoring Helps Members Learn About Diversity

Diverse mentoring relationships provide members with a unique opportunity to learn about diversity, particularly when the relationship is high-quality. As described earlier, high-quality relationships involve mutual learning and safe havens that foster trust, acceptance and disclosure. Members know that their fears, concerns, and experiences will be accepted and not judged by their partners. This offers them the opportunity to engage in “*diversity dialogues*.” Diversity dialogues involve candid and open discussions about diversity. During these dialogues members can share their backgrounds and personal experiences with diversity, their reactions to encounters involving diversity, and their perceptions, struggles, and concerns about diversity within and outside the workplace. High-quality relationships offer the opportunity to ask questions and engage in difficult conversations that are often skirted in the workplace.

These diversity dialogues offer an exceptional opportunity for learning and personal growth. Consider the example where a senior White male executive is mentoring a junior

woman of color. A high-quality relationship offers them the opportunity to have open and candid discussions about the role of race in their organization. The protégé of color could share her experiences with micro-aggressions and the subtle but corrosive experiences of racism she encounters at work. These dialogues would not only raise the mentor’s awareness of racism at his organization, but may also prompt him to think more deeply about modern or “underground” racism, White privilege, and the role of race in his life. For example, he may grapple with such questions as: What does it mean to be White? How has my race affected my career and experience at this organization? This dialogue may also give the protégé of color a different perspective that helps her understand why her White colleagues may not see or even deny her experiences of racism. These dialogues offer a powerful opportunity for developing perspective taking skills and for understanding the dynamics of race and diversity within and outside the workplace.

High-quality mentoring relationships may be even more effective than diversity training for changing attitudes. Organizations provide diversity training to raise consciousness and eliminate racism at work, but employees may hesitate to have frank discussions about race in public forums. High-quality mentoring relationships offer a safe space to ask questions and engage in conversations that raise consciousness and awareness about diversity. Instead of watching Power Point descriptions in training sessions, members of diverse mentoring relationships can gain first-hand knowledge about diversity in their workplace. High-quality mentoring relationships can therefore be a powerful tool for changing attitudes and creating more inclusive diversity climates in organizations.

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS PROMOTE HIGH-QUALITY MENTORING?

Managers, leaders and organizations can take an active role in promoting high-quality mentoring at work. Here are a few tips to help guide this journey.

Establish Relational Mentoring Cultures and Effective Training Programs

Organizations can promote high-quality mentoring by fostering *relational mentoring cultures*. A relational mentoring culture values employees’ learning, growth, and development. Organizations with relational mentoring cultures recognize that mentoring relationships are the medium for learning and development, and actively promote mentoring through their policies, practices and programs. Mentoring is valued and woven into the very fabric of the company. Employees understand what high-quality mentoring looks like, and their mentoring relationships are reinforced and supported. Their leaders actively take on the mantle of mentoring and “walk the talk” by modeling their mentoring relationships and mentoring identities for others at work.

There are a number of practical strategies that organizations can use to develop relational mentoring cultures. To start, they can offer training programs that apply the strategies and principles presented in this article. These strategies and principles are summarized in [Tables 3 and 4](#), and can

Table 4 Summary of Antecedents, Processes and Outcomes of High-quality Mentoring Relationships at Work

Antecedents of high-quality mentoring	High-quality mentoring experience	Outcomes of high-quality mentoring
<u>Individual Processes & Attributes</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Structures of Mentoring: Mentoring Schemas, Identities & Possible Selves • Relational Knowledge & Experience in High-quality Relationships • Individual Differences & Skills Empathy & Perspective Taking Effective Communication Skills Emotional Intelligence Self-Construal & Attachment Style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience of Needs-Based Fit • Safe Havens & Stress Buffers • Relational Authenticity • Satisfaction with Relationship • Commitment to Relationship • Close Mentoring Bonds 	<u>Relational Outcomes</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual Learning, Growth & Development • Relational Competencies & Caches • Professional & Authentic Identities • Self-Efficacy, Empowerment & Resilience • Inspiration, Creativity, Vitality & Thriving • Health, Well-being & Balance • Life Satisfaction, Flourishing & Meaning • Affirmation of Ideal, Best & Authentic Selves • Motivated to enter future mentoring relationships
<u>Relationship Norms, Processes & Behaviors</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communal Norms • Shared Influence & Fluid Expertise • Mutuality, Reciprocity & Vulnerability • Trust & Disclosure • Relational Behaviors 		<u>Traditional Outcomes</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job Attitudes & Performance • Promotion & Compensation • Retention & Organizational Attachment • Career Satisfaction & Efficacy
<u>Organizational Context</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational Mentoring Culture • Norms, Policies & Practices • High-quality Formal Mentoring Programs 		<u>Diversity Outcomes</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity & Authentic Identities at Work • Thriving & Surviving Strategies • Learning about Diversity & Diversity Dialogues

be incorporated into training programs that are offered to all employees, not just those in formal mentoring programs.

Training can help employees develop positive mentoring schemas by showing what high-quality mentoring relationships do (i.e., relational behaviors), what they provide (i.e., relational outcomes), and their unique dynamics (i.e., co-learning, fluid expertise, safe havens, trust, and commitment). One effective training technique is to ask trainees to brainstorm characteristics of high-quality mentors and protégés and then list their ideas on the board. This visually illustrates the range of behaviors in high-quality relationships, clarifies expectations in the relationship, and helps trainees understand the limitations of traditional teacher–student models of mentoring. Since people develop mentoring schemas by learning from others, trainers can also ask trainees to share their own high-quality mentoring experiences (as mentors and as protégés), which include: how their mentoring relationships developed, the benefits they received from them, and how their relationships affected their lives and identities. This technique helps trainees develop a vision or mental model of high-quality mentoring, which can guide their current and future development of high-quality mentoring relationships. The training could also include the communication, listening, empathy, and perspective taking skills described earlier in this article.

Organizations also need to recognize the time that goes into developing high-quality mentoring and not inadvertently penalize mentors for taking on a mentoring role. For example, organizations that work primarily on commissions and

billable hours can ensure that their pay and promotion systems don't penalize mentors for taking the time needed to develop high-quality mentoring relationships.

The Role of Formal Mentoring Programs

Formal mentoring programs can play an important role in promoting mentoring cultures and high-quality mentoring relationships at work. Formal mentoring relationships involve relationships that are assigned by the organization as part of a formal mentoring program. Like their informal siblings, formal mentoring relationships fall along a continuum of quality. Due to their short-term contractual nature, formal relationships are generally of lower quality than informal relationships. However, formal and informal relationships overlap in quality and some formal relationships can be of higher quality than informal relationships. Overall, the quality of the relationship matters more than whether the relationship is formal or informal. We found, for example, that high-quality formal mentoring relationships offered employees more benefits than informal relationships that were of marginal quality, and that high-quality formal mentors could buffer their protégés from the negative effects of a discriminatory workplace. It's important to recognize the continuum of quality in formal relationships and not simply dismiss them as being less effective than informal relationships.

Quality begets quality, and organizations are unlikely to produce high-quality relationships from low quality programs. The quality of the program depends on the resources.

Some organizations devote the resources needed to create and maintain high-quality programs; they develop tailored program goals and objectives, carefully select and train mentors and protégés, conduct careful matching that is aligned with program goals, monitor the match, and evaluate the program. Other organizations simply throw mentors and protégés together and hope for the best. In some cases, high-quality relationships may emerge from haphazard programs, but generally the more resources and care taken in developing the program, the higher the quality of the relationships it produces. While some employees may learn what not to do from a marginal or dysfunctional relationship, others may be soothed by the experience, so it is important that organizations devote the resources needed to create high-quality mentoring programs.

High-quality formal mentoring offers a number of important benefits for organizations. Effective programs are a great way to promote mentoring cultures, and the training provided in these programs can help employees develop high-quality formal, as well as informal mentoring relationships. High-quality formal mentoring can help employees develop positive mentoring schemas and mentoring identities, which can motivate them to develop and maintain other high-quality mentoring relationships in their organization. Our research has found that today's protégés are tomorrow's mentors: people who have been protégés in the past are more likely to become a mentor in the future than those who have never been in a mentoring relationship. Formal mentoring can therefore be the gateway to informal mentoring and can give protégés the background, experience, and motivation to be mentors in the future — if the experience is positive.

Finally, formal mentoring can promote diverse mentoring relationships and level the playing field for access to mentors.

One problem with informal mentoring is that mentors often choose protégés who they see as a younger version of themselves. So a White male mentor may choose a White male as his protégé because of perceived similarity and comfort. Indeed, female employees and employees of color have been found to report more barriers to getting an informal mentor than their White male counterparts. Formal mentoring programs can remove barriers to mentors and also provide the benefits associated with diverse mentoring relationships described earlier.

In short, formal mentoring relationships are not the ugly step sisters of informal relationships, but rather are close cousins that can provide unique resources and benefits. It's also important to remember that we do not have to choose — we can have both formal and informal relationships in our family of developmental relationships.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Mentoring relationships can range from ordinary to extraordinary. Some relationships can be transformative and change the way we view our careers, our environment, and ourselves. These relationships affect us in profound and enduring ways. They inspire us to flourish and find our best and authentic selves. They energize us, opening new avenues for learning, growth and discovery. They generate fresh perspectives that spark our imagination and ignite our creativity. They offer safe havens that accept us for who we really are, giving us the freedom to experiment and grow in our careers and lives. They give us the courage to do the things we think we cannot do, and the strength to overcome our limitations. They bring out the best in us and in others.



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