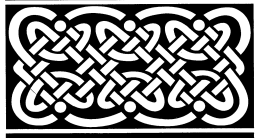


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The Critical Human Factor: Mentoring Our Young People

Background

Throughout most of human history, family and community/tribal mentors have played a major role in helping young people make the transition to adulthood. Until the factory system arrived during the Industrial Revolution, and universal education was introduced in Britain and Europe in the latter half of the 19th century, young people learned how to work the land, develop a trade, hunt, gather and look after a household through direct training provided by close adult mentors.

The formal apprenticeship system, prevalent during the Middle Ages, was simply an evolutionary step in the more traditional system of mentoring. Under the apprenticeship system, young people were placed outside their immediate families for education and training in one of a number of trades, crafts or professions. For much of prehistoric and recorded human history, young people learned how to survive and become productive members of their tribe or community through a process of mentoring or apprenticeship. Mentoring involves the pairing of an individual and a 'significant other' who takes an interest in that individual and who provides personal and professional guidance.

It is only during the last 140 years of social history in developed societies that mentoring has not been the dominant process of transition from child-

hood to adulthood. As the millennium ends, society is faced with a serious challenge. The formal education system, our contemporary alternative to mentoring, no longer is capable of assuring young people of a relatively smooth transition from childhood to the world of work.

In the past, there were periods of economic recession and depression during which well-trained and educated young people were unemployed. These periods, the worst of which was the Great Depression of the 1930s, were due to serious cyclical disruptions in the industrial economy. However, our economy is now facing a more major modification. The entire developed world is moving from the modern industrial age to the information age, a period of incredibly disruptive social and economic turbulence. All the goods, services and food we consume can be provided by fewer workers than are available. Under such circumstances, youth and older workers become most vulnerable to unemployment.

To add to the problem, young people are caught in an adult guidance vacuum without adequate personal direction and support. In the past, young people had close mentors to guide and support them through employment and life difficulties; they now have only a piece of paper which credentials their academic and/or training qualifications. Some upper-middle-class young people may have the benefit of a private school or their family's social con-

nections, but this employment route is not available to the majority of Canadian youth. It is rapidly becoming evident to most youth that they are permanently disposable as workers.

In 1996, Mr. Al Flood, former Chairman of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Canada, stated: "The most serious social problem in Canada today is that of youth unemployment." The unemployment rate for Canadian youth stood at 12.7 percent in 1990. It rose quickly during the 1991-92 recession, as did unemployment generally, reaching a peak of 17.8 percent in 1992. The national unemployment rate fell gradually but significantly following the recession, from 11.3 percent in 1992 to 8.3 percent in 1998. However, youth unemployment has remained stubbornly high, not easing until 1998 – and then only to 15.2 percent. Moreover, the true level of youth unemployment – i.e., taking into account young people too discouraged to look actively for work – likely is around 18 percent.

What is most troubling about these statistics is the evident failure of youth job training and employment strategies to make much of a dent in the high rate of unemployment among Canadian youth. Despite the fact that the past seven years have been an era of increasing economic prosperity for Canada, unemployment and underemployment among youth have not improved substantially.

This problem may be due to two possible factors. First, the majority of youth job training and employment programs may be ineffective. But given the positive short-term outcome statistics provided by many of these programs, they appear to be more effective than doing nothing.

The second explanation may, therefore, be closer to the truth. The effective programs which do exist are not adequate to meet the burgeoning need. Too often governments and organizations launch pilot programs to address a social problem with remarkable fanfare and publicity. But the majority of unemployed young people who never have held a job – those most at risk – are not entitled to enrol in most of the approved government training programs unless they are a beneficiary of an income security program.

Models of mentoring

This backdrop leads to the subject of mentoring, an approach heralded by Prime Minister Chrétien in the 1997 Speech from the Throne. The roots of mentoring in North America appeared in the form of organized Friendly Visiting programs launched in the 1880s by numerous churches and charitable societies. Their mission was to address the growing social problems of working class households that were beginning to exert more authority through militant trade unions.

The organizational antecedents of formal mentoring programs can be found in the Big Brothers and Big Sisters movements in Canada, dating back to the First World War when many children had fathers and older brothers fighting in Europe. But as social agencies and the helping professions began to expand, formal mentoring programs lay dormant in Canada until the mid-1970s. During that decade, a program entitled Youth Assisting Youth began operating in Scarborough, Ontario, under the auspices of the Family Service Association of Metro Toronto.

This effort was bolstered by the results of an early study which uncovered the importance that the intervention of a 'significant other' could play in the lives of six Grade 13 high school students [Golombek and Kline 1974]. These young people from multi-problem families seemed doomed to failure during their early schooling. However, the close support of a 'significant other' in their lives appeared to have counteracted the anticipated negative educational prospects of all six young people. The students went on to university despite poverty, criminal behaviour among siblings, lack of parental interest and separation – factors which should have set them on a course of academic failure. Couchman [1979] applied these findings to the field of recreation.

More recently, the 1996 report from the Ministerial Task Force on Youth proposed ten recommendations, including mentoring and supports for youth facing multiple barriers to employment. The Liberal's Red Book II stressed the importance of a Youth Employment Strategy which included a mentoring initiative focussed on improving access to

information and building on programs proven effective. The 1997 Speech from the Throne highlighted as a crucial factor the need for mentors, thus laying the foundation for the development of a Canada-wide mentoring initiative. While there is no national effort currently in place, there are some exemplary practices upon which to build.

Models of mentoring programs for young people facing multiple barriers to employment have been documented in the study "Mentorship: The Bridging Model" [Carr 1999]. One such program was initiated by the Canadian Youth Business Foundation. Though not a mentoring program specific to youth facing multiple barriers, its work is the most advanced corporate youth mentoring program in Canada. Initiated by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce and the Canadian Youth Foundation (with additional business partners since added), the program supports young entrepreneurs through a business loan program, training and mentoring. Each young entrepreneur is partnered with an experienced business volunteer for the first three years of the company's operation. The mentoring is done both in person and on line.

In 1998, the Asper Centre for Entrepreneurial Studies at the University of Manitoba launched a dual business training and mentoring project called the Youth Entrepreneur Training Program. The program was initiated by a Canadian charitable foundation with support from the Winnipeg business community. A grant from the Department of Human Resources Development Canada permitted the Centre to select 28 teens from inner-city high schools to participate in the program, which consisted of a two-week business camp followed by the mentoring of graduates by MBA students. Each young person was offered a loan of up to \$500 to establish his or her business. The program is modelled on similar business school initiatives at Columbia University and the University of California at Berkeley.

Since 1992, the YWCA Mentorship Program in Vancouver has served more than 200 young women, aged 16 to 18 years, making it one of the more established school-to-career mentoring programs in Canada. Young women are paired with career women from the Vancouver area on the basis

of career interests. Mentors are expected to have four two-hour meetings with the young women during the November to May program, though many mentors and their charges meet more frequently and continue the relationship beyond the seven-month program period.

Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Canada is the largest and best supported mentoring program in the country. It has made approximately 9,000 matches. In the US, the Big Brothers and Big Sisters Organization has made an estimated 75,000 matches (the potential number of young candidates is between five and 15 million in the US, with similar ratios in Canada). The waiting list for big brothers and sisters is very high; the number of qualifying young people far exceeds the capacity of the organization's resources.

There are also many interesting models of mentoring that have not been formally documented. In Waterloo, Ontario, for example, a young man of Greek/Canadian heritage founded a peer mentoring program in his former high school. He wanted to help recent immigrant students encountering adjustment difficulties upon entering high school. He recalled his own difficulties entering secondary school and felt the need to assist young people experiencing the same problems he once faced.

Success factors

Public/Private Ventures of Philadelphia has conducted the most extensive and rigorous research on how to design and structure successful mentoring programs [1996]. Critical success variables include the fact that both mentors and young people requiring mentoring must be carefully screened and matched. Not all adults who want to mentor young people are suitable for the task. Similarly, some young people are not ready to avail themselves of mentoring assistance.

Mentors must receive good orientation and training to promote good practice and to bolster confidence. They require ongoing supervision and support to sustain the mentoring relationship and to achieve its identified objectives. Problems between

the mentor and young person are normal and inevitable. It is important for the volunteer mentor to be able to discuss such issues and to debrief regularly in order to ensure a successful relationship.

Challenges

Three major problems loom as barriers to the more widespread application of mentoring. The first is the lack of adults willing or able to support the mentoring of young people. Mentoring is an intensive act of voluntarism requiring time, patience and personal devotion. The evidence suggests that very few volunteers are available to serve as mentors. In both Canada and the US, well-organized mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters, meet less than one percent of the actual need.

Significant attention also must be paid to the recruitment and selection process to screen out potential pedophiles and child abusers. As a highly personal relationship, mentoring is a perfect cover for an adult who wants to exploit young people. Not only is the possibility of such behaviour repugnant, but the cost of insurance to protect organizations and individuals against potential abuse will rise prohibitively if there are frequent lawsuits, or may even become unavailable. Criminal records' verification of potential mentors is a crucial first step in the selection process.

Finally, agencies and corporations committing themselves to this important intervention must be aware that there are real costs associated with mentoring. It involves not just finding a volunteer mentor. To be successful, recruitment, training and support costs must be covered by the sponsoring organization. Most youth-serving agencies capable of launching mentoring programs utilize their professional resources to work directly with youth. Getting them to realign their core funds to incorporate volunteer mentors is a major challenge.

Conclusion

Research on mentoring suggests that a close and sustained personal relationship with a caring adult can have a very positive impact upon young people.

From a public policy viewpoint, the time is certainly right to reintroduce mentoring to our culture. While voluntary significant relationships have been eclipsed for most of the 20th century by professionally delivered counselling services, the limited availability of these professional services has left far too many young people without the traditional adult support which once smoothed the transition from youth into adulthood.

It will, however, take a virtual social service revolution to reintroduce the traditional role of mentors. It will require strong national and provincial social service and educational leadership. The time to act is now, to head off serious discontent and social discord among rising numbers of disaffected youth.

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