

Study: Mentoring can build great leaders - if they can handle the truth

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(PhysOrg.com) -- For some, the question isn't really whether leaders are born or made, it's finding the best way to make them. Now, a first-of-its-kind study suggests an answer.

In a field experiment, researchers found that pairing a seasoned pro with a promising prospect in an informal mentorship was significantly more potent in developing strong leaders than formal group training. The process, however, was effective only if protégés fully trusted their mentor and were willing to handle blunt criticism, not just empty praise.

The findings, forthcoming in the journal *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, reinforce the notion that the more organizations can move away from one-size-fits-all training toward one-on-one mentorships characterized by trust, the better their chances for building strong leaders will be.

“Organizations in the U.S. spend billions each year trying to develop better leaders with mixed results. This study is important because it explains why so many programs may be falling short of expectations,” said Peter Harms, assistant professor of management at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and co-author of the study. “Our research demonstrates that if leadership training efforts are to be successful, the targets of such interventions must be ready to develop. And the foundation of such readiness is an atmosphere of trust and a willingness to hear the hard truth about yourself.”

While the value of personal mentorship for future leaders is often touted, little research had empirically determined whether it actually has a positive effect on leadership development. In particular, no research had been conducted showing that being in a mentorship relationship increased the confidence protégés had in their own leadership abilities -- a belief that has been linked with leader performance in previous studies.

The research was conducted over six months and involved hundreds of cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The field experiment randomly assigned cadets to either a tailored, structured mentorship program or a comparison group that participated in group leadership training in a classroom setting. Results showed that cadets participating in the semi-formal mentorships were significantly more likely to increase their confidence for being in a leadership role than their counterparts.

Why? Mentors may have been important in helping protégés make meaning out of their experiences in a focused, one-on-one manner as compared to a less-personalized group setting. Mentors also provided important psychosocial support and served to validate their protégés' claims of leadership.

For the process to work, however, protégés needed to be open and willing to discuss and explore their leadership with their mentor. That required a high level of trust, Harms said. Additionally, protégés who were oriented to handle tough and negative feedback also got more from the mentorships than those who preferred to be only complimented on their performance. For the latter group, mentoring was relatively ineffective.

“West Point cadets are taught the value of doing what is right, even if it is hard for them,” Harms said. “There’s a reason for this. Individuals

who embraced this principle showed that they are the ones who deserve to be leaders of the future. And when the time comes, they will be ready.”

The research has important implications for business, Harms said. Organizations may want to consider approaching leadership development in new, more systematic ways by using mentors. Prior research has also demonstrated that mentoring relationships have positive benefits for [mentors](#) as well as their protégés.

“Organizations have to decide for themselves how important leadership development is for them. It is possible, but it is also hard. But as this study showed, for both organizations and for individuals, self-improvement sometimes means doing something that is hard for you,” he said.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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