

Chapter 5

Servant Mentors and Transnational Mentees

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ABSTRACT

Relational connectedness is critical for servant leaders, who aspire to articulate inclusiveness, concern, and citizenship within the enterprise. This chapter argues that relational connectedness and a similar set of values are also critical for successful mentoring. Mentoring is concerned with providing benefit, support, and advancement for the novice who is engaged in the guiding relationship. The chapter considers the dynamics of mentoring transnational students who are distanced culturally, spatially, and experientially from their mentor. Although grounded in a specific mentoring context, the chapter argues that similar relational distance occurs in all mentoring work and suggests that the process of mentoring is made stronger and more effective if it utilizes the tenets of servant leadership. This more relational approach is termed “servant mentoring.” Following an analysis of what servant mentoring might entail, a number of suggestions are made to assist mentors lower interactional distance and to strengthen their mentoring practice.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter brings together two relational perspectives: mentoring and servant leadership. Although mentoring and servant leadership both depend on strong relational bonds, there has been little discussion of their similarities in the mentoring literature. Some have previously connected servant leadership with academic counselling, while others have proposed tentative conceptual frameworks linking servant leadership with mentoring; however, the connection remains

under-explored and under-researched (Kohle, Courtney-Smith, & Dochney, 2012; Poon, 2006). This chapter argues that mentors can more effectively empower and guide mentees by clearly communicating the nature of the relationship and the values upon which it is built. The values associated with the mentoring relationship are similar to those enacted by the servant leader, and it is suggested that mentors may benefit from reviewing, recognizing, and incorporating these enactments in their own practice.

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Servant leadership is based on a cluster of assumptions, attributes, and expectations that are assumed by the leader and which then permeate the organizational context and inform organizational participants (Boone & Makhani, 2013; Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Parris & Peachey, 2013). Servant leaders are concerned with the aspirations and wellbeing of those whom they lead and they develop strong connections with organizational participants based on mutual respect and social exchange (Bal, Chiaburu, & Jansen, 2010; Byrne, Pitts, Chiaburu, & Steiner, 2011). All of these aspects of servant leading resonate with the effective mentoring relationship. This is not to say that servant leaders and mentors perform identical roles; rather, it is to suggest that more effective and satisfying mentoring can result if the process is reviewed and restructured in light of servant leadership theory and practice. This chapter examines a more considered and revitalized approach mentoring, especially in academic contexts, which is identified as *servant mentorship*.

At the outset, it is important to recognize that the mentoring process is personal and idiosyncratic. Although participants might work within a given framework and general definition, mentors and mentees inevitably approach mentoring through personal interpretations and unique enactments. Mentoring tends to reflect the unique character of the mentor-mentee relationship and the functions that the relationship serves. It may, however, be difficult for mentor or mentee to fully explain the relationship and its function: “no word currently in use is adequate to convey the nature of the relationship” (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978, p. 97).

For example, my own mentoring practice takes place in transnational settings in which students in one country learn in an educational institution that is registered in another (McBurnie & Zigu-ras, 2007; Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011). This means that I have a different national culture from my mentees, and that they engage in a mentoring process that is embedded in a set of cultural

and educational values different from their own. Additionally, unlike traditional mentoring, most of my practice is conducted at a distance with limited face-to-face interaction. This means that mentees also have to negotiate spatial distance in the mentoring process. All of these contextual factors lead to complex and challenging relational work that is often difficult to fully describe.

Mentoring is a process of social and interpersonal exchange with roots in antiquity. In the Homeric epics, Mentor is represented as a real person: an older and wiser man. He was appointed by Odysseus to act as the supporting guide for his young son Telemachus. Mentor’s care and influence was particularly important, because Odysseus was engaged in his own personal struggles far from his growing son. Yet, there is subtlety and ambiguity in the legend. Most of the time, Mentor is portrayed as a flesh-and-blood human guide; however, in other instances where Telemachus is in need of urgent advice the “Mentor” who guides him is actually the embodiment of Athena, deity of wisdom and guardian of Odysseus. This is unknown to Telemachus, who cannot distinguish between the human and divine, the male or the female. Despite changing emphases and evolving understandings of the mentoring relationship, these old roots significantly – and perhaps subliminally – inform what contemporary mentors do and how they relate to mentees (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2009).

Some may wince at the depiction of mentoring in these epical and archetypal terms. It better fits modern sensibilities to describe mentors more prosaically as those who “provide their expertise to less experienced individuals in order to help the novices advance their careers, enhance their education, and build their networks” (Sherman, Muñoz, & Pankake, 2008, p. 244). This is certainly an accurate description of what mentors do, but it fails to capture the powerful dynamics that fill a relationship that can potentially be a “life-altering event when experienced at a pivotal time in a person’s life” (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder,

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