Group Mentoring in Practice

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Abstract:

This article examines the implementation of a group mentorship program by the New England Archivists, and considers the advantages and disadvantages of group mentoring.

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Everyone agrees that mentorship is important, as it helps people navigate the professional and

personal challenges they face in their vocations. In library science in particular, early-career librarians

and archivists face the challenge of piecing together part-time or temporary project positions while

they search for permanent work, strategizing their career development in the modern career lattice,[1] to

keep up with new developments in the field.

This column explores group mentorship, a non-traditional form of mentorship in which

multiple mentors supervise multiple mentees all at once. I will describe the group mentorship model

and how one professional organization, the New England Archivists (NEA), uses this approach to

encourage multi-directional teaching—peer to peer, mentor to mentee, and mentee to mentor—within

the groups. I will use my experiences, as both an NEA mentor and an NEA mentee, to discuss the

advantages of the group mentorship mode. Finally, I will discuss the disadvantages of group

mentorship.

Group mentorship, also called "mentorship circles," is a style of mentoring in which multiple

learners and experts come together to discuss a variety of career development issues.[2] This style of

mentorship makes efficient use of mentors' time by connecting them to entire groups of people, rather

than just individuals, who are looking for advice. Groups consist of one or two mentors, and several

mentees. The circles encourage dynamic mentoring relationships; while mentors guide the group and

provide structure to meetings, the expertise is multi-directional. By sharing experiences, stories, and

advice on a variety of issues, mentees learn from one another as well as from the mentors. Thus, the

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[1] The notion of a career lattice is somewhat more informative than the more traditional notion of a career ladder. The Work and Family Researchers Network ("Career Lattice, Definitions of," 2017) define it as a career path that sometimes moves laterally, rather than just vertically.
[2] Huizing (2012) has an excellent literature review of group mentoring programs. He discusses the various types of group mentoring: peer group, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many.

distinction between the roles of "mentor" and "mentee" is more fluid than in traditional mentorship

models.

NEA founded a group mentoring program in 2014.[3] The NEA Mentoring Program, which is open

to all NEA members, organizes both in-person and online meetings. The program generally connects

two mid-career mentors with four to six students and early professionals. Each group meets once a

month, depending on the schedules of the participants, for about nine months. The meetings occur

outside of work, and convene for a minimum of one hour. Groups that meet online use free meeting

platforms like Google Hangouts to connect. Each mentorship circle is unique, shaped by the interests

and social dynamics of that group. All participants receive a manual, created by NEA, which explains

the roles and expectations of the mentors and mentees, but there is no one way to lead a circle.

Mentees determine the topics of conversation, and mentors prepare exercises and readings for the

group on those topics. During the meetings, mentors help mentees with career planning, whether that

involves finding a first position, navigating multiple temporary positions, or setting long-term goals.

They discuss their experiences with applying for grants and working on audiovisual and digital

archives. Mentees play a significant role in these discussions. By sharing their own experiences and

perspectives, they help advise the other members of their group.

From my experience as a mentor and mentee,[4] I perceive three clear benefits to this style of

mentorship. The first concerns the multiplicity of viewpoints that the circles offer. Mentees get to hear

additional solutions. The second benefit is that participants get to hear each other's problems. By

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[3] For a description of the origin and logistics of the NEA mentoring program, see Stoudt, L., Birch, C., Chiles, M., Spracher, L., & White, D. (2016).
[4] As a student in library school, I belonged to a mentoring circle from 2014 to 2015. I am now a mentor in the same program.

listening to their colleagues, mentees get a better sense of the field, as well as the issues they might

have to face. Finally, participants benefit from creating and maintaining these professional

connections. At the end of the year, participants have developed closer connections to those in the

field. They can reach out to a mentor or a mentee when they need guidance and advice. Mid-career

professionals benefit from mentorship too, and the group mentorship model facilitates these

interactions. Participation in these exercises and discussions allows the mentors to reflect upon their

own career trajectory and development. They are supported in the same way as the mentees by the

multi-directional teaching that occurs between co-mentor and the mentees.

Group mentorship has some disadvantages, of course. Mentees do not receive the

personalized, one-on-one guidance that more traditional mentorship models provide. For lack of time,

topics are sometimes covered somewhat hastily. Moreover, for group mentorship to work, everyone

must trust each other and get along reasonably well. And scheduling is not always easy, as it is

occasionally difficult to find a meeting time that works for everyone in the circle.

Group mentorship, though currently less common than more traditional models, provides an

effective way to meet mentorship needs. By having mentors work with an entire group of people

seeking mentorship, it more efficiently uses the mentor's time. It encourages participants to both learn

from, and to advise, each other. Organizations seeking to set up a mentorship model, or early

professionals investigating possible options for mentorship, should not overlook mentorship circles.

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