


Mentoring as Change Agency – A Psychodynamic Approach

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The growth of mentoring programmes in the UK and USA is now prolific. Approaches vary from “caring, nurturing relationships” designed to “maximise potential”, (Hamilton, 1994) to coaching, and even to clairvoyancy, (Smith, 1993). Whilst mentors are often trained counsellors, mentoring is clearly distinguishable from counselling at work. Counselling at work is usually located within an employee assistance function, its focus can be wide ranging, and the scope of intervention is usually limited to the individual. By contrast, mentoring is located within the mainstream of line management, its focus is on the overlap between individual and organisational interests, and the scope of intervention may often include the individual, the team and the organisation as a whole. Mentoring in corporations is typically conducted through a series of one-to-one consultations either with a senior employee of the organisation, or with an external consultant specifically trained for the purpose. This article outlines the work of a consultancy currently operating with a major UK corporation. The approach is unusual, in so far as intrapsychic and systemic approaches have been combined to create a win/win situation for individuals and the organisation, which is undergoing rapid culture change.

Rapid organisational change often causes distress and turbulence for individuals and organisations alike and this can manifest in dysfunction at all levels. The consultancy has found that individual and group methodologies firmly rooted in psychodynamic theory and practice have been most useful in understanding and transforming potentially damaging dynamics into positive action. It is perhaps the extent and rapidity of change experienced by large contemporary institutions which determine the necessity for depth psychology to most effectively understand and manage the complexities of the human dimension.

A brief description of the current programme is given, followed by a theoretical exposition of some of the more useful concepts which have been applied to, or which have emerged from




practice. Finally, comment on the programme is provided and individual and organisational benefits are noted.

Overview

The mentoring programme was commissioned early in 1993 as an integral part of the Change Programme of a company employing some 60,000 staff. Initially open to the top 60 managers, including the Chief Executive, the programme has now been extended to 134 managers, and additionally includes extensive group work throughout the organisation. The programme is designed to last two years and aims to embed a “mentoring attitude” within line management. The business objective is to help the organisation through a process of rapid change towards a culture where high level skills in human relations are not only valued, but acknowledged as a source of competitive advantage in a mature service industry.

The use of psychodynamics and phenomenological approaches to human relations is still leading edge, as industry has a stronger tradition of empirical measurement deriving from its dominant accounting methodology. The discipline of robust challenge to major investment decisions is of course essential for any sound business needing to demonstrate return on equity through rigorous cost management. Hence behavioural psychology, with its emphasis on measurable outcomes found ready acceptance in the business arena. Nonetheless, in the organisation in question, approaches to management development derived from this field (eg “management competencies) have now been complemented by the mentoring programme, which acknowledges and values the inner world of the mentee and its power in the construction of corporate reality. Direct indications of success of the mentoring programme are largely qualitative, which signifies an important additional perspective in a large corporation strongly grounded in empirical quantitative methodology. The growing awareness of the importance of phenomenological approaches to organisational management is perhaps reflected not only in providing “warmer” customer service but also in the recognition of the necessity to develop “transformational leadership” skills in senior managers (Howell and Avolio, 1993).



In order to operate a personal mentoring programme in a corporate context, boundary conditions must be clearly stated. In the case of the project in question potential mentees sign a contract with their mentor and the employing organisation, which binds the mentor to confidentiality and commits him/her to the Code of Ethics of the British Association for Counselling. Thereafter, hourly sessions are conducted weekly. The freedom of the individual to decline participation in the programme is explained by the Chief Executive in written communication prior to launch. Furthermore, mentors interview each potential mentee in some depth, again emphasising the voluntary nature of the scheme before engaging. In the organisation described, approximately 5% of the initial group preferred not to participate. The process can be terminated by individual mentees at any time and specific agendas are chosen by the mentee. Occasionally mentees may get in touch with painful personal material which requires a therapeutic environment for full working through and a system exists whereby mentees with their consent, may be referred to the British Association for Counselling and/or psychotherapists known to the organisation. It is noteworthy that during the project in question, there have been no referrals, and it is possible that the rigorous psychodynamic underpinning has, in many cases, enabled anxieties to be contained within the mentor/mentee relationship. Whilst the programme itself is defined in broad stages, the pace is set by mentees who will use the process to varying degrees of depth. Where appropriate, mentors will help mentees examine connections between the different areas of experience depicted in figure 1.

Mentors are typically masters level counsellors, counselling psychologists, or psychotherapists, with dual business qualifications and experience. All are required to attend supervision one and a half hours weekly, training four hours per week, offsite training one day per month and one residential week per quarter. Additionally, all mentors are encouraged to continue personal growth and professional development, and each must subscribe to the relevant professional body. The consultancy has group membership of the British Association for Counselling.

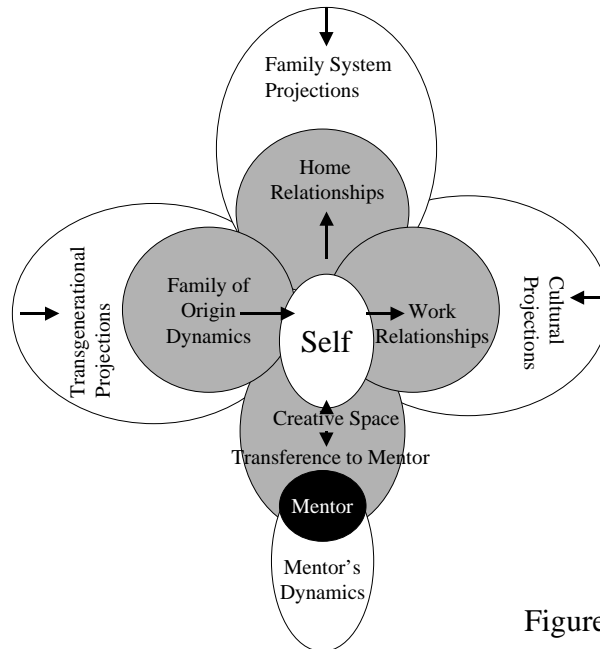


Figure 1

The Mentor as a Change Agent

Clearly, a major investment in the programme is made by both the individual concerned and the corporation, particularly taking into account opportunity costs of staff time. Where mentees wish to communicate business issues up the line anonymously, business data is gathered for presentation in the form of a Mentor Action Report. This identifies themes and issues which are often disconfirming of senior management beliefs about organisation performance and provides invaluable feedback which forms a basis of improved decision making. This has proved useful for the organisation concerned, which, because of its size, and despite flat structures, has a long line of communication between senior executives and front line managers. Individual mentoring, mentor action reporting, and group work ensure that culture change is driven top-down, horizontally, and bottom-up (Glaser and Eynde, 1989).

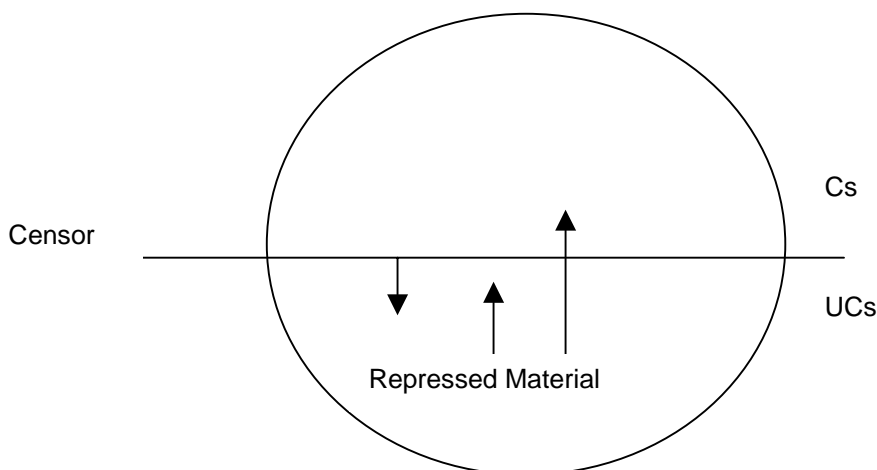
Individual Mentoring

Individual change through this particular kind of mentoring is underpinned by a dynamic process of bringing to awareness some of the unconscious factors, which drive perception, beliefs and behaviours. This typically enhances strategic capability at the conscious level as the individual gains greater understanding and control of behaviours, which may have been dysfunctional.




Progress is characterised by a greater sense of “personal mastery”, greater choice and an increased repertoire of behaviour, improved strategic decision making capability, and an openness to new learning. There is predictably significant reduction in reality distortion and a move from repetition to generativity. The process can be simply represented as follows:

The model is essentially psychodynamic and derives from Freud’s early descriptions of the workings of the psyche (Freud, 1900). In practice, ideas derived from Freud’s later work have also proved helpful, as well as from the formulations of the post-Freudians. Much energy is often wasted in unnecessary “intrapsychic conflict” where unacceptable impulses and unpleasant feelings and memories are constantly being censored. Perception can be distorted, behaviour can become “stuck” and world views can become fixed. Through the mentoring relationship, unconscious material is brought into the arena of conscious action. “Material” can be analysed and decoded in terms of its “unconscious” or “latent” meaning. A range of interactive dynamic techniques are employed in the mentoring relationship to transform dammed-up energy into creativity.



Through interpretation of the transference (see Figure 1), mentors can help mentees understand not only the extent to which family of origin dynamics replay in the work context (Argyris and Schon, 1980) but also the phenomenon of transgenerational projection, where themes and situations replay throughout the history of generations (Pitt-Aikens and Ellis, 1988). Central to



the process is the use of the relationship between mentor and mentee, which operates in the context of past relationships, present family and work relationships and future. The fundamental aim is to help the mentee become aware of themes and situations which are likely to replay, often contrary to the mentee's well being or conscious intention. The working approach derives from Freud's (1920) notion of repetition compulsion.

Consider for a moment the hypothetical example of a senior manager who, physically and psychologically distanced from his/her own team, experiences all relationships with seniors as hostile and persecuting, and whose team experiences his/her management style in a similar fashion. Insight into earlier relationships with an abusive parent, and further insight into that parent's childhood difficulties can often bring about realisation of the transgenerations and family of origin introjects, and awareness of some of the reasons for difficulties with the manager's own team. The sense of grappling with such awesome material is often followed by an appreciation of the power of cultural influence and the contribution of the unconscious projection of others to family and work. Gains made in this area can often yield substantial benefits in the area of the mentee's life. In the work arena, patterns of troubled relationships with bosses, peers, and team members can be transformed. Such is the substance of culture transformation.

Similarly, a mentee may discover through the relationship with his/her mentor, tendencies to unwittingly coach the mentor to behave in certain ways, eg to abandon or to behave punitively. Mentor counter-transference in this respect is monitored through close supervision and mentees are thereby helped to examine the relationship. The individual may well find that this brings to mind hitherto forgotten uncomfortable memories from his/her family of orientation, which might also be replaying in present relationships at work.

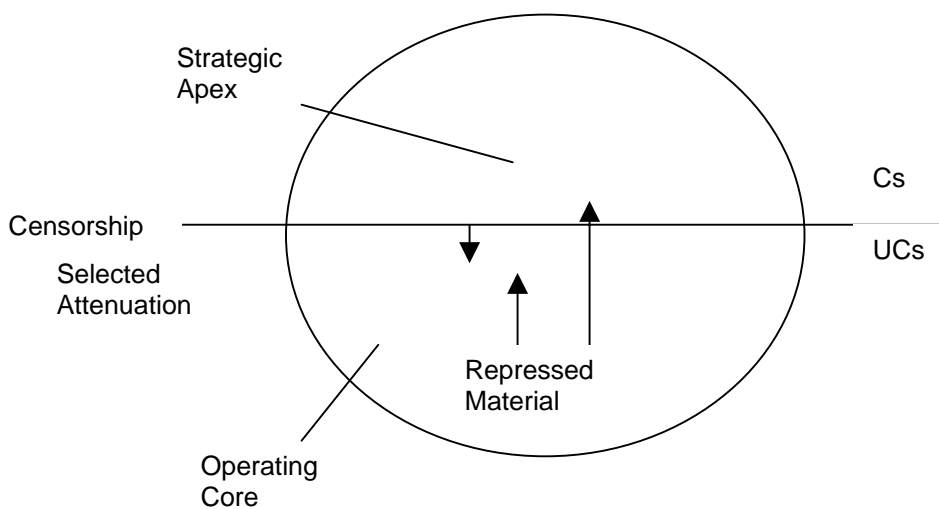
Greater control over aspects of work life, which may relate to repeated family of orientation dynamics can often be gained in this way.

Organisational Change

At the organisational level, the culture transformation process operates in a similar way. From the "organisation as a whole" perspective (Agazarian and Peters, 1981), the aim is to improve



strategic capability by promoting the flow of undistorted valid data (Schein, 1992) up through the system to the strategic apex (Mintzberg, 1983). This can be conceptualised as bringing the organisational unconscious to awareness, in the same manner as the mentoring programme promotes individual growth.



Information must of course be attenuated as it flows towards the strategic apex (Beer, 1985; Mintzberg, 1983), but all large corporations select out anxiety provoking, disconfirming data according to the “ego strength” of the top team. This material, however, contains information of both operational value and of dynamic importance. It is characterised by the anxieties, which often drive the organisation into repetitive behaviour and fixed belief systems.

Through the Mentoring Programme, latent material of significance to the business is elicited, decoded and presented to the strategic apex in the form of the Mentor Action Report. This enables the strategic apex of the organisation to function with greater choice, creativity and competitive strength in relation to the business environment.

Mentor Action Reporting might typically involve the recording and presentation to senior managers of a number of related issues realised by mentees from different parts of the



organisation. For example, if the organisation is moving towards staff empowerment, one might expect a large number of questions and concerns expressed about the clarification of boundaries. At the same time, anxiety might be manifest in “splitting” (them and us) as the organisation works through its rapprochement issues.


The critical need for clear communication at such times can be expressed through the mentor action report to senior managers who become increasingly aware of the dynamic impact of their own behaviour, and who are thereby enabled to manage more effectively. More simply, several mentees may report a similar problem with a technical function of the business, which direct information may be invaluable and otherwise not available to senior managers, who strongly invested in the success of the area in question, might be susceptible to denial.

Team Change

At the team level, again the aim is to improve group strategic capability by bringing awareness to those unconscious aspects of group life which drive behaviours towards “off task” goals (Bion, 1959). At the same time, the creative power of the group unconscious can be harnessed and employed to bring about a quantum leap in performance.

Group ego strength is built to enable it to successfully manage increasing levels of disconfirming data both from within the group “repressed area” and from the organisational area. Group cohesiveness is engendered through the development of high-level trust, intimacy, and self regard through success orientation. From this base, non-critical mistakes can be reviewed as learning opportunities and, respectful challenge and disagreement can be encouraged as contributions to learning (Short, 1991). Emphasis on task orientation ensures that “group think” phenomena (Bernthal and Insko, 1993) are minimised.

Consider a typical team locked into process at the expense of task. The group may enjoy being together and may be strongly creative, but produce little of value to the organisation as a whole, and may become increasingly marginalised. Refocus on the task of the group within its organisational context might help the team consider its outputs, as well as its creativity. It could



be that the team is behaving as though its purpose is to provide an opportunity for the members to engage in creative activity rather than to produce any particular outputs (“basic assumption pairing” mode – Bion 1959). Awareness of this phenomenon can provide the first step towards the team understanding how it processes anxiety, and can help the team focus its creativity in a functional direction.

Conclusion

Whilst methodology in each area is quite different, the overall shape of the culture transformation process is, as described, contained in each component, as well as in the whole. The integrity of design accelerates the change process as it is experienced simultaneously at all levels of the organisation – as whole, group systemic, and individual.

The mentoring programme is now regarded as an essential component of the culture transformation process, and is being extended to include a wider range of group work and facilitation training. Many senior managers in the organisation feel that their self-knowledge, interpersonal skills, and business performance have increased as a result of mentoring, and many are beginning to apply a mentoring approach to their own staff management. Independent Audit findings report that mentees are highly appreciative of outcomes, which result in a greater sense of personal mastery in their lives, and in observably enhanced interpersonal functioning and decision making at work.

The indirect link of the mentoring programme to improved business performance is acknowledged, and there has been a shift from a “power” culture towards a “humanistic” approach, which has been independently measured by a culture inventory. The quality of service experienced by the customer has correspondingly improved, as have all quality indicators used by the organisation to measure its performance. Similar quantitative measures of staff pride and morale have also risen.

Areas in which participants have experienced direct benefits from the programme are listed in the independent audit as: performance improvement, leadership skills, personal growth and



change management activities. A key finding is that managers feel more able, not only to empower, facilitate and listen, but also to set appropriate boundaries and to insist on results. This aspect of management may appear one of the more difficult facets to integrate within the overall culture change, but is usefully addressed dynamically from the perspective of the exercise of good authority based on positive parent introjects (Pitt-Aikens and Ellis, 1988).

In conclusion, it has been greatly encouraging to note the ready acceptance of applied psychodynamics by a major corporate employer and to be able to demonstrate clear added value through enhanced organisational capability and business performance. The programme has been particularly relevant in the context of a mature service industry where competitive advantage is sought through improving customer service, staff development, and strategic decision making capability.

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