

Is Adaptive Mentorship[®] a Viable Mentoring Model?

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Abstract

During the past quarter century, the authors have designed, tested, and refined the Adaptive Mentorship[®] (AM) model within the internship component of teacher education programs. They also asked mentorship programmers from a variety of other professional disciplines to consider adapting the model in the mentoring/supervisory phase of their respective clinical/practicum offerings, and to research the results. In this report, the authors first describe AM, its rationale, and its implementation procedures; and they synthesize its research history, strengths, and limitations. On the basis of that record, they invite other interested mentorship planners to determine whether or not to implement Adaptive Mentorship within their own mentoring programs.

1. Introduction

Since ancient times *mentorship* has spanned the social spectrum and has been used in a variety of forms wherever elements of human education/training/learning existed [1]. We regard mentorship in the classical sense where one person helps another to learn, and we have described the Adaptive Mentorship (AM) model [2] in a similar fashion. The AM model is shown in Figure 1.

In the AM model the authors conceptualized mentorship as a developmental process by which an individual with more knowledge and skill in a field (i.e., the mentor) assists a person with less knowledge and skill in that field (i.e., the protégé) to develop in these areas [3]. With AM, mentors adjust their mentoring responses to match protégés' task-specific development level while coaching them in their learning setting.

The authors have shown [4] that the outer border of the diagram represents the overall physical, psychological, social, organizational, and cultural context within which the mentorship process functions. Many of these contextual factors cannot be changed by the pair, but they can change their own actions. Thus, mentors can modify their mentorship behaviour, which consists of two

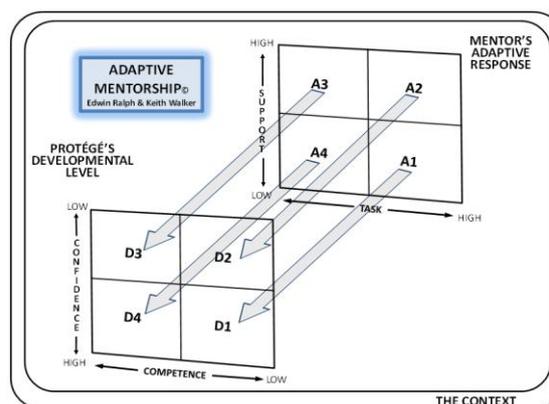


Figure 1. The Adaptive Mentorship[®] model. The mentor synchronizes his/her adaptive response indicated in the A-grid to appropriately match the task-specific developmental level of the protégé shown in the D-grid

dimensions shown in Figure 1: (a) their “task” response (i.e., the degree of specific direction given to the protégé regarding the technical, mechanical, or procedural aspect of the latter’s performance of the task being learned) and (b) their “support” response (i.e., the degree of “human” or psycho/social/emotional expression they provide the protégé learning the skill-set).

Moreover, the factor over which protégés have most control is their task-specific developmental level. It likewise consists of two dimensions: their “competence” level (i.e., their actual technical ability to perform the task in question) and their “confidence” level (i.e., their degree of self-assurance, composure, psychological comfort, and security and/or safety in performing the skill-set).

We originally named the model *Contextual Supervision*, patterning it after early contingency management approaches [5]. We have gradually adjusted refined, and improved it over time based on our own and others’ [6] ongoing research findings.

2. How is AM implemented?

We have shown [7] that AM is applied using the three basic steps explained below.

2.1. Determining the Protégé's Development

First, the protégé/mentor pair ascertains the existing development level of the protégé to perform a specific skill-set being learned at the time. As illustrated in the "D-grid", a protégé's task-specific level of development consists of both his/her competence and his/her confidence levels to perform the task. The D1 quadrant reflects an individual with "low competence" and "high confidence" to accomplish the task (i.e., he/she does not know exactly how to perform it, but is confident, willing, and eager to try). A protégé at D2 is low both on competence and confidence; a protégé at D3 shows higher competence and lower confidence; while a protégé at D4 is high on both dimensions for the particular skill-set. A protégé's developmental level may be identified: (a) by the mentor's formal and informal observations of the protégé's actual performance of the skill/task; (b) by the pairs' informal conversations about the protégé's D-level; and (c) by the protégé's answers to the mentor's direct questions about his/her progress. D-levels are: task-specific; changeable over-time; different for different skill-sets; and temporary indicators of a protégé's stage at a specific point in time [8].

2.2. Synchronizing the mentor's response

Next, the mentor appropriately adjusts his/her mentorship response to match the existing D-level of the protégé regarding the particular competency: A1 matches D1, A2 matches D2, and so on. The mentor's "A" adaptive-response also has two dimensions: the degree of support the mentor provides (i.e., the psycho-emotional aspects of encouragement, reinforcement, and praise to bolster the protégé as he/she attempts to develop the particular skill-set). Support consists of genuinely positive words and/or actions, and varies along a continuum. The other A-element is task (i.e., how directive the mentor is toward the protégé regarding his/her technical or mechanical prowess in the task), which also varies along a continuum, ranging for example, from telling, to demonstrating, to suggesting, to questioning, or to delegating with respect to the protégé's skill-specific technique.

The key principle for the mentor to correctly match the A and D quadrants is that his/her task response must be inverse in magnitude to the extent of the protégé's competence level; and simultaneously, the extent of the mentor's support is similarly inversely proportional to the novice's level of confidence for the particular task.

2.3 Monitoring the protégé's development

Then, the mentorship pair continually and mutually monitors the protégé's ongoing level of

development, which necessitates that the mentor simultaneously adjusts his/her adaptive response to match, in inverse proportions, the protégé's changing development level(s).

3. What is AM's research record?

In this subsection we condense the results of the research that we and others conducted on the efficacy of the model, as reported by participants who used the model in their own mentoring practice and by experts in the field of mentorship, whom we asked to examine and evaluate the model.

3.1. Earlier studies

Between 1998 and 2005, we conducted research on the first version of the AM model, Contextual Supervision (CS), with several cohorts of pre-service teachers completing their 16-week internships in schools under the tutorship of their classroom co-operating teachers and their university supervisor. We coached the pairs to employ CS during the extended practicum and we researched the effects and published our findings in several publications [9]. Although the evidence here was largely positive, some limitations were reported, which were mostly related to mentors mismatching their mentoring behavior with changing levels of protégé developmental readiness.

3.2. Later research

Based on this early body of research, we refined the initial model by revising some of the nomenclature, restructuring some of the graphic elements, and re-replacing the name of "Contextual Supervision" with "Adaptive Mentorship." However, we retained the core developmental-element of the AM approach, whereby mentors were responsible to continually adjust and tailor the *support* and *task* dimensions of their leadership style and response to properly promote the protégé's corresponding developmental levels of confidence and competence in performing each skill-set.

The similarity between the earlier CS research and this later set of studies was that we continued to monitor the effects of the AM model with mentorship pairs whom we prepared to adapt it. However, one major difference with regard to the recent set of studies is that we received several grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and the University of Saskatchewan to help support the research. As a result, we were able to substantially expand our work to include mentorship not only in other professions (e.g., English-as-an-Additional Language, Dietetic Education, Nursing, Medicine, Pharmacy, and

University Advising), but in other countries as well, such as Iran, New Zealand, and some South Pacific island nations [10].

A second major difference in the later research, which also resulted from the grants and the increased dissemination activity, was that we were able to request several panels of experts to evaluate the AM model based on their recognized mentorship expertise, experience, and reputation [11].

The results of this latter group of studies generally confirmed the earlier findings, in that AM's benefits far outweighed its drawbacks. We synthesize these data in the following subsection.

4. What are AM's key strengths and limitations?

In this section we condense the research results that have accumulated regarding the effects of the AM model and we provide a summary highlighting its overall advantages and disadvantages.

4.1. AM's strengths

Its advantages, according to practitioners who have used it in their mentoring practice, can be summarized as follows [12]: (a) AM helped users clarify their overall conceptualization of the mentorship process; (b) it promoted the professional development of protégés and mentors, alike; (c) it was adaptable across the professional disciplines; (d) it offered a possible solution to partner impasse or interpersonal conflicts by helping users re-interpret such difficulties in terms of the possible mismatching of mentor response with protégé task-specific level of development; and (e) it provided participants with practical guidelines to facilitate mutual learning within their respective roles, whether protégé or mentor.

At the same time, as verified in the accumulating body of AM research, shortcomings have been identified [2], [3], [4], [11], [12]. One relatively minor but persistent limitation related to the fact that a small percentage of mentors (10% to 15%), who had been trained to use the model, did not adjust their mentorship response to appropriately synchronize with the existing developmental level of their protégés, which in turn may have led to an escalation of relationship difficulties.

Further research is required to investigate the possible factors affecting this mismatching phenomenon, such as: (a) organizers' failure to adequately present/explain the model, its rationale, procedures, and record; (b) participants' reluctance or resistance to accept AM; or (c) partners' miscommunication about or misapplication of it.

A second caveat was that AM would only be effective if users would spend sufficient time to

become familiar with its terms and procedures. Not surprisingly, this "familiarity proviso" could not be rushed nor shortchanged. Further research regarding this time factor may help identify reasons for the relatively small mismatching problem, and suggest potential ways to either prevent this issue from arising or to de-fuse it from intensifying.

A third limitation that was identified was related to intercultural differences among users of it [10], [13]. Indeed, we have found that when introducing the model in international settings, we must be both sensitive and sensible in ensuring that the model respectfully honors all individuals and groups, and their respective cultures, histories, and traditions. We have learned that the model must be seen and accepted as an *adaptable mentoring tool* (as its name infers) to serve mentorship partners within any cross-disciplinary and international context. We maintain that its sole purpose is to offer users a practical means of helping to clarify their conceptualization and practice of mentorship within their unique settings.

5. Conclusion

With respect to responding to the question posed in the title of this article, readers who examine these data can respond in the affirmative: AM does, in fact, provide a viable mentorship option. However, as is the case with any conceptual representation used in the social sciences, no framework is perfect [14]. Although the AM model has been shown to offer practical guidance for mentoring participants in a wide variety of professions, it is not a panacea and it must be employed judiciously [15]. In this regard we are in accord with Zais [16], who affirmed that models in the social sciences can serve as representations or metaphors of reality to assist managers, leaders, and researchers not only think more deeply about their practice, but also to help them pose related questions worthy of further research.

6. Invitation

It is in this spirit of seeking to expand knowledge about mentorship that we respectfully reiterate Barry Posner's decade-old admonition regarding the earlier version of our mentorship model [17]. We therefore repeat his invitation to anyone interested in using the AM model to help improve the mentorship process in their respective settings to do so, and then to share the results: "let's hear from you about your own experience" [17]. We believe that such collaboration could serve not only to strengthen the AM model, but that it has the potential to help bolster mentorship's overall effectiveness in enhancing the learning of professionals, everywhere.

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