Refining *Adaptive Mentorship*©: Three Expert-Groups' Assessments

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Abstract

In this study, the authors extended their research and refinement of the Adaptive Mentorship (AM) model by inviting attendees at three 2014 AM workshops to serve as additional panels of experts to evaluate the model's potential as a mentoring guide. At the conclusion of the workshops, participants submitted written assessments regarding their perspectives on the model's strengths and limitations. The authors analyzed these data and compared them with findings from their previous research regarding the efficacy of AM. Overall, the results confirmed the earlier research, in that all respondents in this latest study rated the model positively. Further, 71% of the respondents identified specific concerns or cautions they foresaw regarding practitioners' use of the AM model. These caveats focused on alerting mentorship programmers to ensure that all mentors and protégés utilizing AM become familiar with the model before attempting to put it into practice. The experts indicated that participants' insufficient preparation and commitment would produce inadequate mentoring results.

1. Introduction

The mentorship process is a critical component of the practicum, field-experience, and clinical phase of professional education programs [1]. Protégés from across the disciplines have regularly reported that the field-based/clinical component of their pre-service education was crucial to their professional learning [2]. At the same time, however, protégés in these experiential learning or internship programs also indicated that the overall success of the experience depended on the quality of mentorship they received [3].

The literature has also identified certain negative factors that often seem to materialize within this mentoring process that are detrimental to the mentoring process [4]. Furthermore, these difficulties appear to emerge across the professional-education spectrum and across cultures [5], which in turn hinders the learning and professional development of protégés and mentors, alike [6]. In order to help address these mentorship limitations, during the past two decades the authors have designed, applied, researched, and refined a mentoring model called *Adaptive Mentorship*[©] (AM) [7]. One part of this research effort to enhance the effectiveness of the AM model has entailed the solicitation of experts' evaluation of AM with respect to its efficacy in assisting mentorship participants to function in their respective roles in the learning/teaching relationship [8]. The purpose of the project reported in this article was to collect and analyze the judgements of three additional panels of experts regarding the value and effectiveness of the Adaptive Mentorship model.

2. Background

Because of the significance that effective mentorship has on protégés' professional growth during their practicum/clinical experiences, the author and his colleagues created *Adaptive Mentorship* (which they originally called *Contextual Supervision* [9, 10, 11]. The model was based on early contingency leadership approaches from the management field [12, 13], and it emphasized the key principle that successful mentorship occurs when the mentor continually adjusts or *adapts* his/her mentoring style to match the evolving developmental level of the protégé during the practical learning situation [14]. Moreover, the model assisted mentors who implemented it to synchronize their ongoing mentoring responses to match the protégé's changing skill-specific stages of development, and thereby to reduce miscommunication, misunderstanding, and potential conflict that often resulted from using a "one-size-fits-all" approach [10].

During the mentorship process, the relationship forged between mentorship partners directly affects protégés' growth of competence and confidence, as they seek, under their mentors' tutelage, to acquire the professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions required by their specific profession [15, 16]. The relationship irritants that often emerge during the mentorship enterprise typically stem from such elements as poor practicum-program design, insufficient partner preparation/training, inadequate pair planning, ill-structured mentorship processes, unclear partner expectations, poor placement/pairing procedures, interpersonal miscommunication or misunderstanding, power differentials between mentor/protégé, and role uncertainty or confusion [7, 10]. Moreover, mentorship participants are well aware that failure to defuse these matters early, often further escalates the problem [17, 18]; however the author and his co-researchers found that when mentoring partners employed the AM model they were able to identify and reduce potential problems early [14, 19, 20].

2.1 The Adaptive Mentorship Model

Adaptive Mentorship [16, p. 22] is a model that guides mentors in adjusting their mentoring responses to appropriately match the task-specific development level of protégés whom they are assisting in the learning/working situation. It is shown in Figure 1.
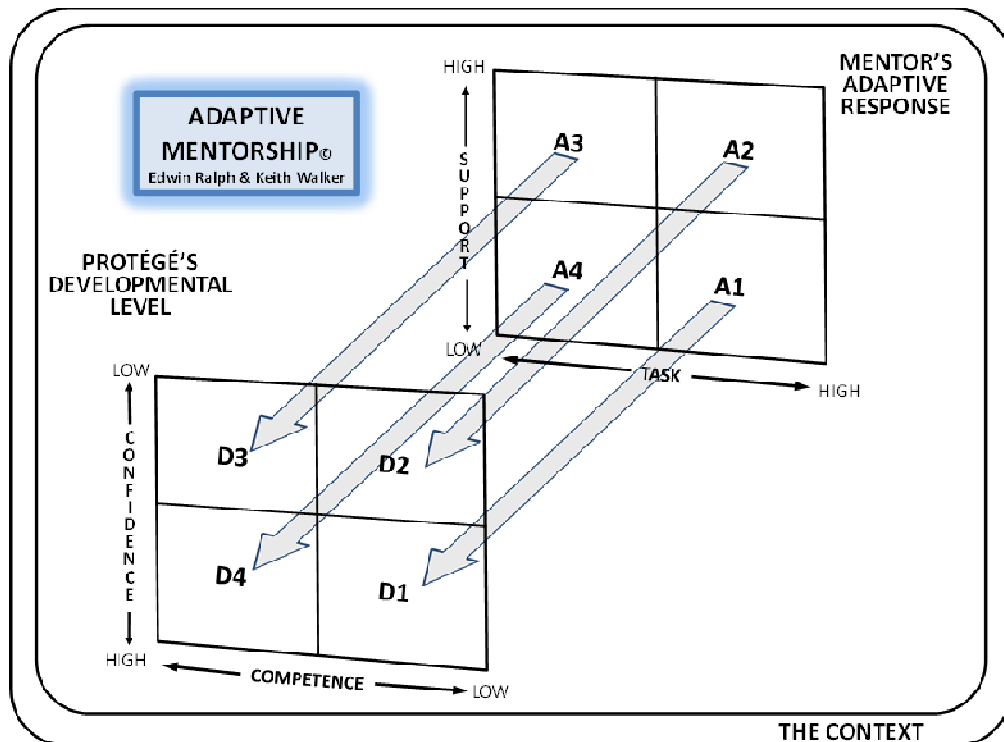
Figure 1: The Adaptive Mentorship$^{©}$ model. The mentor synchronizes his/her adaptive response indicated in the A-grid to appropriately match the task-specific developmental level of the protégé shown in the D-grid [7, 8, 10, 16, 19, 22].

In their original AM research publications [19, pp. 9-10; 21, pp. 206-207], the authors have previously described the AM model using the graphic shown in Figure 1. The outer border of the diagram represents the entire physical, psychological, social, organizational, and cultural context within which the mentorship process functions. Many of these influences cannot be changed by the mentor or the protégé; however, the aspect that they can control is their own behaviour. Thus, mentors can modify their mentorship action, which consist of two 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 or task).

By contrast, 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 task). The heart of the AM model is represented by the shaded arrows linking the D- and A-grids, which portray the mentor's matching of one of four typical "A" (adaptive) responses with a similarly numbered "D" (developmental) level characterizing the protégé's performance of the particular skill/competency. Of course, there are many more than four positions within each grid, because there is a host of possible A/D combinations. However, for conceptual/analytical purposes, we highlighted these four combinations simply to reflect types within each quadrant.

2.2 Applying AM

The authors have previously explained how mentorship pairs may apply AM using three key steps [21, pp. 207-208; 22, pp. 222-223] as shown below:

2.2.1. Determine Protégé's Development: First, the protégé/mentor pair mutually 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 on both competence and confidence, a protégé at D3 shows higher competence and lower confidence, and a protégé at D4 is high on both dimensions for the particular skill-set.

2.2.2 Synchronize Mentor Response: Next the mentor must appropriately adapt his/her mentorship response to correspond to the existing developmental level of the mentee regarding the competency in question. This matching process represents the core of AM.

As depicted in Figure 1, the mentor's adaptive response also has two dimensions: the amount of support the mentor provides (i.e., the human-relationship aspects of encouragement, positive reinforcement, praise, and psychological/emotional bolstering of the protégé as he/she attempts to develop the skill). This support consists of genuinely positive words, pleasant facial expressions, affirming gestures, and accepting body language. The other response-element is the task dimension (i.e., direction regarding the technical or mechanical component of mastering a competency, in which the mentor's response varies along a continuum of lesser to greater amounts of guidance or specific technical advice about the performance). This task-dimension would involve such behaviours as telling, showing, guiding, demonstrating, advising, directing, or providing procedural strategies regarding the protégé's "technique".

The key principle in correctly matching the A and D quadrants is that the mentor's 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 in performing the skill-set. In short, the degree of mentor response is opposite to that of protégé development.

2.2.3. Continually Observe and Adapt Mentor Response: The mentorship pair would continually monitor the protégé's changing level of development, and the mentor would correspondingly synchronize his/her adaptive response to match, in inverse degrees, the mentee's changing development level(s).   As a protégé advances from D1 to D2 to D3 to D4, the mentor would reciprocate by responding correspondingly with A1, A2, A3 and A4 adaptations.

2.3 AM Research Results

Research on Adaptive Mentorship (and CS) has been conducted and published by the author and other educational personnel during the past 25 years. In the following subsection the author synthesizes some key findings of these studies.

2.3.1 The Primary Research Record

In the 1990s, one of the authors created *Contextual Supervision* (CS), which was the prototype of the present model, and he studied its implementation in the field of teacher education [10, 11, 14, 23, 24]. He and his colleagues used the results of these CS studies, first to rename the model as *Adaptive Mentorship*, and further to refine and expand the model and to continue to conduct research on its efficacy [7, 15, 19, 20, 22]. This broadened research base included ongoing studies of AM's effects in mentoring teacher candidates in their internship programs [25, 46]; and with multidisciplinary panels of experts who assessed the model's potential [8]. This expanded research effort also included: AM's broader dissemination across cultures [26, 27, 28]; its adaptation in other fields of professional education, such as early childhood instructional preparation [29]; Agricultural consultant training [30]; Nursing preceptoring [31, 32]; Medicine/Nursing collaboration [33]; Dietetics

training [34]; university-level English-as-a-second language acquisition [35]; Pharmacy education [36]; undergraduate and graduate student advising [37, 38]; and business-management training [39].

A synthesis of this accumulating body of mentoring research [8, 10, 11, pp. 274-275; 20, pp. 80-81] has confirmed that the overall strengths of the AM model were that it provided a visual representation of how effective mentorship functioned; it gave practical guidelines for mentors and protégés to follow; it offered mentorship partners a helpful way to recognize and deal with potential mentorship problems before misunderstanding and conflict developed; it helped pairs re-fexamine the proverbial cop-out of "personality clash" or the casting of aspersions or blaming (e.g., "lazy," "stubborn," "stupid") in terms of mentors adapting their style; it showed pairs how mentors could re-adjust their task and support behaviours to match, in inverse proportions, the protégés existing levels confidence and competence mentor's matching; and it re-emphasized that clear and open interpersonal communication is a necessity not a cliché or platitude.

Furthermore, another lingering limitation that was identified in this research was that the AM model is not a panacea, because not all of the mentors who learned how to apply the AM model were consistent in appropriately matching their mentorship responses to the changing developmental-levels of their protégés. This issue may be due a variety of factors, such as: mentors disagreeing with or being indifferent to the model; mentors feeling though the model was somehow being forced upon them in a top-down fashion against their will; mentorship organizers not initially presenting the model clearly enough; organizers not following up with mentorship pirs during the implementation stage (i.e., mentoring the mentors); or participants unwilling to commit to fulfilling their mutual obligations in the mentorship process [7, 8, 10, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22].

2.3.2 Further Research Support

Additional research focusing on the potential of the AM model included several supplemental studies reported by Ralph and Walker [8]. In these investigations, the researchers solicited the perspectives of groups of mentorship participants and educators, who represented a variety of professional disciplines and cultures, and whom the authors considered to be experts in mentoring practice and/or scholarship. Over a five-year period the researchers invited 49 expert groups from eight countries, who attended AM workshops, to examine and evaluate the model and to submit written responses documenting their judgments regarding the model's positive and limiting aspects. The findings showed that the experts unanimously attested to the value of AM as an effective mentorship tool. They commended its clarity, its ease of implementation, and its benefit for facilitating the development of protégés and mentors, alike. At the same time, however, approximately 80% of the respondents over the period also identified possible cautions and/or caveats concerning its application, such as recommending to mentorship programmers to ensure they provided adequate time for participants to become acquainted with and practice using the model and its procedures.

3. Method

In the present qualitative study, one of the authors collected data using a combination of questionnaire and focus group techniques [40, 41, 44]. He gathered these data from 21 attendees who attended three Adaptive Mentorship workshops that he conducted at two Canadian universities (10 individuals in a meeting in eastern Canada and 11 others at a university in Western Canada) during the summer of 2014. He considered the attendees as panels of experts [42] in the field of mentorship, because of their previous mentoring background, experience, and/or interest, and because of their decision to attend the workshops and accept his invitation to take on the role of expert to judge the AM model. The author used a similar format at each workshop. First, he facilitated a focus-group conversation by having each cohort address four preliminary questions: (a) What was their definition of mentorship? (b) What were attributes of a good mentor? (c) How does one know when the mentorship process was successful? and (d) What deficiencies, if any, existed in the mentorship program

in which they were currently involved? Second, he described the AM model and its rationale, implementation, and research record. Third, he facilitated the group in practicing the model's application in a simulation activity. The final step was his invitation to attendees to culminate their expert-panelist role [43] by evaluating the model. He invited volunteers anonymously submit their written answers to two questions: What was positive about the model? and What did they see as challenges or cautions about its use?

3.1 Data Analysis

The author recorded field notes during the focus group discussions, and in keeping with recommended data analysis strategies [41, pp. 468-469], he categorized and analyzed these qualitative data and identified emerging patterns or themes. In like manner, he analyzed the written questionnaire-responses by using the constant comparative technique of the qualitative research approach [42, pp. 141-150] to collate, analyze, and categorize/re-categorize the attendees' submitted written comments. He also examined/re-examined all of these data and continually observed for dominant trends [41, p. 16]. He then added a quantitative elelment to the process by calculating the percentages of respondents' views within each emerging theme after which he reported these values in Table 1.

4. Results

There was an overall response rate of 70% (with 21 of 30 attendees submitting written responses). The results displayed in Table 1 indicated that the overall ratio of the experts' positive comments to the limitations they identified was approximately 2:1. In all, the experts wrote 62 distinct statements about the model; and 100% of them identified advantages of AM, while 71% mentioned caveats. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents did not write anything under the challenges question or they wrote "none" or "n/a" (for "not applicable"). Forty-two of all 62 written statements mentioned the model's strengths, and the remaining 20 comments expressed cautions or concerns either about its framework or application.

The author also noted that two attendees, who had attended one of the conferences from another country, arrived late at the AM workshop and thus did not participate in all the activities. The pair therefore declined to submit written assessments of the AM model; however, based on their limited observations of the session, they conversed with the presenter at the conclusion of the workshop and orally endorsed the model. They further requested e-copies of the presentation slide-set from him, and stated, "We would like to study the approach in more depth, and take it back home to share with our colleagues and explore possible future collaborations regarding the model…." These statements are not included in the Table 1 data.

However, in the following sub-sections, the author elaborates on the three positive and three cautionary sub-categories that emerged from the written data that the attendees did submit.

4.1 Positive Aspects

The largest sub-category of evaluative comments shown in Table 1 referred to the AM model's clarity. Sample statements illustrating this theme were: "I can see how useful and helpful AM would be on our workforce;" "It is easy to adapt for specific cases;" "It provides a structure for reference to reflect and focus during the mentoring process;" "It is a graphic which makes the complex task understandable;" "It is very clear and simple but extremely helpful in understanding the mentor-protégé relationships;" and "It's easy to follow, clear, concise and helps mentors have clear directions for action."

The second largest positive sub-category was related to how the model benefitted mentors and protégés, alike. Illustrative statements here were: "Both protégés and mentors can benefit from knowing where they each are in relation to one another's perspective;" "It allows being able each to adapt in terms of both the student and the teacher;" "I like how it provides an easy way to correct issues that either a student or a mentor may be having;" "The two window

panes can be matched up and they make sense;" and "In terms of leadership and management this approach will help strengthen the whole team, not just the protégé."

The third most positive feature identified by the experts was the model's interdisciplinarity. Comments addressing this aspect were: "It is easy to apply across a variety of situations;" "A good starting point for the conversation of mentorship anywhere;" "A simple model that can be easily followed and understood in a lot of areas; and from a delegate who added the follwing comment on the day following the workshop, "After I described the model last night to [name], he told me to tell you he might be contacting you regarding giving this workshop to his group of supervisors/managers at [name] mine up north."

4.2 Challenging Aspects

Although all 21 experts identified one or more positive aspects of the AM model, four of them did not write any answer for the limitation question. Nevertheless, approximately one-third of all submitted comments focused on challenges or concerns panelists raised with respect to the AM model and/or its implementation. These responses reflected three basic themes shown in the lower portion of Table 1. The largest of these sub-categories dealt with ensuring that participants were sufficiently acquainted with the model and its processes before implementing it. Examples of the statements in this sub-section were: "It will be difficult to determine pairs' positions on the grid unless there exists an identifying process or checklist to use;" "The pairs must see value in the model or it won't be applied properly;" "Both parties must have clear, honest discussions for the model to work;" "Be sure to address the power imbalance issues with all partners, so that protégés won't fear expressing their views;" "People will need to learn to be flexible as they move through the steps;" "Will they master using it in a limited few weeks?" and "Pairs will need to practice it with more case studies."

The second largest cautionary sub-section mentioned the possibility of participants resisting or rejecting the model, as illustrated by the following statements: "To make it work we have to sell it to our organization;" "It may not work unless you select mentors who are skilled and willing, and ensure that the mentees are wanting help and willing to be involved;" and "Be prepared that the mentor or the learner may refuse to place themselves on the grid. If so, the whole exercise would collapse, or else there might be different interpretations of the quadrant stages."

The third sub-category consisting of two percent of the responses dealt with unique but important factors, such as: "When mentoring the teacher candidates, we must not forget the needs of the pupils they are teaching;" and "Unless pairs are open, you may not really know the level of the partner."

4. Discussion

A cpmparison of the findings reported in Table 1 with those from the larger study of experts' judgments of the model showed a similarity of sub-categories and percentages for both the positive and negative aspects of the Adaptive Mentorship model. Furthermore, the findings from the present study were also generally consistent with the trends that emerged in the earlier research regardings both the Adaptive Mentorship model [7, 8, 22] and its earlier prototype, Contextual Supervision [9, 10, 11]. An analysis of all these AM and CS studies showed that individuals familiar with the model believed that: (a) there were more positive than negative aspects identified for the model; (b) the model helped clarify their conceptualization of the entire mentoring process; (c) it was relatively easy for partners to understand; (d) it offered each participant sensible and sensitive guidelines to facilitate their respective actions within the mentorship relationship; (e) it moved mentors away from relying on a single mentorship/leadership response-set toward an *adaptive* style that they could adjust to match protégés' changing development; and (f) it helped mentoting partners to consider re-interpreting miscommunication and mis-judgment issues instead as a possible mismatch of mentor response with protégé readiness. That is, by virtue of the mentor's role in the relationship, he/she is ultimately responsible for the facilitation of the mentorship process.

Table 1: Summary of Feedback of Three Expert-Groups Regarding the AM Model, 2014

Aspect	Percentage
Positive	
1. Provides clear framework	42
2. Benefits both mentor and protégé	19
3. Applies across disciplines	6
Challenging	
1. Requires more time for deeper familiarity	27
2. Requires consideration of other factors	3
3. Resistance may occur	2

Note: From the three workshops/seminars conducted at two Canadian universities, 21 participants submitted 62 distinct comments. All participants provided at least one positive comment, while 15 participants provided at least one cautionary comment. Values reflect percentages of the comments in each sub-category, and do not total 100 because of rounding.

The challenges that were identified in this study were also similar to those reported in the previous AM studies [8, 11, 14, 16, 22] centered on the fact that the degree of the model's effectiveness depended less on its charateristics and graphics and more on the skills and attitudes of the people utilizing it. In other words, as is the case with any conceptual framework or practitioner tool in the social sciences, a conceptual model can be misused, abused, unused, or used wisely, depending on the implementers' familiarity with and attitude toward it [10, p. 109]. Although the respondents in the expert panels participating in this study acknowledged AM's advantages, they also readily recognized its risks, as articulated by one respondent who wrote, "If the mentor happens to be a 'dud' then no matter how good the model is, it would not be used properly."

Possible implications that one may draw from the findings of the present study and those from earlier AM and CS research are that practitioners and administrators who decide to employ the model within their particular mentorship programs should not only attend to maintaining the positive features that characterize their unique settings, but they should endeavor to reduce/eliminate the deficiencies that may be identified. If mentorship leaders assume that all mentoring participants desire to develop and/or improve their respective professional practice, then the Adaptive Mentorship model appears to be a viable tool to help them accomplish that goal.

Acknowledgments

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