Mentoring as a Bridge to Understanding Cultural Difference

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Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives (Anzaldua, 2002, p. 1).

At its best, mentoring serves as an important bridge in many of the ways described by Anzaldua (2002). When asked to think about our mentoring relationships, I imagine many of us have experienced these critical developmental partnerships as passageways carrying us through the changing terrain of our career journeys or acting as connectors allowing us to transition from one phase or job to the next. Mentoring relationships literally and figuratively provide a way for us to cross borders, to gain access to alternative perspectives, and experiences. In light of a number of shifting demographics, including increasing workforce diversity, globalization, and technological advances, the use of mentoring as a bridge will become more critical as a tool to navigate the changing landscape.

Drawing from Anzaldua's (2002) description of bridges as primal symbols, we see that mentoring also draws on archetype. There is an image of mentoring that is timeless—a wise, older person taking someone younger under his wing. What is left unsaid is that in this archetype of mentoring, the mentor and protégé are similar to one another; they are from the same clan. Yet, more and more, we are required to work and connect with people from whom we are very different.

What happens as we are on our career sojourns and we must interact with travelers from a different land? While the study of mentoring has become more and more popular over the past three decades, there are still gaps in our understanding, places where we don't know as much about how relationships unfold between mentoring partners who are very different from one another because we have not yet paid sufficient attention to increasingly complex and nuanced dynamics. The scenario below describes some of the gaps and highlights the opportunities and the challenges of understanding mentoring in a global context that exist in an increasingly diverse workforce.

Meihui is preparing to meet with her colleague, John Young. They met when both were part of a product team in a large pharmaceutical company. After the product launch, Meihui continued to stay in touch with John, getting together occasionally to talk about the different products they were selling, strategies to penetrate target markets and partnerships that they needed to forge to operate effectively. John was always forthcoming about his own experiences in the company. He often had suggestions and strategies, some that Meihui adopted. Although neither Meihui nor John had formally identified their relationship as a mentoring one, she believed that John was a resource to whom she could turn to gain guidance and support.

Meihui felt that she could really use some of that guidance in light of her recent meeting with her manager.

Adam. Last week, Meihui had completed her annual performance review with Adam. While the overall news was good, there were several red flags. During Meihui's seven years in the company, her performance had been consistently rated as "exceeds expectations." Yet, Adam still didn't feel comfortable putting her in front of the high-visibility, high stakes clients. Adam suggested that she needed to develop her presence more. "You know your product line like the back of your hand and you are technically proficient. But in order to connect with these clients, you need to fill the room in a space with pretty big personalities." Adam also felt as if Meihui did not assert herself enough. At the conclusion of the review, Adam's parting words of advice were, "You know, Meihui, we have a saying—the squeaky wheel gets the oil. I need to hear more from you."

Meihui struggled with this advice. What should she do when all that she had been taught as she was growing up—to be more emotionally restrained, to listen and observe rather than jump in the fray and to avoid conflict and challenging authority—clashed with the norms and culture of her organization? Meihui knew that her tendency to be more reserved was not viewed favorably in the high adrenaline environment of sales. But another saying, one that she'd heard many times, ran through her mind. In contrast to Adam's advice, a common Chinese saying is that "The loudest duck gets shot." Gaining John's thoughts on how to address this feedback would be helpful. But this discussion would put them in new territory. How much could she really share with John? Would John be able to bridge their cultural differences and understand her perspective? Would John's opinion of her shift if Meihui shared her concerns?

Understanding the Dynamics of the Relationship

On one hand, John and Meihui stand to benefit from sharing their different and unique vantage points. On the other hand, the differences from which they might benefit could also be barriers to building an effective mentoring relationship. This example personifies the challenges and opportunities of understanding mentoring in a global context, as a bridge to transverse cultural differences.

Mentoring partnerships have been identified as a powerful tool to enable the careers of those advancing through the ranks in organizations (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). Mentors support their protégés by providing career support, including exposure and visibility, sponsorship, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments. Mentors also provide psychosocial or emotional support to their protégés, including acceptance and confirmation, counseling, friendship, and role modeling (Kram, 1983).

Mentoring is always fraught with the concern of how to cross boundaries, how to bridge cultural differences to show yourself, and to accompany another on their journey. The scenario that Meihui and John face offers us a chance to delve into one such area—where there is both opportunity and challenge for traversing differences of culture and ethnicity. What happens as we start to explore mentoring, not just across racial or gender differences, but across differences of culture and or nationality?

Dimensions of National Culture

Hofstede's (1984) germinal research on culture remains the benchmark for discussion of national cultures or values. His work, based on an analysis of surveys conducted with IBM employees in 49 countries around 1967 and 1973, provided descriptions of national norms and values for each country; the countries were assigned a value index along dimensions of culture that he identified. Hofstede (2001) identified four basic dimensions including *power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance.*

Power Distance represents the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country's society. A high power distance suggests that inequalities of power and wealth are very present within the society. In contrast, a low power distance indicates that there is a de-emphasis in differences between citizens in relation to power and wealth, with a focus on equality and opportunity for all. *Individualism* represents the degree to which individual or collective relationships are reinforced within a society. In highly individualistic cultures, the rights of the individual are foremost and relationships with others are characterized more loosely. In low individualistic cultures, extended families and collective relationships that support mutual responsibility are valued. These cultures are characterized by close ties between individuals. *Masculinity* highlights the degree which that culture reinforces traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power. Cultures that are high in masculinity are characterized by a high degree of gender differentiation. Those that are low in masculinity have a low level of differentiation between men and women; in these societies, we are likely to see women treated equally to men in several different societal aspects. *Uncertainty Avoidance* refers to the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Societies with high uncertainty avoidance have a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; these cultures are characterized by a number of rules, laws, and regulations to ensure order and to reduce uncertainty. In low uncertainty avoidance societies, there is less concern

about ambiguity and uncertainty; these societies are characterized by a greater tolerance for change and risk-taking and they are less rule-oriented.

Recent research has built on Hofstede's (1984) research (see House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004 for a detailed review). Despite critiques of Hofstede's work (see Javidan, House, Dorfman, Hanges, & Sully de Luque, 2006), Hofstede's dimensions of culture provide a feasible place to start to understand how mentoring might be situated differently depending on aspects of national culture.

The Impact of National Culture

How might Hofstede's dimensions of national culture impact mentoring relationships? Actually, all four dimensions are relevant to our understanding of mentoring. For the purposes of illustration, my discussion is limited to two dimensions: *Power Distance* and *Masculinity-Femininity*.

Apospori, Nikandrou and Panayotopoulou's (2006) study of mentoring in Greece provides a compelling example for understanding dimensions of culture and their potential impact on mentoring relationships. Apospori and her colleagues note that Greece has been identified as a culture that is strongly characterized by high power distance. As a result, there is a concentration of power and control in the hands of those in the highest levels of management. They suggest that because relationships in Greek culture are reflective of high power distance, it is more challenging to engender mentoring. Mentoring requires a degree of reciprocity and candid discussion that is not encouraged by high power distance dynamics. Particularly, high power distance has been found to impede upward and downward communication, to discourage personalization of the relationships between superiors and subordinates, and to reduce the amount of participative goal-setting done by management (Apospori et al., 2006). Each one of these conditions may negatively impact the potential presence and quality of mentoring relationships.

As we return to Meihui and John, we see that power distance might be a factor that could affect their relationship. John may have advice for Meihui that suggests that she challenges or questions Adam's perception of her performance. While this pushing back may be perfectly acceptable for someone who is from a culture that is low in power distance, it might be more challenging for someone who is from a high power distance culture. If Meihui is grounded in Chinese culture, which like Greece is also classified as a high power distance country, she may not feel comfortable questioning her manager's authority.

Masculinity is another dimension of culture which also influences mentoring relationships. In cultures with high levels of masculinity, the traditional roles by which both men and women are bound can impact mentoring relationships. In a recent qualitative study of 12 Indian women, I found that the gender expectations of women had several implications for their ability to initiate and maintain mentoring relationships. The sharp delineation between work and home, and the expectation that these women would limit themselves to the home sphere once they had children, set up boundaries that made initiating mentoring relationships challenging. Also, the societal expectation that cross-gender relationships at work should be tightly constrained meant that behaviors necessary to maintain mentoring relationships (close contact, frequent communication, a measure of vulnerability, and sharing) placed these women outside of accepted norms. As a result, they were subject to additional scrutiny and even attacks on their personal character. A final finding representing the strong masculinity measure of India is that only one of the women indicated that she had a female mentor. The remaining respondents indicated that they did not see models of women at high levels in their organizations; they were seeing a shift in the demographics at the top of organizations in terms of representation of women in leadership positions but the change is a slow one. All of the women in my study acknowledged the importance of mentoring for their careers; they were also cognizant of the numerous hurdles that dimensions of culture placed in their path to creating effective mentoring relationships.

Meihui and John's relationship may also be influenced by the Masculinity-Femininity dimension of culture. Meihui may be struggling with conflict between the demands of her job, that she should be aggressive, outspoken, and very visible, with cultural expectations of behavior that suggest she should be demure and understated in demeanor. If John is from a culture that is low in

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masculinity, he may not understand Meihui's reluctance to draw attention to herself.

If we look to the extant research on mentoring to delve into the interaction between John and Meihui from a cultural perspective, we won't find much to help us. Studies of mentoring are undergirded by an assumption of similarity in cultural origin. In addition, many mentoring studies have been done in a Western context, reflecting the predominance of studies based on data collected in the United States.

Mentoring as a Bridge

What lessons for navigating across cultural dimensions of difference can we gain from Meihui and John's experiences? What do Hofstede (1984, 2001) and others whose research explores dimensions of culture offer to those who are navigating relationships across traditions and rituals? There are strategies that those involved with mentoring can implement to navigate these relationships—at both individual and group levels. Mentoring can serve as a bridge at each level—a passageway to gain access to alternative perspectives and insights.

At the individual level, one of the most effective competencies to enable mentoring relationships is emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). To the extent that individuals are aware of and managing their emotions (through self-awareness and self-regulation) and in touch with the emotions of others (through empathy and social skills), they may find that their mentoring relationships are strengthened. Emotional intelligence is a useful bridging competency because as mentoring partners are reaching across dimensions of difference, they are likely to face misunderstandings and miscommunications that can devastate a mentoring relationship. But if they have a tool to navigate the emotional aspects of mentoring, they stand a much better chance of being able to effectively leverage their differences to enhance their mentoring relationship.

At the group level, individuals may be required to show greater cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence is the ability to make sense of and fit into unfamiliar contexts (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). Cultural intelligence represents the ability to distinguish between what aspects of behavior can be attributed to cultural norms and what aspects are idiosyncratic, to understand what is specific versus what is general. Within mentoring relationships, understanding the difference between cultural influence and individual attributes may provide critical guidance to a mentor like John as he is offering feedback to Meihui. If John thinks that Meihui is not challenging her manager because she is an introvert or shy, he may offer different advice than if he believes that she is showing restraint because it is her cultural tradition. So the understanding of what is cultural

and what is idiosyncratic is an important factor for consideration.

"Gathering people from many geographies in a multicultural approach is a mark of inclusivity, increased consciousness and dialogue" (Anzaldua, 2002, p. 3). Given the changing global demographics combined with workplace trends, how people relate to each other is of immediate practical importance. It speaks to the effectiveness of organizations as well as to individuals' abilities to advance in their careers and to gain satisfaction from their work. At the same time, there are differences of nationality that require us to do some additional work in reaching across chasms to build mentoring relationships. In light of the changing workforce, that ability to bridge the cultural gaps that separate us will be increasingly critical to the sustained well-being of a diverse workforce. Now more than ever, mentoring can serve as a bridge to crossing cultural differences.

Reflection Questions for Examining and Expanding Mentoring Practice

1. What does your institution need to do to create a climate for building trust with people who are culturally different from the majority group?
2. What are the advantages and challenges of mentoring across dimensions of culture?
3. How does mentoring across cultural differences enhance the mentoring process in your organization?

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