

With a little help from our friends: How to leverage relationships for employee and management development

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Learning **4** Learning
Professionals

Executive Summary

As learning is viewed more and more as embedded in day-to-day work rather than in separate formal learning events, human resource development professions seek to leverage the value of learning through relationships as a deliberate developmental tool. Research and theory in HRD provides the following recommendations for enabling and leveraging all kinds of developmental relationships.

- Check that the right interpersonal, relational, and organizational factors are in play to produce solid developmental relationships.
- Ensure that those in organization-initiated relationships intentionally engage in the specific developer or learner processes that generate learning.
- Provide support for people to learn from and with one another by orienting them to their roles and developing their skill in proven developer/learner processes if necessary.

Target Audience

This material will be especially useful for those who are:

- Designing a mentoring program or “buddy” program to support employee development
- Looking to use social learning or learning communities as a developmental support mechanism
- Seeking to enhance their own professional development by deliberately engaging with others as mentors, peer developers, or coaches

Questions in Practice



Developmental relationships are one-on-one relationships that facilitate learning and growth.

This article addresses the following questions:

- What needs to be in place for relationships to successfully support development?
- How can we successfully leverage relationships to support development goals?
- How do relationships develop people? What is the approach developers and learners take that makes these relationships powerful for developing knowledge and skill?
- What should developers and learners be taught about these relationships that might help them to establish more successful relationships?
- What precipitates the failure of formal relationships initiated by the organization to support development?

How to leverage relationships for employee and management development

If you listen to the hype, it might seem that social learning is a new technique in human resource development. The truth of the matter is that humans have learned through interpersonal interactions and informal means at least since the dawn of civilization.

The process and benefits of learning in relationship has become a valued topic for theory and research in the field. Particular attention has been paid to the custom of mentoring and using other kinds of one-on-one developmental relationships. From Greek myths to today, we recognize that acolytes, disciples, students, and apprentices trace their knowledge and expertise to having learned from teachers and master craftspeople. Passing knowledge and skill from person to person is also an integral part of culture and family dynamics.

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Our modern, connected age is moving toward a greater reliance on learning in the context of day-to-day work, the transmission in tacit knowledge, and the co-creation of knowledge and skill to meet emerging challenges in the workplace. This new culture of learning is putting interpersonal learning in the spotlight. HRD professionals want to leverage relationships as part of a comprehensive strategy for the development of needed skills.

This kind of learning is not as easily controlled and tracked as are attendance in formal courses and achievement of set learning objectives. In interpersonal learning, objectives are loose and progress is incremental and difficult to capture and measure. Nonetheless, professionals who support learning and development of specific skills recognize that engaging mentors and peers as developers can be critical. To be successful, therefore, HRD professionals must develop a deeper understanding about how learning through relationships works in order to design and encourage interpersonal learning that will have the intended impact.

The rich array of developmental relationships

Support for professional development can come from a wide variety of people, from a direct supervisor, to a spouse, to a professional colleague. The most often referenced interpersonal relationship aimed at professional development is the mentor-protégé relationship, and many organizations employ mentoring programs to accelerate development. Among researchers, mentoring has a specific operational definition – a developer at least two levels above the mentee and a relationship focused on socialization, accelerated growth, and career advancement. Many studies have revealed positive outcomes for the mentee when these relationships work – rapid promotions, meaty assignments, development of political savvy, and smooth introduction to the powers-that-be in an organization.

But a mentor relationship is only one of the ways that individuals connect with others in the workplace. We often use the term *developmental relationships* to refer to one-on-one relationships that facilitate learning and growth.

Developmental relationships go by a number of names – peer mentor, “buddy,” role model, coach, senior (or tenured) peer, learning coach, on-the-job trainer, or no real title at all other than colleague or co-worker. Sometimes, direct supervisors or managers take on a developmental role as well (in fact, many of the best managers are terrific at developing people). Researchers have documented that most professionals indeed have an entire network of relationships that support them in achieving developmental goals. And many organizations use the term “community of practice”¹ to describe networks of people who work and grow professionally together.

In this discussion, we will focus on the ways that people interact in a work context that promotes knowledge and skill growth. The recommendations are drawn from theory and research that focuses primarily on relational

learning dynamics in which one player is seen as more knowledgeable or tenured and the other is cast in a learning mode, either for the purposes of knowledge and skill development or for career advancement. That said, most people are both learners and teachers at various times within a developmental relationships, and researchers often characterize developmental relationships as mutually supportive, even when there is a power or level differential. In exploring learning through relationships, we need to understand that the roles of developer and learner switch off among people who work together in a highly dynamic way. At the same time, we can recognize that there are sustained periods of enacting the learner role when people are new to their jobs, and there are sustained periods of being a developer when people desire to pass on their hard-earned learning to others.

The construction and dynamics of these relationships vary in many different ways so it can be difficult to characterize them. Nonetheless, researchers Andrew Rock and Thomas Garavan have been able to tease out the ways that these relationships tend to vary.² They describe differences in focus, for example, as some are focused on developing interpersonal savvy, some on sharing knowledge and skill related to a specific role, and some on long term career trajectories. Relationships also vary in time span - some intense for just a few weeks, while others spanning a large arc of a career. And developers take different approaches, some using a very active or directive stance, while others act more as sounding boards.

Those who support learning and development recognize the value of interpersonal relationships in increasing employees' knowledge, strengthening their skill sets, and shaping identity and commitment. While these relationships develop naturally, it's also true that organizations can create environments in which these relationships thrive – and in which they fail. It is important, therefore, to have an understanding of the dynamics that increase the possibility that people will connect with each other and experience growth from those relationships.

How relationships form and flourish

There are a number of individual, relational, and organizational factors that influence the likelihood of individuals engaging in relationships for developmental purposes, and these factors also influence the depth of the relationship.³ Individual factors were identified from studies that focused on the learner, but it's likely that developers, too, need these same qualities. Relational factors describe key characteristics of the relationship and the behaviors engaged in by the developer and learner. And organizational factors describe supportive qualities of the environment in which the two of them work. See Figure 1.

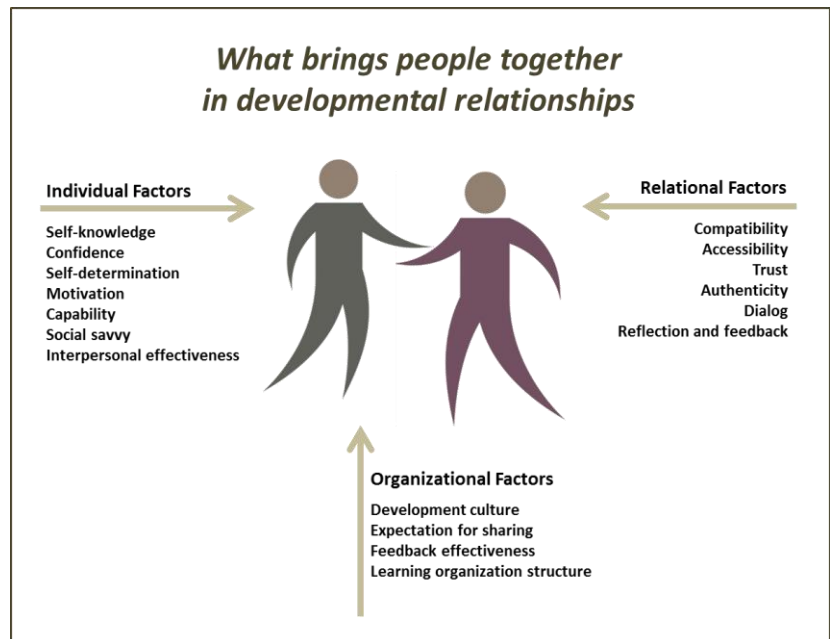


Figure 1

The factors that allow relationships to form and flourish are defined as follows:

Individual Factors

Self-knowledge – knowing one’s own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences; recognizing one’s identity.

Confidence – for learners, a belief that they can grow if they apply themselves, and the belief that they themselves can initiate that growth; for developers, the assurance that they have something to give in the relationship.

Self-determination – the ability to set one’s own goals.

Motivation – the inclination to engage to achieve desired results.

Capability –having the skills to learn and to teach or develop others along with readiness to change.

Social savvy – an understanding of one’s social network, how to build it, and how to engage with it for developmental purposes.

Interpersonal effectiveness – the communication skills to engage in a relationship.

Relational Factors

Compatibility – the feeling that two people can relate to one another, which can be based in both similarities and complimentary differences.

Accessibility – the ability to come in contact with each other, which can be facilitated through physical proximity or effective virtual connectivity.

Trust – a belief that the other has your best interests at heart, that he or she will keep commitments and be candid.

Authenticity – the ability to bring one’s true self to the relationship, to be open and honest.

Dialog – the ability to engage in deep conversation, to effectively communicate and listen.

Reflection and feedback – the ability to engage in conversation that specifically utilizes questioning, deep reflection and feedback for growth.

Organizational Factors

Development culture – a culture where learning is the norm.

Expectation for sharing – an atmosphere of teamwork and inclination to help one another.

Feedback effectiveness – an emphasis on quality and timeliness of feedback and expectation that feedback will be used to guide change.

Learning organization structure – a structure that supports continuous improvement.

By reviewing this list of influential factors, HRD leaders can identify a few leverage points for actively promoting relationships.

To solidify individual factors. HRD professionals can validate and promote learner readiness by helping learners to know their strengths and weaknesses, identify goals, and develop interpersonal skills. They can also promote the critical factor of learner motivation by emphasizing individual benefits. Developer readiness can also be promoted by defining the purpose of the relationship and ensuring that developers are motivated and capable to engage.

To solidify relational factors. To promote the relationship, HRD professionals can bring together compatible people by looking at their goals, areas of expertise, career trajectories, personality types, and other factors. They can encourage and enable the pair to meet frequently. It may also be helpful to support the development of skills in dialog and feedback.

To solidify organizational factors. HRD professionals should work to build a developmental culture in the organization, creating a positive environment for sharing and feedback along with the structure that makes that as easy as possible.

When these relationships go wrong, it's often due to lack of commitment, lack of contact, a failure to identify a purpose for the relationship, or lack of preparation for developer-learner meetings.⁴

It's also important to note that being a "follower" or "friend" does not necessarily create a developmental relationship; these social media relationships have real value, but they can lack the depth of interpersonal contact to be characterized as developmental relationships. The factors above give clues as to the ways these relationships can be nurtured in order to become more developmental.

How we learn in developmental relationships

Relationships are dynamic and unique; they vary in terms of how people interact with one another, how often they connect, the activities they engage in together, and the degree of closeness they engender. It's understandable, then, that the ways that people learn from and with each other also vary widely, and it seems to be a daunting exercise to put our finger on exactly what is occurring so that we can encourage those actions that generate learning.

Nonetheless, a number of studies have looked at learning processes and teased out specific actions on the part of developers as well as actions engaged by learners. These processes are summarized in Figure 2.⁵ These activities may be engaged sporadically with a wide range of people in an individual's network. For example, a learner may draw out lessons (vicarious learning) from listening to a personal anecdote presented by an organizational leader (personal openness), but the two do not have a developmental relationship. Effective developmental relationships, on the other hand, engage most if not all of these processes in an exchange characterized by compatibility, trust, authenticity, and meaningful dialog. In that context, the activities below accelerate learning.

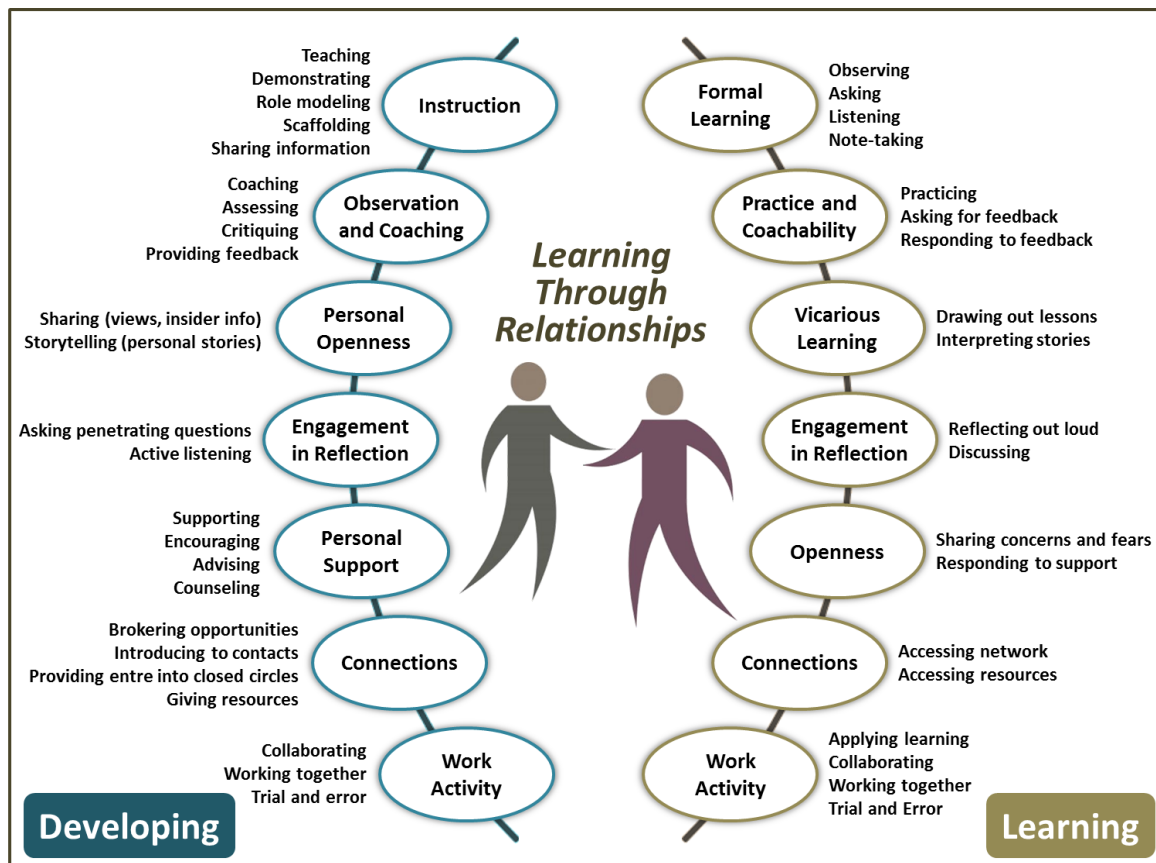


Figure 2

Many of these activities can be conceived of as a type of call and response: the developer acts as role model, the learner observes and emulates; the learner practices, the developer critiques and coaches; the developer challenges the learner to think more deeply, the learner reflects out loud and engages in a discussion of options and ramifications, etc.

In the “work activity” category of processes, though, the dynamic changes. In the activities of day-to-day work, knowledge is discovered and new skills emerge. Oftentimes in working together the distinction between developer and learner disappears as they become engrossed in co-creating knowledge and co-inventing practice.

In all of these instances, there is a degree of intentionality to the learning. It isn’t just stumbled upon or accidentally absorbed. There is deliberate action meant to transfer knowledge or develop skill, and deliberate pursuit of learning. We could also describe the characteristics that make each of these activities effective. We know from research, for example, that *critiquing* is most impactful when it is timely, focused on changeable

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behavior, and specific. We know that it is important to gradually reduce *scaffolding* and let learners take on more and more of the action on their own. Across all of the activities, key characteristics include clarity, relevance, genuineness, candor, focus on behavior, gradual lessening of degree of support (whatever its nature), and good communication and listening skills.

Experts in developmental relationships recommend that HRD leaders promote developmental relationships by working with people to identify goals, develop excellent communication skills, and learn particular techniques related to whatever process they want to engage.⁶ It is important that developers and learners are aware of the full range of learning processes available to them; having the full picture may prompt them to engage processes they had not been considering.

Leveraging relationships to support development

While the formation of developmental relationships is a natural, ongoing phenomenon, it is sometimes appropriate for HRD leaders and managers to intentionally set up and promote relationships for specific learning and development goals. This strategy is especially important when knowledge and skill is largely tacit, and when practices are changing so rapidly there is not time to package them into formal resources or training programs. Learning through relationships is also important when there are clear thought or practice leaders whose practices you would like to see promulgated in the organization.

Understanding the dynamics of developmental relationships can give you ideas about what to do to create and strengthen them. Developers and learners themselves may also want to deepen what they are able to accomplish through these relationships.

Here are some specific recommendations for practice:

- Check that the right interpersonal, relational, and organizational factors are in play to produce solid developmental relationships.
- Ensure that those in organization-initiated relationships intentionally engage in the specific developer or learner processes that generate learning.
- Provide support for people to learn from and with one another by orienting them to their roles and developing their skill in proven developer/learner processes if necessary.

In Practice

If you are planning to promote a developmental relationship or social learning strategy to achieve specific employee or management development goals in your organization, consider these questions, and design your program to create or support these factors:

- To what degree are learners able to identify their own development goals? Do they clearly understand their strengths and weaknesses?
- Are learners motivated to learn and grow along the dimensions you would like them to develop? To what degree might they intend to apply what they are learning to change their on-the-job behaviors and performance?
- Do learners have the interpersonal skills to engage effectively in relationships? Can they effectively form their own relationships, or will organizational support be helpful to match them with appropriate developers?
- To what degree does the work environment support learners and developers finding one another? Is it obvious to learners who the most appropriate guides might be? Is it obvious to developers that they have knowledge and skill that learners need?
- Where and when will learners and developers be able to meet (in person or virtually)? Is the environment conducive to deep conversation?
- Will learners and developers be willing to trust one another? Are there factors in the environment that might negatively impact the pair's ability to establish trust and behave authentically in the relationship?
- Do learners and developers have the skill to engage in deep conversation and effectively communicate with one another, especially with regard to giving and receiving feedback?
- To what degree is learning and development a cultural norm in the organization?
- To what degree is the work culture conducive to sharing and feedback?
- Where your assessment of any of these factors is unfavorable, what can you do to mitigate the impact on the success of the developmental relationships you are promoting?
- To what degree are learners and developers aware of the entire set of possible behaviors that facilitate learning through relationships?
- How skilled are learners and developers at engaging the behaviors that facilitate learning through relationships? Which of the processes are most important in the context you are supporting?

Footnotes

¹ Communities of practice theory is a related field of study. While developmental relationship theory focuses on the individual and his/her network of developers, communities of practice theory focuses on groups of people learning and working together on a common domain and set of practices. See, for example, Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

² For a more thorough discussion of these differences, see Rock & Garavan, 2006. (Details in bibliography)

³ Individual and organizational factors are drawn from Rock & Garavan, 2011; relational influences are drawn from Rock & Garavan, 2006. (Details in bibliography)

⁴ See, for example, Hamlin, R. & Sage, L. (2011). Behavioral criteria of perceived mentoring effectiveness. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 35(8), 752-778.

⁵ The learning processes were synthesized from Hezlett, 2005, Jones, 2013, and Lombardozi & Casey, 2008. (Details in bibliography)

⁶ Recommendations for practice drawn from Chandler, Hall & Kram, 2010 (Details in bibliography)

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