WHAT'S IN IT FOR MENTORS?

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"Why did you do all this for me?" [Wilbur] asked. "I don't deserve it. I've never done anything for you."

"You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "...By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift my life a trifle. Heaven knows, anyone's life can stand a little of that."

—E. B. White, Charlotte's Web

BACKGROUND

This quotation raises, and then helps us answer, the question, “Do volunteers derive any benefits from mentoring?” The potential rewards to mentors are rarely considered in youth mentoring. Instead relationships are conveyed mainly in terms of the mentor selflessly giving to the mentee in a decidedly one-sided relationship. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that mentors stand nothing to gain. In fact, when mentors don’t derive benefits, relationships are at greater risk for early termination. One-sided relationships drain mentors of enthusiasm and leave mentees feeling burdened by the imbalance.

Alternatively, when mentees see that admired adults find it personally rewarding to spend time with them, they feel a new surge of self-worth and empowerment.

Frank Riessman’s helper-therapy principle—that people help themselves through the process of being genuinely helpful to others—is particularly applicable to understanding the considerable rewards of mentoring.¹ The sense of efficacy and pride that can come from being admired and helpful may well be a driving force in the positive changes commonly observed in mentors’ lives. As the saying goes, “if you help someone up the hill, you get closer to the top yourself.”

RESEARCH

A number of recent studies have focused specifically on the benefits of youth mentoring and other forms of volunteerism, particularly in the workplace and in the lives of older adults.

Benefits of youth mentoring:

To examine mentors’ experiences in relationships, Kate Philip & Leo Hendrey² recently conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 30 mentees (aged 13 to 18) and 30 adult mentors.

Mentors perceived the experience of being identified as a mentor and the process of mentoring in highly positive terms.

Mentors’ experiences provided them with a form of “cultural capital,” that helped them to:
- Make sense of their own past (sometimes difficult) experiences and current challenges;
- Gain insight into the day-to-day lives of youth; and
- Develop positive, more reciprocal relationships with youth.

Cultural capital was described as a “set of recipes to deal with the challenges they [mentors] face in their day to day lives.” These challenges included dealing with difficulties in relationships with their own children and others, and surviving on few resources.
The Commonwealth Fund\(^3\) surveyed a nationally representative sample of adult mentors of youth. It found:

- Three-quarters of the 1,504 mentors surveyed reported that their experience had had a “very positive” effect on their lives. They felt that mentoring provided a break from their busy professional lives and a chance to give something back.
- Eighty-three percent indicated that they learned or gained something personally from their mentoring experience, including feeling that they were a better person, increased patience, friendship, a feeling of effectiveness, and a chance to acquire skills.

Another study\(^4\) interviewed mentors regarding their perceptions of the personal benefits of the relationship. Respondents identified several benefits:

- Enhanced self-images. Mentors saw themselves as being competent, helpful, visionary and loved.
- Feelings of accomplishment and the creation of networks of other volunteers.
- Fulfilling expression of the mentor’s spiritual values.

Studies\(^5\) have discussed benefits to mentors, including:

- Improved health and self-esteem;
- Insight into one’s own childhood or children;
- Public recognition; and
- Enriching mentors’ family life, e.g., when mentees provide support and companionship to the mentors’ children.

Interestingly, the experience of being a mentee, appears to help pave the way for later mentoring. In a recent study, researchers found that individuals who had been mentored in the past anticipated fewer costs and more benefits than those who were never mentored.\(^6\) Thus, in addition to helping today’s youth, mentoring programs may be helping to develop a pool of future mentors.

As Schulz\(^7\) noted, “There is a pure enjoyment in working with someone who is open to learning and who values what the mentor has to say. Mentoring is positive and infectious, the reasons why many protégés eventually take on the role of mentor.”

**IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS**

Efforts to recruit mentors should highlight the potential benefits to volunteers. Campaigns that point out the potential health, psychosocial and career benefits of mentoring may attract more volunteers.

Evaluations of mentoring should not be limited in scope to mentees. Policy makers, funders and others should be made aware of the fact that mentoring programs can promote the well-being of both mentees and mentors.

Organizations, such as AARP, which was founded on the principle, “To serve, not to be served,” should be reminded of the research on the benefits of mentoring to retirees.

Efforts to increase business and organizational involvement in mentoring should draw on the research regarding the benefits of workplace programs.
LITERATURE CITED


