ACHIEVING AN EFFECTIVE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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Abstract - In Hong Kong, vocational education and training (VET) has been playing a vital role in broadening the learning opportunities for school leavers and in-service personnel as well as nurturing the requisite uman capital in support of Hong Kong's development (Education Bureau, 2015). Although a robust model of vocational pedagogy is still under researched and undertheorised (UNESCO, 2014), mentoring has been long employed as a learning and teaching strategy to develop skills in workplaces. Successful mentoring very much depends on the quality of the relationship between mentor and mentee. This study aims to identify the essential elements for achieving an effective mentoring relationship. The findings would be a pilot study for developing further case studies for training on workplace mentoring in different vocations. Apart from reviewing relevant articles on this area, four interviews were conducted in order to solicit information on authentic workplace mentoring cases which are valuable information for potential workplace mentors. Four interviewees were experienced incumbent workplace mentors invited from the industry partners of a vocational institute. A list of well-structured questions was used to probe the information during the interviews. In conclusion, to achieve a quality experience in mentoring, mentors should have the core competencies such as understanding others, self-awareness, organizational know-how, commitment to own learning, relationship management, effective communication skill and desire to develop others. It was found that the workplace mentors in this study have similar opinion on such essential core competencies for a mentor. All of them also acknowledged that a mentor's positive attitudes and key skills as well as a mentee's behaviours and willingness to participate during the mentoring process are significant factors in achieving an effective mentoring relationship.

Index Terms - Mentoring, Pastoral Care, Guidance and Counseling

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education and training (VET) is often seen as the second-chance education because not all students can benefit from traditional academic pursuits. However, technical and vocational education and training is now widely seen as having a key role in promoting both economic and socio-economic growth, increasing productivity, empowering citizens and alleviating poverty around the world (UNESCO, 2014). Likewise, in Hong Kong, VET has been playing a vital role in broadening the learning opportunities for school leavers and in-service personnel as well as nurturing the requisite human capital in support of Hong Kong's development (Education Bureau, 2015). In this connection, it has been receiving increasing policy attention during recent years in Hong Kong. For example, the Chief Executive's Policy Address in 2014 emphasised on the importance of vocational education, and subsequently formed the Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education to conduct an overview of the vocational education and advise the Secretary for Education on strategies and concrete proposals to raise the awareness and recognition of vocational education in Hong Kong.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Benefits of mentoring

Mentoring is a distinct relationship where one person (the mentor) supports the learning, development and progress of another person (mentee) (Starr, 2014). There was evidence that learners in higher education benefited from mentoring by learning long-standing practices of the trades and major professions in the workplace (Billett, 2001). Likewise, workplace mentors believed in the efficacy of mentoring approach which could assist learning in the workplace (Billett, 2003, Tyler, 2011). Mentoring programmes are also becoming increasingly popular in workplaces as many companies noted that not only mentee benefits from mentoring but also the workplace mentor and the organization (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2017; Hussain, 2009; University of Wolverhampton Business School, 2010; Gray & Goregaokar, 2013). In Hong Kong, mentoring could be one of the signature pedagogies to facilitate vocational education and training in view of the characteristics of the curriculum design of VET programmes. According to the Education Bureau of Hong Kong (EDB, 2017), the VET programmes are rich in specialized contents in its curriculum design. The objectives of VET programmes are to acquire the appropriate attitude, knowledge and skills to support their initial employment at the para-professional level. Therefore, teaching and learning in VET emphasized the blending of theoretical knowledge and practical application which enables students to pursue a career in a specific field. Evidence suggested that workplace learning experience are essential to develop the kinds of skills required for entry into, and competent performance in, students' selected occupations (Billett, 2003). Through engaging in

work activities, learners are exposed to the realities of today's workplace and such real life learning experience is very important in VET. Mentoring, as a pedagogic practice, could then provide learners with integrated experiences and insights into the relevance oftheir study and chosen profession (Cooper et al, 2010).

Through learning alongside their workplace mentors who are expert and experienced workers, learners could develop general employability skills as well as specific skills required for a selected occupations. Therefore, many VET course providers in Hong Kong would arrange students to undertake industry attachment prior to graduation.

B. Mentor's personal qualities for building a successful mentor-mentee relationship

To effectively facilitate workplace learning through mentoring, a good mentoring relationship needs to be achieved during the mentoring process. To articulate a successful mentoring relationship, it is essential for a mentor to have the following core competence identified in different publications (American Psychological Association, 2006; Chao, G.T., 1997; Clutterbuck Associates, 2005; Diagne, L., 2008; Loretto, P. 2017; Lowbridge, 2012; Manchester Metropolitan University, 2017; The Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern Pennsylvania, 2017; University of Greenwich, 2013; University of Wolverhampton Business School, 2009/10):



Understanding others

Mentors should be able to understand different perspectives of the mentees by being sensitive to their emotions and feelings. For example, mentors should recognize mentees' body language, listen not only to the mentees' words but also to understand their underlying meaning. Mentors should also appreciate the differences between two unique individuals rather than forcing their personal views on mentee in a mentoring relationship. For example, mentors have to value and respect mentees' viewpoints and initiatives so as to help them build selfconfidence and self-esteem.

Self-awareness

Mentors should have a clear understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses which can help them to be open and to empathise with the mentee's behaviours. Mentors should be able to master their own personalities, language and behaviours well so as to develop rapport and trust with their mentees.

Organisational know-how

Mentors are selected to be mentors because they are skilled in their industry jobs. Therefore, they are business or professional savvy who should have the knowledge of the organisation, networks, processes/knowledge of how things work.

- **Commitment to own learning**

Mentors should be committed and open to their own development needs. They should see mentoring as an opportunity to enrich their own experience and inspire for excellence.

- **Relationship management**

Mutual respect and trust are key components of rapport building as they could eventually create a secure and safe environment for mentoring to take place. Hughes (2004) concluded that a trust relationship could increase the mentees willingness to reveal and reflect upon the messiness of their learning. Likewise, Higgin et al. (2008) pointed out that a mentor who could build a significant trust relationship with mentees could engage them in learning effectively. Mutual respect and trust could be achieved by being an effective listener, for example, keeping openminded, and being sensitive to diversity and empathetic to mentee's feelings and points of views. Mentors could also build a positive influence with trust and engagement, for example, keeping confidential for anything discussed with the mentee, honoring the scheduled meetings, showing support and being honest with the mentees.

Communication

Mentors need to have excellent communication skills including listening, questioning, explaining and giving constructive feedback. A good mentor is capable of asking appropriate questions to clarify mentee's needs and explore additional information. He or she should be able to understand ideas and feelings of others with an open mind and suspending judgements. Mentoring involves both communication and interaction. Good mentoring communication builds on trust and respect, dialogue rather than monologue - both mentor and mentee feel comfortable in each other's presence. As such, the mentor should be cautious about their use of language during the discussion in order to avoid being falsely perceived as the superior figure in the relationship,

and to ensure that the mentee is given enough space and opportunity to communicate. Also, an open and honest communication could create a secure and safe environment for freely expression of unpleasant and sensitive issues, feelings, constructive and critical feedback, and innovative ways of thinking.

Desire to develop others

The attitude of mentor is also one of the factors affecting mentoring relationship (Allen, 1997; Billett, 2003). As such, good mentors are those who are willing to invest time inhelping and developing other people. According to the research of Billett (2003), there was evidence that a supportive workplace environment would help generate positive benefits of mentoring. Once the mentors committed to the mentoring relationship, they should devote certain amount of time and meet with the mentees according to the schedule mutually agreed. Also, mentors should be willing to share skills, knowledge and expertise with the mentee. They should demonstrate a positive attitude and devote sufficient time to offer support and guidance to mentees, and express a desire and genuine care to help other people grow. For example, during the mentoring process, the mentor should not only support but also give the mentee an adequate level of challenge in order to stimulate the mentee's professional growth. Sometimes, the mentor could lead challenging discussion by setting positive expectations and asking curious questions.

III. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

This is a case study designed to identify the essential elements for building a successful mentoring relationship. Apart from reviewing relevant articles on this area, four personal interviews were also conducted in order to identify essential elements from authentic mentoring cases in different vocations for building a successful mentoring relationship. Selection of the workplace mentors was mainly due to convenience around operational requirement - the interviewees were experienced incumbent workplace mentors from three vocations - Servicing (Mentor A), healthcare and community service (Mentors B and C), business and management (Mentor D) – selected from the industry partners of a vocational institute in Hong Kong. The following six well-structured questions were used to probe
the information during the interviews:

1. What are the benefits of mentoring?
2. What do you normally do during mentoring?
3. How did you build rapport with your mentee(s) at the beginning?
4. Are there any special issues you have encountered during the mentoring process? How did you deal with these issues?
5. Did you come across any mentees that you couldn't match with them? How did you solve the problem then?
6. What tips would you give to those who are going to be mentors?

Information collected in these personal interviews was interpreted and used to derive the significant and valid elements for developing an effective mentoring relationship in vocational education and training. Although the authentic workplace cases were collected from a limited samples of workplace mentors, this study did capture experiences of specific workplace mentors to distinguish essential elements contributing to a successful mentoring, as well as to highlight some practical constraints in mentoring and offer practical suggestions and references.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section summarised the findings from the authentic mentoring cases shared among workplace mentors in the personal interviews.

A. Key success factors for a workplace mentoring

The following essential elements were finally derived according to the mentoring cases shared by these workplace mentors.

Mentees should be well prepared at the beginning of the mentoring

Mentor A said: "I usually clarifies the expectations and responsibilities of both parties at the beginning as a workplace is very different from a school environment. And, I usually sets learning outcomes on the first meeting day and then keeps track on the learning progress." Mentors B and C said: "we usually have a practice to brief the mentees about the work procedures and remind them to be vigilant to the workplace environment. Due to the job nature, the mentees should be well informed of the panic working environment and the severe impacts of making mistakes. Also, we always remind mentees to have a good learning attitude – be pro-active and punctual, and treasure every learning opportunity." Mentor D said: "it is a professional practice to plan ahead before the mentoring process. For example, I will set theagenda before each meeting, and normally send the mentees the guiding questions prior to the next meeting so as to let them brainstorm the points and prepare for the discussions."

The importance of a mentor's attitude towards mentoring

Mentor A said: "I always view myself as a role model to the mentee - showing the mentee a positive and professional workplace attitude, and correct ethical standard." Mentors B and C said: "We love being mentors as it's a recognition of our ability and we could achieve a sense of self-satisfaction from helping others to develop.....Wefound that the sharing between a mentor and mentee should not be limited to subject knowledge, but also about the

mentor's personal experience in people's relationship, personal growth, career planning and development. We therefore always kept ourselves abreast of the professional knowledge as well as relevant mentoring skills in order to be competent mentors." Mentor D said: "My character is people-oriented. I love being a mentor as I can enlighten others by sharing my own experience. Mentoring is a very meaningful and enjoyable job - I always have a feeling of self-satisfaction during the mentoring process."

A mentor's soft skills would bring mentoring a success

Apart from a positive attitude towards mentoring, a mentor should have different kinds of soft skills in order to make the mentoring relationship a success. All mentors agreed unanimously that a successful mentor should have the following soft skills:

- A mentor should have good listening skill so as to help mentees identify their difficulties;
- Instead of pointing out mistakes directly to the mentees, the mentor could use questioning techniques to encourage mentees to reflect on their performance;
- A mentor needs to speak tactfully while giving feedback on performance in order to encourage improvement and build a rapport relationship with the mentee.
- The mentor has to render support to the mentees by providing counselling when they encountered problems and frustrations at work.

On top of the above common views, mentors B and C added: "it's important that a mentor is willing to appreciate mentees' opinion and praise them for any good performance and improvement." Likewise, Mentor D stated: "a mentor's praise on mentees' improvement could reinforce their good behaviours." Mentor D further stated "a mentor should be able to keep confidential for anything discussed with the mentee throughout the mentoring process. Only this criterion could bring about a true sharing between the mentor and mentee."

Challenges of a workplace mentoring

The following are main challenges experienced by the workplace mentors interviewed in this study:

- **Mentee's attitudes towards mentoring**

In some cases, a mentee's attitude towards mentoring could be a barrier to a mentoring relationship. Mentor A said: "I was assigned a mentee in a university's mentoring programme. Although I took the initiative to approach the mentee at different intervals, the mentee has never contacted me." "In another mentoring programme, I was matched with a mentee who was very proud of his own background and experience in business, and this mentoring was not successful as he refused to take advice from other people." Mentors B and C said: "We have encountered some mentees who were difficult to get along with people and not cooperative which rendered a failure in developing a good mentoring relationship." Mentor D said: "I had come across a very experienced and over confident mentee, who never took my advice though he had room for improvement." "I was also assigned a mentee who was very defensive and this mentoring was not a happy ending."

- **Mentor's personal qualities and commitment**

Mentors B and C said: "as mentoring is a time-consuming job, mentors' long commitment is a real challenge for a workplace mentoring. For example, in order to be competent workplace mentors, we need to put additional effort to prepare for the mentoring on top of our normal daily jobs, such as trying to be vigilant to the new development of the field, attending trainings on mentoring etc." Mentor D said: "a mentor's personal qualities is crucial to a successful mentoring. If a person doesn't appreciate the value of mentoring nor have a personal aspiration to share personal experience with others, he/she would find mentoring a difficult and frustrated job."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the workplace mentors shared their perspectives and experiences on mentoring and also shared some good practices that could help develop such relationship. Three essential elements contributing to a successful and effective workplace mentoring are finally derived according to the mentoring cases shared by these workplace mentors. Surprisingly, these elements are closely related with those mentor's personal qualities identified in the literature review.

Research findings (Allen, 1997; Billett, 2003) concluded that mentor's attitude is crucial during the mentoring process. All workplace mentors in this study demonstrated a positive attitude towards mentoring and an aspiration to develop others. They had no hesitation to devote their time in mentoring and valued it as an opportunity to enrich their own experience and articulate a sense of self-satisfaction. They also shared the belief that "a successful mentoring always started with good preparation" - one of the key success factors derived from their cases. The workplace mentors opined that good communication skills, empathy, organization know-how, being trustworthy (confidentiality), open-mindedness, conveying respect and acceptance are essential personal qualities for a mentor. These soft skills also corresponded with those identified as a mentor's personal qualities for building a successful mentormentee relationship in those research findings summarized in the Literature Review. All workplace mentors in this study acknowledged that a successful and fruitful workplace mentoring very much depends on the contributions of both mentor and mentee. In

some cases, a mentor's personal characters and his willingness to give long-commitment to mentoring could be a challenge for a workplace mentoring. But a mentee's behaviour and willingness to participate is equally important to the success of a mentoring relationship. Also, a timely match between the mentor and the mentee, in terms of their expectations, backgrounds and needs could help motivating a mentee's participation. In short, a number of elements contributed to a successful and effective workplace mentoring relationship. It is hoped that the sharing of these workplace mentors could arousethe awareness of potential workplace mentors on these essential elements and practical constraints in mentoring. The information collected from this study would be used as references for developing further training on workplace mentoring in different vocations.

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