Teachability in leading organizational mentees: A narrative analysis of reverse mentoring as reflexive moments for coping in personal crisis

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Introduction

With increasing complexity in organizational life through globalization and rapid technological changes, management and organizational literature have begun to move toward a more dynamic and emergent relational conception of organizational processes (Miller, 2015; Barge & Oliver, 2003). Weick (1979; 1995) argued that organizational life is an ongoing process of change and sense-making. Thus, organizations should be seen as their *verb* denotation, organizing. Organizing, as a verb rather than a noun, places greater emphasis on organizational processes and organizations as the collective enactment of ongoing work. In turn, communication becomes centralized in the construction of the social organizational environment (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

As a communicative act, leaders manage meaning while co-constructing new organizational realties through linguistic devices such as stories (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Barge, 2004b). Fairhurst (2007) demonstrates the discursive nature of leading through conversation. By doing so, Fairhurst brings to light the advantages of privileging a communicative lens when explicating the essence of leadership. Her work does so by acknowledging leadership is an attributed meaning, which is often contested in the terra firma of relationships and organizing processes (Cooren, 2006). For the purpose of this study, leading as mentoring must also be examined using a communicative lens, much like Fairhurst has applied to leadership studies. More specifically, this study is interested in narratives and how they can construct positive work experiences and enable the development of relational and loss coping mechanisms. Central to this argument is the contested nature of meaning, and thus, what leading/mentoring is. Leading/mentoring

often connotes a top-down influence model assuming that the leader/mentor powerfully influences the follower/protégé; however, the top-down, authoritarian, influence model is contested in this study as mentoring is examined as mutually influential and reversing the top-down model to examine how a protégé may also powerfully influence the mentor, termed reverse mentoring. This study synthesizes stories lived – the actual experiences lived by the actants – and stories told – the performative telling of stories lived by actants afterwards – using narrative analysis to balance how reverse mentoring simultaneously assists mentors and protégés in making sense of complex communication environments (Barge, 2004a; 2004b; Pearce & Cronen, 1980).

Highlighting teachability as a chief characteristic of leading, reverse mentoring co-constructs new narratives for both mentor and protégé, in the case of this study to cope with crisis situations. Reciprocal openness to divergent perspectives lends itself to moments in which stories merge and cross to influence both organizational leader and protégé. Thus, appreciative multivocality enables all voices to lead in the co-construction of new organizational and personal narratives. In turn, mentees, and term without the culture baggage, are empowered and motivated to invest in the organization and the relationship of others. First, mentoring and leadership literature will be examined to demonstrate the progression of follower agency. Second, social constructionist and poststructuralist organizational communication literature will be synthesized to build a pivot point on moving from deficit communication to dialogic communication. Third, data collection and analytic methods will be explained. Lastly, findings and concluding remarks will be presented.

On Leading In Mentoring Relationships

Overall, mentoring and leadership research has not addressed the positive possibilities of co-constructed mentor-mentee narratives in the context of coping. This section briefly examines approaches to mentoring and leadership that demonstrate the need for appreciative inquiry within this body of research. Appreciative inquiry, which will be explored in subsequent section, offers a framework for positive and constructive meaning to be generated through dialogue, to frame and reframe experience in terms of possibilities, and to garner appreciation for learning. To begin, this section explores mentoring and leadership literature and the modeling of influence within those relationships.

Mentoring is often situated in leadership and coaching literature as a formal, strategic and a beneficial experience. Scholars have further categorized mentoring in terms of who is being mentored and the type of influence exerted in mentoring. Categories beyond traditional mentoring include 1) peer mentoring (Kram & Isabella, 1985), 2) reverse mentoring (Baily, 2009; Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012), 3) reciprocal mentoring (Harvey et al., 2009), and even 4) anonymous mentoring (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). First, peer mentoring features mentoring relationships between individuals that are peers such as student-student mentoring. Second, reverse mentoring explores mentoring relationships in which the protégé, which may be categorized by age/rank/experience, influences the mentor. Third, reciprocal mentoring focuses on the mutual influence in a mentoring relationship, and fourth, anonymous mentoring demonstrates how relational influence does not have to be limited to face-to-face mentoring interactions but can take place anonymously.

Additional studies indicate that mentor-protégé relationships can cause tension and even workplace harassment. Most of these studies focus on the power, whether negative or positive, of the leader versus the mentee (Yukl, 2013). Organizational communication studies provide critical examinations of power, discourse and leadership, as well as descriptions that illuminate enactments of positive communication practices that can enhance and redefine leading in mentor relationships. By reflexively examining communication practices in tense dynamic environments, the consequences of those actions may lead to new theory or revisions that move society forward, and more specifically the study of mentoring in the context of this inquiry (Barge, 2004a; 2004b).

Next, leadership studies have evolved from privileging intrinsic personality traits and styles that provide prescriptive laws for building effective leadership skills (House, 1971; Northouse, 2013; Fairhust, 2007) to poststructuralist studies that take into account the power of surveillance (Foucault, 1983), peer-discipline (Barker, 1993; Barker & Tompkins, 1994), and follower resistance (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2008). The historical tendency of leadership studies has been to focus on top-down or flatten hierarchical communication directing or motivating followers. Mentoring literature holds that same to be true. Mentor is privileged as superior, and the mentee is a receiver and doer of commands, follower of the master seducer or actor to be assimilated into the system. Communicative assumptions privileging the mentor are privy to cast communication as transmission of information (i.e. expertise that the mentor or reverse mentor may transmit to the mentee) (Axley, 1984); yet, communication as constitutive of mentoring relationships assumes that mentoring relationships are mutually constituted through communication, in which meaning is co-constructed in mentor-protégé dialogue (Shotter,

2009). The transmissional view privileges a directive form of communication versus the constitutive view, which is empowering and opens the possibilities of transformative experiences for both the mentor and protégé. This study moves away from modeling theories that privilege transmissional and directive views of communication to co-constructed relationships emerging in moments in history through dialogue and transformational experiences.

Human relations approaches to leadership have focused on building motivational components into the system or relationships between leaders and follower by valuing (i.e. compensation, benefits, breaks) members to elevate productivity and efficiency. Members are still under the power of authority. Empowerment is not robustly explored. Feminist, as well as other critical scholars, have demonstrated how cultural ideologies are often taken-for-granted and not considered to be oppressive. Through a poststructuralist lens, Calas and Smircich (1991) sought to empower organizational members by demonstrating how leadership is often equated with seduction techniques. In order to move past domination, leadership studies must come to appreciate the power of communication, meaning and followers, in general.

Followership (Collinson, 2006; 2005) has been argued as the essence of leadership (Bjerke, 1999), the necessary component for leadership (Kelley, 1992), and only in existence when interaction is present between leaders and followers (Grint, 2000). Nevertheless, most works rarely import these into their assumptions about leadership as conclusions are made or as theory is developed. Calls have been issued to shift from leader-centered to follower-centered approaches (Collinson, 2005), but little has been done to incorporate "both/and" scenarios in the relationship of leader-follower.

"Both/and" scenarios examine "both" leader-centered and follower-centered approaches "and" examine scenarios that centralize leader and follower simultaneously. When follower-centered perspectives are taken, the language of the studies are in deficit mode with primacy placed on emancipation and empowerment, which is a noble and worthy cause. However, these studies do not explore how followers and leaders may mutually construct empowering relationships. This study does not ignore the very real oppressive nature of many leadership scenarios, but by acknowledging that followers have equal, or in some cases more, agency in defining moments, mentoring becomes situated in reciprocal investment and mutually constitutive relationships. Simply put, since followership is the essence, necessity and interaction of leadership, both leader and follower have localized moments to redefine and reverse the mentoring relationship for the good of both parties and potentially the organization. To further explore the co-constructed possibilities of influence in mentoring relationships, the following section focuses on leadership in mentoring through appreciative dialogue.

Communicating Leadership through Appreciative Dialogue

This section teases out what is meant by the concept of appreciative dialogue and how such dialogue may function in mentoring. Barge and Oliver (2003) remind us that the "contested nature of meaning and power within organizations may threaten an individual's ability to maintain an appreciative spirit" (p. 139). Especially true in toxic work environments, an appreciative spirit can be shattered by slander, bullying and intimidation by administrators and domineering personalities. Thus, to battle negative talk and debilitating toxicity, followers courageously (Jablin, 2006) endure by framing moments from negativity to positive talk (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). The communicative

act transitioning from negativity to positive talk is the essence of appreciate dialogue. Methods for such reflexivity and courage in appreciative dialogue include: positioning voice, perspective taking, future talk, and reflecting conversations (Barge & Oliver, 2003). Positioning voice "involves placing people in different roles they may not normally occupy and having participants speak in the voice of others" (p. 135). For example, speaking for those who have no voice in the moment. Next, by talking out a situation using another's perspective, one can gain appreciation for them. Third, talking about the future enables discussions of hope and dreams and develops vision – blaming is left to the side, as the focus becomes future success. Lastly, listening through reflecting on observed conservation allows for bringing in multiple voices (third-person perspectives) and questions that may previously be lost. While these techniques can work, poststructuralists argue that the social realities constructed through conversation unfold and emerge in the moment. If lists, such as the one above, are elevated to interactional law, the positive and meaning talk will be lost as practices become displaced from their context and as organizational members construct their own alternative meanings.

Positive communication carries with it a stigma of being fixed, but positive communication might not look so positive in the moment of construction, which Barge (2004a) denotes as stories lived. Reflexively, painful experiences can be talked out to co-construct a more appreciative narrative. Subsequently, as stories told become embedded in the fluctuating narratives of mentor-mentee relationship, both parties have the potential to lead each other through difficult moments. A pluralistic moment, where multiple voices are allowed and encouraged to be present and valued, leads to the construction of

open narratives with broader application and increased richness. Thus, dialogue is the central component of leadership in mentoring relationships because dialogue permits communication between mentor and protégé to value multiple interpretations of narratives and to shape/reshape one another's' storytelling. We term this willingness on the part of each member to appreciate, invest and listen to each other *teachability*. Teachability is the communicative practice of learning in all moments with the underlying ethic of valuing all voices. A teachable leader is open to reverse mentoring, as mentees assist them through their fallibility. Appreciation and plurality are central to reverse mentoring.

> *RQ1:* How might teachability change the value of mentoring in organizational
> life?

> *RQ2:* How might reverse mentoring assist both mentor and protégé in coping with
> crises?

Methods

As *homonarrans* (Fisher, 1984) or human storytellers, humans are characterized by their storytelling (Riessman, 2008). Narrative methodology is challenging to operationalize due to the numerous applications, interdisciplinary nature, and wide-range of underlying philosophical assumptions (Czarniawska, 1998). Nevertheless, in the spirit of other organizational scholars such as Boje (2001; 1995; 1991; Boje et al., 1997; 1999), Mumby (2004; 1993; 1987), and Gabriel (2004a; 2004b), this analysis furthers the scope of narrative analysis in organizational communication inquiry by using interactive interviewing to tease out mentoring narratives over the course of a 20 year mentoring relationship. This section further delineates how mentoring narratives were generated

through interactive interviewing. The co-authors of this study employed interactive interviewing (Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy, 1997) as a means to recreate mentoring conversations related to coping with grief during their 20 year mentoring relationship. Consistent with other auto-ethnographic methods of data collection (Ellis and Bochner, 1992), the two authors acknowledge that this mentoring narrative is their narrative, which is shaped by and shapes the subsequent analysis; yet, this narrative has broader implications as to how mentoring relationships are cast in mentoring and leadership studies and shifts the focus to the dynamics of teachability across several configurations of the mentor-protégé relationship. To analyze the resulting narratives, comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006) of the narratives involved identifying emergent themes related to the two research questions and continual reworking of those themes throughout the writing of this study to better understand appreciative dialogue across mentor-protégé interactions. The subsequent data analysis section adopts a narrative structure followed by findings and conclusions.

Constructing Teachability through Reverse Mentoring: A Narrative

In the following data analysis section, we discuss three relational contexts that emerged related to the dynamic and timing of the mentoring phenomena: professor-student, colleague, and confidant relational contexts. With that said, it was quite difficult to label any of these relationships as traditional (top-down influence), reverse (down-top influence), peer (mutual influence of similar rank/role), or reciprocal (mutual influence) mentoring based on the unique narratives. For example, in the more traditional mentoring context of professor-student, we tease out how a student coping with a loss of a brother may learn a great deal about grief from his interpersonal crisis communication

professor, and at the same time, how the vulnerability of disclosure in the professor-student becomes a reverse mentoring opportunity for the student to reveal the lived narrative of grieving back to the professor. Or in the case of colleague relationship that developed 10 years later, peer mentoring would be an inaccurate description given the hierarchical difference between a senior and junior faculty member. We argue that regardless of how the mentoring relationship is categorized, it has the possibility to co-construct coping relationships of mutual teaching and learning regarding crises that mentors and protégés experience during the course of their relationships. Yet, given the foundational nature of the types of mentoring relationships, each relational context is categorized as mentoring or reverse mentoring to demonstrate how these unique narratives elucidate the power of teachability in leading and how lived experiences work outside of traditional or functional expectations associated with top-down mentoring.

Mentoring: Professor-Student

Having known Mentee[1], an undergraduate student, for a lengthy time, Mentor[2] was deeply concerned, as the professor, at the loss of the student's brother just prior to him taking an interpersonal crisis communication course. The concern was voiced in a conversation where the Mentor asked Mentee if the course content would be appropriate so close to the loss. Acknowledging the difficulty and timing of the circumstance, Mentee voiced a desire to remain registered for the course. As a point of pedagogy, Mentor structured the course around class discussions of readings and guest lectures from community members' experiences with grief. The course proved to be fruitful for

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[1] Mentee is used to identify the traditional position of the mentee-mentor relationship in the narrative. Yet, mentee signifies less authoritarian emphasis.
[2] Mentor is used to identify the traditional position of the mentor-mentee relationship in the narrative.

Mentee as discussions provided a nonthreatening environment to learn and share as he felt comfortable. In sharing throughout the semester, Mentee's lived experience of losing his brother became a learning moment for him and teachable moments for his classmates and Mentor, the professor. According to Mentor, Mentee "not only had a teachable attitude in classes in general, but he also had a teachable attitude in his grief journey." Ranging from grief processing to counseling to learning from others' grief experiences, the Mentee's relatively new experience became a memorable story and professionally satisfying experience for Mentor through the years.

Reverse Mentoring: Colleague and Confidant

A little more than a decade later, Mentee became a colleague at the same university as Mentor. In doing so, the relationship changed from a professor-student relationship to one of a more traditional-like mentoring relationship common in the daily operations of organizations. This new mentoring relationship functionally assisted with professional development in the workplace as the mentor had opportunities to dialogue and, thus, shape meaning, regarding workplace and life experiences. The exception to this colleague mentoring relationship was the unique relationship as professor-student that proceeded and the reverse mentoring relationship that was fostered as the student became the teacher with regards to technology and a newer sub-discipline of their shared field. During the early days of Mentee's career, Mentor asked him to write a chapter in a new book on what students had taught Mentor through the years in relation to Mentee's experience grieving the loss of his brother. The process became very cathartic for him, whose experience would once again become encouraging for Mentor to read. Sharing the experience of conflict within the workplace enabled that chapter to become a foundation

for many conversations to come. Mentor indicated, "Through his ability to endure through grief and pay the professional price of completing graduate degrees, Mentee taught me how to have a *teachable spirit* while overcoming grief and challenges in life."

In the division of colleagues and confidant, Mentor revealed that Mentee had helped Mentor process the death of his nephew, who died in a sudden, traumatic work accident. While assisting his nephew perform a minor job pumping water out of a customer's basement, Mentor witnessed his nephew being electrocuted. His nephew died instantly. Mentor commented, "One moment I was working with a fun-loving yet deeply spiritual man. The next, I saw him lying on the floor dead. The traumatic shock is beyond what words can describe." Mentor confided in Mentee about his loss, grief, and trauma as a new semester began at their institution.

Throughout Mentor's grieving process, he found support through his relationship with Mentee and the words of Mentee's chapter. For example, Mentor frequently reread these words in Mentee's writing:

> "For me, the change begins in the heart. The change is nothing we can do. Change is something we have to be. It is consistent transformation from a life lived for one's own desires to a life lived for something far greater than our imagination could ever take us. When your focus in life changes to what you were eternally designed to be, then you will truly find peace" (Spradley, 2006, p. 38).

Through reading and discussing these words with Mentee, Mentor acknowledged that his former student, now colleague, had *transformed into his mentor* and confidant. Mentor

stated, "It has been deeply meaningful for me to acknowledge that Mentee became a confidant as he walked with me through grief." Through disclosures of stories, a willingness to listen and learn facilitates the revelation of life-changing insights. This is part of the core of what mentoring as well as reverse mentoring means. Mentor recalled Mentee sharing that the best teaching is much like a process of shared meditation where the teacher and student sit together learning to pay close attention to those aspects and dimensions of the "self" that the student may be unable to touch on their own. Similarly, the relationship parallels to an optimal parent-child relationship where the child matures, then the child begins to perform the role of parent for the parent. As one matures in life, one becomes more comfortable with paradoxes and more appreciative of life's ambiguities, its many levels, and its inherent conflicts. We are living in mystery as we journey through the situations and events of life together as mentors, reverse mentors, peer mentors, and reciprocal mentors, but more importantly, being teachable.

Constructing Teachability through Reverse Mentoring: A Narrative

At this juncture, analysis moves from the narratives and their classification to exploring how these narratives converge and diverge with mentoring literature. First, mentoring is usually a long-term structured and intentional program implemented by organizations to assimilate newcomers into organizational ways-of-doing, teacher development, or training members on technology (Fruchter & Lewis, 2000; Swap et al., 2001; Finkelstein et al., 2003; Leh, 2005). These studies show significant improvement in technology interaction when mentor/mentee relationships are used. Additionally, as noted in Scott and Myers' (2005) study on newcomer assimilation in a fire department, the findings demonstrate the power of training mentees to adjust and control emotion in

the wake of disaster. Focusing on age in mentoring relationships, Finkelstein et al. (2003) found ideal age separation to be 8 to 15 years. Using content analysis Finkelstein et al. found that only 8% of mentees indicated a younger mentor. Older mentees are often found in more informal scenarios than formally developed and assigned mentorships. Findings from Finkelstein et al.'s study indicated that older mentors put less effort into career-related mentoring and psychosocial mentoring, relying primarily on experience. Younger mentors put fourth more effort, possibly because they are working upward in the organization. Similar age mentorship may assist in identification and interpersonal comfort. With these studies, mentor/mentee relationships that are informal are most likely to be psychosocial in nature.

Due to the formality of a professor/student relationship, the Mentor's mentoring experience was not unique in that a professor could provide comfort and that the student would be willing to learn. What does become evident in the narrative is *the emotional connection and openness each member expressed*. Given the common spiritual background, the relationship was forged in a deep-level identification than most formal mentor/mentee relationships. With a spiritual connection, where emotion and openness interconnect, the mentoring relationship allowed for the construction of a warm, welcoming relationship within formal roles.

If the way organizational members identify with one another is considered in the development of more formal mentoring relationships, formal organizational practices may be more likely to be considered by the mentee. A real danger is the power wielded by the mentor, as a formal work relationship becomes something more. Thus, when considering such relationships, organizations must value the person over the task, provide

means by which open dialogue can occur when the mentee feels threatened or abused. In the case of this study, the deeper connection led to valued counsel that had long-term benefits for both mentor and mentee. An important conclusion is for organizations to provide a more organic process for mentoring relationships in order for mentoring to be a fruitful and prosperous experience for all involved. Locking members into mentoring relationships by organizational policies or practices, whether formal or informal, can be disastrous. Healthy mentoring relationships are reciprocal.

The chief characteristic found in this narrative on mentoring is the willingness to be taught or led through traumatic events. Teachability is headlined in the narrative through the Mentee's willing to respond to the Mentor's openness and compassion. With the spirit of warmth in Mentor, Mentee would have most likely never discussed his personal crisis. Additionally, teachability demonstrates the co-constructive nature of the leading relationship. Both parties have agency and the power to assist, inside and outside formal boundaries. Instead of seeing power as evil, power is seen as the ability to form both mentor and mentee to be empowered by identification and openness to diverse opinions. As stories lived move into stories told, greater lines of identification or differentiation are privileged. This narrative demonstrated the power of identification, which leads to the appreciation of diverse experiences and opinions. If the relationship began to be built on stories told that place greater emphasis on differentiation, diverse perspectives might have wounded the progression of the mentor/mentee relationship. Thus, the dialogic nature of teachability hinges on the ethic of openness, willingness to listen and see value in difference.

Teachability is a learned communicative skill. It takes both parties willing to invest in the relationship and the overall purpose of the organization or task at hand. Yet, teachability is performed. It is enacted as the situation plays out. Trying to emulate scenarios where mentors and mentees connect may be a fruitless effort. In the case of this narrative, the relationship was organic. It grew and developed naturally in the moment without being engineered by an administration. Thus, leading through mentoring programs could learn to approach mentoring as an activity that should organically emerge through less structured means. Simply, mentoring relationships should not be forced by programs developed by organizations. Mentoring is best suited as an outcome of opportunities that the organization provides for willing participants or as relationships that emerge from everyday conversations between parties involved.

As indicated in the narrative above, the organic nature of the mentor/mentee relationship provided grounding for teachable moments. Leading relationships that develop naturally overtime might bring greater likelihood of success and, in this case, brought a level of encouraging words in the time of each party's greatest need. Thus, as the loss of the Mentee's brother was acted out co-constructed stories were being written that would later prove to be useful for the Mentor. In the reverse mentoring moments, stories told enabled the Mentor to construct a new story of living through the loss of his nephew. He did this by recalling the grieving of his mentee, reading the previously written chapter and daily conversations with Mentee. The Mentor's willingness to learn in this difficult moment further connected the two, as grieving became an identification point for both of them. This identification became key to developing the appreciative lens by which both would view each other's advice and mentoring. Consequently,

identification, reciprocity and openness in the mentoring relationships tend to lead to reverse mentoring scenarios where Mentees take on the role Mentor. This set of characteristics and the essence of teachability are keys to healthy interpersonal dialogue and demonstrate that emotion is part of all bonding processes.

Conclusions

In summary, mentoring relationships can develop more organically, emerging from lived moments that highly impact the mentor and mentee individually. In the case of this narrative, reverse mentoring allowed the Mentor to wade through the grief of losing his closest friend and nephew with a colleague. When barriers to work relationships are broken down by emerging moments, such as grief and toxic environments, teachability adds a layer of utility to the mentoring dimension of leadership. As stories are lived, storying develops co-constructed meanings that are bound in time (stories told) and useful in everyday conversation and coping with unexpected events (stories lived).

Thus, by reflexively constructing meaning in the moment, we make sense of our unexpected environments (Weick, 1979; 1995). Vicariously learning through others in mentoring relationships provides greater numbers and more develop stories to draw on during highly equivocal environments. The Mentor used the stories constructed by the Mentee through writing and the co-constructed stories experienced together to enable him to cope with the grief he experienced after losing his nephew. Through story, the Mentor learned that grief is not an overnight solution. As he experienced the social reality of the Mentee's story, Mentor was able to make sense out of a highly emotional and difficult circumstance. Both parties in mentoring relationships should work to maintain teachable spirits in the relationship in order to foster life-long lessons. With a more empathetic

mindset, organizations should work to breakdown traditional models of top-down design in mentoring by focusing more on the provision of opportunities for mentoring relationships to emerge.

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