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## Requisite participant characteristics for effective peer group mentoring

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### ABSTRACT

Effective mentorship, due to the developmental nature of the experience, hinges upon the people involved—specifically, the personal characteristics of the mentoring collaborators. In this paper, the author explored requisite participant characteristics for peer group mentoring. One dozen executive-level professional women shared their stories-of-experience as participants in peer mentoring groups. A thematic analysis was utilized to investigate the narrative data from these interviews. Findings suggest that these participant characteristics include (a) an intrinsic interest; (b) a learning disposition; (c) a commitment to the mentoring experience; (d) comfortability with vulnerability and having the courage to share struggles; and (e) an inherent desire to support others in their learning, growth, and development.

### KEYWORDS

Participant characteristics;  
peer group mentoring

### Introduction

Mentoring relationships are developmental relationships. Individuals participate in mentorship experiences because they expect to provide opportunities for learning and growth—or receive the challenge and support to learn and grow. When engaging synergistically with mentoring counterparts, individuals are offered an occasion for both. In this inquiry, I analyzed an understudied aspect of mentorship—*requisite personal characteristics* of participants. For the purposes of this paper, I identified *requisite personal characteristics* as the essential interests, personality traits, and commitments of the individual actors who participate in a specialized form of group mentoring: peer group mentorship.

### What is mentoring?

Mentoring can be distinguished from other developmental relationships (e.g., advising, coaching, role modeling, supervising) due to the strategic and intentional

use of challenge and support. “Mentors dance an intricate two-step, because they practice the art of supporting and challenging more or less simultaneously” (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 130).

Support manifests through recognition, validation, and creating a sense of belonging (Earnshaw, 1995). In mentoring relationships, support is provided when mentoring counterparts (particularly the person in the mentor role) serve as guides to resources and sources of comfort and healing (Daloz Parks, 2000). Support is provided in tandem with challenge. Without challenge, the support received is solely affirmation. Affirmation alone does not lead to the desired learning, growth, and development expected from a mentoring relationship.

Challenge has been identified as a key ingredient to mentee growth (Burgess & Butcher, 1999; Butcher, 2002; McNally & Martin, 1998). Challenge is utilized to create dissonance. It is through the processing of challenges that new insight is gleaned, learning occurs, and actions for change or improvement are designed. Daloz (1986) illuminated the relationship between challenge and support in mentoring interactions. When participants engage with low levels of challenge and support, the result is stasis. High levels of challenge with low levels of support lead to retreat and disengagement. High levels of support and low levels of challenge produce affirmation and confirmation. Effective mentoring, where the learning occurs, is when the engagement is an integration of high levels of both, challenge *and* support.

Scholars of traditional one-to-one mentorship indicate that effective mentoring is predicated upon various personal characteristics of those involved. This is particularly true, although not limited to, the individual in the mentor role. In these types of learning partnerships (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Maki, 2012), practices for effectively engaging in one-to-one mentoring include validating the others’ capacity to know and offer wisdom, situating the mentoring engagement in the experiences of the participants, and defining learning as mutually constructed (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). It takes a certain type of person to relinquish control and utilize these mechanisms to challenge and support others in their learning, growth, and development.

Daloz (1999) suggested that mentors should be particularly mindful of the how they engage in the mentorship experience. In this role, mentors ought to be engendering trust, recognizing the mentees’ developmental locale, and encouraging the voice of the mentee. Additionally, this mentoring collaborator should introduce conflict (in helpful, healthy ways), emphasize positive development, and celebrate the mentee throughout the mentorship experience. Similarly, the character and disposition of mentors are of utmost concern if they expect to engage in these practices with the aim of cultivating developmental experiences.

### **Traditional mentorship**

Traditional forms of mentorship are described in a variety of ways: grooming (Haring, 1999), functionalist (Darwin, 2000), apprenticeship (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007),

sponsorship (Clutterbuck, 2008), technical (Mullen, 2009), or transmission-based mentoring (Jones & Brown, 2011). Here, the mentor imparts knowledge—the mentee receives it. If not engaged in mindfully, this approach may be problematic due to the mentoring experience being treated as a power-laden, mechanical process.

The dyadic mentorship relationship, when judged against other one-to-one relationships, appears to be the most hierarchical, exclusionary, and elitist (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Traditional mentorship can reinforce and protect existing role orthodoxies and traditions (Southworth, 1995) due to implicit assumptions of knowledge and power. Darwin (2000) explained the etymological meaning of the terms *mentor* and *protégé* (*protégé* is synonymous with mentee):

The term [mentor] comes from the root *men*, which means to remember, think, counsel. The word *protégé* comes from the French verb *protéger*, to protect. Thus, traditionally, the mentoring relationship has been framed in a language of paternalism and dependency and stems from a power-dependent, hierarchical relationship aimed at maintaining the status quo. (p. 198)

Traditional one-to-one mentoring structures can be exclusive and may perpetuate the cultural socializing forces that produce inequities. Marginalized groups, namely women and people of color, have historically been exempt from formal workplace mentoring programs. These groups have also struggled to develop mentorship relationships through informal settings: golf courses, private clubs, and sporting events (Mott, 2002) due to exclusions in membership and structural mechanisms. The power dynamics and hierarchical nature of traditional mentoring is only heightened in cross-gender and cross-cultural mentoring due to differing locations of *societal* hierarchies (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002). Alternative forms of mentorship can have a marked difference to groups who face exclusion (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998).

### **Group and peer group mentoring**

Group mentoring has been defined as a collection of three or more individuals, connected by their social relationship, distinctly gathered for the specific and shared purpose of intentionally challenging and supporting the others to enhance personal growth and professional skills/development (Kroll, 2015, 2016). Peer group mentoring is a subset of group mentoring. In this structure, participants have self-identified as being *peers*—in a similar situation to others (Kaunisto, Estola, & Niemisto, 2012). For example, when teachers within a school, regardless of age or years of teaching experience gather together to engage in a mentoring experience in small groups. Their *peeriness* is rooted in their role as educators. Or, like the participants in this study, are all executive-level professional women. These mentoring collaborators hail from various industries and functional areas, yet identify as *peers* due to their senior-level status and professional responsibilities within their own organizations.

Additionally, peer group mentoring is distinct in that the mentoring collaborators engage in a *reciprocal* practice—whereby all participants serve in both mentoring roles—mentor and mentee. There is an expectation that everyone will provide challenge and support (serve in the mentor role)—and receive mentorship (engage as a mentee). In peer group mentoring, learning does not occur through the traditional transfer-of-knowledge from one participant to the others. Rather, learning occurs through dialog and social interaction (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjala, 2012). In this structure, each person is valued and is valuable to the learning, growth, and development of the others.

Group mentoring, as a sub-field of mentorship, is still in its infancy with regard to research and scholarship. Although group mentoring has been practiced for millennia, intentional exploration of this mentorship structure has only begun since the end of the twentieth century. Over the last couple decades, researchers have focused selectively on the *rationale* (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995; Darwin, 2000; Mullen, 2000) for group mentoring and the *outcomes* (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister, 2009; Mitchell, 1999) for group mentorship participants.

### *Rationale*

Group structures to mentorship are not new. In fact, Benjamin Franklin joined with other Philadelphia tradesmen to create the Leather Apron Club—a mentoring collective designed as a supportive holding environment as the mentoring collaborators pursued personal development, professional skills enhancement, and civic projects for the community at large (Kroll, 2016). Group mentoring has had a resurgence in research and practice since the mid-1990's due to potentially limiting structural and social factors associated with traditional one-to-one mentorship.

Group mentoring is a constructivist approach to mentorship (McGowan, Stone, & Kegan, 2007; Millwater & Yarrow, 1997). In this approach, attitudinal shifting occurs—a move from expert-based paradigms (apprenticeship model) to that of mentoring as a socially constructed developmental experience. In this contemporary era, group mentoring structures have been opportunities to purposefully challenge power-laden, frequently unexamined, and uncritically applied traditional forms of mentorship (Mott, 2002).

One of the earliest commentaries to express this shift—Bona et al. (1995)—advocated for group mentoring as a response to the male-dominated hierarchical nature of mentoring. The authors utilized the term *co-mentoring*—to emphasize that when *co* is placed intentionally before *mentoring*, the relationship is reconstructed as nonhierarchical. The *co* establishes the mentoring relationship as reciprocal and mutual—its placement invites the participants to share responsibilities as mentors and mentees. Co-mentoring differs significantly from the traditional androcentric conception of mentoring—that is, centered upon the experiences of men, hierarchical in nature, and grounded in knowledge and power differences (Bona et al., 1995).

Furthermore, the constructivist group approach to mentoring promotes a counter-culture to traditional mentorship—one that is opposed to the prevailing institutional practices of separation and exploitation (Mullen, 2000). Mentoring in this way is “a catalyst for changing traditional practices, hierarchical systems, and homogeneous cultures that result in stagnation. Co-mentoring values diversity in such areas as ethnicity, gender, status, age, ability, learning style” (Mullen, 2000, p. 5).

Group mentoring is commonly enacted as *mentorship circles*. Mentoring circles, as described by Darwin (2000), are group mentorship experiences rooted in co-learning that encourages authentic dialog and power-sharing across cultures, genders, and hierarchical levels. Within mentorship circles, group members share experiences, challenges, and opportunities for the purpose of creating solutions (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). The circle concept is a group mentoring structure that encourages multiple experiences and diverse perspectives that go above and beyond what any one participant could contribute.

### Outcomes

Although research on group mentoring is limited—Huizing (2012) found just 43 full-text peer-reviewed articles and dissertations on group mentoring—the initial findings indicate positive implications. Group mentoring has resulted in participants successfully moving from solitary work to collaborative work, seeing oneself as valuable and valued, and developing an understanding of self, other, and environment (Driscoll et al., 2009); gaining access to networks, reduction in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, and knowledge acquisition (Darwin & Palmer, 2009); and feeling supported, effectively generating new ideas, and resolving problems (Mitchell, 1999). Due to the limited data that exist, this is clearly an area for future study.

The purpose of my study was to neither explore the rationale nor the outcomes for such mentoring experiences. Rather, it was, in part, designed to understand ways in which peer group mentoring, in particular, and mentoring, in general, might be better prepared for and engaged in. By understanding *requisite personal characteristics* of mentoring participants, organizers of mentoring experiences can ensure that the participants have the essential interests, personality traits, and commitments that encourage fruitful mentorship engagements and developmental outcomes. In the next section I detail this particular study beginning with the research method.

### Research method

My research inquiry was conducted to explore factors that facilitate effective peer group mentoring. One dozen executive-level professional women from a mid-west American city shared their stories-of-experience. A thematic analysis of the data

illuminated five requisite personal characteristics of mentoring collaborators that facilitate effective peer group mentoring.

### **Research approach**

Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research methodology, was utilized because it provides an opportunity to reveal cultural and social patterns through the lens of individual experience (Patton, 2002). It is through narrative research that “we can penetrate cultural barriers, give voice to the human experience, and understand human action and intention” (Larson, 1997, p. 455). Qualitative research, as compared to quantitative approaches, is guided by an attempt to *understand* rather than predict or control. Within this methodological framework, rather than forming hypotheses, the researcher frames questions for exploration. In place of measurement, the challenge of deeply listening to others is emphasized. Instead of statistics, the ambiguities of thoughtful text analysis provide insight into a response to the research inquiry (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003).

This research method is appropriate for exploring effective peer group mentoring specifically in the context of participant characteristics. Narrative inquiry is designed so that perceptions can be captured, beliefs and attitudes can be described, and implications can be presented. Furthermore, the publishing of such research allows for the complexities of human experience to emerge, fostering learning (Magolda, 2000). Readers can then utilize this learning as a springboard for action in their particular contexts.

### **Participants**

One dozen executive-level professional women, representing four independent and autonomous peer mentoring groups volunteered to contribute to this study. These women are all members of PaceSetter, an invitation-only membership-based professional development and networking organization in an American Midwest city. PaceSetter and the participant names throughout are all pseudonyms as a measure to protect the identity of the organization and the research participants. Founded in 1975, PaceSetter membership is restricted to *women of talent, ambition, and drive*. Furthermore, they are noted for *being part of decision-making and power structures, holding positions of influence, and are or have the potential to be giants in the community*.

The \$475 annual membership dues provide members access to most of PaceSetter’s programming. Offerings include professional development seminars, social and networking gatherings, two annual marquee events, and access to peer mentoring groups. These peer mentoring groups are commonly referenced by the research participants as *Mentoring Circles* or just as *Circles*.

PaceSetter peer mentoring groups were established in 2010 in response to membership interest. These peer group-based mentoring experiences are intended to provide a forum for open and confidential exchanges of insights. PaceSetter Circles

are typically comprised of 6–8 participants and most are organized loosely by functional areas (e.g., nonprofit leaders, marketing/communications executives, banking and finance, those working in small organizations or large corporations).

The 12 participants are not representative of all PaceSetter Mentor Circles. Nor is any one Mentor Circle fully represented. Collectively, the participants are Caucasian, live in or around the same Midwest American city, and range in age between late 1930s and mid-1980s.

### **Data generation**

Data for this inquiry were collected through confidential face-to-face, one-to-one interviews. The reflective, semi-structured interviews (Roulston, 2010) created space for the participants to reflect upon and share stories about their peer group mentorship experience. The goal of narrative interviewing is not to ascertain brief responses, but to generate detailed accounts of the participants' lived experiences. Four principles were followed as a model when approaching these conversations: (a) utilizing open-ended questions, (b) eliciting stories, (c) avoiding *why* questions, and (d) following-up by applying the participants' language (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007).

Each interview was digitally audio recorded creating an MP3 file and sent to a professional transcription service. In addition to utilizing the audio recordings and the transcripts, during and following the interviews the researcher made use of field notes to stimulate further reflections and observations. The field notes were supportive in two ways. First, they functioned to document the research activities. Furthermore, the field notes served as a repository for researcher thoughts and questions. The act of journaling in this way allowed for unexpected insights to emerge and for connections across the data to be drawn.

### **Trustworthiness**

Researchers, appropriately so, are answerable to scholars, practitioners, and their participants for confirmation of valid, credible, and believable research (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001). In order to evaluate *narrative* research, compared to positivist or realist approaches to research (those seeking *Truth*—with a capital *T*), interpretivist approaches (e.g., narrative inquiry) seek *trustworthiness*. Trustworthiness, what Polkinghorne (2007) considered *narrative truth*, is evidence for personal meaning of the events and experiences described. Narrative researchers explore and seek understanding of the meaning behind what is shared (the phenomenon, in this case, peer group mentorship), not in the factual occurrence of the reported events and experiences. Although qualitative research, in general, and narrative inquiry, in particular, celebrate subjectivity and the diversities of perspective, certain criteria enable narrative research to be more (or less) trustworthy. The following criteria were utilized to establish trustworthiness in this



study—including below is a statement of the selected criteria as well as how they were specifically implemented in this research inquiry.

### *Data triangulation*

Data triangulation occurs when a variety of different sources are utilized to gather information and obtain a diverse view of the same phenomenon (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). In this inquiry, triangulation was implemented by interviewing multiple participants (12), representing four different, autonomous peer mentoring groups.

### *Member-checking*

Member-checking involves inviting the research participants to review, comment on, and contribute to the findings (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). If the researcher's reconstructions are perceived as recognizable and adequate representations of the participants' experiences, credibility is increased (Riessman, 1993). The research participants in my study were invited to share their critique of the findings and the researcher's interpretations of data.

### *Transferability*

Qualitative research approaches do not claim to be generalizable. The data are only representative of those particular participants, in those particular experiences, at that particular point of time. However, the trustworthiness of a qualitative study rests on the ability of the findings to be applied to other contexts. Transferability speaks to a pragmatic application of the findings (Riessman, 1993).

Although it is too soon to tell if the data are transferable, it is believed that what is offered in this paper can be useful in the creation, implementation, and sustainability of peer group mentoring, in particular, and group mentoring experiences, in general. It is also believed that the participant characteristics described in this paper are universal enough for application in traditional one-to-one mentoring experiences.

### *Confidentiality*

Narrative researchers navigate between fostering an intimate relationship with their research participants *and* a professional responsibility to the scholarly community (Josselson, 2007). Researchers need to ensure that participants willingly participate—that the research experience is rooted in free consent. With both signing of the Informed Consent Form as well as verbally expressing their option to terminate the interview or withdraw from the final report, the participants were aware that they were freely participating—and that they could opt-out at any time.

### *Data analysis*

Narrative data can be analyzed utilizing four distinct processes—thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic/performance analysis, and visual analysis (Riessman, 2008). In this narrative inquiry, a *thematic analysis* was utilized.

Thematic analysis is a research method designed to identify, analyze, and report themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A *theme* is a pattern found within the data, which at minimum describes and organizes observations (Boyatzis, 1998). Rather than search for pre-determined themes, this method allowed for codes (which the themes are built upon) to be constructed from the patterns and commonalities filtered from the transcribed stories. Below is a brief description of the phases employed in the data analysis process of this study.

### *Phase I: becoming familiar with the data*

Phase I began by sitting with the audio recordings and simply listening to the interviews. This made it possible to immerse myself into the data and to become familiar with not only the spoken words, but also the emotion associated with those words. For example, one participant, Henrietta expressed that from the inaugural gathering of her peer mentoring group, her collaborators were “*all in.*” When describing this all in-ness, her voice changed. There was a sense of excitement in her tone and pride in her inflection. By simply listening to the recordings, nuances could be captured that would not have been attainable from just reading the transcripts.

### *Phase II: generating initial codes*

Following these listening sessions, I assigned codes to the data via a line-by-line reading of the transcripts. This coding process was a systematic way to identify and draft labels within each particular transcript and across the transcripts. Rather than approach the data with preconceived codes, an inductive approach allowed the codes to surface by themes directly from the data.

Latent codes were utilized as a way to capture the underlying phenomena that were described through the participant’s storytelling. For example, *Intrinsic Interest*, is a latent code. Although none of the participants stated explicitly, “I have an intrinsic interest in this peer group mentoring experience,” they did communicate their desire to partake in this developmental experience. For example, one participant Jesse remarked about her Mentoring Circle, “I thought that seems like a really neat opportunity and something I want to get involved in.”

Manifest codes (sometimes known as *in vivo* codes) were also used in my data analysis. This provided an opportunity to utilize the actual voice (language) of the participants when poignant. *Being Vulnerable* was identified as a manifest code. For example, Evelyn shared, “vulnerability is hard and yet when you have the courage to be vulnerable I think you gain from it.”

### *Phase III: searching for and defining themes*

After all of the codes were compiled and organized, I developed initial themes. These themes provided an overarching perspective of the codes. This grand view allowed the researcher to draw connections across codes from the 12 transcripts. Memos and other notes were utilized as a way to define themes, set thematic parameters, and to clarify thinking around particular themes.

### Phase IV: producing the report

The final phase of a research project was to draft a report. My article serves as a report of the research findings pertinent to participants' reflections on requisite personal characteristics for effective peer group mentoring.

## Findings

Mentoring is a distinctive, relational learning experience. Participants utilize challenge and support in order to create a developmental learning experience for the others. The nature of these experiences call for mentoring collaborators to have certain interests, personality traits, and commitments to ensure effectiveness. These requisite participant characteristics include: (a) an intrinsic interest; (b) a learning disposition; (c) a commitment to the mentoring experience; (d) comfortability with vulnerability and having the courage to share struggles; and (e) an inherent desire to support others in their learning, growth, and development (Figure 1).

### Intrinsic interest

Effective peer group mentoring occurs when the collaborators have an intrinsic desire to participate. Susanna, for example, was interested in the PaceSetter Circles because of the opportunity to engage with a group of peer women—meaning other executive-level professionals. For Susanna, access to another space where she could “share concerns about professional life” was limited. This was an important outlet for her.

Becca believed that joining PaceSetter and participating in the Mentor Circle experience would meet her needs with regard to “fellowship, support, learning about the city, and developing friendships.” Like Susanna and Becca, Jesse joined

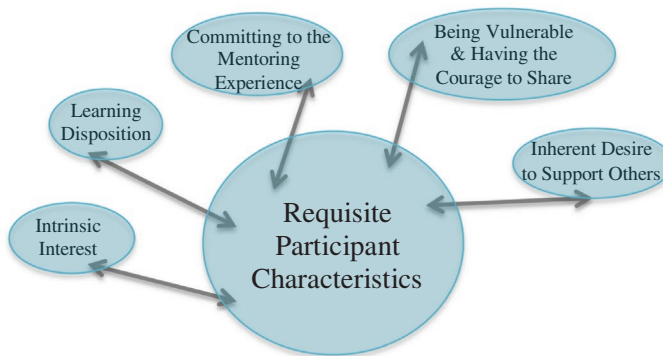


Figure 1. Requisite participant characteristics of mentoring collaborators.

a Circle due to her interest in engaging with others about the struggles and successes of professional women:

I learned about the Mentoring Circles at [PaceSetter] orientation ... I thought that seems like a really neat opportunity and something I want to get involved in because working in the financial services industry is very much still a male dominated field ... the opportunity to sit down with other professional women ... was really appealing to me.

Although varied in their rationale for joining, PaceSetter Mentoring Circle participants are aligned in their intrinsic interest in this mentorship opportunity. Their personal desire and drive to participate in a mentorship experience, in general, and their Mentor Circle, in particular, appears to be one factor that fuels their effective peer group mentoring.

### **Learning disposition**

A *disposition* can be understood as a tendency that leads individuals in one direction or another, within the freedom of their actions (Perkins, 1995). A *learning disposition*, therefore, is a personal attribute that describes individuals' internal desire to purposefully engage in experiences that expand their knowledge base and sense of self. This type of disposition reflects one's ready and willingness to partake in learning opportunities (Carr & Claxton, 2002). During the interviews, the research participants highlighted their own learning dispositions.

Paula used her Mentor Circle experience to develop an "encyclopedia" and a "library" of ways in which to deal with various situations. She declared that this type of learning experience better equip her to deal with situations that arise. Echoing that sentiment, Jesse, with a professional background in the financial services, articulated that:

I've learned something from all of their experiences ... even though I'm probably never going to work for a nonprofit ... you can peel back the layers and say, "okay, she still faces dealing with colleagues, she still faces the responsibility for developing younger staff people, definitely faces budget issues—and has to make difficult decisions on how to spend the budget." Those are all decisions that I face on a day-to-day basis too.

Evelyn described that although mentoring conversations "can be ... painful", they are important. They "preserve a certain amount of humility ... no matter where you are at along the life course you can always learn a new way to do things."

Through their sharing, the research participants underscored an important personal participant characteristic that informs effective peer group mentoring; a *learning disposition*. Although some mentoring conversations may not be directly relevant to their particular industry, or may be uncomfortable—even painful—a learning disposition will allow participants to see the advantages that can come from their commitment to continued participation.

### ***Committing to the mentoring experience***

A sincere and strong commitment to the mentoring experience is another personal characteristic necessary for effective peer group mentoring. The research participants described ways they commit to their Circle and the mentoring experience in two general ways. One is through preparation. The other is while gathered together.

Sara, as a preparatory show of commitment, ensured that the monthly gathering remains “calendared—I don’t allow it to get bumped for something else—which tells me I’ve definitely made that commitment.” Joy described that in her Circle, the group members review the yearly calendar in January and lock-in the Circle gathering dates. “In January you set your calendar for the whole year. You look at your conflicts . . . If you already know there’s conflicts backtrack and find another date.” In Jesse’s Circle, the mentoring collaborators carve out time to hold an “annual review”. During that conversation, the Circle members “reconfirm” their commitment: “If you don’t show up, it [the mentoring] doesn’t work—so we need everyone to commit to it.”

When gathered for the monthly mentoring conversations, commitment is regarded as an essential practice. Violet utilized the notion of *presence* to describe a tangible way commitment is expressed in her Circles. To Violet, commitment is about “arriving on time, staying the full hour, and being *present* to others—meaning intentionally not checking the phone or taking calls.” Similarly, Henrietta described commitment in terms of attendance. With pride, she stated that over the 4 years of participating in her Mentor Circle, she has only missed two gatherings. She went on to share that when other Circle members are inconsistent in their attendance, “It’s so hard . . . you don’t feel like you can count on them” (Henrietta).

The participants recognized that for them to engage in an effective mentoring experience, individual commitment to the experience was essential. Jesse articulated her belief that the close connections, “bonds,” she has cultivated with the other women in her Mentor Circle, is directly related to the commitment her collaborators have made to one another and the mentoring experience.

### ***Being vulnerable and having the courage to share struggles***

The mentoring PaceSetter Circle participants explained that their peer mentoring group can be an effective developmental experience when *each person* expresses vulnerability has the courage to share struggles. Sharing candidly, Edith offered that Circle members “have to be willing to talk and share. They can’t just sit there like a lump on a bog [*sic*].” She further explained that just being an attentive listener is not enough, “you have to be willing to bring some content. I don’t think you can just go . . . and be the supporter . . . you’ve got to be willing to share something.”

Henrietta pointedly proposed that the willingness of one of her group members to share “a really big set of personal and professional issues” was the “catalyst” for her group. Reflecting on her Circle, Henrietta continued,

We came and we opened up and we said this is what we’re going to be, we’re going to be safe ... Lynn opening up the way she did ... set the tone for the group ... it was the tough stuff. It was the kind of open-yourself-up, be vulnerable stuff.

Similarly, Jesse suggested that by her collaborators having the courage to share struggles, the Circle became a space for growth:

We all acknowledge that we’re not going to grow together unless we are vulnerable. If you’re sitting around a Circle and one person every month says, “oh things are fabulous, things are great. I have no issues, no challenges,” it just doesn’t lend itself to a trust-building environment.

Being vulnerable and having the courage to share struggles with mentoring collaborators was expressed as a cornerstone of effective peer group mentoring. As Jewel emphasized, “if people are ... not willing to open up ... then there’s really not a lot of value for their participation.” “*You have to be willing to take that step*” suggests Evelyn.

### *Inherent desire to support others*

A final peer group mentoring participant characteristic is an authentic aspiration to support their peers. When describing the participants in her Circle, Paula emphasized, “we’ve actually had a good group of women who really want to see each other succeed ... people are really focused on helping, truly helping each other ... nobody has an ulterior objective.” The notion of an “ulterior objective” came to light during Henrietta’s interview. For her, the Mentor Circle experience is meaningful because it is rooted in each woman assisting the others “without any ulterior motives. There is a tremendous willingness to help in this group.” She continued with her reflection:

The older I get the more I believe this is true, if you put really well thinking, well intentioned, good hearted people together and they have the best interests of the group in mind you’ll get what you need and I think that’s what happened ... there is no politics in the Mentor Circle. We are only in it to help one another. (Henrietta)

Other Mentor Circle participants expressed the importance of authentically engaging in a mentoring relationship. After one year of engaging with her Mentoring Circle collaborators, Violet is confident that she can “count on them to give honest, trustworthy recommendation[s] based on what they really think will be *best for me*.” A genuine focus on supporting others in their learning, growth, and development is a final participant characteristic for effective peer group mentoring. Personal egos are subsided in order to counsel peers in working through struggles, making healthy changes, and achieving goals.

### *Mentoring participant characteristics summary*

The participants themselves are a core feature of effective peer group mentoring. Requisite participant characteristics for such developmental experiences include: an *intrinsic interest* in the peer group mentoring experience, a *learning disposition*, a *commitment to the mentoring experience*, *being vulnerable and having the courage to share* with their mentoring collaborators, and an *inherent desire to support their mentoring peers*.

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study demonstrate that effective peer group mentoring is predicated upon certain personal characteristics of the participants. Those who engage in mentoring relationships—either by choice or forcibly—without these characteristics may do more harm than good in the development, learning, and growth of their mentoring collaborators. It is essential that mentoring relationships be reserved for those who have an (a) intrinsic interest in the mentorship experience; (b) a learning disposition; (c) a commitment to mentoring; (d) comfortability with vulnerability and the courage to share struggles; and (e) an inherent desire to support their peers.

It makes sense that effective peer group mentoring is rooted in participants having an intrinsic interest to engage in such developmental experiences. One can assume that individuals without the desire to partake will invest minimally (if at all) in their mentoring relationships. As leaders within nonprofit organizations and corporations whip-up mandated mentoring programs, it behooves them to pause and assess the levels of interest of the expected participants. For instance, it can be assumed that the value for the mentoring participants—and the organization alike—is restricted if the individuals are only limitedly invested. Similarly, as colleges and universities explore forced mentoring for their students, faculty, and administrators, it is important to recognize the potential harm that may be caused when participants struggle to identify the relevance and value of such mentorship experiences.

A personal learning disposition steers individuals towards experiences where they can develop and grow. Mentoring is such an experience. Effective peer group mentoring is cultivated when the group is comprised of participants who seek out these types of learning-driven developmental relationships. In general, if individuals have a lack of interest acquiring new knowledge, enhancing their professional abilities, or seeking new ways to approach situations, we can expect that peer mentoring groups will not be an appropriate forum for them. Although some mentoring conversations may not be directly relevant to their particular industry, or may be uncomfortable—even painful—a learning disposition will allow participants to see the advantages that can come from their commitment to continued participation.

Peer group mentoring is expected to be a long-term investment of time and energy. Henrietta expressed that her group was still meeting after four years and had no interest in stopping. Effective peer group mentoring occurs when the participants commit, fully, to the mentoring experience. Not only do they plan appropriately and show up for their mentoring gatherings regularly, they engage with *presence* and attention when gathered. This commitment—this high level of engagement—is what enables a fruitful learning partnership between the peer mentoring collaborators.

Comfortability with sharing vulnerabilities and having the courage to present struggles is not easy. Nevertheless, effective peer group mentoring necessitates that participants relinquish their fears and express those challenges that serve as hindrances to their professional and personal lives. In peer mentoring groups, all the participants are expected to play both roles—mentor and mentee. As a mentor, individuals provide healthy challenge and support. As a mentee, participants courageously express their vulnerabilities, areas for improvement, and dilemmas within work or personal contexts. The equanimical distribution encourages a mutual learning experience and enforces the notion of *peerness*. It is exactly this type of sharing that is the fodder for mentoring conversations.

The final requisite participant characteristic for effective peer group mentoring is an inherent desire to support one's collaborators. There are no ulterior motives for participation. Individuals who engage in such mentoring relationships are committed to assisting their peers learn, grow, and achieve success. They recognize that this is a developmental relationship and commit to serving as an advocate, ally, ambassador, resource, and sponsor for their collaborators.

## Limitations

The findings presented above are designed to illuminate a variety of requisite participant characteristics for those who engage in peer group mentoring experiences. I did not design my study to provide the definitive answer to what participant characteristics conclusively lead to effective peer group mentoring. In this qualitative study, I sought to explore the depth-of-experience rather than breadth. Like all research investigations, there are certain limitations.

The participants of the study are one such limitation. The 12 women are only selectively representative. These are women of privilege and power. They are educated and hold positions of influence and responsibility. They each paid (or their organizations supported) the necessary annual dues for PaceSetter membership. They all identified as Caucasian and live in one specific regional area in the United States of America's Midwest.

The size of the data-set is limiting. Although saturation was achieved, the findings are solely demonstrative of *these* dozen participants. The findings are not representative of more diverse populations, individuals from other locales, or peer mentoring groups with varied structures, formats, and models.



Furthermore, as a man interviewing women, I recognize that there may have been information withheld or a misunderstanding on my part as to what was trying to be communicated. This may not be for any other reason than the lenses with which we (I and each research participant) perceive the world and live within it. Although I am grateful for the candor displayed during our conversations, as a man (a person of privilege), I am an outsider to this population, and not able to fully recognize structural inequalities and other forms of prejudice and exclusion that women face, especially those who are executive-level professionals.

## Conclusion

When launching this inquiry, it was important to craft a study in which I could explore ways to enhance the preparations for and practice of peer group mentoring, in particular, and group mentoring, in general. Diamond (2010) suggested that, “mentoring can launch either a journey of developmental learning *or* one of crippling disablement” (p. 203). I believe it begins by focusing on the participants themselves. Participants matter.

The personal characteristics of those involved greatly inform the potential for effectiveness in peer group mentoring. Based on my in-depth study, *requisite participant characteristics* for effective peer group mentorship among executive-level professional women include: (a) an intrinsic interest; (b) a learning disposition; (c) a commitment to the mentoring experience; (d) comfortability with vulnerability and having the courage to share struggles; and (e) an inherent desire to support others in their learning, growth, and development. When designing formal and informal peer group mentoring experiences, such participant characteristics can serve as guideposts as mentoring organizers aim for mentoring relationships that facilitate individuals through journeys of developmental learning.

Future research on group mentoring participant characteristics is necessary. By uncovering desired qualities and attributes of group mentoring collaborators, one will be able to better prepare for and facilitate effective group mentoring. Additionally, it will be important to explore and unpack, a deepened understanding of each of the five requisite participant characteristics previously presented. For example, researchers may consider a variety of inquiry questions including; how is *commitment* defined and practiced by individual actors in various group mentoring contexts?—or—What does *having comfortability with vulnerability and sharing courageously* look and feel like when university students engage in mentoring groups—as compared to executive professional women—such as the participants in this study?

Studying the personal characteristic of group mentoring participants and publishing the data in this journal adds to the growing body of research and literature on group mentoring. For scholars, my data allow for a starting point for further research that can be utilized to compare data across group mentoring contexts as well as for investigators to consider further each of the participant characteristics.

For practitioners, the findings from this study provide targeted data that serve to enhance group mentoring participant selection processes as well as group mentoring engagements.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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