**Encyclopedic Dictionary
of Public Administration**

The reference for understanding government action

MENTORING

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Mentoring is a coaching process through which an experienced person, or mentor, supports the development of another, less experienced person, called a mentee, and offers guidance with respect to his or her professional integration (for example, in a new environment or in a position with new responsibilities). This voluntary learning relationship, whether formal or informal, is confidential in nature and presupposes trust, respect and reciprocity on the part of both mentor and mentee.

The notion of mentoring has its roots in Greek mythology. Mentor, a faithful companion of Ulysses, was entrusted with the upbringing of the hero's son, Telemachus. Mentor acted as a wise counsellor, guide and teacher, during Ulysses' long absence. At times, the goddess Athena took on Mentor's features and appeared before Telemachus to protect him and inspire his actions. Today, the tradition of mentoring has spread from the U.S.A., where it first developed, to become a well-accepted aspect of public administration. Mentoring is based principally on the concepts of learning, knowledge transfer and career path development, within a theoretical framework drawing on theories of organizational behaviour that encompass such subjects as communication, motivation and leadership.

Fundamental shifts in social and interpersonal relationships within organizations, along with transformations in the world of work, have made the support of a mentor increasingly necessary and, consequently, more popular (Houde, 2010). Since its founding in 2002, the non profit organization Mentorat Québec has become a well-known reference for the promotion of mentoring in Quebec, illustrating the growing interest for this type of coaching in organizations.

As recently as the 1980s, literature on mentoring was published almost exclusively in English. However, with time, as the practice of mentoring became more widespread in Quebec and was applied in various French-speaking organizational contexts, the term *mentorat* began to be used to refer to this relationship of support (eventually the words *mentor* and *mentorée* (for mentee) entered the French language and are now accepted by the Office québécois de la langue française as terms describing the roles played in a mentoring relationship). Matching mentors with mentees is today part of the strategies used by public organizations to facilitate employees' career development and the transmission of organizational values.

Definitions of mentoring highlight the diverse facets of this practice. Certain authors emphasize the importance of interpersonal bonds, commitment and reciprocity (Houde, 2010; Zachary, 2000). Others assign more weight to the way mentoring facilitates integration, influences career development and provides significant personal and professional advantages, including

strengthened professional identity, increased self-confidence and the acquisition of interpersonal competencies and leadership abilities (Cohen, 1998; Guay and Lirette, 2004; Ragins and Kram, 2007).

Within the context of public administration, mentoring is defined as a mode of voluntary coaching through a temporary learning relationship, based on reciprocity and mutual respect, between an experienced person (or mentor), recognized and respected in his or her field and capable of listening and providing useful feedback, and a less experienced, often younger person (or mentee), open to learning, interested in his or her career development and capable of making good use of the knowledge and challenges proposed by the mentor (Cuerrier, 2003a; Guay and Lirette, 2003).

In this non-hierarchical relationship, mentors share their vision, knowledge, expertise and network of contacts. Further, while supporting mentees in assuming roles and pursuing avenues for professional development, mentors also improve their own interpersonal competencies. Mentoring also enables mentees to integrate into a new environment or a new position, strengthen their professional identity at critical points in their careers, and gain a better grasp of the challenges and the cultural specificities of their workplace (Benabou, 1995; Guay and Lirette, 2003).

The success of the mentoring relationship is very closely linked to the matching of mentor with mentee. Whether made in a natural manner or based on a list of selected individuals, matches should take into account the mentee's needs and the mentor's competencies. Furthermore, meetings between the two should be marked by confidentiality, receptivity, flexibility and mutual commitment (Guay and Lirette, 2004).

It is possible for mentoring to take place in an unstructured context and foster natural ties or spontaneous relationships; such mentoring is said to be informal. However, many public sector organizations and networks offer mentoring programs based on a structured approach within a framework of general ethical rules and training, supported by senior officers within the organization; this is known as formal mentoring (Guay, 1999; Guay and Lirette, 2004; Blanc and Cuerrier, 2007).

Structured mentoring programs, which should be part of a broader human resources management plan, may focus on specific clienteles (recent graduates, senior civil servants, women in management positions or considering political involvement) and pursue various objectives, such as facilitating the integration of professionals or newly hired civil servants in their jobs, fostering the leadership skills of incumbents of high-level positions and transmitting an organization's values.

In addition the two types of mentoring described above, there is a third model, known as virtual mentoring or online coaching, which makes use of new communication technologies to give participants more flexibility in terms of time and space (Légaré and Lajoie, 2003). In Quebec, the Academos online mentoring service, supported by the Quebec government's Secrétariat à la jeunesse (Youth Secretariat), gives secondary school students a chance to correspond via email with specialists who are familiar with various work environments. According to Légaré, Grouzet and Lajoie (2007), virtual mentoring has a positive impact on student motivation and persistence in school. The success of the program has led a dozen "cégeps" (a Quebec equivalent of junior college providing general and vocational education) to offer this type of coaching to their students.

Over the past few years, mentoring in the public sector has been the object of increased government initiatives and support as a result of institutional changes, as well as social and

demographic shifts (Blanc and Cuerrier, 2007; Guay and Lirette, 2003 and 2004). In the federal government, mentoring has been integrated into the organizational landscape with the aim of creating intergenerational bonds and interministerial relations, as well as facilitating the integration of certain employees in new positions (Cuerrier, 2003b; Guay, 1999). In Quebec's public administration, formal programs have been implemented in several ministries and agencies, not only to facilitate the integration of professionals and recent graduates, but also to support women and incumbents of high-level positions in assuming new responsibilities. In these various cases, the administrators in charge have been keenly aware of the benefits of these programs and have thus been eager to provide employees with appropriate training (Guay, 1999; Guay and Lirette, 2004).

The results of research carried out in 2004 following the implementation of a government mentoring program to integrate recent graduates clearly showed that this training enabled the participants to gain a better understanding of the stakes, demands, responsibilities and rewards related to fulfilling their roles and that they thus drew more gratification from their mentoring relationships (Guay and Lirette, 2004).

To encourage rigor and reflection in the field, the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) recently introduced a short graduate program in mentoring. As well as supplying the requisite tools for developing and implementing organizational mentoring, the program seeks to foster the skills needed to accomplish these objectives.

All in all, mentoring is alive and well in public administration. Structured experiences in mentoring have until now shown that it is an efficient and promising means of supporting professional development and building intergenerational relationships that serve the interests of tomorrow's public administration.

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