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PEER GROUP MENTORING AS A WAY TO SUPPORT THE WELL-BEING AND COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY PERSONNEL

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Abstract

When discussing peer group mentoring there are several related concepts, such as peer learning, tutoring and mentoring. The term 'peer' refers to a person with a comparable position as the other persons involved [1,2]. According to Skaniakos and Piirainen [2], the traditional mentoring idea varies in two ways in peer group mentoring. Peer group mentoring differs from a hierarchical mentor-mentee relationship as the role of the mentor shifts within the group. There is a difference with the distribution of power and authority, flattening of hierarchy, increased confidence, better self-understanding, and professional development [3]. Secondly, the central aspect in peer group mentoring is the group [2].

The project managers in universities of applied sciences are often quite lonely in their work, when many of the colleagues are still just teaching and guiding the students. In this article, the experiences of peer group mentoring to support competence development and well-being in higher education is presented. In this context, the peer group mentoring is planned to help as a method for collegial working, which supports the sharing of tacit knowledge, experiences and attitudes, team working in expert organizations, developing the organizational culture and operations, as well as learning and getting familiar with new tasks at work in different stages of careers. All the members, juniors and seniors, in a peer group can learn from each other equally around the joint objectives – the differences in expertise, responsibilities and obligations are enriching.

This article answers the questions why, how and what is done and learnt. The article describes the experiences of the staff members of three universities of applied sciences from different disciplines, who gathered to share and learn in peer groups.

Keywords: Peer group mentoring, learning, well-being, competence development, university personnel.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Finnish higher education institutions, the working life -oriented pedagogical models offer a way to learn in authentic research and development projects. There are several pedagogic models in Finnish universities of applied sciences to support the need. One of these is a model called Learning by Developing (LbD), which was developed and implemented at Laurea University of Applied Sciences in the beginning of 21st century.

Learning by Developing model has expanded teachers' role as a pedagogue, a regional developer and a researcher, which can be identified 1) as preparers and organizers of the LbD implementation process; 2) as implementers and 3) as evaluators, mentors and partners for students. [4, 5.]. Parallel to the traditional teacher's role, the teacher often works as a researcher or/and a project manager of a research or development project [7]. Ahonen, Meristö, Ranta & Tuohimaa [6] describe how projects contain different roles. On the other hand, a project coordinator's role includes administrative tasks and monitoring; e.g. budgeting and resources as well as coordination of communications in the project. Another role is a researcher's role, which means that a project manager might be responsible for the scientific input and outcome in the project as well as the design of the project. The third role might be to integrate the project in learning activities for the students.

In this complex job, the skills required are various. Project management and networking management, financial management and international communication skills are typically not present in a traditional teachers' everyday work [7]. On the other hand, the integration of teaching and research and development is easiest in the work culture, which Mäki [8] defines as the combination of a collaborative work culture and "a moving mosaic work culture". Laurea UAS has offered an internal Certified Project Manager –training program to support the development of these skills [7, 9]. In addition to learning the skills, the project managers are in a true need of a continuous peer support from the colleagues facing the same challenges in their daily work.

To increase the well-being and competence development of the teachers who work as project managers as well, the three universities of applied sciences in the Helsinki Capital Area started a joint multi-disciplinary group peer mentoring program in spring 2019. Background for the program lies in a project called Verme², which is funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The project supported the collaborative working in higher education institutions. Peer group mentoring was originally organized as mentoring pilots with different target groups. The target groups (consisting of members of all three UAS) were working according to peer group mentoring principles, and at the same time were designing the implementations of new peer mentoring groups in their own universities. The author of this article was working in a first mentoring group for research and development personnel. This peer group founded the new peer group mentoring program for the project managers, which started in spring 2019 and ends in September 2019 (later called the second group). Why, how and what is done and learnt in these peer groups is presented in this article.

2 PEER GROUP MENTORING

When discussing peer group mentoring, there are several related concepts, such as peer learning, tutoring and mentoring. The term peer refers to a person with a comparable position as the other persons involved [1, 2]. The traditional mentoring idea varies in two ways in peer group mentoring. Peer group mentoring differs from a hierarchical mentor-mentee relationship as the role of the mentor shifts within the group. There is a difference with the distribution of power and authority, flattening of hierarchy, increased confidence, better self-understanding, and professional development. Secondly, the central aspect in peer group mentoring is the group. [2,3]

According to Skaniakos and Piirainen [2], there are three core categories of peer group mentoring phenomenon: 1) individual's participation in the group, 2) professional development with others, and 3) community enabling sharing and development. The first core category describes how the self is reflected upon the other members of the group. According to the studies of Skaniakos and Piirainen [2], the main purpose of the peer mentoring group is to support selfhood. The main idea of the second core category is the group as a space where individuals work together equally. The main role of the others is still to support personal development, but the development is not possible without the others. The role of the mentoring group is professionally oriented. The third core category includes the two previous ones. The mentoring group is already working together as a community, and the discussions include a dialogue. The members' professional development is shared. The levels of "self" and "other" fade out and a context becomes shared. The professional development expands to the work quality. Moving to the next category requires that all the group members are equal, are committed to the group's purpose and mission and the diversity of competencies and skills contributes to group dynamics. [2]

Starck et al [10] applies peer group mentoring as a method to support professional development and well-being at work by small group working. From a traditional mentoring, the peer group mentoring differs by highlighting the equality of the members and the collegiality, no matter how junior or senior one is. As a method, peer group mentoring suits well in the organizational development and sharing the knowledge and experiences providing tools even outside the organizational boundaries. In this method, distinct experts make tacit knowledge visible by gathering around the joint objectives, providing the solution by conversations and reflections. In addition to sharing the tacit knowledge and professional and organizational development, peer group mentoring supports the familiarization of a person to one's new tasks. [12, 13, 14]

In a peer group, the titles are left outside the room. The differences in expert competencies, responsibilities and duties are the richness of the group. All members are equal. Whereas in the traditional mentoring process a senior transfers the experience to a junior, the basis for peer group lies in equality and sharing knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is appreciated to ask and wonder. Confidentiality and a respectful atmosphere are key elements for sharing one's ideas, and even feelings. The peer group working decreases the stress, when the other members of the group are there for one and for all. The shared sorrow is only a half but the joy is double. [11]

Starck & al. evaluates that, at its best, a peer group can be a significant community to strengthen the well-being of an individual expert. The group of peers encourages, supports and inspires to develop one's competencies and skills, even attitudes. When empowered by the group, an individual wants to belong to the organization, has the sense of being needed and the work being meaningful. A possibility to share one's incompleteness in a confidential atmosphere empowers the whole group. [11, 12]

3 THE PEER GROUP MENTORING PROJECT AT THREE UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES

★ *What*

The first peer group, in which the author of this article was participating herself, was lasting six months, from September 2018 to February 2019. It consisted of six sessions. The virtual platform for meetings was available, but the group decided to meet face-to-face. One of the members worked as the main facilitator, who mainly designed the facilitation tools used in the sessions. However, she was participating in a mentoring group as an equal peer. The three other members of the group worked in different positions in three universities of applied sciences. One worked in a manager position, while the others in other expert jobs. All the members were somehow related with research and development tasks.

The group's main objective during the working period ended up to be spreading the practices on peer group mentoring in the three higher education institutions. The group founded the second group, which started the working in March and was working also for six months. The target group was the project managers of the three universities of applied sciences. The goal was to found 1-3 groups of 3-5 persons, but the interest was bigger than expected. Within the second group, there were altogether five small groups formed according to the members' interest areas. The second group was planned to work with the same structure with six sessions. It started to work in March 2019 and ended in September 2019. The first peer group facilitated the first and the last session of the second group, but the small groups themselves facilitated the other sessions.

★ *Why*

The first peer group was established to support the project Verme². The main goal of the project was to support collaborative working in higher education institutions and to spread communal group working practices to develop organizational cultures. The project was implemented as mentoring pilots. The peer groups gathered once a month in meetings and spread the learning outcomes in own organizations meanwhile.

The second group was established as the result of the good experiences of the first group.

★ *How*

The structure, the assignments and the tools for the both groups were similar. The process was facilitated through a Padlet software.

The themes of the mentoring sessions were:

- 1 Group-up
- 2 Joint goal and the agreement of ways of working
- 3 Sharing competences and skills
- 4 Sharing competencies and skills
- 5 Wellbeing and enjoying the work
- 6 Evaluation and the future

For each of the sessions there were tasks and facilitation tools planned beforehand. Different facilitation tools were used in each of the sessions to help concentrating on the topic. The tools were chosen to support the goal of the explicit sessions.

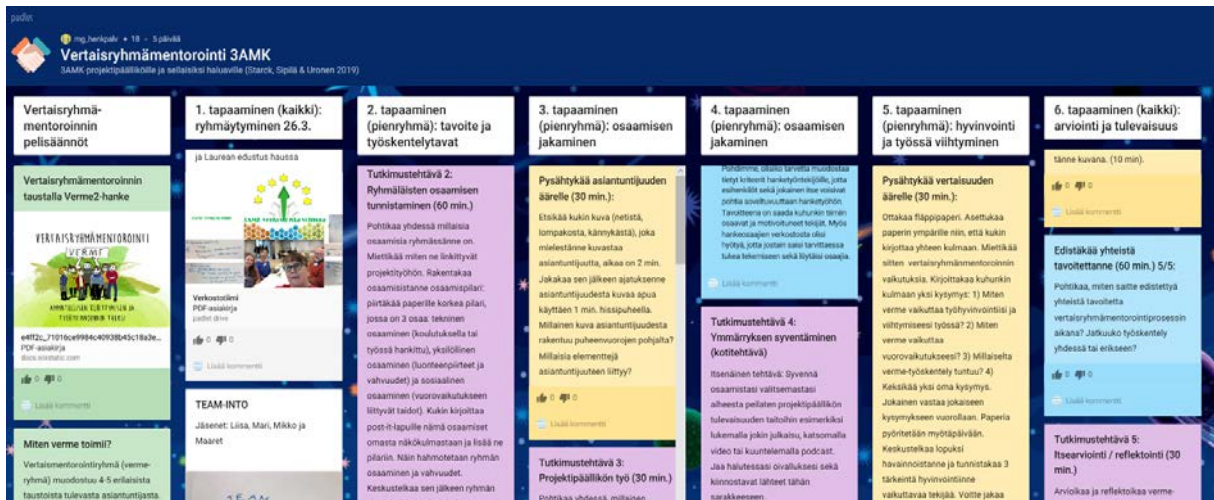


Figure 1. Padlet Table for the peer group mentoring.

4 LEARNING OUTCOMES

The objective of the Verme² project was to support collaborative working in higher education institutions, to spread communal group working practices to develop organizational cultures, as well as to strengthen the competencies and well-being of the participants. The learning outcomes are presented in this section.

4.1 Individual's Participation in the Group

One of the three main findings of Skaniakos and Piirainen study [2] was that the support of the group was essential for the individual's self-reflection process. Self-reflection requires that the group is built on trust and motivation and that the process lasts long enough. The variations of the basic concept in a category 'Individual's participation in the group' are security and belonging, others as mirrors, personalization and identity and commitment and possibility to develop in common space.

The first group did the self-reflection during the mentoring process answering to the questions: How relevant and realistic were the objectives? How have you been able to influence on the peer group mentoring process? Where did we succeed (in mentoring)? What would you do otherwise? How should we communicate about peer group mentoring in our organizations and who should be aware of this to advance the related working culture?

Objectives were found mostly realistic. All along there was a strong will and trust the group will end up with the designed results 1) to develop peer group mentoring practices among the project managers of the three universities of applied sciences and 2) an article to share some learnings of the process. The third goal was buried in the middle of the process due to the unrealistic time schedule and possibility to change the organizations.

Why were we all quite positive? The processes lasted for six months, which seemed to be long enough. Yet, the foundation for commitment and trust was built during the first session. The group got a good start with a good facilitation of one of the group members. The objectives were defined together, as well as the plan how to reach them, when to meet, what to do between the meetings and how to share the tasks based on the strengths and wills of the individuals. All the members had a feeling one can influence the process as much as needed. The peers self-reflected to have succeeded in many aspects: getting to know each other, creating new ideas, sharing knowledge, learning new tools and methods, even new software, taking the peer group mentoring practices further in the three organizations, and perhaps most important, having the courage to step out of the comfort zone as an expert and letting self to learn from a colleague.

The second groups evaluated their process with the best advantages of the process. The best outcome according to them was the sharing of experiences, which helped the loneliness at work. Also a possibility to forget the daily routines in the sessions once a month and learning together were mentioned, as well as new contacts, getting familiar with colleagues and learning from best practices. The least successful issue in this category was the timetable. Even though the process lasted six months; there was a summer break in the middle. The groups found it hard to continue the process after the holiday season.

According to the self-reflections, especially for the first group the security and belonging were strong in the end of the process, which enabled a strong commitment to gain the results. Others were certainly seen as mirrors in both the groups. Possibility to develop together was not mentioned as such, but the joint goal was all about developing together, and learning together was appreciated.

4.2 Professional Development with Others

Professional development with others appears in the second category according to the study of Skaniakos and Piirainen [2]. Professional and personal experiences intertwine to enhance participants' self-understanding and professional development. The variations of the basic concept in a category 'Professional Development with Others' are support and equal atmosphere, others as diversity, collaborative critical inquiry, personal professional development and development of peer group activities.

The mentoring processes were facilitated with a Padlet software and certain facilitation tools planned for each of the sessions. The members of the first group learned a number of new facilitation tools, which was the most influencing aspect of the professional development with others. The experienced best tools are presented in an article 'Strength from facilitation to peer group mentoring', which was published in a book Osallistaen in September 2019 (in Finnish). [12] The second group appreciated the tools that were suggested through the Padlet table, but the learning aspect for new tools was missing in their self-evaluation. The second group changed the roles as facilitators in each of the sessions and the responsibility of the learning may have been too shared.

The individuals felt being supported and equal. The themes, tasks and facilitation tools were presented on a Padlet table before the sessions, which offered equal possibilities for each group member to prepare for them. The tools enabled to concentrate on joint tasks during the meetings. All the sessions were based on knowledge sharing, which made the personal professional development possible. However, the critical inquiry was missing. If the process was longer, the more criticism might have appeared.

Especially the second group evaluated that the goals for the process should have been more concrete, more related to the daily jobs of the individuals. When they were too general, the professional development, especially with project management tasks, was not seen very strong. Designing the goal should be done more thoroughly. Yet, the changing facilitation role supported the commitment of the individuals to the process and peer group mentoring guidelines were learnt.

4.3 Community Enabling Sharing and Development

The third peer group mentoring category highlights the community as a sharing and developing space. Social activity forms places for learning communities in the form of peer group mentoring. The variations of the basic concept in a category 'Community Enabling Sharing and Development' are sharing dialogue, critical knowledge construction in the group, shared professional development and community development. [2]

The communication was strongly based on a dialogue, which was supported by different facilitation tools. Nevertheless, the groups were not able to a critical knowledge construction. The reasons for that may be various. The goals of the groups were either too simple or general to require a strong knowledge construction. Though the members of the groups were working in different positions from different backgrounds, the context was yet the universities of applied sciences in a Helsinki capital area. The half a year time for the peer group working with six meetings may have not been long enough to raise the critical views.

The sharing aspect for professional development was strong as the first group designed and implemented a new peer group mentoring process for the colleagues from all the three universities of applied sciences. There was much more interest towards the process as expected and more than 20 colleagues started the process. The new peer mentoring practices were spread to the organizations to help the lonely and complex work of the project managers. Nevertheless, the second group reflected that there could have been a joint, on-going challenge or process, around which the peer group might get together, to be able to develop the organization. Systematics and continuity were also seen in an important role in community development.

One of the self-evaluation questions was: who should be aware of the method to advance the related working culture in one's organization? The pilot group evaluated that an HRD (human relations and

development) is in an important role – the peer group mentoring should be recognized as one tool to develop the organizational culture.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This article is based on a single case. The context is the Finnish University of Applied Sciences. The experiences of the two groups are still single observations. Strong conclusions can not be made based on this study of the suitability of the peer group mentoring to support the university personnel, but the perceptions of the method presented here are directional.

In Skaniakos and Piirainen study [2], the three core categories are hierarchically organized. The critical aspects are placed in-between the core categories, as a precondition for the next category. The critical aspect in the transition from the first category to the second demands understanding the importance of others in the peer group. The development of the peer group and the personal professional development is enabled by being a member of the peer group. The second critical aspect between the second and third categories expands the idea of group membership from being a member of a group to belonging to a community and developing it as a learning community. Moving to the next category requires the critical aspects to be achieved. All group members have to be committed to the group's purpose and goal. The members of the group have to be equal and the diversity of competencies and skills contribute to group dynamics, but also enhance positive interdependence of other members. [2]

In the peer group mentoring project of the three universities of applied sciences the critical parts can be recognized according to the study of Skaniakos and Piirainen. The first level emphasizing all the individuals' roles in the group was clear. The feeling of being part of the group and respected as a professional raised the identity as a professional developer and as a human being. That alone empowered the wellbeing of an individual peer. Even if the process stayed at this level, the individual's identity as a professional developer would grow in many cases. It is a good feeling to be trusted. The first critical aspect from the first category to the second was achieved.

The second critical aspect from the second to the third category was achieved as well, at least to some extent. The group members were committed to the goal and were equal with the power. There was diversity with the competencies, but from the learning perspective more time might have needed really to learn deeply from other individuals and other organizations. The importance of the joint objective was clear especially with the second group, when it was missing. The professional competence development was not that strongly developed as within the first group. There was interdependence of other members, as some were more skilled in writing, some more skilled in using virtual tools, some were more skilled in facilitating and some more skilled in theoretical analysis and conceptualization. It was summarized that a change is often difficult, but experiments are usually quite easy and interesting. The willingness and skills to develop at the community level were there at least as experiments, which lead to the primary goal of the first group – supporting the well-being and competencies of the colleagues at the university.

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