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What is This?

Exploring Risk Factors in Peer Coaching: A Multilevel Approach

Polly Parker[1], Kathy E. Kram[2], and
Douglas T. Hall[2]

Abstract

Peer coaching has become a recognized tool for career learning in response to the demands of the contemporary business environment. Researchers and practitioners alike have defined it as a dyadic relationship with the potential to foster significant learning for one or both parties. However, the potential of peer coaching to facilitate personal and professional development may be undermined if critical risk factors are not understood and addressed. Exploring the risk factors associated with peer coaching is the explicit focus of this conceptual article. We adopt an ecological lens to deepen understanding of the process of peer coaching, and to show how the interdependence among elements at different levels of analysis influences this relational exchange. This multilevel perspective highlights the dynamic nature of influences which differ in visibility, severity, and levels of the social fabric. We also draw on relational theory in careers, research on interpersonal relationships, and dysfunctional mentoring to predict ways in which effective peer coaching can be undermined. Finally, we propose intervention strategies for minimizing risk factors associated with peer coaching, and an agenda for future research.

Keywords

peer coaching, risk factors, career learning

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Introduction

Peer coaching (PC) is a dyadic relationship between two individuals of equal status that has as the primary purpose to support the personal and professional development of both parties (Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008). The emergence of PC in theory and in practice has become an important factor facilitating career learning for professionals in response to the demands of the contemporary business environment. As effective formal mentoring programs require resources, rewards, and a conducive culture as prerequisite conditions for success, practitioners have sought low-cost alternatives, increasing the demand for PC. However, its potential to facilitate personal and professional development may be undermined if critical risk factors are not understood.

Although PC can have strong beneficial effects for peers, the outcomes are not always positive. Workplace relationships can be harmful as well as helpful, and there is a need to explore those elements that can potentially cause harm if left unaddressed (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000). The emerging literatures associated with high-quality connections, relational learning, and developmental networks have begun to look at possible negative or risk factors involved (cf. Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Eby, 2007). Theoretical perspectives on dysfunctional aspects of mentoring (Scandura, 1998) and trust (Dietz, Skinner, & Weiber, 2011) have explained how negative experiences manifest themselves. Empirically based results present metathemes characterizing negative mentoring relationships (Simon & Eby, 2003). The focus of this conceptual article is to explore the risk elements associated with PC, based on the belief that peers can create conditions for success when they have a realistic understanding of the risk factors associated with PC and can take appropriate preventive or remedial action (Simon & Eby, 2003).

We adopt an ecological lens to deepen our understanding of the process of PC to show how the interdependence among elements at different levels of analysis influences this relational exchange. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) illustrates a range of individual (ontogenic), dyadic (microsystem), and broader contextual (macrosystem) factors within a system. Both direct and indirect influences at these interrelated levels of analysis increase system complexity and point to the inherent limits to addressing issues of change and development at a single level. An ecological perspective highlights the dynamic nature of influences which differ in visibility, in severity, and in their levels of the social fabric.

We draw on relational career theory (Hall & Associates, 1996), research on interpersonal relationships (Duck, 1994; Duck & Kirkpatrick, 2006), and more specifically on dysfunctional mentoring (Eby, 2007; Scandura, 1998) to predict ways in which effective PC can be undermined. The article proceeds as follows. First, we review the relational approach to careers and briefly reiterate the positive aspects of PC. Then we introduce ecological theory to highlight the interdependence among risk factors at different levels of analysis. Finally we discuss the implications of these factors to define an agenda for future research to minimize potential risks that can compromise PC.

A Relational Approach to Careers

Since the earliest study of mentoring (Kram, 1983), scholars have focused on understanding how relationships support the career advancement of protégées. Numerous studies have shown that these developmental relationships provide both career and psychosocial functions (Kram, 1983; Noe, 1988; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Scandura, 1992), can be formal or informal (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000); tend to progress through predictable phases (Chao, 1997; Kram, 1983); shape dynamics according to the demographic characteristics of each party (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Ragins & Scandura, 1999); enhance leader self-efficacy (Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang, & Avolio, 2011); and can produce both career advancement and personal development outcomes (Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003).

In the mid-1990s the focus of research broadened to consider how these hierarchical relationships also benefited the mentors themselves (Allen & Eby, 2003; Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006; Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). Reciprocity and mutuality were introduced into the mentoring discourse to describe characteristics of high-quality relationships (Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). Positive organizational scholars began to delineate how and why relationships characterized by active learning and investment by both parties would lead to more positive performance, satisfaction, and growth outcomes (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007).

Studies in corporate (Bryant & Terbourg, 2008; Kram & Isabella, 1985), educational (Goker, 2006; Murray, Ma, & Mazur, 2008), and sales settings (Fine & Pullins, 1998; Pullins, Fine, & Warren, 2001) demonstrated that relationships with peers can also provide a number of career and psychosocial functions that help individuals to learn the ropes, develop new skills, and prepare for additional responsibilities. Although these functions do not include the kind of sponsorship and exposure that could only come from a mentor with senior status and power in an organizational context, they did include a range of developmental functions of value (Eby, 1997).

With the reconceptualization of mentoring as a developmental network composed of multiple developers (Higgins & Kram, 2001), scholars now consider a range of relationships that support individual learning and career advancement at a given point in time. As D'Abate, Eddy, and Tannenbaum (2003) noted, 13 different types of developmental relationships, alternatively called mentoring, coaching, advising, or apprenticeship, view the development of one or both parties to the relationship as the primary purpose. More recently, Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, and Wilbanks (2011) in their meta-analysis of the mentoring literature since 1980 found 40 different definitions of mentoring, reinforcing the need to define clearly the boundary conditions of interest.

Peer Coaching

Elements of an effective PC relationship have been articulated by Parker et al. (2008). These include equal status of partners (Siegel, 2000), a clear focus on personal and professional development of both peers (K. W. Seibert & Daudelin, 1999; S. E. Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), short time frame (Parker et al., 2008), and regular reflection on practice to identify critical incidents for focus (Daudelin, 1996; Raelin, 2000; S. E. Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). When these characteristics and conditions are in place, engagement in the relationship can lead to increased self-esteem, acquisition of new knowledge and skills, empowered action, and a desire for more connection (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Miller, 2004). Most examples of PC in the literature pertain to educational environments and specifically teacher education where observation and feedback are essential elements of the PC (e.g., Huston & Weaver, 2008; Ovens, 2004).

There is limited empirical research in business and other kinds of work settings, particularly distinctions between formal and informal PC. In developmental domains such as leadership development, formal PC involves a matching process before individual leaders enlist peer support in their ongoing growth. Leaders are encouraged to share new self-insights with one or more peers, and to engage in mutual dialogue for the purpose of identifying appropriate development goals and specific strategies for moving forward on these goals (McCauley & Guthrie, 2007). These PC dyads may continue beyond the formal program to provide ongoing guidance and support as leaders move forward and attempt to integrate new learning into the workplace, emphasizing the potential for informal PC to also become a relatively low cost and invaluable resource (Chandler, Hall, & Kram, 2010; Parker et al., 2008). There is also evidence that engaging in these relationships has health and cognitive processing benefits (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006).

However, relational life has the capacity to influence in both adaptive and maladaptive ways (Blustein, Palladino Schultheiss, & Flum, 2010). For every necessary skill, such as empathy, the absence or misuse of that skill can cause damage. For every necessary condition there can be a potential risk factor that can undermine effective outcomes. We present a range of factors known to compromise effective outcomes of PC. Our list is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Risk Factors Through an Ecological Lens

The ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 2006), most often applied to human development processes and conditions, proposes that people develop through increasingly complex reciprocal interactions within a system. This theory is appropriate for issues of career development which also occur across systems through increasingly complex states of interdependence and interpersonal connection (Kram, 1996) such as those that exist in most workplaces. The ecological perspective emphasizes a context in which structures are nested inside each other. These present
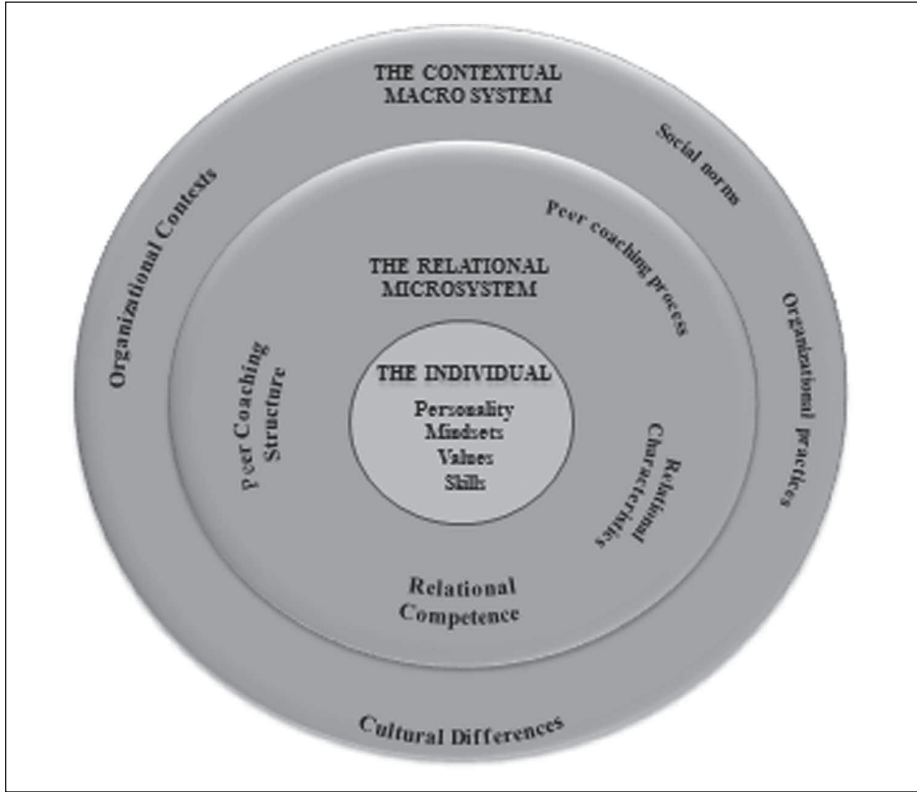
Figure 1. Risk factors in peer coaching: An ecological systems perspective

considerable challenges to the effectiveness of PC but have received scant attention to date. Although PC is ostensibly a dyadic entity (while also applicable in group settings), undermining factors may emerge from dysfunctions attributable at multiple levels to individual differences in, for example, personality, values, mind-sets, and skill levels; to interpersonal process issues grounded in dyadic interactions; and to broader contextual issues such as societal norms and the organizational environment in which the PC is embedded. Thus, these three interdependent levels of analysis create the ecological system of interest here (Chandler, Kram, & Yip, 2011; Wah-I, 2011), and are represented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

The nesting of potential dysfunctional elements contributes to the complexity of addressing risk factors of PC, as elements within a dynamic ecological system exert both direct and indirect influences (Dishion & Kavanagh, 2000; Wah-I, 2011). Potentially dysfunctional risk factors of PC occur within and across different levels of the social system, and vary according to participants' competence, the visibility, and

severity of factors. When peers' skill deficits are visible they can be addressed to increase competence. However, risk factors may be invisible (at least to the peers themselves) and include factors that have not been articulated and explored (Duck, 1994), making identification difficult. Invisible factors may or may not be necessarily destructive but need to be surfaced for examination, particularly as they need to be managed effectively to increase the likelihood that PC will result in individual development.

Furthermore, participants lacking awareness of risk factors may underestimate or not recognize the potential dysfunction, which creates additional difficulties in overcoming them (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Simon and Eby's (2003) five metathemes characterizing negative mentoring relationships and Ragins and Verbos's (2007) continuum to identify the severity of issues in mentoring relationship quality, reflect attention to risk factors that are also applicable to PC. Inadequate skills are less severe than intentionally destructive aspects of relationships and interpersonal interactions. Overcoming the more severe issues requires willingness on behalf of the participants and often the additional support of a qualified professional to surface them and to effect changes.

Individual (Ontogenic) Factors

Recent work on relational learning (e.g., Davidson & James, 2007; Lankau & Scandura, 2007) identifies several attributes that individuals bring to relationships that contribute to the development of potential developmental alliances (Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Individual factors that contribute to negative outcomes of PC include mind-sets and values, inadequate skills relevant to peer's needs, lack of self-awareness, oppositional stance toward relational learning, unrealistic expectations, or lack of motivation to learn, help, or engage.

Lack of skills relevant to peer's needs. The concept of a "needs-based fit" between peers is fundamental to relational learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2007). PC has a short-term time frame and a specific focus that requires adequate skills to generate personal and professional learning (including performance and identity), growth, and adaptability. Therefore, when either or both partners lack some of the requisite skills to engage with and contribute to another's learning at work there is a risk to a successful outcome. For example, a well-meaning individual may equate being helpful with giving advice. Not only may the peer resist the advice but the approach can also elicit unexpected responses of annoyance or anger at the directive manner. As Schein (2010) notes (in his work on process consultation), the common temptation to enter a "doctor" or "expert" mode can undermine the development of a truly helpful relationship. Furthermore, a "dual burden" emerges when the peer coach is both incompetent and unaware of it (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Failure to listen attentively, to speak from one's own experience, and to enable one's partner to be in charge of this personal work, can lead to disappointment, frustration, and disillusionment about the value of PC. Dealing effectively with these

emotional responses requires a level of emotional competence[1] by each peer to effect a constructive outcome and avoid both parties becoming negatively inclined toward PC as a future resource for learning. There is mounting evidence that with motivation, opportunity, and practice, many of these requisite skills—including listening, self-disclosure, feedback, and empathy—can be developed (Cherniss, 2007; Druskat, Sala, & Mount, 2005; Druskat & Wolff, 2001).

Such problems can be addressed early on in a formal context yet harder to detect when PC evolves naturally. This highlights the benefits of establishing preconditions for effectiveness as PC outcomes can be compromised due to a lack of adequate training or skills at the outset (Huston & Weaver, 2008; Parker et al., 2008). Awareness of skill deficiency requires considerable insight and often emotional competence to effect change (Cherniss, 2007). In the immediate future, self-confidence and/or clarity for one's next steps may be elusive. Either or both parties can end up feeling worse off than before the relationship was initiated.

Lack of self-awareness. Self-awareness is a quality/characteristic which is considered a foundation of emotional intelligence and essential to leadership and group effectiveness in organizational settings (Boyatzis, McKee, & Goleman, 2002; Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnston, 2008). Self-awareness extends further when it acts as a catalyst to test outmoded ideas and behaviors and embrace uncomfortable situations and discussions as crucibles for learning (Thomas, 2008). In effective PC, self-awareness ensures understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses and recognition of the impact of one's emotions on self and others. Self-awareness promotes reflection on practice to develop personal insight into areas for growth and discerns actions that will lead to further learning and effectiveness at work.

Individuals who have not achieved a minimum level of self-awareness are likely to underestimate the potential value of working with another to enhance growth in themselves or their peer. They may therefore be less willing to commit to the process with purpose, enthusiasm, and insight, reducing the likelihood of a growth-enhancing peer relationship. Boyatzis's (2007) model of intentional change suggests that these intrapersonal factors must be in place before meaningful learning and personal development can evolve. Thus, even if one peer partner comes with self-awareness and personal goals, the other is likely to experience frustration and/or disillusionment with the relational process.

Mind-sets toward relational learning. Ragins and Verbos (2007) identified relational schema that consist of assumptions about how to best learn and the role that others might play in their learning. Similarly, in PC interactions, prior experiences and beliefs about learning with others influence the expectations of outcomes and, in turn, the attitudes and behaviors that emerge. These relational schemas are shaped by the experiences and mental models that precede a new relational opportunity.

Learning approaches, defined by Davidson and James (2007) as sets of "behaviors that reflect curiosity and inquisitiveness and result in gaining new knowledge about a given context, person, or relationship" (p. 146) underpin the processes of learning and impact outcomes of PC relationships. Behaviors brought to such relationships

epitomize a learning goal orientation in which an individual strives to increase levels of competence in a given activity (Lankau & Scandura, 2007). Peers with growth mind-sets seek and thrive on challenges, reflecting their enthusiasm for learning (Dweck, 2008). In contrast, a performance-based approach leads the individual to achieve success in proven behaviors rather than experiment with different ones (Hall & Chandler, 2007).

Stances toward relational learning are captured by relational schema that are composed of learning approaches, mind-sets, and characteristic behaviors that either predispose individuals toward engaging in relationships with peers, mentors, and others for the purpose of learning, or toward learning independently without asking others for help. Attitudes not conducive to being open to ideas, or to peers' perspectives and support, inhibit genuine investment in the relationship and effective outcomes from coaching interactions. These influences are more complex than we describe here yet govern behavior including whether and how PC alliances will unfold (Heslin, Vanderwalle, & Latham, 2006).

Several recent studies have demonstrated individual differences in help-seeking behavior that are undoubtedly shaped by these relational stances (Chandler, 2006; Chandler & Kram, 2005; Higgins, Chandler, & Kram, 2007). Individuals who are proactive in reaching out to engage others in their learning and development are more likely to have mentors and other learning partners than those who do not (Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Proactive individuals see relationships as potential sites for personal learning, and act in ways that build positive interactions and support mutual learning such as seeking out potential mentors and learning partners, building trust through self-disclosure and active listening, and demonstrating gratitude for the time and attention offered by the other. In formal PC initiatives these actions are necessary to build and sustain a meaningful and ongoing dialogue beyond the original settings (Parker et al., 2008).

Single-loop and double-loop learning. Another perspective for thinking about learning involves the level of self-awareness of the entity that is learning (person, dyad, group, or organization). Going beyond whatever the person's mind-set is regarding learning or growth, a higher order question is, how aware is the person of the way that he or she is thinking about that learning. In single-loop learning the person is focused on one particular objective and never questions that objective (Argyris, 1992). But in double-loop learning, the person is capable of getting "up on the balcony," observing his or her own thought process, and reappraising the learning objective. Thus, he or she could, as a result of an unsuccessful attempt, realize that it would be possible not only to try different methods of attaining a particular goal but also to explore pursuing different goals. Single-loop learning would involve the loop between action, outcome, and back to (revised) action. Double-loop learning would entail a larger loop, from goal to action, to outcome, and back to the original goal. With this larger frame of self-awareness, the person would be able to explore more complicated cause-and-effect relationships and thus might have more power to detect ways of achieving better outcomes. (And, as we suggested at the beginning of this paragraph, these single- and

double-loop processes could operate at the individual, group, or organizational levels of analysis.)

Unrealistic or unmet expectations. An individual may have good intentions and high motivation yet unrealistic expectations. Skill deficits, such as poor communication can impede the development of trust, and in turn, mutual learning. It takes time and considerable effort to effect deep change particularly when long-term patterns of behavior are required (Boyatzis, 2007). Peers may focus on too many aspects simultaneously and therefore dilute attention to key areas. Even when such change is achieved the desired career outcomes may not follow. Furthermore, a lack of self-direction may result in unrealistic expectations of who is responsible for career decisions and success. These issues need to be addressed where possible at the start of the PC relationship so that expectations are clear, realistic, and achievable.

Lack of motivation or failure to engage. Effective PC requires motivation to learn personally and to reciprocate support and learning. Directive behavior, lack of empathy, and reluctance to take the time for deep listening, reflection, and creative problem-solving compromise a partner's ability to achieve additional self-awareness and clarity regarding appropriate next steps. The dynamic may stem from a selfish attitude that influences motivation and commitment and compromises reciprocal outcome quality (Lankau & Scandura, 2007). Alternatively, the self-oriented intention may stem from a perception that helping another person is a distraction from the "real work." It may also reflect a lack of emotional competence. Each case prevents a potentially competent peer coach from being effective in the peer alliance, and a "fixed entity mind-set" could make people doubt whether PC will be a fruitful investment of their time (Heslin et al., 2006).

Understanding how these factors operate is essential to mitigate their undermining effects on PC. Individual shortcomings in any one of these characteristics described above can produce negative emotions in the peer partner (such as disappointment or betrayal) that undermine trust and mutual learning. At best, the PC relationship remains superficial, resulting in a low- or medium-quality peer process (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). At worst, it can produce alienation, sense of failure, and a persistent distrust of the value of learning in relationships at work, a result akin to Ragin and Verbos's dysfunctional state.

As an ecological systems perspective suggests, intrapersonal factors occurring at one level in the system produce emergent consequences at other levels within the system. Intrapersonal factors lead to reduced quality interpersonal relational dynamics, an impact felt at both dyadic (or group) and macrocontextual levels. In addition, other risk factors emerge at the dyadic level of analysis to which we now turn.

Dyadic (Interpersonal) Factors

The ecological perspective highlights dyadic risk elements that manifest *in* the coaching process, including relational processes and competence. These issues differ from those that emerge when there is a power differential between the people involved—as

in a supervisory or therapeutic relationship. Despite equal power between peers, the coordination of the interdependent work of PC gives rise to dyadic risk factors. Represented as a relational microsystem in Figure 1, these include lack of relational competence, such as inadequate communication skills, overdependence, or submissiveness creating a lack of balance between peers, bad intentions, and finally betrayal or regret.

As with intrapersonal issues, deficits of low severity can be addressed most easily. The more visible they are the more likely that they can be rectified through appropriate education and training (e.g., self-assessment and training in emotional intelligence competencies). Problems of high severity include hostile interactions that can lead to sabotage, harassment, or disengagement. These problems may not only make effective PC impossible (Eby, 2007) but also lead to destructive consequences including lowered self-esteem, poor performance, personal or career damage, and/or the decision to leave the organization. Again, our list is indicative rather than exhaustive and reflects our collective experience in practice.

Lack of relational competence. Relational competence evident in effective interactions with others is based on the interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity that characterize high-quality relationships (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). Effective interaction requires peer coaches to work together positively to effect reciprocal benefits, an essential relational component of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1978). Deficiencies in relational competence may manifest as an inability to move fluidly between the position of learner and facilitator within the dyadic relationship. These latter shortcomings, stemming (to some extent) from the developmental position of each peer leads to problems in facilitating a peer's personal growth (e.g., Kegan, 1982). Until each peer coach is of a mind-set to learn and to facilitate the learning of the other, the coaching relationship will fall short of the necessary mutuality and reciprocity proposed.

Inadequate individual skills may manifest at the dyadic level where peers engage in interpersonal learning. These may manifest as failure to reflect feelings and content, inadequate attention and summarizing, posing only superficial questions to support critical reflection, demonstrating a lack of empathy, and inadequate capability to give and receive feedback (Amundson, 2003). The severity of the skill deficit determines the impact on the PC process. Outcome effects include superficial interactions, low engagement, and unmet expectations. Furthermore, factors at the societal level can influence relational process through group membership (e.g., gender, ethnicity) and associated stereotypes. In turn, these conditions may influence individual outcomes as well such as self-esteem.

Overdependence or submissiveness. Scandura (1998) outlines problematic relational dynamics resulting from overdependence or submissiveness wherein both partners to a relationship collude in disempowering one of them. She notes that this often occurs as a result of unexamined gender or racial stereotypes which tacitly place the minority group member in a one-down position in relation to the other. This example highlights how contextual factors also influence the PC process (see Figure 1). Although Scandura's

research was focused on mentoring relationships, we suggest that the same may occur in PC relationships. Group memberships embedded in social contexts are powerful influences on attitudes and behaviors. For example, one peer can be observed giving much advice and the other peer absorbing it without question (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2007). Similarly, a male peer may be reluctant to ask for help from a female peer if his relational schema is grounded in the assumption that only more experienced male colleagues can be a useful resource for learning. In extreme circumstances, gender stereotypes may result in controlling or harassing behavior. These destructive dynamics lead to psychological abuse resulting in poor self-esteem, stress and anxiety, isolation, and withdrawal (Marshall, 1994).

Bad intentions. As Duck (1994) delineated in his work on interpersonal relationships, relational problems can be categorized according to intentions, and whether the problems are inherent (there from the outset, or unavoidable) or emergent over time. When intentions are to learn and want to help the other learn as well, it is possible to address the negative dynamics that we have outlined so far. Even in situations when peers encounter disappointment or frustration, adequate personal resources or third-party interventions can alter the dynamics, enabling peers to learn from the temporary derailment of productive dialogue.

However, it is naïve to assume that all individuals want to engage in mutually enhancing relationships with their peers and the most problematic relational problems are those rooted in bad intentions from the start. Individuals who bring a relational stance rooted in a worldview comparable to "survival of the fittest" are likely to be self-protective. Scandura (1998) includes exploitative behavior such as bullying, as an example of an intentional breach among negative aspects of mentoring relationships. In PC, those who see their peers as competitors rather than as potential sources of support and development are likely to undermine efforts to engage positively. Such examples exist in contexts characterized by limited resources, hierarchy, and competition. Casualties resulting from sabotage, betrayal, or revenge can range from individual disaffection, career damage, destroyed relationships, or to leaving the organization. As Gersick et al. (2000) point out, "negative experiences tend to have disproportionate effects on attitudes and behavior" (p. 1031). Furthermore, such losses (if relatively frequent) are likely to negatively affect the organization's culture as well, affecting future hiring and retention of good employees, morale, and other valued outcomes such as innovation and productivity.

Drawing on Fletcher and Ragins's (2007) notion of a mentoring "episode," we can consider the frequency and severity of negative episodes occurring in PC relationships. Developmental episodes are short-term interactions within relationships that contribute to both peers' learning. In contrast, those that lead to disappointment, frustration, isolation, and other negative outcomes are best described as nondevelopmental or destructive episodes. Potential remedies to reduce destructive consequences may be as straightforward as helping individuals to actively listen more effectively, or as complex as considering whether the relationship can be repaired to the point where mutual learning is possible.

Betrayal or regret. The potential exists for betrayal or regret. The individual who breaks the confidence of one's peer may do so without having sufficiently considered the consequences for the peer or other colleagues. Such poor judgment invokes the dark side of trust (Dietz et al., 2011). Alternatively, a loss of perspective in order to meet personal goals, may invite actions that embarrass, ignore, or undermine peers, leading to lost opportunities, damage to the careers or reputations of self and/or others. In these indicative examples trust is compromised, individuals are hurt, disillusioned and/or disaffected, and the potential of PC to foster learning and development is at best "spoiled" (Scandura, 1998, p. 455) if not entirely lost.

In addition to the intrapersonal and interpersonal factors discussed above, ecological theory highlights additional influences arising from the macrosystem, the context in which PC occurs. Perhaps this least examined aspect of the risks of PC, potentially has the most powerful influences on outcomes, as both individual (ontological) and dyadic (microsystem) level issues embedded within it contribute to a complex interplay of factors (Duck, 2007).

The Context of Peer Coaching

The context for PC is most often an organization although in a boundaryless career environment (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) coaching may occur within a range of career communities such as an industry, an occupation, or alumni or family contexts (Parker, Arthur, & Inkson, 2004). From an ecological perspective, the context reflects a macrosystem that includes social norms and cultural differences. The prevailing culture and practices significantly shape relationships among its members (Duck, 2007; Martin, 2002; Schein, 2010). In developmental cultures the espoused and practiced values and beliefs of the organization support development options for individuals, enhancing capability (Simonsen, 1997). Negative contextual factors that can impede effective outcomes include a highly competitive culture, inappropriate incentives and rewards, and mismatching of peers. These factors are discussed below.

Competitive culture. A useful lens that supports the impact of nested risk factors is offered by Ann Swidler (1986). She defined a cultural toolkit comprising habits, skills, and styles from which individuals construct strategies of action within a worldview framed by organizational culture. In developmental cultures (Hall & Associates, 1996; Simonsen, 1997), employees at all levels are rewarded to some extent, for their abilities to learn, acquire new competencies, and teach others.

However, if the culture neither reflects high trust, teamwork, and collaboration, nor values ongoing learning and development of new skills, it is unlikely that peers will naturally teach and coach one another. In contexts characterized by fierce individualistic competition, it is difficult for peers to ask for help, admit mistakes, or have the skills to lend active support to their peers. They are therefore less likely to form trusting and mutually enhancing learning partnerships (Sherif, 1996).

Incentives and rewards. The incentive system and rewards available to organizational members are observable artifacts of culture (Schein, 2010), that act as powerful

determinants of acceptable attitudes and behaviors (Kerr & Slocum, 1987). When employee development supersedes evaluation employees are encouraged to regularly reflect on their successes, challenges, and personal goals. In this context PC is likely to thrive as taking time to actively listen and engage in learning partnerships with one's peers is considered an important part of the capability development (Mavrinac, 2005; Simonsen, 1997).

Cultures that prioritize and reward short-term bottom-line results are less likely to support formal PC unless some of that reward is tied to teamwork that necessitates collaborative efforts among peers. Where results-oriented cultures emphasize individual achievement, and members compete with each other for recognition as top performers, PC relationships are also less likely to be prevalent. Furthermore, those that exist will be vulnerable to some of the negative relationship problems outlined previously.

Mismatching of peers. Even if parties to a PC alliance have the necessary personal skills to engage in relational learning, research on mentoring programs in work settings (Blake-Beard et al., 2007; Sontag, Vappie, & Wanberg, 2007) and PC in educational settings (Parker et al., 2008), consistently demonstrate the importance of a sound matching process that includes input from participants, adequate time to building the foundation for a learning partnership, and essential information about the purpose, structure, and process of PC (see Parker et al., 2008). The absence of any one of these conditions may cause problems such as disparity of interests and needs, unrealistic expectations for the PC relationship, and/or some of the negative dynamics suggested earlier. Research on formal mentoring has consistently shown that if matching processes do not include input from the participants, if individuals are coerced in to participation, or there is a lack of adequate training around expectations and requisite skills, a number of the relational problems outlined above are likely (Blake-Beard et al., 2007; Huston & Weaver, 2008). In contexts where PC relationships (one-to-one or group) are designated by a third party (e.g., instructor, facilitator, manager), the matching process is critical to successfully establishing an alliance characterized by mutual learning and growth.

Implications of Risk Factors

Our purpose has been to alert practitioners to the subtle yet powerful factors that can undermine the potential of PC, and to encourage scholars to investigate how best to address them. Relational career theory emphasizes the need for individuals to continuously develop self-awareness, resilience, and adaptability to thrive in the 21st-century work context (Hall, 2002). For managers in particular, PC has the potential to be an important resource for enhancing these competencies. However, successful outcomes are more likely to be achieved when conditions to minimize risk are identified and preempted. How can we create such conditions in organizations? What avenues of research will further illuminate aspects of PC that could limit its potential? This section's aim is to address these two questions.

Addressing Key Risk Factors

Identifying the individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors that can undermine the potential of PC, suggests that intervening at any one of these levels will in turn, influence other parts of the ecological system (Wah-I, 2011). Scholars and practitioners who are interested in identifying strategies that will foster high-quality connections at work have begun to articulate several approaches which are applicable to PC (Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Ragins & Kram, 2007). These are discussed below.

Assessing the organizational context. The work context can amplify or mute individuals' efforts to build high-quality connections (Dutton, 2003). Organizational culture shapes the extent to which individuals engage in relationship building efforts that would lead to high-quality connections at work, particularly when values of teamwork, development of the whole person, and valuing respect and dignity of every employee are enacted (Baker & Dutton, 2007; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). A key to addressing risk factors is to provide conditions to establish and nurture growth-enhancing interpersonal relationships.

The influence of a competitive macrosystem context where individual bottom-line results are rewarded at the expense of teamwork and mutual helping, compromises growth in the microsystem dyadic relationships. Here, the implementation of a formal PC initiative may be the beginning of a cultural change process. Cooperative climates have a stronger association with psychosocial support than competitive ones (O'Neill, 2005). In practice, at the macrosystems level, these values are conveyed and reinforced through human resource policies and management practices including rewards and recognition for teamwork, and helping others. In addition, when the structure, division of labor, and social networks in an organization minimize hierarchy, and encourage teamwork and multiplex ties among members, high-quality connections are likely to follow.

Ongoing macrosystem management practices include the structure and running of meetings, leaders' modeling of behaviors, and the extent to which collaborative technologies are leveraged for work and to create learning opportunities. Stevens, Heaphy, and Dutton (2011) illustrate with examples from a small software design firm, that frequent and informal meetings in which members are invited to share their current work challenges fostered more mutually helpful interactions among the programmers. Other practices, including the integration of play into the work day helped create a climate in which members enjoyed one another, got to know each other as whole persons (rather than simply as programmers), and created multiple opportunities for interaction and exchange that ultimately enriched their connections at work.

Informal PC is more likely to occur when the macrosystem encourages collaborative behavior, rewards and recognition reinforce helping behavior, and management practices related to selection, socialization, and meeting practices foster the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms of high-quality connections (Stevens et al., 2011). College graduates who work for organizations that have developmental

cultures are more likely to find informal mentors than those who do not (Wanberg et al., 2003).

Informal PC has its own advantages, such as the ability to respond to personal motivation to work with a particular colleague who may have specific attributes to offer. The emergence of a solid working relationship allows for greater flexibility in working arrangements, less pressure to adhere to preestablished rules, and the freedom to monitor progress as it unfolds. Trust may exist already rather than needing to be built into the process. Furthermore, when informal PC occurs naturally the individuals are likely to bring appropriate motives and a willingness to develop the necessary relational skills. However, individuals may gravitate to coaches like themselves, who are unlikely to challenge or threaten them in any way. This may allow people to remain in their comfort zones rather than extend into a learning zone, and thus lessen the potential development that comes from a peer coach who brings different experiences and perspectives to the relationship.

Establishing formal PC. One possibility is to focus first at the dyadic level to create a cultural island in which individuals are invited to experience the potential of PC (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; McCauley & Guthrie, 2007; Parker et al., 2008). A structured approach to preparing individuals for PC increases the likelihood that they will develop the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms necessary for high-quality connections at work (Stevens et al., 2011). For example, a leadership development program to amplify individual learning, simultaneously supports individuals to develop self-awareness and critical relational skills. The Johari window (Luft, 1969) is an excellent frame of reference to illustrate how self-awareness can be developed in relationships enhancing both self-understanding and relational skills. Sharing data with peers increases the open space and reduces the hidden area. (The earlier section on single-loop and double-loop learning suggests that progressing from a single-loop to a double-loop mind-set can be a way of expanding one's self-awareness and, thus, growing the size of the open space.)

Self-assessments and 360 feedback instruments can be an excellent starting point for building self-awareness (Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010). Combined with effective facilitation, these activities can create readiness among participants to explore the meaning of data they have generated (and received in feedback reports) with a peer coach. Relevant input such as use of Johari's window can reduce blind spots through receiving relevant feedback. Coupled with reflection and sufficient practice, such an experience can help individuals develop the self-awareness, empathy, and social skills to build a meaningful and productive dialogue with a peer coach.

In sum, individuals who have specific guidelines for getting started and managing the relationship as it unfolds, and have a cognitive understanding of the potential, limits, and characteristics of effective PC will be unlikely to experience individual and dyadic (or group) risk elements. Similarly, in a supportive context, individuals who are guided to practice and hone deep listening, self-disclosure, empathy, and other interpersonal actions that lead to positive emotions, respectful engagement, and mutual learning, minimize the potentially negative consequences that can accrue. Achieving

positive outcomes (outlined above) requires informed selection of program participants (see e.g., Parker et al., 2008), voluntary participation, and individual intentions and expectations that are aligned with the overall purpose of the program to address many of the taxing and severe risk factors including bad intentions, betrayal, overdependence, or submissiveness. Norms of confidentiality, mutual support and encouragement, and personal inquiry and risk-taking enable participants to address some of the individual and relational elements that could otherwise limit the potential value of the PC experience. Over time, individuals' growing self-awareness will increase visibility of potential obstacles to effective PC, whereas enhanced relational skills will provide the emotional and behavioral skills to overcome them.

Overall, formal PC has the advantage of being prescribed and thus potentially recognized by the organization as a valued activity. The formal establishment of process and boundaries contributes to increasing safety through maximizing trust in the relationship until it is inherent in the peers' process. Guidelines can be made explicit and provide operating principles to direct coaching activity. Examples include purposeful matching of peers, establishment of formal working agreements that set operating guidelines (e.g., identification of focus for each meeting, regulation of meeting frequency, and length of sessions), and reflection or reporting on the processes followed. Although the formality of this approach may contribute to a concomitant disadvantage in the lack of flexibility, the potential to replicate these positive experiences going forward in other work relationships is significant.

Next Steps in Research

Although previous research on mentoring (Ragins & Kram, 2007), high-quality connections (Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007), leadership development (Van Velsor et al., 2010), and PC (Parker et al., 2008) support the practical implications that we have outlined, research specifically designed to illuminate the boundary conditions, outcomes, and limitations of each alternative is needed. A healthy ecology promotes systemic attention to intrapersonal, relational, and contextual factors (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). For example, a training intervention focused on individual skill development potentially enhances both individual and relational competence. In turn, further effects may emerge at the contextual level. Similarly, changes in contextual factors such as organizational practices may result in increased relational competence. Thus, a holistic approach is required to provide an integrated perspective of the risk factors that shape PC.

In this section, we suggest avenues for next steps in research that consider multiple levels of analysis. At each level within the system, we give examples of specific studies for future research that could confirm or disconfirm risk factors that we have identified. At the individual level, we provide examples related to skills, mind-sets, and self-awareness. At the relational level, our examples highlight lack of relational competence and elements of structure and process of PC, including comparisons of formal and informal situations. The contextual level acknowledges societal norms and

elements of national and organizational culture that influence the dynamics of PC processes.

Targeting the Individual Level

A number of field experiments would illuminate the best way to prepare individuals for PC. For example, in a classroom setting a treatment option would be to train one group in active listening skills including reflection of content and feelings, summarizing content within the dialogue, challenging inconsistencies, and exploring options. A control group would be given a talk on the benefits of PC but without any specific skills practice. Measuring PC outcomes for both groups would provide data on the impact of such preparatory training. A time series or longitudinal design would be an obvious extension.

A variation on the focus using the same design would target levels of self-awareness. This might include self- and 360-degree assessments that would enable individuals to increase understanding of their skills, values, developmental needs, and career interests and goals. The benefit of an experiment is to identify clearly which approaches better prepare individuals for effective PC.

A third field experiment focused on individual characteristics prior to PC would identify growth versus performance orientations (Dweck, 2008). One possible design is to pair individuals with similar mind-sets (either growth or performance) and to compare PC outcomes. In addition, mixed pairs provide addition data on the effects of different mind-sets within the pairs. Should we find that growth mind-sets have a positive impact, training on mind-sets prior to coaching would enhance positive outcomes and be an area for intervention. Again, a time-series design may provide insights into the dynamics of the PC process over time.

Targeting the Relational Level

At the relational level of analysis our suggested focus is twofold: first a focus on facilitating high-quality connections, and second, attention to the structure and process of PC. Fortunately, the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms of high-quality connections are now more clearly defined (Stevens et al., 2011), and scholars are developing scales to assess relationship quality (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). These advances can be applied to PC to increase success factors in managerial learning.

A focus on facilitating high-quality connections in PC is timely given that PC is becoming a regular element in action learning projects (Raelin, 2010) and leadership development programs (McCauley & Guthrie, 2007; Van Velsor et al., 2010). The focus now is to systematically assess the quality of PC relationships, and the extent to which these relationships are characterized by the subjective experiences and the structural ties that define high-quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Are these relationships characterized by high emotional carrying capacity, tensility, and connectivity? (Carrying capacity refers to the ability of the relationship to withstand

Table 1. Typology of Risk Factors in Peer Coaching

Level	Risk factors
Individual	Lack of experience relevant to peer's needs
	Inadequate individual skill set and competencies
	Lack of self-awareness
	Oppositional mind-sets toward relational learning
	Unrealistic expectations for relationship
	Lack of motivation to help or failure to engage
Relational	Lack of relational competence
	Overdependence or submissiveness
	Bad intentions
	Betrayal or regret
Contextual	Competitive corporate culture that does not value personal development, Climate of mistrust
	Company unwillingness to adapt practices that foster peer coaching, low level of team work and collaboration
	Limited cultural toolkit (e.g., skills for reflecting and designing action plans)
	Inappropriate incentives and rewards
	Mismatching of peers

more emotional expression as well as a greater range of emotions, tensility describes the resilience of the relationship, and connectivity reflects "a relationship's generativity and openness to new ideas and influences," Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p. 266.) Do individuals experience vitality, positive regard, and mutuality in their PC relationships? Is outcome success correlated with the initial matching process?

Instruments developed by Carmeli and Gittell (2009) and Ragins (2011) that measure elements of high-quality connections can be applied to PC in field experiments. For example, varying the risk factors identified in this article (see Table 1) could be carried out in Executive Education classes, open leadership, or MBA programs. Additionally, a larger, sample questionnaire study could test the impact of the risk factors such as lack of self-direction in career intention or lack of relational competence including the agility to move back and forth between positions of learner and facilitator.

Comparisons of formal and informal PC for individuals at different career stages, and in different contexts will illuminate under what conditions particular forms of PC are most appropriate. The opportunities to observe variations in PC are growing both in a broader range of classroom settings and in business environments, increasing the opportunities to systematically delineate which forms of PC will be best suited for particular contexts.

Particular outcomes such as instrumental skill development may be more suited to formal PC than informal processes. In contrast, informal coaching in some areas may emerge in challenging situations where helping behavior is frequently enacted. For

example, in examining task-oriented groups we might observe the frequency of informal PC occurring naturally to facilitate the output. A suggested experiment would be for a participant observer (such as a teaching assistant) to identify the frequency and quality of relational interactions. Key outcomes would also be tracked, and we would hypothesize that teams with more evidence of informal PC would outperform teams with less.

Creating hybrid models of coaching is an additional focus at the relational level. PC is ideally one learning relationship within a developmental network that includes seniors, juniors, and peers (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Some organizations and professional associations are experimenting with new structures such as mentoring and PC circles that bring together several seniors and several juniors to facilitate each member's development. This design may make it easy for members to enlist seniors, juniors, and peers in their ongoing developmental network. A comparison of outcomes from structures that mix junior and senior coaches based on age or experience would elucidate differences in individual and relational outcomes compared with homogenous pairings or groups. Ultimately these experiments may reveal best practices for PC interventions.

Targeting the Contextual Level

At the contextual level we consider societal social norms, as well as elements of national and organizational culture. These variables encompass how PC is enacted in different countries as well as in different organizational contexts. One possible experiment is to explicitly question in a multicultural setting (such as a classroom program), the underlying assumptions that shape helping behaviors generally and PC in particular. For example, our experience has shown that cultures that highly value relational connections may simultaneously frown on proactively asking for what is perceived as "instrumental" help of others. This unaccepted tension maybe explained by the power of social norms on embedded relational processes.

Our focus in this article has implied an egalitarian norm, yet PC may hold more potential for growth and support within cultures characterized by higher power-distance (Hofstede, 2001). In such countries, training programs are neither conducive to self-disclosure, particularly in groups, nor when the potential exists for loss of face. Furthermore, collectivist and individualistic orientations are likely to influence helping behavior and in turn PC processes. Thus, experiments comparing groups across nations could examine the impact of training interventions in various cultural contexts to identify the specific impacts of local societal norms.

At the organizational level, experiments could test the impact of practices such as a reward system that acknowledges and values relationship building and helping behaviors as a measure of organizational citizenship. An example of organizational culture that may enhance or impede PC effectiveness would be illuminated by comparing PC processes within competitive and collaborative contexts. Although initial experiments could focus within a single organizational context, an extension would include using the organization context as an independent variable and compare across organizations.

Identifying potential risks associated with PC also raises awareness of the need to ensure that practitioners can articulate the results. If PC processes are to be implemented effectively, the beneficial outcomes need to be marketed explicitly to all relevant stakeholders and recognized across the ecological system. Collection of both quantitative and qualitative data that reflect the alignment of outcomes to business strategy, PC processes, and personal objectives can provide compelling support for future implementation of PC. Acknowledging reciprocal links among levels of analysis is not only necessary to provide accountability but also to highlight the effect of different interventions to contribute to a business case to guide future investments. Within organizations, HR practitioners may be charged with stewardship of the program in which case adopting a dynamic ecological view of links among macro, micro, and ontogenic outcomes will ensure that strategic initiatives are supported at all levels.

Conclusion

Our purpose has been to identify individual, relational, and contextual factors that can undermine the potential of PC and to consider the implications for practice and future research. We used an ecologically informed approach to highlight these interdependent factors and emphasize the complexity of addressing conditions, processes, and consequences that occur at different levels and undermine the value of PC.

PC is growing in the frequency of its application, in part because it is so straightforward to use. But, as we are learning through research and practice, it can be difficult to use well. Practitioners, advocates, and PC participants all need to be alert to the subtle and powerful unintended negative outcomes that are potentially destructive of personal learning, professional development, and performance. The key focus in this article has been on raising awareness of potential detractors of PC to minimize barriers to success. Our underlying hope is that identifying risk elements will be a useful step in promoting PC as an unparalleled means of accelerating career learning in the 21st century.

Note

1. Emotional competence comprises Goleman's (2005) dimensions of emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Cherniss, 2007).

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