

# Group mentoring: rapid multiplication of learning

Randy Emelo

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *This paper aims to evaluate group mentoring as a large-scale form of collaborative learning.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Researchers used a 12-question survey and personal interviews to assess the relevancy and success of group mentoring, and its impact on personal productivity/effectiveness and organizational success.*

**Findings** – *A total of 93 percent said topics discussed during their group mentoring events were relevant to them and their jobs, and 96 percent reported that they could apply information gained during group mentoring directly to their role in the organization.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *Further research with a larger survey population would be valuable, particularly as the use of group mentoring expands.*

**Practical implications** – *Group mentoring can replace costly classroom training, allowing more people to gain useful and practical knowledge in a setting that supports large-scale productivity and effectiveness back on the job.*

**Originality/value** – *All content in this paper is new. Readers will discover the latest research and trends in group mentoring and collaborative learning.*

**Keywords** *Mentoring, Productivity rate, Learning, Group teaching methods, Workplace training*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction

Learning and development must keep pace with the rapid changes occurring in business practices today. Outdated training techniques and irrelevant content can create a widening chasm between what people need to know to do their jobs well and what information they are actually offered. To help close this gap, organizations need to shift the way they support knowledge transfer.

One new learning approach gaining traction in support of this is group mentoring. Both fast and effective, group mentoring leverages a few internal leaders or knowledge experts to multiply the learning in the organization. Through this practice, one or a few advisors lead a cohort of learners in a collective knowledge sharing environment, with group sizes varying based on learning objectives. Groups focused more on gaining complex skills or learning about in-depth processes may be smaller, while groups focused on broader topics or created around affinity areas to support peer collaboration may be larger in nature. Through my work with Triple Creek and our clients using our Open Mentoring® software, I have seen groups vary in size from five to 50 learners.

To discover more about this emerging learning option, Triple Creek conducted research on a few of our clients using group mentoring within our Open Mentoring® software. What we found indicates that the collaborative learning environment within group mentoring produces excellent results and provides an attractive alternative to traditional learning models such as classroom training.

This two-part series will examine Triple Creek's group mentoring research. The first part will explore survey results and what we learned about the benefits and impact of group mentoring. The second part (to be published in *ICT*, Vol. 43 No. 4) will describe how global organizations are actually implementing the emerging best practices for group mentoring, with a case study on CDW included to give insight into the design, implementation and evaluation of major group mentoring initiatives at leading organizations.

### Research scope and design

In late 2009-early 2010, Triple Creek conducted research on four client organizations who were early adopters to using group mentoring within our enterprise mentoring software, Open Mentoring®. Our research approach included:

- A 12-question survey of group learners at three of the organizations (one chose not to participate in this section).
- Interviews with group advisors at all four organizations.
- Interviews with group mentoring program administrators at all four organizations.

Survey questions were sent to 211 participants across 24 different group mentoring events. A total of 73 people responded to the survey, for a response rate of 35 percent. We conducted interviews with two group advisors and three program managers. (Since surveying these early adopters, the use of group mentoring has rapidly expanded. Triple Creek now has 29 organizations offering group mentoring with more than 200 group mentoring events in progress.)

The four organizations surveyed used group mentoring in very unique ways, illustrating the flexibility of this approach to learning. One organization used it as a degree program resource for undergraduates. Another leveraged group mentoring to support competency development between executives and a small group of employees. A third focused on developing critical leadership skills through group mentoring, while the last used it to foster more diversity in their leadership core. (See the Group mentoring examples (Box 1) for more information on how our current clients use group mentoring.)

The second article in this series will include more of Triple Creek's recent work with organizations in setting up group mentoring initiatives. The remainder of this article will synthesize the survey results with first-person comments and interview excerpts to explore the impact of group mentoring. The following survey results highlight the impact group mentoring had on individuals and the organizations where they work, where learning and information came from in these groups, the satisfaction people had with group mentoring, and factors leading to their satisfaction.

#### Box 1. Group mentoring examples

The use of group mentoring is gaining in popularity today, in part because the many can learn from the few. Scores of people can learn from limited expert resources, making it an efficient way to spread knowledge. It is also finding its mark today because the topics that groups focus on can be as diverse as the learners participating. Some examples of how our current clients use group mentoring include:

- Mentor development.
- High-potential development.
- Managing vision in leadership.
- Affinity groups.
- Sales leadership academy graduates.
- Having difficult conversations.
- Emerging leaders.

## Impact on individuals

The impact of group mentoring on individuals can be seen in numerous ways. In our research, 75 percent of respondents indicated they increased their productivity/effectiveness because of their group mentoring involvement (see Figures 1-2). Of those, more than 60 percent said they improved by 5 percent to 15 percent. Furthermore, 35 percent reported improvement ranging from 20 percent to 35 percent and beyond. These numbers are quite significant because they show that individuals truly see the positive impact of group mentoring back on the job in terms of their productivity/effectiveness and they feel confident enough in these increases to assign a percentage to them.

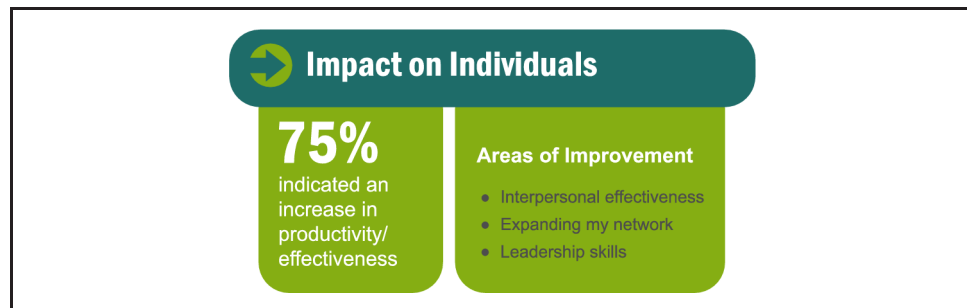
In addition to quantifying the degree of their improvement, participants also indicated which of ten specific areas they improved in. Participants could choose as many of the ten areas as they deemed appropriate, with people selecting an average of 2.78 areas each, indicating improvement in approximately three main areas due to their group mentoring experience.

The top three areas of improvement identified were:

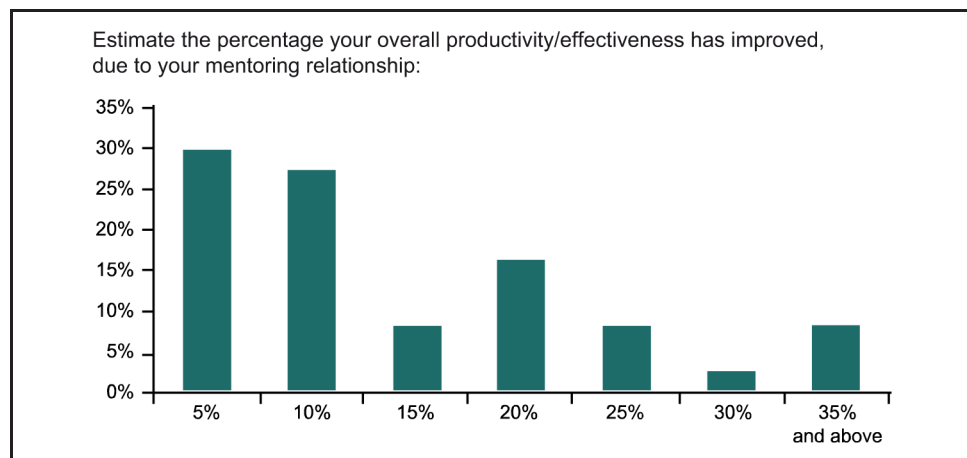
1. Interpersonal effectiveness.
2. Expanding my network.
3. Leadership skills (see Table I for a complete list).

Interpersonal effectiveness and expanding my network, ranked 1 and 2, are both integral to a group mentoring experience. Learning with, working with, and exploring new ideas with others in a group setting tends to rely heavily on interpersonal effectiveness. Likewise, the

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2** Improved productivity/effectiveness



<b>Table I</b> Areas of improvement for group participants	
<i>Areas of improvement for group participants</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents who indicated great, good or moderate improvement</i>
Interpersonal effectiveness	50
Expanding my network	49
Leadership skills	40
Confidence in role	31
Knowledge of department/organization	21
Problem solving	21
Business skills	18
Stress management	17
Job-specific information	15
Technical skills	4
<b>Notes:</b> <i>n</i> = 72	

nature of a group environment lends itself to helping participants expand their networks. Therefore, these top two selections fit well with the goals of collective knowledge sharing that takes place in group mentoring.

The third most popular area of improvement was leadership skills. This may be due to the group mentoring approach employed, as many of the groups focused specifically on developing leadership skills or were designed to connect group members with organization leaders who passed on their skills.

The organizations included in this survey formed mentoring groups with specific goals and outcomes in mind. While they reached these goals, the relational nature of the group experience helped foster secondary learning experiences that have a real impact on individual competencies.

Group mentoring is an ideal way to help new leaders and managers gain effectiveness, confidence and skills needed to move into roles that require more relational responsibility. This, in turn, can have a huge impact on organizational effectiveness.

**Impact on organization**

In order to understand how group mentoring impacted the organization, the survey looked at if participants could apply learning back on the job in their particular roles, and in which areas they contributed the most to the organization (Figure 3). Results showed that 96 percent of participants agreed they could apply what they learned back on the job and in their role. The top areas where organizational impact was felt were:

- Understanding/helping another person understand a different point of view.
- Improving my relationship with leadership.



**“ Learning with, working with, and exploring new ideas with others in a group setting tends to rely heavily on interpersonal effectiveness. ”**

- Assisting in the development of another.
- Providing or receiving encouragement/support to or from another (see Table II for a complete list).

As is evident, the top four choices of participants all have a strong relational component. Learners and advisors engaged in a give and take during their group mentoring meetings, which impacted how they interacted with and supported one another.

Participant comments further illustrate the value that the group mentoring process had to the organization:

The mentor brought many section leaders to our group discussion. I had the chance to talk to them and learn from them.

Meeting other associates in different working situations brought a wide variety of perspectives that greatly expanded my understanding of the company.

Understanding more about the challenges of those who manage up helped me to make the shift in my previous focus of managing (or in my case, supporting) those in the field to understand more about what the executive may require of me.

*Usage idea*

When increasing relational cohesion is an organizational priority, such as in a merger or acquisition, group mentoring would be an ideal learning mode to leverage. Support, dialogue and knowledge sharing through group mentoring can create a smoother transition for the merger or acquisition.

<b>Table II</b> Contributions to organization	
<i>Organizational impact areas</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents who selected this item</i>
Understanding/helping another person understand a different point of view	53
Improving my relationship with leadership	47
Assisting in the development of another	46
Providing or receiving encouragement/support to or from another	44
Increasing my productivity/effectiveness	40
Making better decisions	37
Increasing the productivity of a work group/team	36
Transferring valuable knowledge/skill/experience	34
Increasing the quality of my work	33
I do not feel mentoring has helped me to contribute to the success of the organization	10
Achieving a cost savings	7
<b>Notes:</b> n = 70	

## Sources of learning in groups

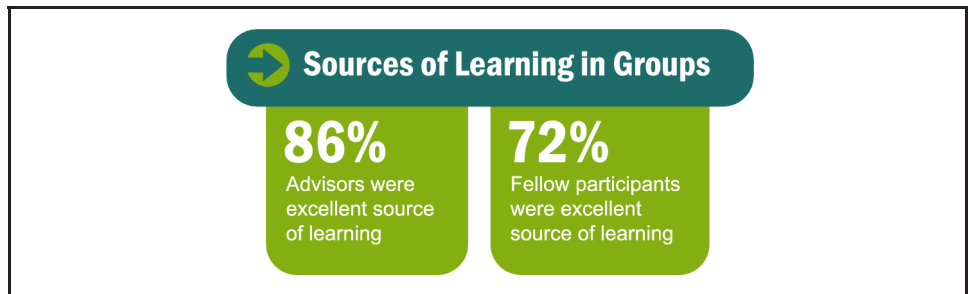
Group mentoring clearly had a positive impact on individuals in a way that is beneficial for the organization as a whole (Figure 4). What makes group mentoring such a highly effective learning context? The combination of internal experts with the relational nature of these groups enabled each person to learn in his/her own style. Our research indicated that those who prefer more of a classroom experience find great value in the expertise of the advisors and the resources they provided. It also seems that those who prefer a more collaborative experience valued both learning from fellow participants and self-reflection.

For the purposes of our study, we measured four sources of learning available in the group mentoring experience. Participants found all four sources of learning to be helpful in large numbers, but we were struck by how evenly distributed these results were (see Table III).

As expected, the greatest number of participants, 86 percent, rated the group advisor as a good or excellent source of learning. Supporting our view that the flexible nature of group mentoring allows people to learn in their own style, we found a strong positive correlation between the perceived effectiveness of group mentoring and classroom training (69 percent vs 81 percent). This means that if an employee finds classroom training effective, they are also likely to find group mentoring effective. This is an important finding, particularly in the era of shrinking training and travel budgets. The relational nature of group mentoring and the efficiency of addressing multiple learners at one time make it an attractive substitute for some areas traditionally handled by classroom training.

A unique aspect of group mentoring is the interaction that takes place amongst learners. A large number of participants saw the interaction with peers as a significant part of their learning. In fact, 72 percent of respondents rated their peers as a good or excellent source of learning. The largest number of positive text responses concerned the value of the group experience itself and the learning that took place among peers and advisors alike. One respondent commented that the most helpful part of the learning came from “the years of skills and experience that the whole group brought to the table.” Another said that “sharing thoughts with others in similar scenarios” was the most helpful part of the experience, in part because this person learned from group peers and gained real-life suggestions for applying what was learned. These results are critical because they exemplify the nature of a collective learning experience and the support that can be found through group mentoring.

**Figure 4**



**Table III** Sources of learning

<i>Source of learning</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents who chose good or excellent</i>
Group advisors	86
Resources provided	80
Self-reflection	73
Fellow group learners	72

## Satisfaction as a leading indicator of impact

Good mentoring programs produce good results. Satisfaction has long been proven as the leading indicator for mentoring program impact, and one significant factor for satisfaction is if a participant would recommend the program to someone else (Figure 5). Triple Creek's research revealed strong positive responses to these two indicators: 90 percent were satisfied with their group mentoring experience and 94 percent indicated they would recommend it to others.

Positive comments from participants provide further support for the group mentoring initiatives. Feedback included a variety of comments, such as:

The concept is great to bring together people who have a common interest and goal with a mentor to learn.

Make it a regular event, expand group size.

This mentoring experience was exceptional.

By corporate standards, these are high marks for any learning initiative. The mentoring champions at our client organizations are using this data to continue to promote and expand the use of group mentoring, assured that people will both enjoy and benefit from their experience.

## Factors leading to satisfaction

Two factors contributed to the high satisfaction and recommendation numbers given to these group mentoring events: the effective environment and relevant topics found in the group mentoring experiences (Figure 6).

One of the key benefits of this approach to learning is that relevant topics can be selected by those on the front lines of the organization based on actual and felt learning needs. This translates into people getting the information and skills they need at exactly the moment when they need it. They can then bring this new knowledge back to their jobs and improve their productivity or effectiveness based on their learning experience.

Figure 5



Figure 6



In our study, 93 percent said the topics discussed during their group mentoring events were relevant to them and their jobs (see Figure 7). It is hard to overestimate the importance of this result. Organizations can offer relevant topics in a timely manner using internal resources, rather than going through the laborious process of creating formal training or writing e-learning courses. With group mentoring, learning can be quick, impactful, and timely.

Additionally, 85 percent of participants agreed that the environment was safe and effective. This can lead to greater levels of satisfaction with the experience because people are willing to be candid and share openly with one another. Rich dialogue and honest conversation will make group mentoring experiences more meaningful. In fact, participants who felt positively about the atmosphere often referred to sharing information with others to describe what was most valuable to them:

Sharing with others who have similar challenges that I face.

Discussing sensitive “people issue” topics and how to manage them.

You can learn from several people in a small, non-threatening environment.

Picking a relevant topic, creating a safe atmosphere, and keeping the discussion on target are all keys to increasing satisfaction and maximizing the learning value of the group mentoring experience.

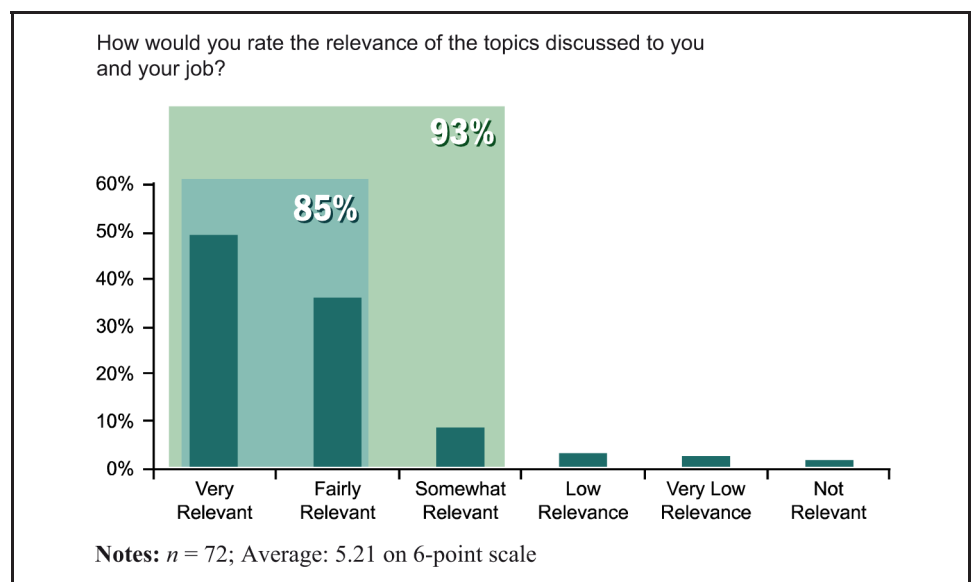
### Observations and implications

Group mentoring is clearly an effective way to transfer relevant know-how from experienced employees to eager learners in the organization. Two key findings from this study support this view:

1. Of respondents, 93 percent reported that the topic was relevant to their role in the organization.
2. A total 96 percent reported that they could apply the information gained from the group mentoring experience directly to their role in the organization.

Part of the effectiveness of group mentoring comes from the flexible, relational approach where individuals can find what is most helpful for them from the variety of learning resources available in the group mentoring experience. We believe this means that group mentoring

**Figure 7**





**“Group mentoring would be a good choice for multi-generational learning experiences, where older workers respect the expertise of group advisors but younger workers want a more collaborative, open environment.”**

would be a good choice for multi-generational learning experiences, where older workers respect the expertise of group advisors but younger workers want a more collaborative, open environment where questions are welcome and dialogue is generated.

Four additional factors add to the argument for expanded use of collaborative learning processes like group mentoring.

1. The world is changing so rapidly that it is both faster and more effective to let internal experts communicate directly with fellow practitioners, rather than go through the intervening steps of developing a standard curriculum, designing training, and then hiring professional trainers to communicate the material. Group mentoring provides a forum for organizations to leverage internal leaders who have already shown they have knowledge and skills the organization finds valuable. In addition, peers can learn from one another around how to implement their new understandings in their current job context in real time. In fact, as Triple Creek's research showed, participants gained almost as much benefit from interacting with other participants as from the designated leaders, compounding the positive impacts of group mentoring.
2. Innovation and creative learning occur best when people are exposed to ideas and perspectives that are different from their own. This is one of the reasons why mentors report that they learn as much as mentees. Groups provide multiple perspectives on the issues being discussed rather than the singular view of an instructor. In our research, the number one outcome that benefits organizational effectiveness was understanding/helping another person understand a different point of view. Differences in values, culture, job level and generation are seen not as communication barriers, but as innovation accelerators for all parties involved in group mentoring.
3. Technology removes geography as a barrier to accessing the wisdom and knowledge of others. No longer are people bound by physical location to dictate who they can seek out for help and knowledge. In fact, Triple Creek's clients use group mentoring in both face-to-face and virtual settings, leveraging distance collaboration technology as needed. Our research found no statistically significant difference between those participants using group mentoring in a face-to-face manner or virtually. Technology is a standard part of life today and it is second nature for people to use it to find one another and communicate with them. These simple facts make it possible for today's workers to access the power of the enormous tacit knowledge base of a global enterprise.
4. Group mentoring provides one way to rapidly multiply the accumulated knowledge and wisdom in the enterprise. While this outcome was beyond the scope of our research at this point, leading learning experts are making this claim for all forms of collaborative learning environments. In their book *The Power of Pull* (Basic Books: 2010), John Hagel III, John Seely Brown, and Lang Davison demonstrate exponential growth of accessible knowledge from the experiences of software giant SAP and the online gaming phenomenon World of Warcraft. For example, in SAP's user collaboration suite from 2004 to 2008, the amount of knowledge resources that SAP users could access increased ten times faster than the number of users did during that same period of time. This shows that collaboration does not just add to learning, it actually multiplies accessible knowledge. If,

for example, ten learners share with their peers and coworkers (be it through formal and informal learning relationships) even *some* of what they gained through the group mentoring experience, the multiplication of accessible knowledge increases exponentially throughout the enterprise.

The need for group mentoring is clear, as are the positive results organizations can gain by using this emerging practice. The second part of this series will look further at the best practices of group mentoring and will explore examples of effective programs implemented by CDW.

#### **About the author**

Randy Emelo, President and CEO of Triple Creek ([www.3creek.com](http://www.3creek.com)), has more than 25 years of experience in management, training and leadership development with military, profit and nonprofit organizations both nationally and internationally. His ability to anticipate the next trends in the world of knowledge transfer and mentoring has set him apart as a much sought-after thought leader. Open Mentoring® is Triple Creek's award-winning enterprise mentoring software that is used by people in more than 50 countries. Randy Emelo can be contacted at: [remelo@3creek.com](mailto:remelo@3creek.com)

Triple Creek and Open Mentoring® – Winner of the 2008 ASTD Excellence in Practice Citation with CDW and the 2007 ASTD Excellence in Practice Citation with Rockwell Collins.

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