

Trust and connection in formal, virtual mentoring

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Abstract

Trust between mentees and mentors is important. This article considers how trust can be generated in a formal scheme in a third-sector organisation, the NCT. Interviews and documents were used in a single case study. The challenges imposed by being an insider-researcher are noted. Trust was developed through several layers, forming a complex picture. Important factors included multi-faceted connections between mentees and mentors, plus organisational features promoting support and expectations of behaviour. It is suggested that formal mentoring schemes match mentees and mentors with connections in mind. Mentors might endeavour to enhance these connections, but mentees need to be engaged for this to be effective.

Keywords: trust, connections, formal, virtual, mentoring

Introduction

This article reports on how connections helped to build trust between strangers in formal, virtual mentoring relationships. Trust is perhaps one of the key factors involved in whether mentoring can be successful, and it can be suggested that it is harder to build up trust within a formal mentoring relationship. It is also thought to be harder to generate trust when virtual means of communication are used. In this study, virtual mentoring is used as the organisation involved is a dispersed one; it is known as NCT (formerly the National Childbirth Trust).

NCT is a large national charity focusing on providing education and support for people in the time around the transition to parenthood. Self-employed birth and parenting practitioners (including antenatal teachers, breastfeeding counsellors, and postnatal facilitators) facilitate courses and services on behalf of NCT throughout the UK and beyond. All practitioners are women, and most (but not all) are mothers. As NCT is a dispersed organisation, practitioners (NCTPs) can be isolated and feel unsupported, particularly when newly qualified. Mentors were suggested as one way to support practitioners while enabling a focused approach to quality assurance. My role as mentor tutor and coordinator began in 2012 when I was asked to write a training programme, to be implemented alongside a new education programme with a new University partner to validate the qualifications offered. Since then I have implemented and managed the programme although it is still very much a small-scale effort in terms of numbers of mentors (sixteen at the time of writing). Mentors must be 'Excellent Practitioners' by NCT standards, i.e. have passed a gate-keeping assessment demonstrating their skills as practitioners and their worth as 'good NCT citizens'. As all NCTPs are self-employed, they are paid separately for each specialism (e.g. antenatal teacher, breastfeeding counsellor, postnatal facilitator) and each role (e.g. assessor, supervisor, and mentor). Thus, being paid for mentoring is acceptable in the NCT context. However, payment necessitates limiting the time available as charity funds only stretch so



far. Various factors mean that virtual mentoring is essential. These include NCT being a dispersed organisation, with no time or funding for face-to-face meetings, and that mentees are matched with a limited number of mentors who may be hundreds of miles apart.

In the next section I will briefly outline the existing literature pertaining to formal and virtual mentoring, and on trust and connections within formal mentoring relationships. I will then focus on the methodology used for the research study and consider some of the issues around being an insider researcher. I will then highlight the relevant findings. Finally, there is a discussion of, and conclusions from, this aspect of the research.

Literature

A literature search found no analysis of the combination of formal, virtual, time-bound and paid-for mentoring in a dispersed organisation. However, many studies suggest that individual elements within NCT mentoring would restrict meaningful developmental outcomes. For example, formal mentoring is often posited to be less effective than informal mentoring (Swap, Leonard, Shields & Abrams, 2001; Brechtel, 2003; Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Underhill, 2006; Schunk & Mullen, 2013), while formal mentoring is typically considered to be an altruistic act and therefore is usually unpaid (Kasprisin, Single, Single, Ferrier & Muller, 2008; Garvey, 2011). It can be thought that mentoring is much harder via virtual means as opposed to face-to-face interactions (Wanberg, Welsh & Hezlett, 2003; Long, McKenzie-Robblee, Schaefer, Steeves, Wnuk, Pinnegar & Clandinin, 2012), and a time-limited mentoring scheme might be equally limited in effectiveness (Headlam-Wells, 2004; Gibb & Telfer, 2008; Smith-Jentsch, Scielzo, Yarborough & Rosopa, 2008; Gut, Bean, Henning, Cochran & Knight, 2014). Despite this, evaluations and reports into the early years of the scheme suggest that for the most part it was proving to be developmental for both mentees and mentors. It must be acknowledged that not all mentoring relationships proved to be so, particularly in the early years of the scheme; however, most are reported as developmental.

Trust can be considered to be among the key features of quality mentoring relationships, along with respect, emotional intelligence and empathy (Kram, 1985/1988; Hall & Kahn, 2002; Chun, Litzky, Sosik, Bechtold, & Godshalk, 2010). Informal mentoring relationships are often based on existing liking and respect (Allen, Day & Lentz, 2005) with trust already present before mentoring begins (Brechtel, 2003). In a formal scheme, these aspects need to be built up within a mentoring dyad, with training programmes emphasising the importance of building relationships (Bierema, 2017).

Trust has been defined as the “extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions and decisions of another” (McAllister, 1995:25) and is suggested to contain affect-based and cognition-based aspects. Bear (2018) considers that affective trust enables more confident relationships, where more can be achieved. Thus, mentees may begin to trust their mentors when they are perceived to be caring, concerned and open, reliable, dependable and competent (Bouquillon, Sosik & Lee, 2005; Cherniss, 2007). There is less in the literature around how mentors may develop trust for mentees. However, it is posited that self-disclosure can enable the development of trust on both sides (Hall & Kahn, 2002; Wanberg, Welsh & Kammermeyer-Mueller, 2007; Ghosh, 2014) as both feel trusted.

It can be considered that trust is more difficult to build within formal mentoring relationships (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Wanberg *et al.*, 2007; Buche, 2008; Finkelstein, Allen, Ritchie, Lynch & Monte, 2012), and that virtual mentoring can impact on its development (Bierema &



Merriam, 2002; Zolin & Hinds, 2007; Buche, 2008; Bierema, 2017). However, organisational trust theories (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 1998; Hale, 2000) lead to the expectation that high levels of trust can exist even when members of an organisation are strangers, as trust is based on expectations and general knowledge about the organisation. These theories are supported by Hezlett and Gibson's (2007) ideas about generalised trust, where individuals without much direct contact may trust each other simply because they belong to the same group. Also, similarities in background and interests may help to speed development of rapport and trust (Cox, 2005; Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller & Marchese, 2006; de Janasz & Godshalk, 2013). However, English and Sutton (2000) suggest that it might be more difficult to establish feelings of safety and trust when mentoring within one organisation. It is unclear whether this would apply to a dispersed organisation, where there is a workforce but not a single workplace.

Historically, perceived similarities between mentee and mentor were thought to enable role-modelling (Kram, 1985/1988), which may not be an effective element of virtual mentoring (Ensher, Heun & Blanchard, 2003). Otherwise, it can be thought that either similarities or differences within a mentoring dyad are important in enabling successful work together (Hale, 2000; Wanberg *et al.*, 2003). However, Richardson (2015) consider that being too alike restricts opportunities for development, while de Janasz and Godshalk (2013) posit that it is perceived similarities that are important.

Methodology

A single case study was undertaken as it is recognised as a valuable method when asking 'how' or 'why' questions (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2014) about complex social phenomena (Yin, 2014). Mentoring is accepted as such (Garvey & Alred, 2008; Eliahoo, 2016). Any case study needs boundaries (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and NCT's mentoring scheme has definite temporal boundaries as it has only existed since 2012. It also has concrete boundaries (Yin, 2014) in that it is a clearly delineated programme with a specific number of participants. In order for a case study to result in a worthwhile account of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009), evidence needs to be gained from several directions (Thomas, 2011). Thus, various methods were used within the case study to look at relationships and processes within the bounded situation. Interviewing people has been suggested to be an effective way to explore people's experiences, meanings, and perceptions (Cunliffe, 2011), while documents are part of the research setting and as such, valid sources of data within the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interviews with mentees and mentors and documents were drawn on to examine the question of how formal, virtual, time-bound and paid-for mentoring could support the professional development of self-employed birth and parenting practitioners, within a dispersed third-sector organisation. Twenty-four participants were interviewed in various settings between February and December 2016; comprising seventeen mentees and seven mentors. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. Pseudonyms were selected from colours used as girls' names. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and, after a number of schedule-guided questions, included an element of "visual as prompt" (Woodhouse, 2012:21). This aspect involved using postcards of my own with some additional images resourced from the internet. This is a familiar method within NCT to stimulate reflection and evaluation on study events. Each participant had an unspecified amount of time to examine and handle the same set of fifty different images. Interviewees were asked to select those images that promoted or assisted reflections on their experiences within the NCT mentoring scheme, and then comment on them. Additionally, a search was carried out of my own records and of NCT's intranet, producing a total of eighty-two relevant



documents. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was undertaken on the transcripts and documents, using NVivo10 as a data-management tool.

One key aspect of the research was that I was an insider-researcher, with knowledge of the setting and some of the people being researched. Hellowell (2006) considers insider-outsider as a spectrum rather than as a dichotomy which would perhaps support my position as a “partial-insider” (Chavez, 2008:475). Although I know all the mentors who participated in the research, I know few mentees and am not involved in day-to-day mentoring activities. Rather I am a distant figure to most mentees, known only by name through emails to facilitate mentoring relationships. This complicates the effects of being an insider-researcher and no existing research was found to clarify this position. It could be posited that ‘insiderism’ is an effect of empathy rather than distance or closeness (Hellowell, 2006:489) and my long career within NCT does lead to empathy with the work that both mentees and mentors are involved with. The implications of this, however theoretical they may be (Chavez, 2008) were addressed by maintaining an audit trail (Greene, 2014), careful reflexivity and reflection with supervisors and peers, and the use of a reflective journal. The latter was particularly used to address any existing relationships with either mentees or mentors when traveling both to and from interviews. The advantages of being an insider perhaps outweighed any disadvantages, as I was able to understand references and context when interviewees spoke, thus enhancing the generation of data (Roulston, 2010). The languages and values shared between us enabled me to interpret participants’ meanings perhaps more effectively (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

My position within NCT might have led to power issues around interviews. This was addressed firstly by being open about any such issues with participants and assuring them of which role I was inhabiting while interviewing – i.e. that of researcher not of tutor or coordinator. Secondly, when my role shifted during the interview I acknowledged this and overtly changed my stance back to that of researcher. The use of “visual as prompt” (Woodhouse, 2012:21) may have helped to alleviate any perceived power imbalances (Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Van Auken, Frisvoll & Steward, 2010; Pain, 2012).

Findings

Analysis of the data collected from interviews and documents suggested that trust was an important element within successful mentoring, and that it had a complex nature (see Figure 1). One mentee (Olive) considered there not to be trust within her mentoring relationship although she still turned to her mentor in a difficult situation, so perhaps there was trust on an unrecognised level. All other mentees who were interviewed found a sense of trust developed within their mentoring dyad. Some mentoring relationships had not been successful for mentors, and Amber and Lavender occasionally sensed disrespect from those mentees, with no opportunity for trust to develop, but these were in the minority. Emerald particularly noted that a lack of contact did not imply disrespect. Evaluation forms sent to all mentees after their relationship ended did not ask directly about trust, but some mentees nevertheless mentioned it. One mentee’s form highlighted that there had not been enough time to build up a trusting relationship, particularly when it was conducted over the telephone. However, she had built up such a relationship with other NCT colleagues which had proved sufficient for her needs at that time.

Mentees generally felt that there were attributes and behaviours on the part of their mentors that helped in building trust and respect. In interviews they spoke about “being listened to” (Pink, Scarlet) and “knowing the conversation was confidential” (Garnet, Hazel, Raven) which led to them feeling able to be honest and open. They also mentioned “not feeling



judged” (Garnet, Hazel, Pearl, Sable), and mentors who shared their experiences and knowledge and disclosed about themselves. This highlighted the importance of connections within the studied scheme.

Connections proved to be a multi-faceted aspect. It was perceived as important that all mentees and mentors worked for NCT. The fact that they were “all a certain breed in the first place” (Crystal) or “cut from the same cloth” (Sable) suggested various aspects were almost taken for granted as a result of both being NCTPs. There was an acknowledgement that most people are drawn to such work by a desire to help and support those who are in the transition to parenthood; as a result, they “share a passion” (Raven) and core values (Pink). The resulting set of shared values and behaviours in the study, together with the presence of organisational trust, I quickly came to refer to as ‘NCT-ness’, which most participants recognised. Mentees particularly could expect their mentors to behave in certain ways, with an expectation of confidentiality that provided a safe space for most mentees. Mentors were expected to have certain skills, such as an ability to help adults to learn, with good listening and communication skills. To some extent this expectation of attributes was also true for mentors, although as there were some mentees who were not engaged their behaviour was less predictable to mentors. Another factor was the recognition that both mentee and mentor were parents, including an acknowledgement of the difficulties of balancing NCT practice and / or studying with the work of bringing up young children. Mentors were matched as far as possible to the particular specialism of the mentee (e.g. both being antenatal teachers) which meant shared insights into the challenges and rewards of the type of work being carried out. Any specialist language used was also familiar within the pair, increasing understanding. Blanche (a mentee) commented that she could “...just say one word and sigh” and her mentor would understand. The fact that no long explanations were needed was “crucial”. Another mentee (Pink) commented that the sharing of practical knowledge and experience enabled her mentor to ask her “the right questions”. Others needed to discuss “the specifics” (Sage) of courses so a shared knowledge base in antenatal teaching, breastfeeding counselling, or postnatal facilitation was essential. This aspect was brought out particularly by the images used, several of which elicited descriptions of pathways or journeys. One image showed a single set of footprints walking up and over a sand dune and one mentee (Olive) commented positively on her mentor walking the same way, but before her. Similarly, an image of a lone figure in the snow evoked the idea that walking in someone’s footsteps had made the journey easier for Marigold, another mentee.

Another important factor was that all NCTPs are women, leading to expectations of “...friendship – and warmth – and that nurturing thing that women do really well” (Garnet). Sable wondered if there had been a maternal aspect to her mentor. Once again, images helped to bring this out strongly as images of women talking or laughing together were used by both mentees and mentors to illustrate their reflections; Hazel commenting on the “huge support” they displayed. An expectation of support runs throughout the organisation as practitioners offer support to parents through a variety of NCT services, and are also expected to support each other. Elements provided by NCT, including mentoring, add to this pattern of mutual support.

The commonalities between mentees and mentors seemed to enable the establishment of relationships quite quickly so that work could begin straight away. Mentors deliberately drew on their shared experiences so that mentees would know they were “on the same page” (Lavender) and that mentors remembered when they were newly qualified. The short time frame may have contributed to the ease of establishing relationships as the restricted hours provided a structure and a focus for most mentoring pairs. However, as one mentee commented, “...they must get that common ground to gain confidence...nobody’s going to



tell you how they really feel – unless they feel confident” (Hazel). Disclosure on the part of the mentor seemed to help to bring about this initial rapport, in most (but not all) cases.

The fact that the scheme was a formal one showed the organisation valuing both mentees and mentors but largely it was a neutral factor, rather than the negative perspective suggested by some literature. For some mentees the formality had suggested a ‘box-ticking’ view of mentoring, but interaction with mentors soon changed that and mentoring became viewed as supportive. Clementine (a mentee) was grateful for the opportunity, and Scarlet (another mentee) saw the offer as very positive. The virtual nature of the scheme helped to promote openness between mentee and mentor as it provided a safe space away from local colleagues. As Cherry pointed out, she was unlikely to meet with her mentor in a local meeting, which prevented the risk of “upset[ting] anybody locally”, when discussing her work. Several mentees echoed this in evaluation forms, stating the distance enabled honesty on their part.

Discussion

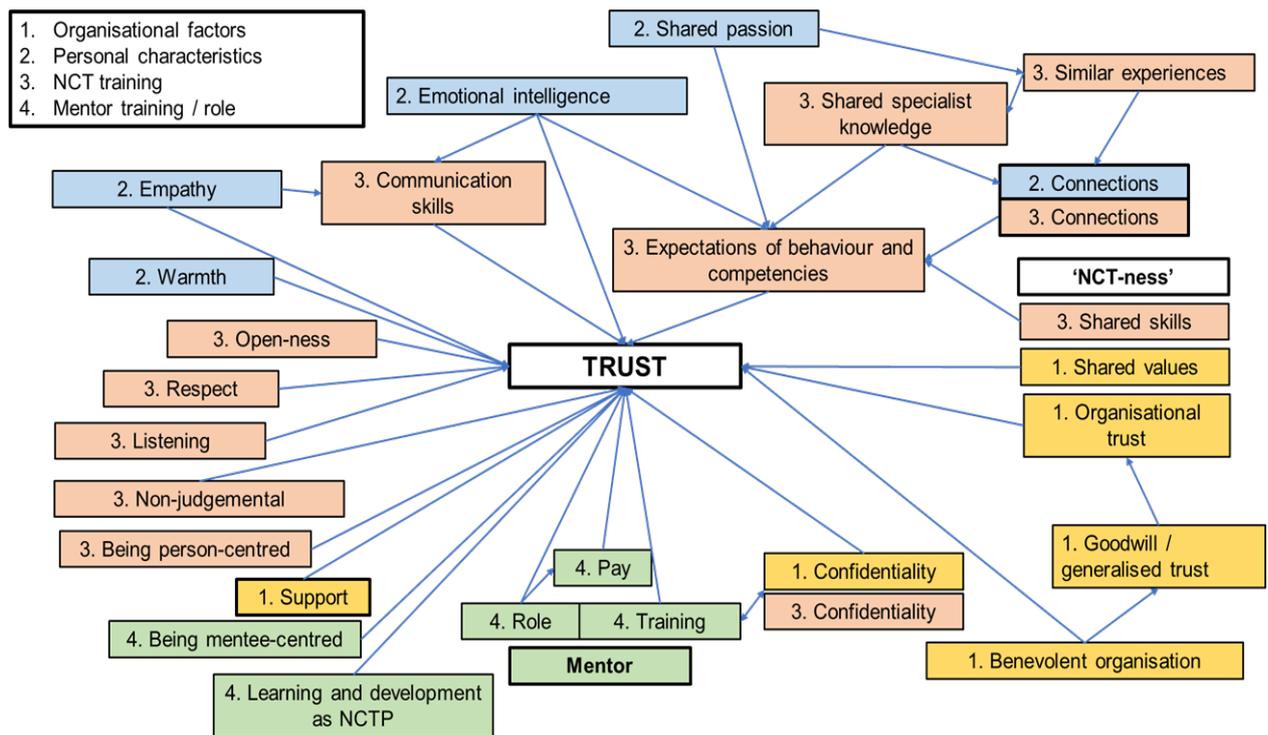
It might be expected that simply putting two strangers in touch via virtual means, with restricted time, and with mentors being paid for the interactions, would not lead to a development of trust. However, it was clear from the interviews that trust did develop within most mentoring relationships and that it was a complex picture as to why this was so. Figure 1 summarises the features within NCT’s mentoring scheme that supported the development of trust.

From participants’ views trust appears to be generated and enhanced through four layers. The first layer is the organisational factors: the perception of NCT as a benevolent, trustworthy organisation (Elsbach, 2007) with a culture of support, and the presence of goodwill trust (Fineman, Gabriel & Sims, 2010) between members. Generalised trust (Hezlett & Gibson, 2007) connecting members of an organisation provides a foundation of trust before mentoring begins and was high in NCT for those interviewed. Organisational trust (McKnight *et al.*, 1998; Hale, 2000) contributed to the development of shared values and behaviours referred to as ‘NCT-ness’. This is supported by Henttonen and Blomqvist’s (2005) work on virtual teams, where being in the same organisation led to expectations of similarity and the development of trust. The values shared throughout the organisation include confidentiality, and the importance of support for parents and for each other.

Secondly, the women drawn to become NCTPs tend to have personal characteristics including empathy, warmth, and emotional intelligence. As they are mostly mothers this facilitates connections and shared understanding of the difficulties of balancing work in anti-social hours with family life. The third layer is added by NCT training which enhances or instils skills and traits such as open-ness, respect, and active listening, contributing shared specialist knowledge and similar experiences to further assist connections. All this enables expectations of behaviour and competencies, particularly for mentees. Finally, senior, experienced practitioners undergoing mentor training have the shared skills reinforced, with the role (and the training) being seen as trustworthy. These layers mutually reinforce one another to support trust in mentoring and work towards ensuring the focus of mentoring is development. This is a contribution to the literature around trust in organisations as well as in mentoring.



Figure 1: Factors influencing trust in NCT mentoring.



One of the key factors therefore is confidentiality. It is already well recognised that confidentiality is important to mentoring (Wallace & Gravells, 2007; Leck & Orser, 2013), and that it enables the development of trust, although virtual mentoring may make confidentiality harder to maintain (Fagenson-Eland & Lu, 2004). A basic tenet underpinning all NCT practice is that practitioners are expected to maintain the confidences of the parents and colleagues with whom they work, while acknowledging that there are exceptions to every rule if a person is at risk. Training as an NCTP inculcates this organisational expectation, and mentor training provides further reinforcement. [SEE diagram?] The knowledge that every practitioner has the same expectation enables mentees to anticipate their mentor will provide them with a safe space to be honest and open. This supports findings (Wallace & Gravells, 2007; Leck & Orser, 2013) of confidentiality enabling the development of trust.

A separate element of trusting NCT training, including for becoming a mentor, instils a shared sense of integrity about confidentiality, which helps towards trust. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) hold integrity as one of their three key elements to a person being found trustworthy, with benevolence and ability as the other two. Perhaps practitioners working for NCT are assumed to be benevolent as it is not well-paid work, and mentors are deemed to be able as they have passed the gate-keeping EP assessment, so these factors may also contribute to the development of trust. Being associated with an organisation seen as benevolent enhances the trustworthiness of both mentees and mentors (Elsbach, 2007). The expectation of a safe space is further reinforced by the virtual nature of NCT mentoring, which operates to overcome the disadvantages of a dispersed workforce. Being separated from a mentor can further encourage a mentee to be open, knowing that she will not come face-to-face with the mentor within her working area unexpectedly. The ability to be honest increases the amount possible to disclose, which is suggested to enhance trust (Hall and Kahn, 2002; Wanberg, Welsh and Kammermeyer-Mueller, 2007). It is difficult to isolate the

effects of mentoring being a paid role within the organisation. It evidently protected time for mentees, and reduced their sense of being a burden on a mentor. This encouraged openness and showed NCT valuing both mentees and mentors.

However, the connections between mentee and mentor beyond that of working for the same organisation (see below) are equally important. The fact that mentees are following mentors into specialist pathways, thus sharing knowledge, experiences and even a language, means that understandings are already present between them when they are first matched to one another. Mentees thus have a dependable source of knowledge and experience that is relevant to them, and that they trust the mentor to share, while not imposing their own views on the mentee. The “shared passion” for practice is recognised by Ryan, Goldberg and Evans (2010) as supporting positive mentoring relationships, and was certainly influential in establishing and strengthening connections.

All participants in the study were mothers, and although there are a very few NCTPs who are not parents they are all women. These factors too provide connections that enable mentors to empathise with mentees’ challenges in establishing early working lives, while in some cases still studying, working at other jobs and parenting young children.

- Both are members of NCT
- Shared values around birth and parenting
- Passion for working with new or expectant parents
- Being a practitioner
- Common skills or activities
- Sharing a specialism, knowledge, and a language
- Being women/ mothers
- Family circumstances
- Age (for some mentees particularly)
- Working context or clientele
- Common ground e.g. pets / interests

Conclusion

This study is limited in that only twenty-four people participated in the interviews, and not every mentee returned an evaluation form, so there are voices missing from the analysis. Efforts were made to ameliorate power issues arising out of my NCT roles by being overt around them and using images as part of interviews. However, it is still possible that these measures did not affect perceptions of power, and that participants told me what they felt I wanted to hear, rather than offering a realistic picture. The fact that three participants were less than positive does suggest that this risk is a limited one.

The expectations of supportive behaviour, of shared values and of shared passion for practice, together with the connections between mentees and mentors, enabled the development of trust quickly within a formal mentoring scheme. It is valuable having mentors for whom mentoring work is not an extra burden but a paid role, which protects time and reduces the sense of being a burden for mentees. This could be useful for other sectors where mentoring time is short. Dyads are matched to enable shared experiences, and drawing deliberately on these enhances the sense of connection and the development of trust for both mentees and mentors. Mentor training in other sectors could encourage appropriate disclosure to mentees, although any strategies will not work if mentees are not



engaged. Matching could be focused on enabling connections, and mentors could be trained to enhance those that exist.

For future research, more focused questions might elicit when trust actually developed within a mentoring dyad, and how important the various layers of trust (Figure 1) are relative to one another. Other organisations might be examined to see if similar factors exist, or if the 'NCT-ness' that was found is a unique factor.

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