
Mentoring and motivational versatility: an exploration of reversal theory

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Keywords

Psychology, Mentoring

Abstract

The present paper is intended as an exploration of the relevance of reversal theory for mentoring. In principle, reversal theory would appear to offer some major strengths in this respect and these strengths are discussed. Reversal theory itself is briefly described and, finally, implications for mentoring are discussed.

Reversal theory is a general theory of motivation, emotion and personality that has generated interest among researchers and practitioners over the last 20 years, following the publication of Apter's (1982) book, *The Experience of Motivation*. A recent volume reviewing all the research that has been carried out on the theory, and all the applications to which it has been put, has recently been published by the American Psychological Society (Apter, 2001). Twelve other books have been published on the theory, including collections of papers from some of the international conferences organized by the Reversal Theory Society. Over 300 academic papers and chapters have also been published on, or using, reversal theory.

replaced by more sophisticated and dynamic concepts. It also believes that it is more helpful for people who need to change, such as those being mentored, to see themselves as changing all the time anyway, so that there is no "change inertia" to overcome.

- The theory brings to bear a set of concepts that have already proved useful in other applied settings, such as child guidance and adult therapy (Lafreniere *et al.*, 2001), health counselling (Svebak and Apter, 1997) and sports coaching (Kerr, 2001). And it has been used with success in other organizational applications, including leadership development and team building (Carter, 1999; Apter and Carter, 2001). Apter International has been set up specifically to apply the insights of reversal theory to organizations.
- Various psychometric instruments have been developed by those working with the theory, and these could be used immediately in a mentoring context. This is particularly true of the Apter Motivational Style Profile that uses an expert system (available over the Internet) to feedback narrative reports to respondents in a way that raises issues to be discussed between a respondent and his/her counsellor – or mentor – or for personal reflection. Further, since the AMSP provides a "snapshot" of the individual at a given moment it can be administered on a number of occasions during mentoring to document change.

Relevance to mentoring

The present paper is intended as an exploration of the relevance of reversal theory for mentoring. In principle, reversal theory would appear to offer some major strengths in this respect:

- The time element is central to the reversal theory approach, since it looks at the way in which states succeed each other over time. In this respect it potentially provides a certain "fit" with mentoring, since mentoring is essentially a process that takes place over extended periods of time – unlike some other kinds of intervention (workshops, inspirational talks, one-off counselling interviews, etc.).
- Reversal theory emphasizes changeability, since it regards personality as a pattern of change over time rather than as a static position on some dimension or in some category. It suggests that "traits" and "types" are simplistic ways of looking at people that need to be

Reversal theory

The theory is a complex one, but at its heart is a set of oppositions representing four pairs of opposing fundamental motives. Each of these motives represents a basic value, leads



Career Development
International
7/5 [2002] 292–295

© MCB UP Limited
[ISSN 1362-0436]
[DOI 10.1108/13620430210440136]

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to the world being seen in a certain way, expresses itself through a particular style, and is associated with its own range of possible emotions.

In each pair, only one member of the pair can be active at a given time, but under various circumstances postulated in the theory a reversal can occur – meaning that the opposite state takes over at that moment. (This is not unlike the situation with respect to perceptual reversals, like the Necker cube, that all students of psychology will be familiar with.) Over time, two kinds of change will occur in normal people: alternation between the members of each pair, and changes in focus between the pairs themselves so that different aspects of the world come to the forefront of attention at different times (even though four motivational states, one from each pair, will be active simultaneously at any one moment).

Here are the four pairs:

- 1 *The serious/playful motivational state:*
 - The serious motivational state. Here achievement is the basic value. Orientation is towards the future, and satisfaction is gained from feelings of progress.
 - The playful motivational state. Here enjoyment is the basic value. Orientation is towards the present moment, and satisfaction is gained from fun and stimulation.
- 2 *The conformist/challenging motivational state:*
 - The conformist motivational state. Here fitting in is the basic value. Orientation is towards duty and virtue, and satisfaction is gained from feeling that one is doing the right thing.
 - The challenging motivational state. Here freedom is the basic value. Orientation is towards breaking rules and restrictions, and satisfaction is gained from feeling that one is rebelling.
- 3 *The mastery/sympathy motivational state:*
 - The mastery motivational state. Here power is the basic value. Orientation is towards control and strength, and satisfaction is gained from feeling that one is mastering people, objects or situations.
 - The sympathy motivational state. Here affection (even love) is the basic value. Orientation is towards kindness, and satisfaction is gained from feeling that one is in a close and caring relationship.
- 4 *The self-oriented/other-oriented motivational state:*

- The self-oriented motivational state. Here individuality is the basic value. Orientation is towards one's own needs, and satisfaction is gained from feeling that one has personally gained from the situation.
- The other-oriented motivational state. Here transcendence is the basic value. Orientation is towards the needs of others with whom one identifies (people, groups, causes), and satisfaction is gained from feeling that these others have gained from the situation.

People will have innate tendencies (referred to in the theory as “dominances”) to spend more time in one rather than the other of each pair (e.g. to be more conforming or rebelling), but they will nevertheless in the normal way of things move backwards and forwards within a pair. Their tendencies over all the pairs provide a personal profile, representing the relative importance in their lives of the eight underlying values. (This can be measured by such instruments as the AMSP.) It should be noted that dominance can also change over time (for example it is often the case that people become more serious-dominant as they age).

To be psychologically healthy and effective, people need to be motivationally versatile (to use a term coined by Dixon (1994)). That is, they need to avoid getting stuck in one state in a pair, in this way becoming over-dominant. Another way of putting this is that they need to be “psychodiverse”. They also need to be able to be in the right state at the right time. And they need to have a repertoire of suitable life skills related to the needs of each state.

Psychologically healthy teams and organizations also, like individuals, need to be psychodiverse: they need to be able to harness all eight motivations for different purposes at different times. In other words, all eight states have potential strengths that an organization will need to draw on over time. Measuring such organizational profiles has been made possible through the Apter Work Impact System (AWIS).

Implications for mentoring

Carter (1994) has discussed the four bases of successful mentoring:

- 1 an organizational basis – having the power and contacts to support the mentee;
- 2 an interpersonal basis – being able to build and maintain open, trusting and emotionally rich relationships;

- 3 a development basis – being motivated and having the ability to facilitate the development of another; and
- 4 a contextual basis in which a mentor ensures that the expectations and purpose of the relationship are maintained.

It is easy to see that a wide variety of motivational values and styles will need to be employed to ensure that the relationship is fruitful. Mastery coupled with both self and other clearly impacts upon the organizational and development basis. Conforming will be required to facilitate contextual basis, the sympathy state will underpin a successful relationship basis. The serious state will ensure that mentoring continues to have purpose and direction – challenge the fresh thinking that will be fundamental to a mentee's impact at work.

Here are some specific implications that can be drawn from reversal theory for the practice of mentoring:

- The mentor himself or herself must be in the other-oriented state while mentoring. That is, when acting with or on behalf of the mentee, they must be genuinely concerned with the good of the mentee (rather than of themselves), both in technical mastery terms and in sympathy psychosocial terms. If they are, instead, just going through the motions in the self-oriented state, they are likely to be frustrated in terms of the needs of that state, they will miss out on the satisfactions of the other-oriented state, and they may be regarded by the more perceptive of their colleagues as inauthentic. As a result of all this they may be less effective in helping their mentees. This may be one reason why mentoring which occurs naturally rather than imposed through some sort of scheme seems to be more effective (i.e. the difference between “essential mentoring and “instrumental mentoring,” as proposed by Collin (1988)).
- The best mentors are probably other-oriented dominant. But a mentor cannot be expected to be in the other-oriented state all the time, and therefore it is unwise to expect people to be “professional mentors”. Having to pursue other-orientation too much of the time can lead to burnout – a common problem in such helping professions as psychiatry, teaching, nursing and social work. Again, “essential mentoring” is likely to be more successful than “instrumental mentoring”.
- At the same time, everyone in an organization needs to be other-oriented some of the time, if for no other reason than that self-orientation can also lead to a kind of burnout, but in any case in order to increase psychodiversity in the organization. One way of helping to assure this is to encourage everyone to be involved in mentoring. This also applies to mentees!
- It is often the case that when the mentor and mentee are interacting together, that the playful state is the most appropriate one for them both to be in, and certainly for the mentee. This is because in the playful state it is easier to think about and face up to problems in a detached, non-anxious way than in the serious state. It is also easier to experiment, and to contemplate change in this state.
- More generally, in order to have a good relationship, mentor and mentee will need to be in the same states at the same time (with the exception of the self-oriented and the other-oriented states). Any good relationship (including marriage, teaching, doctor-patient, etc.) needs the partners to the relationship to carry out a kind of “dance” in which their states, and changes of state, are coordinated. Without this, there will not be the necessary “good vibrations”. There are basically two ways in which the mentor can do this – through being sensitive to the mentee's motivational states, or through “climate setting” so as to induce certain states in the mentee.
- One of the things that the mentor should try to do, among others, is to help the mentee experience all the states in the work situation, and in this way to display motivational versatility and psychodiversity, especially since organizations tends to privilege the serious, conformist and mastery states. The good mentor will be adept at spotting deficiencies in this respect, but can be helped through the use of a psychometric instrument like the Apter Motivational Style Profile.
- Reversal theory also provides a way of helping mentees to understand and deal with the essential paradoxes of working life: that individuals need to think of both themselves and others, that they need to fit in and at the same time challenge and seek new approaches, that they must take tough competitive decisions and yet maintain the best possible relationships with all stakeholders, and that they should focus on the future whilst also

ensuring that the here and now is exciting, rewarding and productive. Fostering this motivational versatility may be one of the central tasks of a mentor.

- The mentor may also spot discrepancies between the mentee's values and the values of the organization as displayed in its cultural climate. Both of these sets of values can be understood (and measured) in terms of the reversal theory framework of motivational states. Provided these do not substantially reduce the mentee's psychodiversity, the mentor can help the mentee to bring his or her values more into alignment with those of the organization.

What reversal theory does is to provide a systematic way of looking at the task of mentoring, and a way of assessing its success, at least in psychosocial terms. It does this through understanding personality through the psychological motives that structure the way that both the mentor and the mentee see the world. It also recognizes the way that both parties to the mentoring process may be continually changing – and indeed need to be changing in order to be both fulfilled and effective in the work situation. Finally, it provides a compelling insight into why mentoring can be on occasion one of the most rich and rewarding of work-based relationships.

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