Sponsorship: Developing Leaders for Occupational Therapy

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Professional sponsorship is a helping relationship aimed at career advancement. It includes the hierarchical association between the mentor and protégé, and the collegial associations between peer mentors, among “peer pals,” and in support networks. Sponsors serve as advocates, emotional supporters, and information-givers for those they sponsor. The adoption of sponsorship as a leadership development strategy for occupational therapy is recommended, and illustrations of initiating and using sponsorship are given.

Stogdell defined leadership as “the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement” (1, p 10). Leaders are needed within occupational therapy to formulate and implement the goals of our professional organization, The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), and to promote the missions of occupational therapy in the health care delivery system. Effective leadership is a learned process. Socialization for leadership may occur in a planned or haphazard fashion. This paper discusses one method of selecting and developing leaders for occupational therapy—professional sponsorship.

Sponsorship Definition. A sponsor is one who assumes responsibility for another. Hence, a professional sponsor is an individual who takes responsibility for the professional enhancement of another individual. Shapero, Haseltine, and Rowe (2) described the professional sponsorship system as a continuum of advisory and support persons who may be differentiated in terms of levels of influence and impact. Mentors, symbolizing an intense and hierarchical relationship, are at one end of the continuum, and “peer pals,” reflecting a less influential and more egalitarian relationship, are at the other (2). The sponsorship system, which is also called patronage (2) and networking (3-5), is focused on the politics of career advancement. The emphasis is on the cultivation of relationships to get ahead professionally. For example, an occupational therapist may seek and develop contacts with those professionals, administrators, and legislators who have power and authority relevant to their career plans.

Mentors. In Greek mythology, Mentor was Odysseus’ counselor. In the same spirit, the word mentor is used in reference to a trusted advisor or guide. Historically, mentorship represented a formal or informal relationship between a prestigious, established older person and a younger person (6). The type of support given was often financial. Rowe captured the meaning of mentor, as intended in this paper, when she remarked, “A mentor is a person who comments on your work, criticizing errors and praising excellence. This person sets high standards and teaches you to set and meet high standards” (7, p 41).

Mentor Roles. The mentor serves as a supporter, educator, and advocate for the protégé. Moral support is necessary for professional as well as for personal growth. A chief function of the mentor is to believe in the protégé’s abilities. The mentor sets up performance objectives for the protégé and conveys the expectation or message that the protégé can achieve these. This affirmation assists the protégé in acquiring an image of competence. A self-image of competence, or of the ability to master tasks, facilitates a sense of security, which gives the protégé “growing space” and supports purposeful risk taking (8).

Conformity or imitation is not expected of protégés. Mentors respect the integrity and autonomy of
The mentor serves as a supporter, educator, and advocate for the protégé. Bylaws (10), for instance, document the advent of the Specialty Sections, but the rationale for their emergence is difficult to retrieve. A mentor who served on the Bylaws Committee at the time the Specialty Sections were established would have detailed knowledge about their historical and philosophical significance and could share this with others. The expertise and positions of mentors frequently place them at the center of such decision making and makes them valuable sources of oral history.

Strategies for surviving in bureaucratic environments constitute an important facet of professional behavior. As Rowe stated, one needs to "learn the organizational chart and how the place really works." (7, p 41) The place may be a work setting, such as a hospital or school, or an organization, such as the AOTA. The major concern here revolves around power and politics. The mentor assists the protégé in sensing and understanding the political climate. Knowledge of things such as who owes whom a favor, where the informal power lies, what the unwritten rules are, and how to approach an authoritarian administrator provides an "inside" perspective on group and organizational dynamics. Such assistance is invaluable in managing a bureaucracy efficiently and successfully.

The prompt acquisition of information may be as important to survival as the mere receipt of information. Daniels (3) noted that the expeditious relay of information on issues that require fast action allows maximum preparation time and hence, may make the difference between success and failure. As an established professional, the mentor's position generally provides access to information that is not readily available to the neophyte. This may include notice of job vacancies before public posting, the specific orientation desired in grant applications, and the types of information a particular job interviewer wants to hear. Even where speed is not critical, the mentor can provide assistance that allows tasks to be completed with greater ease. Reference to key references and resource persons reduces the time expended to locate relevant information. Clarification of guidelines for report and proposal writing lessens the anxiety associated with interpreting ambiguous regulations. Such directives constitute labor-saving devices that contribute to work efficiency and productivity.

In addition to being a supporter and educator, the mentor is also an advocate. In this capacity, the mentor introduces the protégé to those in positions of influence and power, recommends the protégé for tasks and responsibilities, and is appropriately assertive when the protégé is criticized. Through such mechanisms the protégé gains visibility and is assisted in establishing a professional communication system. Daniels (3) described the sense of mastery and self-worth that is derived from an understanding of an acceptance into informal networks.

From this discussion, it should be clear that a mentor is more than a role model. Role models exert a passive influence on another. The manner in which they enact their professional role, their personal styles, and their specific characteristics may be emulated. Learning occurs principally through observation and imitation. Role models may, but are not required to, nurture, support, or educate (2, 11).

Qualities of the Mentor. To serve as a supporter, educator, and advocate, certain personal qualities are desirable. The ability to relate well
on a one-to-one level, together with such attributes as authenticity, openness, sensitivity, responsiveness, and availability is advantageous (8). Another favorable quality is generativity. Erikson (12) defined generativity as concern with establishing and guiding the next generation. The mentor's motivational power emanates from this concern of caring. These humanistic dimensions are supplemented by professional competence that embodies skill, commitment, and accountability (8). Competence constitutes the essential quality needed by a mentor.

Qualities of the Protege. It is also advantageous for the protegée to possess certain traits. In view of the commitment of time and effort required to transform talents into competencies, those seeking an advisor need to convince prospective mentors that they are worth an investment in time and effort. Hence, it is desirable for them to display a willingness to learn, and exhibit career directness and trust in the mentor (8). The protegée may invite a mentorship by seeking and offering help. Protegées are appreciative of the help received and acknowledge this, when and as appropriate, to the mentor and others (7).

Mentor-Protegée Relationship. The special qualities of the mentor-protegée relationship emerge from the professional competence and senior position of the mentor. The relationship is hierarchical, not democratic. The protegée with talent, and rudimentary skills, is given a chance to learn from the mentor.

Although hierarchical, the relationship is also mutualistic. Both persons give and receive in a mutually beneficial way. The mentor gives knowledge and support in exchange for the protegée's service. Work with the head is traded for work with the hands, so to speak. Pilette (8) remarked about the spiritedness of the interaction. She observed that after talking with one's mentor one may feel intellectually and physically energized. The perception of mutualism resides between the two parties. Others may well perceive the relationship to be parasitic; however, if either the mentor or the protegée senses that one party is not adequately reciprocating, the positive quality of the relationship is generally destroyed.

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The mentor will generally follow the protegée through a sequence of career developments and will facilitate job entry and mobility at many points along the way (8). The intensity and continuity of the relationship account for its restrictive and exclusionary nature. Since it is difficult for a mentor to sponsor more than a few protegées simultaneously, every learner desiring a mentor may not find one. Buber captured the essence of the mentor-protegée relationship when he said:

Without either being concerned about it, they learned, without noticing they did the mystery of professional survival. They received the spirit of affirmation. (13, p 89)

Collegial Relationships. Sponsor relationships range from those that are hierarchical to those that are collegial (2). At the opposite end of the sponsorship continuum from mentors are peer mentors (5), "peer pals" (14), and networks (4, 5). Like mentors, these dyads, groups, or organizations are focused on career development and job-related issues and seek to serve the same functions as mentors—psychological support, advising, information giving, and referral. Peer and network relationships may be distinguished from the mentor-protegée relationship in terms of the egalitarian quality of the former. Each participant in the collegial relationship sometimes acts as a leader and sometimes as a follower. Thus, the notion that sponsors must be more powerful and successful than those they sponsor is contradicted by the concept of peers helping each other to succeed in their careers. These collegial relationships also differ from mentorship in that they are available to more persons and less exclusive.

Networks generally have a broader power base than peer mentorships and "peer pal" groups. According to Welch (5), the peer mentor dyad is based on complementary talents. A clinical specialist wanting to learn research skills and a faculty member possessing such skills and seeking to renew clinical skills would constitute a viable partnership. In the peer pal model (14), sharing is encouraged among a small group of people. As the term is commonly used, networking implies a larger group than peer pals. Also, in networks, there is generally less emphasis on the development of specific vocational or professional skills and more emphasis on upward career mobility. Competence in specific occupational skills is assumed. Networks operate on the principle that it is who you know, not what you know, that gets
you ahead. By participating in a network, one comes in contact with people who are in positions potentially useful to one’s career and who know other people who are in positions potentially useful to one’s career. Conversely, one’s own position and contacts can be useful to others in the network. The interpersonal linkages formed in and through networks are used to advance one’s career primarily through referrals and recommendations. Although the impact of networks may be less personal than that of a mentor or a peer group, the outreach contact capabilities are much greater.

The Value of Sponsorship for Occupational Therapy

Sponsorship provides an effective, appealing, and personalized strategy for developing leaders for occupational therapy. It is built on a concept of intraprofessional and interprofessional support, which has lacked wide acceptance in “female” professions such as occupational therapy. Levinson and associates (15) observed that women establish fewer mentor relationships than men do. At the same time, Sheehy (16) and Estler (17) documented the importance of a mentor in adult life. The dearth of women in mentorships has been attributed to a lack of opportunity as well as to the general failure to socialize women for leadership positions (18). Others (8, 14) have commented that the sense of distrust and competitiveness among women themselves discourages cooperative interaction. Duncan and Partridge (14) put forth the interesting hypothesis that women may not recognize the association between power and support networks. Whatever the reason, it has become apparent that little has been gained by neglecting sponsorship as a vehicle for leadership development. Recognizing this, women across the country have been joining to form support partnerships and networks to service their career aspirations in much the same way as the good ole boys’ network has done for men.

Sponsorship can be used by occupational therapists in a variety of ways. The intent of the following discussion is to furnish some examples of its application, rather than an exhaustive list of possibilities.

The concept of hierarchy, as embodied in the mentor-protégé relationship, can be extended to many types of dyads—faculty member-student, instructor-professor, novice clinician-experienced clinician, clinician-administrator. The one-to-one situation is particularly conducive to sharing the subjective aspects of professional behavior. For example, personal experience has indicated that, by verbalizing how one thinks about and reacts to a particular client case, students are assisted in developing clinical reasoning skills and in coping with their reactions to the severely disabled. Similarly, peer reviews of one’s articles and conference proposals may be useful in illustrating that scholarly life is usually a combination of successes and productive failures. Professional meetings and conferences afford opportunities for mentors to introduce their protégés to professional leaders through informal gatherings and spontaneous contacts.

Within occupational therapy, the peer group notion is probably best reflected in the local Special Interest Sections. Such groups may serve as a vehicle for addressing both conceptual and career advancement issues. In gerontology, for example, therapists are needed who can conceptualize practice in the aging services network, including protective services, nutritional sites, and senior citizens centers. The Special Interest Sections provide a logical forum for such exploratory thinking. After roles and functions have been projected, strategies for articulating them to persons in power and authority can be developed, tested, and evaluated. When positions for occupational therapists are created in such settings, members of the Special Interest Section can be instrumental in referring qualified therapists for the position and in preparing them for the application and interview process.

Within the AOTA, the Special Interest Sections, as well as all other organized groups, may be construed as issue-oriented networks. Assuming that the interests of gerontological occupational therapy were being neglected in AOTA policies and actions, the Gerontology Special Interest Section could be mobilized to exert pressure on the policy and decision-making bodies. Application of networking principles would involve identifying and patronizing those office holders sympathetic to gerontological issues, persuading and converting other elected and appointed officials, promoting the election and selection of candidates supportive of gerontological issues, and courting the assistance of other AOTA units. These activities would be carried out through person-to-person connections.
contacts and organized actions, with the keen recognition that by helping the causes of gerontological practice, gerontological therapists would be helping themselves and each other.

The power base of occupational therapists could be substantially increased if therapists joined organized support networks such as the Philadelphia Women’s Network or the Bay Area Professional Women’s Network. Network contacts can assist in maneuvering occupational therapists into key administrative positions in occupational therapy units, health care settings, social programs, and governmental agencies. They may also be crucial for eliciting support for such objectives as licensure legislation and reimbursement by health insurance plans. Networks vary in membership characteristics and degree of structure. Some are restricted to men or women, to certain occupational classifications or job levels, or to personnel in a particular facility. Others cover broad geographical regions and are open to all regardless of occupation, position, or sex. Meeting agendas range from informal career-oriented discussions to planned programs dealing with topics such as agenda planning, the negotiation process, and assertiveness. The selection of a network to join emerges from one’s career development needs.

Mechanisms for gaining access to power bases, such as the good ole boys’ network, also merit attention. Many of these ties are developed through associations made during the college years. In recognition of this, it may be advisable for occupational therapy students to take their courses in administration and supervision in schools of business and public or hospital administration, which have as their expressed purposes the education of administrators and executives. Such an educational strategy might not only foster a sharp appreciation of “how the administrator’s mind operates,” it might also facilitate collegial relationships with those who will come to exert control over the delivery of occupational therapy services.

Finally, attention should be directed toward the psychological benefits of sponsorship, regardless of the particular form it takes. Professional role strain, also known as “burnout,” is prevalent among professionals. Many therapists are disillusioned with their careers. They may work alone. They may not feel part of a team. They may realize little administrative support and may rarely receive recognition. The information-giving, psychological support, and advocacy inherent in sponsorship could help alleviate such role strain and foster the innovative visions that occupational therapists have about occupational therapy. Sponsorship creates a sense of belonging to a social network designed to help people help people succeed.

In conclusion, sponsorship does not require large expenditures of money and time, or large numbers of therapists to initiate. One therapist can affirm another and, from here, various kinds of social support structures can grow. For each therapist there is a double challenge—to select someone to sponsor and to acquire a sponsor.

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REFERENCES