

# The ‘Double Helix’ of Mentoring: An Updated Paradigm of Mentor and Protégé Relationships

By Jomo Sankara, Ph.D., ACMA, CGMA; Anne Drougas, Ph.D.; Deborah L. Lindberg, CPA, DBA, MBA; and Khalid Razaki, Ph.D.

**R**ecruiting and retaining employees have become the primary issues for most Certified Public Accountant (CPA) firms.<sup>1</sup> The need for recruiting and retaining CPAs is driven by public accounting growth and stagnation in the supply of CPAs.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there is currently a war for talent in the accounting profession.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, CPA retention has become essential to accounting firms' success and according to the Private Companies Practice Section (PCPS) of AICPA, mentoring practice is one of the five pillars of retaining qualified staff.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as Baby Boomers consider retirement and more Millennials enter the workplace, the demand for more and various types of mentors increases. In fact, rather than having a sole mentor, the protégé (sometimes known as the “mentee”) could greatly benefit by the employment of a portfolio of mentors.

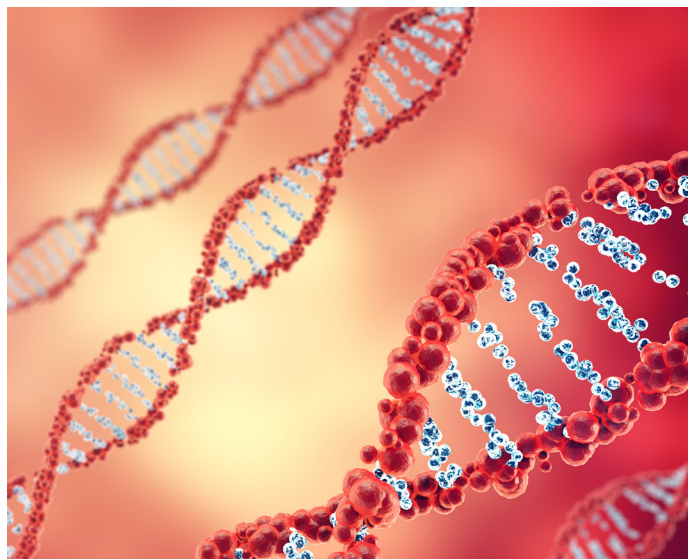
The focus of this article is on the symbiotic relationships that are likely to lead to the protégé eventually becoming the mentor of newer employees and sometimes more senior employees. Not only can this process increase the number of mentors in the organization, this interrelated and interactive mentoring cycle can also lead to necessary changes in the organization's DNA, similar to the double helix design in science.

## Portfolio of Mentors (including Informal Mentors and Functional Experts)

Many organizations have formal mentoring programs, where new employees are given a mentor to help them navigate the culture and politics of the company, give them career advice, make sure they get invited to the “right” meetings, etc. In addition to a formal mentor assigned by the organization, many employees seek out or need more mentoring than that provided by the assigned mentor. It is a fairly common phenomenon for subordinates to choose informal mentors, either consciously or as a naturally evolving relationship. Thus, a formal mentor may advise the protégé about work issues, while an informal mentor may assist with issues the protégé is reluctant to discuss with the formal mentor.

An informal mentor may be someone a person is drawn to because of racial, socio-economic or social similarities. In fact, some organizations are realizing that the mentoring process is likely to be more successful if the formal mentor also “looks like” the protégé in terms of demographics such as age, race and socio-economic status. Mentors from underrepresented minorities benefit mentees because employees from diverse backgrounds are likely to have different experiences, different cultural references, different ideas of workplace attire and even different tastes in music than the majority population.<sup>5</sup>

During a roundtable discussion with young CPAs, many participants stressed the importance of mentors outside the field of finance and accounting. Mentors should represent all areas from where



future clients may come, such as law, banking, marketing, retail and manufacturing.<sup>6</sup>

## Potential Benefits to the Protégé

New employees often need assistance developing their professional skills, and navigating the culture and politics of an organization.<sup>7</sup> A mentor can offer advice, and help the protégé get assigned to key work projects. A mentor may also act as an advocate or “sponsor” for the protégé when the individual is being considered for promotions, transfers and salary increases.

Mentoring seems to be especially important for Millennials, who want and expect frequent and interactive feedback.<sup>8</sup> Mentors can also help young CPAs with soft and technical skills.<sup>9</sup> Organizations that have mentoring programs may be able to attract and retain Millennials, since many employees of this generation want access to senior management, visibility and power,<sup>10,11</sup> aspects of a job that a mentoring relationship can provide. Mentoring may also serve as an effective tool to place underrepresented minorities on higher profile accounts to build confidence and gain access to the best supervisors, managers and CPA partners.<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 1 for ways a protégé may benefit from a mentoring relationship.

## Potential Benefits to the Mentor

A mentoring relationship is also likely to have both tangible and intangible benefits for the mentor. Mentors may experience intangible satisfaction and intrinsic reward by helping the protégé advance his/her career. It may “rejuvenate” a mentor who previously felt stagnated.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, mentoring may help the mentor experience meaning at work and provide psychological growth.<sup>14</sup> Such benefits may not

only improve the commitment and productivity of the mentor (and mentee), it may also positively impact mentor retention rates.<sup>15</sup>

Oftentimes, the protégé may be more technically proficient than the mentor; Millennials have been termed “digital natives.”<sup>16</sup> Mentors, especially relatively older mentors, may be “digital immigrants,” because they had a substantial amount of time offline before they went online.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the protégé may help the mentor with certain aspects of technology, such as how to organize “Big Data” using an advanced analytic review software package. Reverse mentoring is where the mentor is matched with a Millennial who teaches him/her the latest technology or how to use social media. This also provides senior CPAs with invaluable feedback on new employees and provides Millennials with insight into higher levels of the organization.<sup>18,19</sup>

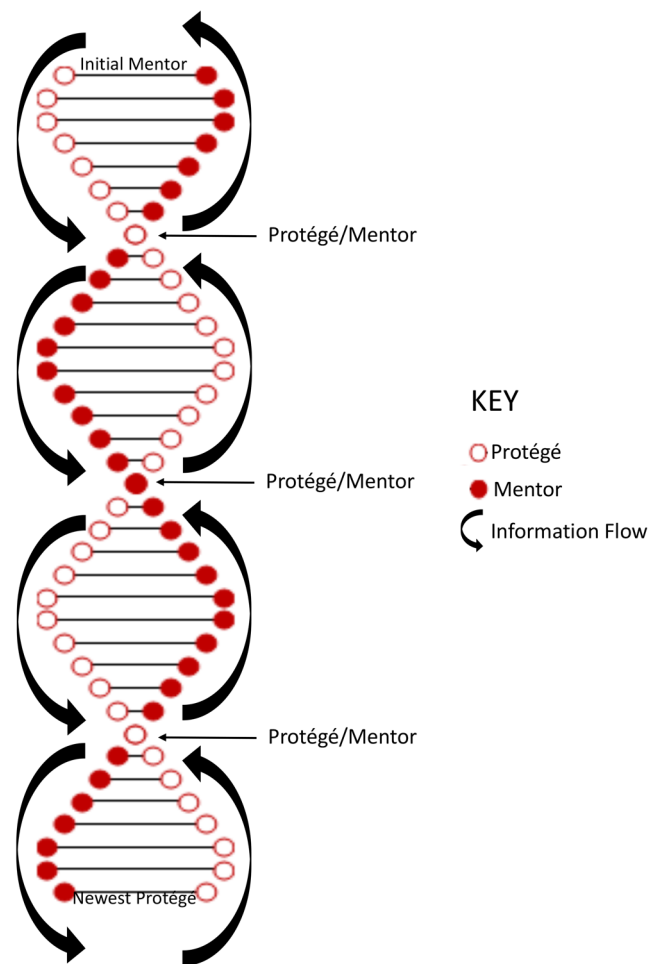
See Appendix 2 for a list of ways in which a mentor may benefit from a mentoring relationship.

### The “Double Helix” of Mentoring

Mentoring can be visualized as a structure similar to the double helix of DNA. Mentors and mentees work as teams and impact the DNA of the entity. First, every entity has a DNA even though it may not have corporeal existence (like corporations and governments). Each strand of DNA has a backbone and accountants represent the backbone of the business transaction.<sup>20</sup> Accountants who serve as mentors must establish trust with the clients they will serve. It may be harder to establish that trust if the accounting profession is not ethnically diverse. The future of the accounting profession is critically dependent upon young Millennial accountants from diverse backgrounds in order to create a stronger backbone when consulting with clients.

Second, changes in DNA produce variations of a species. The accounting profession needs to develop mechanisms for creating pipelines of diverse candidates who possess the technical and people skills to work with a changing client group with different expectations. Changing the species or variations of a species may include continuous learning for Millennials on non-technical aspects such as leadership and communication.<sup>21</sup> Tysiac presents evidence that the accounting profession does not reflect the racial and gender composition of the clients they serve.<sup>22</sup> Through creating partnerships with organizations such as the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA), the Latino Advocacy group (ALPFA) and the Native American Finance Officers Association (NAFOA), diversity initiatives coupled with mentoring can ensure the prosperity and success of the accounting discipline. Furthermore, it is important to produce variations by placing underrepresented minorities on high profile accounts to gain confidence.

Third, an organizational DNA has genes that address the multilevel interactions among its goals and objectives (such as financial and non-financial); people (internal and external stakeholders) and their specific DNAs; formal and informal organizational structures; creation, acquisition, mining, management, and usage of data and information; workplace behavior, attitudes and lifestyle preferences; markets and products; long versus short product life cycles; monetary, and non-monetary compensation and reward systems. Schnader, Westermann, Downey and Thibodeau discuss how it is necessary to mentor Ph.D. candidates in accounting who will then be charged with teaching, and serving as mentors, for the next generation of accountants.<sup>23</sup>



Because Millennials expect their employer to mentor and coach them, companies such as AT&T have developed “leadership” circles where one mentor can work with several mentees at one time either online or in person.<sup>24</sup>

Fourth, all strands are held together by bonds between the bases. The evolving mentor-mentee relationships help preserve those bonds. The Institute of Management Accountants (IMA) Leadership Academy provides necessary training regarding how current and future mentors can establish leadership roles in the IMA.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, DNA is likened to a spiral staircase that shifts and changes. Organizations must adapt to a changing world, and their DNA has to shed some old ineffective or harmful genes and develop new genetic strains that help it survive and prosper. Today, the organization not only has to hire Millennials because they have become the majority of the work force, but also because they are digital natives whose individual work DNA incorporates evolving trends, such as new technology and its uses that are a black hole for older digital immigrants. Millennials’ DNA also contains popular culture, social and political trends, work-home lifestyle preferences, and attitudes towards place and progression in the organization. A spiral staircase analogy implies there are multiple places and paths where the relationship between the mentee and mentor cross.

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### Appendix 1: Ways a protégé may benefit from a mentoring relationship include the following:

- Insight into the DNA and politics of the firm
- Personalized attention
- Enhanced professional skills, such as leadership and time management
- Improved interpersonal communications
- Quicker promotions
- Potentially higher income
- More mature and holistic viewpoints, thus, better decision-making
- Having an advocate or “sponsor”
- Increased opportunities for advancement
- Potential pipeline to disseminate favorable news to superiors
- Getting rational advice in handling awkward interpersonal work relationships
- Obtaining insider information affecting their future or current career
- Feeling more comfortable in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental handicap

### Appendix 2: Ways in which a mentor may benefit from a mentoring relationship include the following:

- Refresh their knowledge of the existing organizational DNA
- Rejuvenate their attitude towards their job
- Increased job satisfaction and psychological growth
- Personal satisfaction derived from interactions with the protégé
- A fresh perspective
- Information about current “lingo”
- Assistance with technology
- Knowledge about the perspectives of younger employees
- Respect from colleagues derived from advancing the career of the protégé
- Mentor may someday become the subordinate of the mentee
- Improved social life within and outside the organization
- Obtain a network of, and informal pipeline to, younger employees through the mentee

In the double helix mentoring process, as the protégé gains work experience, knowledge and confidence, the protégé will be enlisted to become a mentor for newer (often younger) employees who have recently been hired. The experienced protégé will provide guidance and information to the inexperienced protégé. Eventually, this new inexperienced protégé will likely mentor a more recent hire and the cycle continues. In other words, the mentoring cycle repeats itself, information flows in both directions between mentors and protégés, and mentoring relationships are interrelated, similar to the double helix design in science. These mentor and protégé relationships are depicted in Figure 1.

Prior research has found a correlation between the mentees’ (determinants of) satisfaction with their mentoring experience and their willingness to become future mentors.<sup>26,27</sup> Specifically, future mentoring has been found to be associated with mentees’ positive evaluation of their mentorship, mentees’ greater contact with their mentors, and mentees’ perception of their mentors’ approachability and helpfulness.<sup>28</sup>

Some have referred to this relationship as a continuous loop of mentoring.<sup>29</sup> NABA reflects this thinking in their motto of “Lifting as We Climb;” whereby NABA members receive support when they enter the profession and actively seek mentors to be successful. In return, these mentees are expected to become mentors in the future to new black accountants. For example, the NABA leadership team at Walmart provides formal mentoring support and events to new associates with the expectation that beneficiaries will assist the next set of recruits.

Consequently, several jobs advertised through NABA’s websites and conferences provide mentoring opportunities.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Luccock, certified internal auditor, has called this interactive process “Generational Connectivity.”<sup>31</sup>

### Remember the Double Helix

Recruiting and retaining quality employees is critical to the success of great organizations and particularly important to CPA firms. There is currently a war for appropriate CPA talent, and mentoring is a key component of attracting and retaining qualified staff. As the demand for mentoring increases, it is vital that mentees are also willing to play the role of mentors.

The double helix concept may be especially important for Millennials and underrepresented groups. As Baby Boomers increasingly exit the workplace and Millennials join the profession, Millennials will benefit from several types of mentors, including young mentors who may more easily relate to them. Mentoring helps to strengthen Millennials’ loyalty to a firm.<sup>32,33</sup> Similarly, underrepresented groups may seek out and benefit from a portfolio of mentors, which includes mentors from the same or other underrepresented groups. Millennial mentees and mentees from underrepresented groups may therefore be especially needed as mentors. This double helix mentoring process is likely to benefit the organization as a whole, help to retain and develop qualified staff, and provide many career and personal benefits to both protégés and their mentors. ■

**Jomo Sankara, Ph.D., CGMA**

is an assistant professor of accounting at Illinois State University. He can be contacted at 309-438-2266 or via email at [jsanka@ilstu.edu](mailto:jsanka@ilstu.edu).

**Anne Drougas, Ph.D.**

is a professor of finance and quantitative methods at Dominican University. She can be contacted at 708-524-6938 or via email at [adrougas@dom.edu](mailto:adrougas@dom.edu).

**Deborah L. Lindberg, CPA, MBA, DBA**

is a professor of accounting at Illinois State University. She can be contacted at 309-438-7166 or via email at [dlindb@ilstu.edu](mailto:dlindb@ilstu.edu).

**Khalid A. Razaki, Ph.D.**

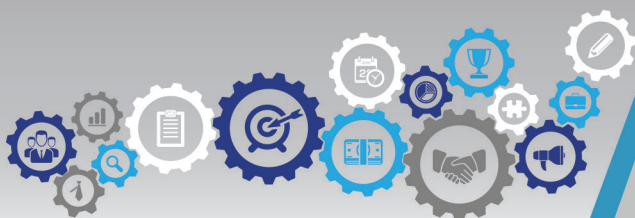
is a professor of accounting at Dominican University. He can be contacted at 708-524-6642 or via email at [krazaki@dom.edu](mailto:krazaki@dom.edu).

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**Kathy Brents, CPA, CBI**

Cell: 501.514.4928

[Kathy@AccountingBizBrokers.com](mailto:Kathy@AccountingBizBrokers.com)

Member of Texas Society of CPAs

**Christy Hudson, CBI**

Cell: 501.499.4357

[Christy@AccountingBizBrokers.com](mailto:Christy@AccountingBizBrokers.com)

