Mentorship in the Professions: A Perspective from Tonga

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Abstract

The authors describe a recent cross-disciplinary mentorship workshop they facilitated in Tonga, which formed one of 11 such workshops they conducted throughout the Pacific island region. The workshop was part of an ongoing leadership initiative co-sponsored by several educational organizations. The purpose of the workshop was to facilitate the cohort of Tongan leaders to begin to develop an adaptive mentorship approach that would not only fit the Tongan context, but that would be both generic and adaptable enough to apply to the variety of professions represented. The authors invite other scholars interested in mentorship to initiate similar collaborative efforts.

Keywords

cross-disciplinary, international, Tonga, Pacific Islands, leadership preparation

Introduction

Interest has expanded worldwide regarding the role of mentorship within professional and organizational life (Allen & Eby, 2007; Obama, 2010), and within leadership development (Rombeau et al., 2010). Leaders and researchers across the disciplines have shown growing interest in the process of mentorship, as demonstrated by a corresponding increase in related research, publications, and conferences over the past three decades. Indeed, a recent Google search we conducted for this article on the term "mentoring" yielded 42 million results.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of the research reported in this paper was to investigate how a cross-disciplinary cohort of educational and professional leaders from the island kingdom of Tonga began to conceptualize "effective mentorship" within the Tongan context. The venue for this activity was a two-day workshop that we, the four workshop leaders, conducted. The workshop objectives were: (a) to facilitate attendees'

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clarification of the essence, the principles, and the practice of effective mentoring across the professions in Tongan society; and (b) to invite them to consider how a specific mentoring model, *Adaptive Mentorship*[©] (AM, Ralph & Walker, 2011a, 2011b), might help inform these deliberations.

Research Questions

We posed the following key questions derived from the purpose of the study, which we used to help guide the research:

1. To what extent did the workshop accomplish its objectives?
2. What was the attendees' emerging view of effective mentorship in the Tongan context?
3. How was this preliminary conceptualization similar to and/or different from other views of mentorship found in the related literature?

Literature Review

Although definitions of "mentorship" and "mentoring", both in the literature and in the field, have varied considerably (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Rose & Best, 2005), there is almost universal agreement that the process of mentorship has certain characteristics (Brock, 2011; Chu, 2009; Ragins & Kram, 2007) such as: (a) it involves providing support to help individuals develop personally and socially/professionally; (b) it has functioned in family, community, and organizational settings since ancient times; (c) it is practiced both formally and informally in a variety of forms; (d) it can yield potential benefits and drawbacks for mentors, protégés, and the groups in which they participate ; and in particular (e) it is influenced by a variety of contextual factors and conditions, not the least of which is the quality of interpersonal relationships forged between/among the participants (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Yoo, 2004).

The South Pacific Context

During the past three decades, educational and professional leaders from several Pacific island nations have been engaged in reform initiatives to reduce or eradicate earlier colonial and post-colonial structures from their respective societies and institutions (Hooper, 2005; Lawson, 2010). They have sought reforms in the operation of their respective governments, administration of financial aid by donors, and the enhancement of their educational and business systems. These reform efforts, which in turn have profound implications for mentorship practice, have been based on

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fundamental principles embraced by many leaders throughout the Pacific island region (Johansson-Fua, 2001, 2003; Penetito, 2002; Sanga, Tagivakatini & Johansson-Fua, 2008; Thaman, 2009).These principles are that: (a) decisions concerning local educational and social policy should be made by the people from each locale; (b) personhood in these initiatives should be understood as being *relational* in nature more than being *individualistic*; (c) reform processes should be framed according to utilitarian, experiential, emotional, and subjective perspectives that focus on individuals' cyclical or divergent thinking, rather than according to "outside" viewpoints that typically focus on abstract, theoretical, cognitive, or objective aspects that stress linear or convergent thinking; and (d) research regarding Pacific development issues should de-emphasize reliance on Westernized and colonial/post-colonial paradigms , but should favour using Pacific paradigms in Pacific contexts with Pacific languages, cultures, and values.

A specific example illustrating this Pacific focus on leadership and mentorship was the establishment of a new program called *Leadership Pacific* in 2005 (Leadership Pacific, 2005). Leadership Pacific can be characterized less as a formal organization and more as a movement or program made up of clusters of educators, professionals, and students within each island nation who represent a variety of educational institutions, government departments, agencies, and organizations. A key goal of Leadership Pacific is to assist young college and university students from the South Pacific islands to develop into ethical leaders, who in turn will be committed to help enhance the growth and development of their own environments, local institutions, communities, and nations, and then eventually the world. The motto of Leadership Pacific is "1,000 New Generation Pacific leaders by 2015."

Leadership Pacific (LP) was initiated by Professor Kabini Sanga, a Solomon Islander, who currently works at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. It was originally funded by the New Zealand International Aid and Development Agency (NZAID), but is now supported on an activity basis by interested institutions/organizations, who request the establishment of the LP program in their institution or community. LP was a product of the original Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for Pacific People by Pacific People (RPEIPP) that operated from 2001 to 2006. A major characteristic of these programs is that they were established and managed by Pacific island people, with government and donor agencies playing a supportive but less directive role. These programs were successful in facilitating collaboration among leaders from a complex web of professional networks representing a variety of local, national, and regional

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organizations across Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Moreover, this work was accomplished with minimal dependency on political, administrative, and/or donor backing.

Because of the importance relegated to the process of mentorship within leadership-development, LP initiated a series of 2011 mentorship workshops in four Pacific island nations with the purpose of assisting participants to re-examine the concept of mentorship and to enhance its practice in their respective countries. Taking into consideration LP's vision, as well as the research results supporting effective professional development (e.g., Schleicher, 2009), the authors planned this series of workshops to facilitate each cohort's development of effective mentorship practice aimed at being relevant to each milieu.

The Tonga Context

Tonga is unique among its Pacific neighbours in that (a) its form of government is a constitutional monarchy with a king as head of state, and (b) it has never been under colonial rule (Government of Tonga, 2008). Like the other island-nations across the South Pacific Ocean, Tonga has been seeking democratic, economic, and social reform during the past several decades; and it held its first elections under a reformed electoral and constitutional process in November 2010, after reforms were agreed by Tonga's parliament (New Zealand, 2011).

Economically, Tonga operates a trade deficit, offset by large inflows of remittances from Tongans who live and work abroad and from external agencies providing development assistance. In 2006, public riots, which occurred as a result of the slow pace of democratic reforms, damaged the economy, negatively impacting government revenue and business confidence. Recently, too, the remittances from Tongans who live and work abroad have declined (Lee, 2006); however, the government is attempting to rejuvenate commerce and business, although the process has been slow. New Zealand and Australia have also been contributing funds to assist private sector reconstruction, which is being administered through commercial banks.

In terms of educational reform, progress has occurred (e.g., French, 2005), but has not been as effective as Tongan educational leaders see as possible (Sanga, 2005). For instance, Dr. 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki (2009), the kingdom's recently appointed Minister of Education, and herself a respected Tongan teacher-scholar, acknowledged Tonga's relative progress, but also urged educators and leaders to be vigilant in ensuring that

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the Tongan core human values (e. g., demonstration of love and compassion; maintenance of relationships; fulfilment of mutual and reciprocal obligations; and commitment to loyalty, generosity, and humility) be prominent in all educational and social-policy discourse.

Other South Pacific scholars (Johansson-Fua, 2009 ; Manu'atu, 2009; Sanga, 2009; Thaman, 2006) have likewise advocated that when leaders of Pacific-island nations propose and plan development initiatives for their respective countries, they must insist that each country's unique culture, language, and beliefs will take precedence over Eurocentric or donor- or consultant-driven goals and values, which still so often pervade innovative programs. It is clear that these principles will have implications on how Tongan mentoring programs are conducted.

Methodology

We used a mixed methodology approach by incorporating both qualitative and quantitative means (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2000) to address the research questions. The workshop attendees represented several disciplinary fields: the university/college system, government ministries (e.g., education, defence, and health), the police service, the banking industry, medical/dental offices, aid agencies, and church/religious organizations. The workshop was one part of an ongoing leadership initiative co-sponsored by seven organizations: the Tonga Ministry of Education, Women's Affairs and Culture; the Pacific Cooperation Foundation; Leadership Pacific; the University of the South Pacific, Institute of Education; Pacific Cooperation Foundation; Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand); the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and the University of Saskatchewan (Canada).

Methodological Principles Guiding the Tonga Workshop

We based our plans for conducting and evaluating the two-day workshop on several prior understandings and assumptions—derived both from Pacific island cultures/values/epistemologies, and from the broader research literature on effective professional development (e.g., Steiner, 2004). These principles were:

1. The event was one of several development efforts arranged by the two Pacific island organizers of our team of four during the recent history of a leadership program initiative (Johansson-Fua, 2009; Manu'atu, 2009).

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2. The workshop was to be facilitative and interactive rather than top-down in nature, in which the inter-professional group of attendees would begin to explore and create a mentorship model or approach appropriate to the Tongan context (Taufe'ulungaki, 2009). Moreover, we planned the sessions to incorporate well-established principles of adult education (Knowles et al., 2005) and motivational learning (Ralph, 1998b).

3. We included a variety of sessions, such as: individual reflection (e.g., "What does mentoring look like for you?), paired discussion (e.g., "Share a story with a partner regarding a powerful mentoring experience you had."), small-group interaction ("What common themes emerged from these stories?" and "What Tongan metaphor best captures these themes of good mentorship?"), and whole-group synthesis (e.g., "In the light of our deliberations, what might an ideal Tongan mentor and protégé look like?" and "What if anything might the Adaptive Mentorship model contribute to this picture?"). In keeping with South Pacific tradition, these workshop sessions were interspersed with planned times for tea (which according to custom actually took the form of small meals) and a noon lunch. We found not surprisingly that these refreshment breaks served as important venues for participant exchange and dialogue to continue.

4. We built into these sessions an ongoing, reflexive, and iterative dimension, in which participants would be invited to respond (and suggest modifications) to successive and evolving draft-reports of the workshop and follow-up deliberations that we composed from participants' feedback and emailed to all attendees.

5. We reassured participants that although two of the four workshop-facilitators were not Pacific islanders, they were credible and reliable scholars and long-time friends of the two Pacific authors/organizers. We described how the Pacific organizers had invited the two Canadian guests to help expedite the workshop and the exchange of knowledge regarding how the cohort of Tongan leaders could begin constructing a meaningful, generic model for effective mentorship suitable across the professions in the Tongan context.

For instance, prior to the workshop the two Canadian team-members endeavoured to demonstrate their empathy with Tongans' worldview and their interest in forging relationships with them. Specifically, they sought to establish a sense of connection

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with the people by attending three pre-workshop events: a men's kava ceremony, a Sunday Tongan church service, and a leaders' organizational meeting at the local hosting institution.

6. The two Pacific facilitators of the team re-affirmed that the workshop's method was to be collaborative, and that one task of the visitors would be to share their mentorship model in order for the participants to consider as part of their mentorship discussions. The visitors called the model Adaptive Mentorship© (AM, which they had previously termed Contextual Supervision, Ralph, 1998a), and which they had developed and refined over the past two decades. Ralph and Walker had found through their research that the AM model was a helpful contextual tool for mentorship participants who implemented it to guide their mentoring practice. For a thorough description of the AM model and its research results, readers can refer to, for example, Ralph (1998a, 2004, 2005) and Ralph & Walker (2010, 2011a, 2011b). Workshop attendees were encouraged to assess the AM model to determine if any of its concepts or components had potential to help inform their deliberations in designing a Tongan mentorship approach.

7. We were also able to employ key elements characterizing the recognized Tongan research framework (Johansson-Fua, 2009; Thaman, 2000) to assist them not only in planning and conducting the workshop, but in our analysis of its results.

8. Individuals, whose names appear in the text of this article and/or in the detailed report of the mentorship workshop (Johansson-Fua et al, 2011) have consented to have their names made public.

9. We designed the workshop to adhere to Tongan protocol in that: all sessions were opened and closed with a Christian prayer conducted by a minister or church official, a practice that reflected the spiritual traditions and values of the nation (Taufe'ulungaki, 2009); and the workshop opening and closing sessions also included formal welcome speeches given by three prominent educational leaders who were well known throughout the Pacific region: Dr. Taufe'ulungaki, the then-new Tongan Minister of Education, who had been a former Director of the Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific; Dr. Hau'alofa'ia Koloto, Director of the University of the South Pacific Tonga Campus; and Dr. Sanga, a key organizer of the Leadership Pacific movement and a long-time, respected leader in higher education. The official welcome of these leaders accomplished three goals:

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(a) it established a positive expectation for the mentorship workshop; (b) it honoured the Tongan value of formal conformity to the social norms and cultural practice of acknowledging rank, authority, and social relationships (Manu'atu, 2009; Vaioleti, 2003); and (c) it granted legitimacy to the input and participation of the Canadian facilitators, as credible workshop participants willing to assist the cohort by offering their mentoring knowledge for the group's consideration.

10. Throughout the sessions, we took the role of participant observers (Wiersma & Jurs, 2008) in that we were actively involved in each session, while also collecting data during the deliberations. Also, we arranged for administrative staff from the host organization to independently conduct a formal workshop evaluation at the end of the two-day meeting. They distributed to attendees a form consisting of Likert-type questions (based on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) with an open-ended item soliciting additional comments. We subsequently collated and analyzed the data from the submitted surveys.

Results

In this section, we divide the findings of our analysis into two sub-sections: (a) a summary of the formal workshop-evaluation survey displayed in Table 1; and (b) a synthesis of the information we gathered both from the open-ended survey item and our field notes of the sessions. We used these data to address the three research questions posed at the beginning of this paper. For instance, the findings provided answers to the first two questions, namely, that the workshop did in fact meet its objectives, and that the workshop delegates did indeed begin to formulate a viable conceptualization of mentorship appropriate to the Tongan context.

With respect to the first set of findings, the survey data shown in Table 1 indicated the perceptions of the 84% of attendees who completed and submitted the print surveys.

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Table1.

Evaluation Results of the Adaptive Mentorship Workshop in Tonga, 25-26 January, 2011

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral
Workshop Objectives			
1. The workshop helped me to share needs, challenges and experiences of mentoring in organisational, community and societal contexts.	68% (21)	32% (10)	
2. The workshop helped me to understand mentoring generally and Adaptive Mentorship (AM) more specifically.	58% (18)	42% (13)	
3. The workshop was effective in helping me with how to implement Adaptive Mentorship in my organisational and community contexts.	55% (17)	42% (13)	3% (1)
4. The workshop provided opportunities for me to develop and discuss personal application plans of AM in my contexts.	58% (18)	32% (10)	3% (1)
Workshop Terminology & Concepts			
5. Key terminology, concepts and frameworks, used during the Workshop, were clarified well.	58% (18)	39% (12)	3% (1)
Workshop Sessions			
6. The session presentations were engaging and educative.	77.5% (24)	22.5% (7)	
7. The workshop sessions were facilitated well.	74% (23)	22.5% (7)	One blank (no response)
Workshop Content and Subject Matter			
8. The workshop has stimulated my interest about the subject matter of mentoring.	68% (21)	29% (9)	3% (1)
9. I value highly what I have learnt at the workshop.	74% (23)	26% (8)	
	Excellent	**Very good**	**Good**
10. Overall, I would rate the value of the workshop as:	61% (19)	35.5% (11)	3% (1)
	Yes		
11. I would recommend the workshop to others.	100% (31)		

Return Rate: 84% or 31 of 37 delegates

The second data-source was our synthesis of (a) the 30 open comments written by 21 of the 31 attendees who submitted evaluation forms, and (b) our field notes recorded in

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the workshop sessions. Based on our examination of these data, we first wrote an official technical report (Johansson-Fua et al., 2011) that described details of the workshop and its results. However, in this section of the present paper we summarize key findings that emerged from the qualitative data. In this summary, we also responded to the third research question by relating our results to those reported in the pertinent literature. First, we confirmed both what previous research (e.g., Fullan, 2007; Steiner, 2004) and what most individuals' personal educational and workplace experiences have repeatedly shown regarding successful professional development initiatives. All of these results suggested that such initiatives tend to focus on: improving both individual and institutional effectiveness, simultaneously; providing participants with active learning opportunities; promoting networking and reflection among the community-members connected to the initiative; and ensuring that members have sufficient time and resources to achieve the project goals.

A second finding related to these principles was that we were able to recognize the distinction between *facilitating* and *directing* the group in their processing of the considerable body of information and ideas that the cohort generated regarding mentorship. We had anticipated that the traditional "one-shot" workshop approach, in which so-called external experts try to dominate proceedings, would be soundly rejected by attendees. Thus, our workshop design required face-to-face interaction and collaboration, which also generated intensity and emotion among participants advocating their respective positions. Although participants engaged in serious discussion/debate regarding the philosophical underpinnings of mentorship, and its core principles and best practices, several participants reported in writing and/or in conversation with us that they felt the group was beginning to craft a meaningful mentorship model for Tonga that could be locally adapted across the disciplines.

A third observation was the animated participation evident during the final session, in which attendees were to create Tongan metaphors that best described effective mentorship in the Tongan context. They presented several metaphors using unique Tongan terms (e.g., a nest, fishing, spreading a mat, erecting a house). We describe the process and results of this metaphor session elsewhere (Sanga et al., 2011).

A fourth finding was the intense manner in which delegates continued their dialogue after the conclusion of the two-day meeting. Ten days after the event, we had emailed a preliminary draft-summary of the workshop report to all attendees, inviting them in turn, to respond to it by adding further comments and/or insights. Several attendees did

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so, and one respondent offered detailed additions (with a rationale) to the original Adaptive Mentorship diagram, which he maintained, if implemented, could strengthen the model's effectiveness.

A fifth feature which we noted was the quality of the participants' formal, written feedback and evaluation. Sixty-eight percent (21 of the 31) of the respondents provided a total of 30 additional comments for the open-ended item, Fifty-three percent of these comments highlighted the positive features of the workshop (e.g., "I have learned some ideas regarding being a good mentor."); while 47% of these comments were related to respondents' desire for additional workshops and/or further training opportunities. One respondent synthesized the comments of several members by writing:

> *"Although the first day of the workshop was cut short due to Cyclone Wilma, I think we had satisfactorily unearthed and voiced the very best of Tongan mentorship practice. I learnt a lot about mentoring, and the contributions were amazing. I have never been to a workshop before where participants willingly shared their experiences with enthusiasm, especially their personal ones Also, several attendees expressed frustration that time was insufficient: "This course should be 3 to 4 days.", "Hurried discussions!", "Thanks for experts. Hope for another workshop in--", "I would like to see that more sessions or days be allowed for the workshop. Some concepts need more time and discussion."* and *"Would have been great if we had enough time to discuss the handout notes. But we have the cyclone to blame."*

We interpreted participants' evaluation comments as a valid indication that an elevated degree of trust did permeate the deliberations, despite the divergence of individuals' workplace and cultural backgrounds. Attendees had willingly risked accepting our invitation to collaborate with fellow Tongan leaders they did not know. Nevertheless, our observation of participant interaction and our co-participation with them prompted us to conclude that the delegates believed strongly in the significance of the mentorship process, and the importance of their pursuit of developing a Tongan model.

Limitations and Discussion

The prominent limitation identified by all of us, attendees and facilitators alike, was the lack of time to complete the task of fully developing a model of effective mentorship for Tonga. Sufficient resources were needed to continue the project and bring it to fruition. Furthermore, we recognized that the workshop simultaneously revealed similarities and differences among attendees' conceptualizations and beliefs regarding mentorship. Such similarities and differences were also evident in the other Pacific locales we

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visited (e.g., Sanga, Ruru, Walker, & Ralph, 2011), as well as in the broader mentorship literature (e.g., Allen & Eby, 2007). These commonalities in perspective were that mentorship: (a) is a supportive learning relationship between/among individuals; (b) is a mutual but asymmetrical arrangement, in that it mainly promotes the protégé's development and progress; (c) is changeable over time and context; (d) is variable in terms of definition, structure, procedure; (e) may be both formal and informal; and (f) is not without interpersonal problems that need to be systematically addressed and not ignored.

Another result was that although the Tonga workshop attendees, who represented a diversity of professions (see, for example, Sanga et al, 2011), expressed idiosyncratic views regarding the mentorship process, a predominant theme was the honour given to matters of the Christian faith, religious values, and church traditions undergirding their mentorship philosophies and practices. This theme characterized nearly all the professional disciplines represented. We noted that in many non-Pacific contexts, such direct expressions of Christian precepts would be rejected on the basis of being intolerant, partisan, bigoted, or politically incorrect; but not so in Tonga. In fact the Minister of Education appeared to set the tone when she began her welcome speech as follows: *"I would like first of all to give thanks to our Father in Heaven for bringing us safely together today to begin this Workshop on Adaptive Mentorship."*

We mention this faith factor as particularly poignant, because we experienced the actual threat of *Cyclone Wilma*, which as forecast, reached Tonga on the first day of the workshop, necessitating the organizers to close the workshop early in the afternoon of January 25, 2011. However, several delegates both via public and personal Christian prayers invoked Divine intervention to divert the storm. We observed the next day that it seemed of little surprise to many attendees that the workshop only had to be postponed until the following morning, at which time we all re-convened and completed our deliberations in calm weather. In the subsequent formal prayers accompanying the final day's sessions the individuals designated to offer the prayers expressed specific thanksgiving to God for sparing the island and for allowing us to finish the workshop.

A third principle that we extracted from the study was the similarity of how the ongoing Tongan experience of creating social and educational change during the past two decades reflected a parallel process, as described in research from other parts of the world (Schleicher, 2009). For instance, the recent Tongan history of economic and educational development--of which our mentorship workshop served as a single

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illustrative microcosm--confirmed several principles that have been observed among other larger-scale institutional reforms, elsewhere (Fullan, 2007). These principles, which have been repeatedly reported in the literature (Kezar & Eckel, 2002), and which have been observed both in the larger Tongan reform movement (Taufe'ulungaki, 2009) and within this single Adaptive Mentorship workshop, were that: (a) senior administrative support was evident, (b) collaborative leadership was operating; (c) careful program design and a tangible vision were prominent; (d) staff/protégé development initiatives were provided; (e) multiple layers of culture were examined; (f) change strategies were aligned with the local culture; and (g) follow-up action was planned and visible.

Implications for Future Mentorship Study

We were honoured to be invited to facilitate this mentorship workshop in Tonga, and we sensed that the participants seriously engaged in this cross-disciplinary and pan-Tongan dialogue. Attendees were unanimous in affirming the key role of mentorship in helping Tongan society to advance: they appeared eager to explore new ways to adapt their mentorship of prospective leaders across the disciplines.

The two Canadian facilitators of our team were relieved that they were not treated as foreigners attempting to force attendees to acquire irrelevant concepts, but rather that a genuine feeling of mutual trust seemed to permeate the workshop sessions and the follow-up communications. We believed that this presence of trust was enhanced and maintained by the influence of our two Pacific team-members, whose own credibility seemed to prompt attendees to accept the contribution of the Canadian visitors. Evidence of this observation emerged when one evaluator offered the following insight that synthesized several other delegates' comments

> *"Adaptive Mentorship (AM) is not a new practice. It is part of our traditional learning systems and has been operating within our culture for many decades. However, for me, this workshop has helped me to realise the power of AM. It has placed AM at the frontline of practices that enable people and organisations to nurture leaders within. It has allowed me to appreciate that AM is a practice that leaders in organisations must be actively engaged in if their organisations are to survive in these swift changing tides.... Leaders must be prepared to invest time in people as much or more than they invest money in infrastructure."*

However, the dissatisfaction with time constraints mentioned by several attendees was summarized in this comment: *"I would be very glad to participate in a follow-up*

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workshop on mentoring to review or assess or appraise the contextualised AM Model we have applied in our respective organisations."

We share this desire to participate in future collaborative efforts that would help sustain the impetus, which has already been established through various leadership initiatives across the Pacific region--including this one.

We invite other scholars and practitioners around the world, who have an interest in adaptive mentorship, to join the ongoing conversation of expanding the research base surrounding this key process.

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