

Role of Storytelling in the Mentoring Process

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question as to what sort of role storytelling plays in the formal mentoring process. Firstly, the individual's personal competence which is divided into knowledge and socially based competencies, and how this competence alters in the course of the individual's working life, is illustrated. Secondly, due to the fact that the mentor's competence is transferred from his or her worldview to the mentee's worldview, the concept of worldview is described. Then the discussion deals with the main content of the paper – namely mentoring and storytelling, and the characteristics of knowledge transferred through these activities. Due to the need to attain a better understanding of the knowledge transferred through mentoring and storytelling, some results of an empirical study conducted on a formal mentoring process in a large Finnish technological manufacturing company (i.e. comments of interviewees) are picked up in brief and included in the paper. The paper ends with the conclusion according to which knowledge transferred through the formal mentoring process differs from the knowledge transferred through an ordinary storytelling practice, and therefore the storytelling plays only a weak role in the mentoring. However, the situation depends upon the characteristics of both the mentor and mentee.

Keywords: competence transfer, mentoring, storytelling, tacit knowledge, worldview.

1. Introduction

The new economy is knowledge driven, which implies that the generation and exploitation of knowledge is playing a predominant role in the creation of wealth (e.g. Drucker, 1985). It encompasses all production and service industries, not just those sometimes classified as high-tech or knowledge intensive. This means that some of the crucial characteristics of the new economy are competencies of people in different forms.

Part of the competencies of companies is in the possession of old timers. These competencies include old timers' work related know-how, networking capabilities, etc., all are valuable to enterprises, and therefore also include the risk that firms will lose them when the old timers retire. This means that in many of these companies it is crucially important to transfer the competencies of the old timers to newcomers.

However, in many companies the transference of competencies has probably not yet been sufficiently understood. For example, attempts to transfer competencies from old timers to newcomers have met with incomplete success (Szulanski, 1996) in part, because of their tacit dimensions. In other words, the fact that a great deal of the competencies of old timers is tied to knowledge that cannot be written down in documents but is realised through the expertise and understanding of old timers, is not taken into consideration at large. Therefore, these companies may not completely understand what sort of managerial practices they should employ in dealing with this problem.

The first goal of this paper is to analyse two interrelated activities - mentoring and storytelling – with the focus on what sort of knowledge – tacit knowledge in particular - is transferred with these activities. The second goal of the paper is to estimate the role of storytelling in the formal mentoring practice. In the pursuit of these goals we first describe the notion of the individual's personal competence and how it changes in the course of his or her working life. Then the discussion goes on to deal with concepts of the individual's worldview and competence transfer from the worldviews of the old timers (i.e. mentors) to the worldviews of the newcomers (i.e. mentees). Due to the need to attain a better understanding of what sort of tacit knowledge is transferred through mentoring and storytelling activities, some results (i.e. comments of interviewees) of an empirical study conducted on a formal mentoring program in a large Finnish technological manufacturing company are picked up in brief and included in the paper.

2. Individual's Personal Competence

Competence is a term widely used but which has become to mean different things to different people. However, it is generally accepted to encompass knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours causally related to superior job performance (e.g. Boyatzis, 1982; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994; Boisot *et al.*, 1996). By the definition of Spencer and Spencer (1993:9) competence is "...an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation".

As Figure 1 suggests, individual's personal competence can be divided into *knowledge based* and *socially based* competencies.

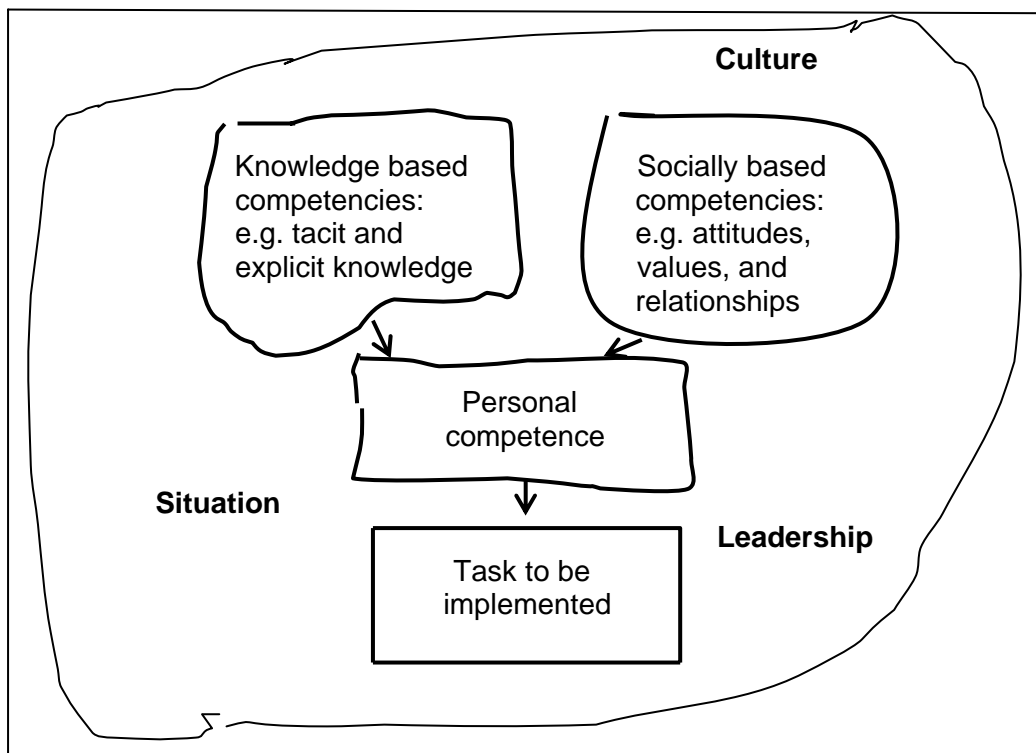


Figure 1. Individual's personal competence

Knowledge based competencies are seen to consist of individual's tacit and explicit knowledge (e.g. Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge is knowledge that an individual has personally adopted while performing different tasks and duties in different working contexts and situations. Many authors divide tacit knowledge into

know-how (i.e. embodied between an individual's ears) and skills (i.e. embodied in an individual's hands). Tacit knowledge can also refer to distorted knowledge that is culturally assimilated, and thus passively given to an individual (e.g. Popper, 1977). Usually it is difficult to express tacit knowledge directly in words. On the practical level many old timers are often unable to express clearly everything they know and are able to do, and how they actually make decisions and come to conclusions.

Unlike tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge can be expressed by words, numbers, or symbols - like grammatical statements, mathematical expressions, specifications, manuals, and so forth (e.g. Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1955) - and therefore it can be communicated easily. For example, in the context of technological manufacturing firm explicit knowledge implies factual statements about such matters as material properties, technical information, and tool characteristics. However, there is no dichotomy between tacit and explicit knowledge, but rather a spectrum of knowledge types with tacit at one extreme and explicit at the other. In the opinion of Tsoukas (1996:14), tacit and explicit knowledge are mutually constituted. In other words, they should not be viewed as two separate types of knowledge.

Then, *socially based competencies* are abilities to integrate thinking, feeling and behaviour in order to achieve social tasks and outcomes valued in the context and culture of a company. In a technological manufacturing enterprise, these tasks and outcomes would include accessing the company's mission successfully, and developing transferable skills and attitudes of value in the company. Recent evidence suggests that socially adept personnel contribute strongly to companies' success (e.g. Baron and Markman, 2000). Specifically, companies with people who are especially competent in perceiving others' emotions accurately and in expressing their own emotions clearly, earned significantly higher income from their businesses than companies with staff that was lower on these skills (cf. the notion of emotional intelligence in Goleman, 1995).

However, the usefulness of an individual's competence always depends on the context and situation (in Figure 1.: situation, leadership style, culture) in which that competence is utilised (e.g. Koskinen, 2003; Koskinen *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, it must be noted that: "...knowledge is about specific insights regarding a particular topic, competence is about the skill to carry out work" (von Krogh and Roos, 1996:424). This means that the competencies of an individual – a mentor or mentee in our case - are not fixed properties. Rather, they are produced continuously in a person's situated practices. In

other words, when an individual's performance is seen as his or her dynamic engagement to a task, the personal competence is understood as emerging from situated practices. The focus, thus, is on understanding the conditions (e.g. human and infrastructural) under which the competence transferring from a mentor to a mentee is more or less likely to be enacted.

3. Old Timer's Competencies in the Context of Technological Manufacturing Companies

An Individual's personal competence in a technological manufacturing company includes the mastery of a body of job-related knowledge and skills, which can be *technical* and/or *managerial*, and also the *motivation* to expand, use, and distribute work-related knowledge to others (cf. Spencer and Spencer, 1993:73). Acquisition and sharing of competencies depend on motivation as much as on the technical knowledge involved. According to Spencer and Spencer (1993), these two aspects of an individual's competence are crucial to transforming knowledge and skills into effective organisational results.

For the purpose of this study, Rosenberg's (1982:143) description of traditional technological knowledge, accumulated in crude empirical ways with no reliance upon science, provides a good definition of old timers' competencies in technological manufacturing companies: "...the knowledge of techniques, methods and designs that work in certain ways and with certain consequences, even when one cannot explain exactly why". According to one interviewed mentor, "*All bustles lead to some sort of knowledge and understanding*".

The competencies of old timers are often socially based and they include a lot of tacit knowledge. This is because old timers have had many chances to work in different contexts and situations, and therefore they have also had chances to gain experiences that have become their tacit knowledge. This means, for example, that the explicit knowledge which an engineer has gained as a junior in a university, has transformed in the course of his or her lifetime into diverse tacit skills. This type of reasoning is also supported by significant evidence of Wagner and Sternberg (1985) and Sternberg *et al.* (1995) according to which old timers and more experienced people tend to utilise more tacit knowledge than juniors and less experienced people. Thus, old timers' competencies often equal practical know-how. One of the interviewed mentees

mentioned: *“During his 30 years career in this place he has seen many deviant situations of our working processes. This means a lot of knowledge I’ll also need”*.

Figure 2 illustrates in principle how the competence of an engineer has changed in the course of his or her working life. The explicit technological knowledge that an engineer has gained in a formal education has transformed into diverse tacit knowledge, like work related know-how, relationships between people, business skills, etc.

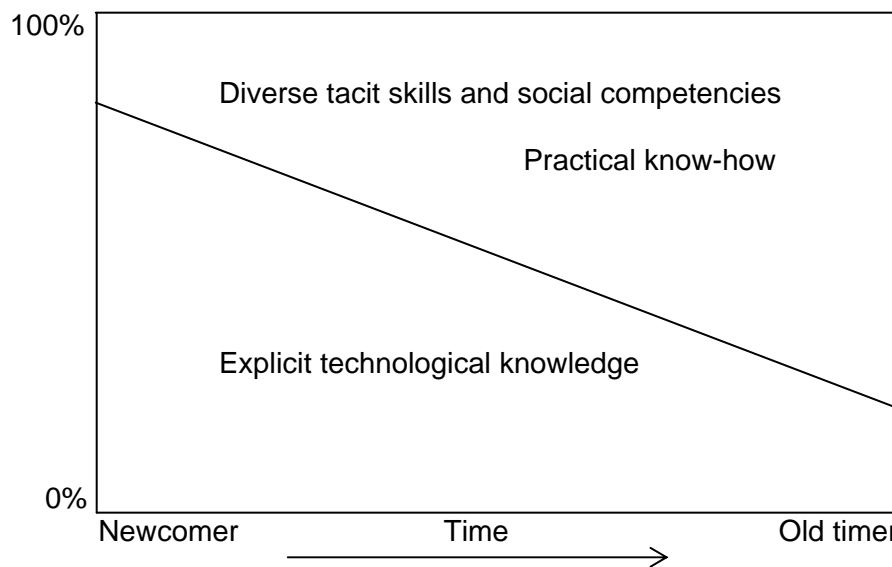


Figure 2. Competence transformation of an engineer in the course of working life.

Old timer competencies can also be a factor that limits learning. Path dependency (Teece *et al.*, 1992) means that an individual’s earlier history limits his or her future behaviour. “Our experiences are not like water in a glass which can be emptied and then refilled” (Flöistad, 1993:73). Thus, a person’s knowledge and know-how are often bound to a specific context and era, and therefore difficult to utilise in other enterprises and/or at other times and in other situations. Therefore, it is not expedient to try to transfer all kinds of competencies of old timers to newcomers. Many old timers possess knowledge and skills that are no longer ‘key competencies’ for the company’s success. As one interviewed mentor mentioned: *“It is important to realise that now the times are different”*. Which competencies are relevant and which ones are not, always depends on the context and situation. This means that the company’s strategy regarding its competence development acts as the main criterion of which kind of competencies are

– and which competencies are not - important to be transferred from the old timers to newcomers.

Because the competence transfer from an old timer to a newcomer means communication of the competencies from the *old timer's worldviews* into the *newcomer's worldviews*, the following chapter deals with the concept of 'worldview'.

4. Old Timer's and Newcomer's Worldviews

The contents of the personal worldviews of both an old timer and newcomer are derived from their previous experiences. The worldview contains information, presuppositions and assumptions. However, the parties cannot readily give a comprehensive account about the contents of the worldview. Moreover, part of it is totally unconscious, but, however, can still influence behaviour. (Koskinen and Pihlanto, 2004)

What a newcomer brings to the learning situation has an important influence on what s/he can learn from an old timer. This is because the newcomer's personal worldview profoundly influences the way s/he experiences the task. "...although it is the individual who learns, this individual is one who has a language, a culture, and a history..." (Usher, 1989:32). Therefore, a newcomer's personal worldview affects, for example, how s/he commits to the task and understands the advice given. People always learn in relation to their worldviews or what they have learned previously.

Quite so, Badaracco (1991) claims that a human being cannot take advantage of new information unless/without having a "social software" connected to that information. Also Cohen and Levinthal (1990), who have introduced the "absorptive capacity" concept, claim that an individual's capability to utilise new information in problem solving depends largely on his or her earlier knowledge. For example, the chances that a technology company will be successful in an engineering project can depend on the staff's experience of similar projects (cf. Koskinen, 2000). Therefore, when people in a technological manufacturing company solve problems, they are guided by the knowledge they have gained from earlier similar problems – i.e. by the contents of their worldviews.

Old timers often have better and more elaborated representations of the task in their worldviews due to extensive practice and more efficient "chunking," the categorisation of information into one unit, than do newcomers (cf. Eysenck and Keane, 1995).

Because the old timers have quite different context and situation based worldviews (i.e. the base of competencies) compared with the newcomers, competence transfer is so difficult to implement: the newcomers simply do not have basic knowledge structures in their worldviews with the help of which they are able to accept the competencies offered by the old timers.

On the basis of the discussion above we conclude that because the competencies of old timers include a lot of tacit knowledge that is only included in more or less ambiguous levels of their worldviews, competencies cannot be transferred well through information technology and in written form. However, the old timers can help newcomers to interpret events, understand technology and business processes, and identify values and norms of a firm. Potential ways to do this are mentoring and storytelling, and therefore the following discussion deals with these activities.

5. Competence Transfer from Old Timers to Newcomers

Transferring competencies presupposes seeing things through other's worldview, and therefore, the nature of transferring is sensitivity and reciprocity (Malinen, 2000). As Schön (1988:25) puts it, "whatever language we may employ, however, our descriptions of knowing-in-action are always constructions". This means that competence transfer cannot be done in its entirety, since the significance of the feeling and the thought of one participant is likely to be different from its significance to the other participant (e.g. Hamlyn, 1970:220).

Quite so, insight into why competence transfer from old timers to newcomers is difficult is well provided by characterization of the tacit dimension of competence (e.g. Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). This is, the cognitive processes that are connected to competence transfer depend upon how the old timers teach and the newcomers learn.

5.1 Mentoring

Mentoring can help to bring about change within an organisation because it encourages the reflection of behaviours and actions as well as identifies options for doing things better (e.g. Whittaker and Cartwright, 2002; Swap *et al.*, 2004).

Mentoring is especially a relationship between two people – mentor and mentee – in which trust and respect enables problems and difficulties to be discussed in an open and supportive environment (e.g. Conway, 1998:39). By sharing experiences, issues

and concerns within an open and trusting environment, the mentee is able to develop and grow and so to maximise his or her respective potential. "Mentoring is not about two people having a conversation", (Whittaker and Cartwright, 2002:184). This means that the mentoring is more or less a structured process that gives the mentee an agreed period of time and space to talk through issues, ideas and situations that are unique to him or her. However, in practise mentoring can take place in a formal or informal way. In both cases the mentoring process is basically a one-to-one activity that can take place in many different contexts and situations.

In this study the focus is on the formal mentoring process that supports the learner's (mentee's) professional development. Formal mentoring relationships are those that are formed by organisational leaders. They typically have a defined duration and purpose. For example, mentoring programs used in training newcomers or less experienced people are typically formal activities. In these programs, mentors and mentees are assigned to work together, and the relationship has a specific purpose defined by the organisation.

In the beginning of the mentoring relationship, both mentor and mentee are inclined to make judgments and form assumptions on the basis of the behaviours they can observe and their interpretations of the words they hear. Behind these behaviours lie a lot of motives, emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes of which all are factors that are part of the participants' worldviews. In other words, these factors usually lie unrecognised beneath the surface. (e.g. Parsloe and Wray, 2004)

In order that the mentoring process would be an effective one, the mentors encourage their mentees to analyse their task performance and identify weaknesses and strengths. Moreover, the mentors give feedback and guidance on how weaknesses can be eliminated or neutralised. They especially help mentees to recognise the tacit dimensions of skills, an important element in the development of mentee's competence and know-how. "Mentors act as a sounding board for their mentees' ideas, and support them as they try out new behaviours and take risks" (Beardwell *et al.*, 2004:300). This means that through the mentoring process the mentee gradually begins to identify and practice different skills needed in his or her work. This is, the mentor stimulates, encourages, guides and cautions, acts as a role model, nurtures learning-to-learn, and encourages the adoption of a future orientation.

On the basis of the discussion above we conclude that through the mentoring process the matching of mentee's worldview with mentor's worldview takes place giving the

mentee an access to a level and range of practical experiences, skills and knowledge (tacit knowledge in particular) that would be difficult to replicate through written material (i.e. explicit knowledge) only.

5.2 Storytelling

Many authors (e.g. Denning, 2001, 2004; Simmons, 2002; Gabriel, 2000; Walsh, 2003; Wilkins, 1983; Swap *et al.*, 2004) have recognised the importance of stories as a means to transfer knowledge. Stories stimulate the imagination and offer reassurance (Bettelheim, 1976), they provide moral education (MacIntyre, 1981), they justify and explain (Kemper, 1984), they inform, advise, and warn (van Dijk, 1975). Bruner (1990) claims that the story is the main mode of human knowledge, and in the opinion of Fisher (1987), the story is the main mode of communication.

Boden (1994), Drew and Heritage (1992), and Sachs (1995), have stressed the importance of informal storytelling and narratives. These knowledge sharing means are often framed in a community of practice which evolves around the sharing of experience related to work practice (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 2001). This experience sharing relates to professional responsibilities, activities and vocabulary. Since the actual work practice often differs from the canonical practice described in manuals and directive documents, the community of practice plays an important role for socialising and sharing experiences of workarounds and trouble shooting. One of the interviewed mentees said: *“I learned much from my mentor’s different short stories”*. According to Mangham and Overington (1987:193), stories and experiences are linked together. “If we listen carefully to the talk around, it is not difficult to think that storytelling goes on almost non-stop. People transform their lives and their experiences into stories with practised ease”. A story emerges as the privileged form of sense making, as “...the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful”, Polkinghorne (1988:1). When old timers share stories with newcomers they realise inadvertent self-disclosures. That is, they are not only narrating events that may prepare newcomers to cope with future similar events. Perhaps just importantly, they are communicating tacit knowledge about their perceptions, feelings, interpretations, values etc. in rich and meaningful ways. (Kupers, 2005)

Propp (1968) points out that the story has a double function: reporting on events, and putting these events into a meaningful whole. To bring an event into a whole, a plot is needed, e.g. ordering the events chronologically or in some other sequence. A story

may thus be seen as a way of making sense of new events by integrating them into the plot, making them understandable in relation to the context of what has happened.

Bruner (1990:44) points out that the strength of the story lies in its indifference to extra linguistic reality. In a story, the perceived coherence of the sequence (e.g. temporal order) of events determines the plot and thus the power of the narrative. Due to the fact that stories simplify the world, they are useful as guides for action. This means that the stories are especially viable instruments for social negotiation also in a context of technological manufacturing companies.

5.3 Characteristics of Knowledge Transferred through Mentoring and Storytelling

Knowledge transferred through a mentoring process is most often problem oriented. The knowledge gives ideas about whether the task executed by the mentee is on the right track, and about possible changes related to task implementation. This means that the advice (i.e. knowledge) from the mentor is often accurate and explicit descriptions focusing on problems and they include explanations for the solutions. In other words, the transferred knowledge is about problems and how they get – or do not get – to be resolved and why. Knowledge typically contains the solution and explanation that tells why the solution has the effect that it does. As one of the interviewed mentors mentioned, *“Knowledge about the done mistakes in order to avoid doing the same mistakes”*. And one of the interviewed mentees said: *“These old fellows know what to avoid”*.

Mentors certainly need to share their *“how to do it so that it comes out right”* knowledge. Personal scenarios, anecdotes and case examples, because they offer valuable, often unforgettable insight, can be shared with the help of mentors. This knowledge forms powerful lessons that provide valuable opportunities for analysing mentees’ realities. Mentors who talk about themselves and their experiences establish a rapport that makes them ‘learning leaders’.

The stories are inscriptions of past performances for future performances. However, it is important to note that they are highly charged narratives, not merely recounting ‘events’, but interpreting them, enriching them, enhancing them, and infusing them with meaning (cf. Gabriel, 2000:31). Omissions, exaggerations, subtle shifts in emphasis, timing, and metaphors are some of the mechanisms that are used in the creation of stories in technological manufacturing companies. In other words, stories include a lot

of tacit elements. This means that the responses invited by stories are not to challenge accurate facts, but to engage with their meanings (cf. Reason and Hawkins, 1988). However, this does not deny the factual basis of stories, nor reduces the stories to elaboration of facts. These stories are often less about *what* to do and more about *how* to do.

It is important to understand that there are often many versions of the same stories. For example, Boddy and Paton (2004) tell about competing narratives, through which different people express different opinions about the objectives, progress or success of a company. Versions of stories vary according to whom and by who these stories are told. People remember different things; attach importance to different things, and view the company from different angles.

The stories about the founding of the company, about charismatic leaders, or about other significant events in the firm may serve a function of presenting an image of the enterprise which people value and which would therefore serve to unify them (e.g. Clark, 1972). For example, stories may include a mythical dimension based on the great men in the past. An example of a myth is that of the Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs who together created Apple Computer. This myth, which has spread widely, still remains alive within the company, despite the departure of the heroes.

The formal mentoring process can also inhabit stories regarding the organisational culture where many things are hidden or unclear. This means that stories are a good help for understanding unwritten and often unacknowledged parts of organisational thought and behaviour. Mentoring relationships can provide a safe environment where many of the more difficult issues surrounding organisational life can be challenged and dealt with stories. This means in practice that the mentors explain and tell stories, and the mentees observe, question and explore. As one interviewed mentor mentioned: *"It is a skill to see the things as a whole."* *"I try to tell the mentee to what wholeness he does the job"*, mentioned another mentor.

The stories are important indicators of the values of the people working for the company, the social prescriptions concerning how things are to be done, and the consequences of compliance or deviance. The stories may also indicate the social categories and statuses which are legitimate in the firm, and are thus an important guide to what kinds of people can do what (e.g. Wilkins, 1983). One of the interviewed mentors said: *"Mentoring is a channel by which it is possible to transfer own values. It is a disadvantage for the company, if the juniors have wrong attitudes and values"*.

However, the opinions of the majority of the interviewed mentors were summarised by one mentor as: *“I see that in our company the mentoring deals with the technical issues, not with the values”*. Moreover, the common opinion of the interviewed mentees seemed to be that the focus of mentoring processes was on the transferring of job related skills, not so much on the values and attitudes.

To sum up, the mentor’s job is to promote intentional learning, which includes capacity building through methods such as advising, providing experiences, and storytelling.

6. Conclusions

Defining mentoring and hence what a mentor does is not always an easy task. For example, what are the differences between the individuals called mentors and storytellers? And what is the relationship between mentoring process and storytelling? In this study we have sought to briefly offer answers to these questions.

The quality of the outcomes from both mentoring and storytelling activities depends on the quality of the relationships and worldviews between the people involved. However, we can conclude that the knowledge transferred with the help of a mentoring process is more job and problem oriented than the knowledge transferred through storytelling. *This seems to mean that the storytelling is a complementary approach that must be used as part of mentoring activity to achieve excellence in company development.*

Storytelling is a non-directive relationship and broadly focused (i.e. socially based competence in Figure 1). Instead mentoring is directive relationship and focused on the job (i.e. knowledge based competence in Figure 1). Moreover, knowledge transfer with the help of storytelling often takes place more or less unconsciously, while knowledge transfer through formal mentoring process is usually a conscious activity.

Although both mentoring process and storytelling activities facilitate the transfer of tacit knowledge, we suggest that tacit knowledge transferred through the mentoring process is largely ‘job at hand’ oriented and tacit knowledge transferred through the storytelling is largely attitudinal and value oriented, see Figure 3.

Furthermore, there is no detailed profile for good mentor. However, we can conclude that the mentor must be sensitive to the mental state of the learners s/he is working with. A good mentor also needs strong behavioural and interpersonal skills. In particular, the mentor must be an active communicator. The role of mentor is played

well by an individual who enjoys interpersonal contacts and has a good sense of existing and emerging problems.

We can also conclude that the good mentor is a good motivator and perceptive. S/he is able to establish a good and professional relationship, and s/he is accessible and knowledgeable about the mentee's area of interest. A good mentor is sufficiently senior to be in touch with the company structure, sharing the firm's values and able to give the mentee access to resources and knowledge.

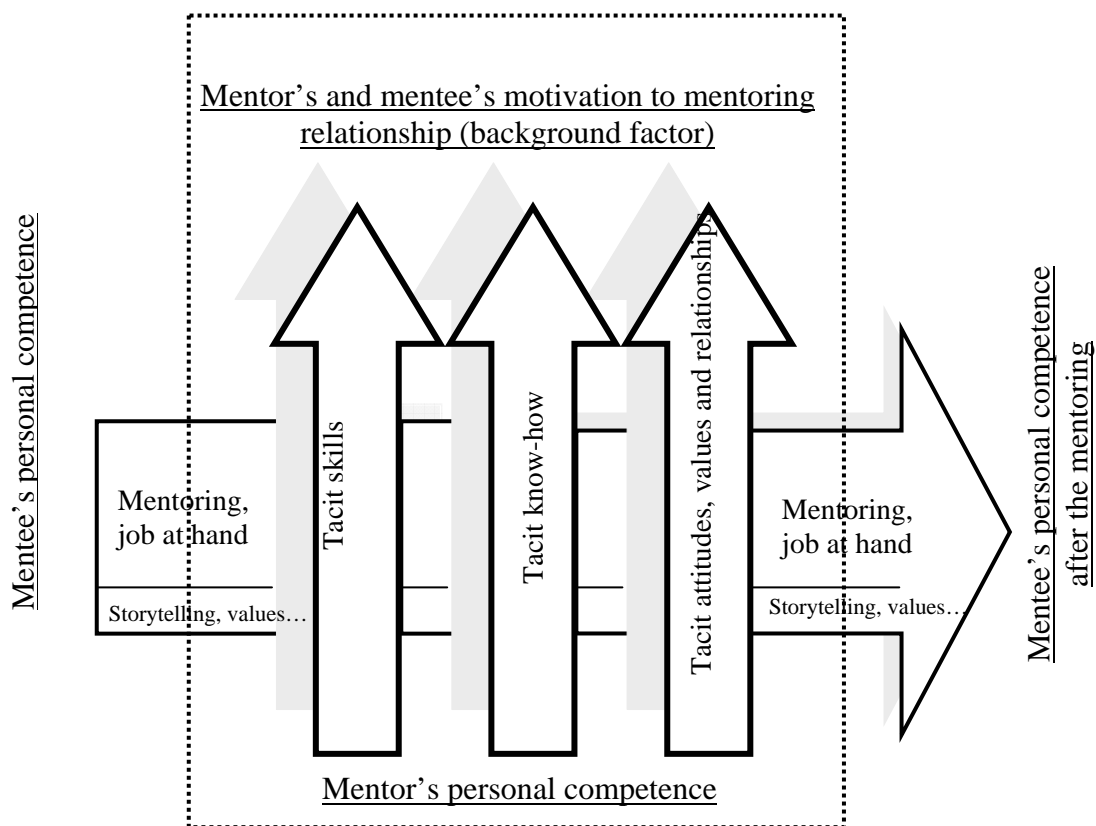


Figure 3. Competence transfer through mentoring process.

Finally, the knowledge transferred through a formal mentoring process differs from the knowledge transferred through an ordinary storytelling practice, and therefore storytelling may play only a weak role in the formal mentoring process. However, the situation depends upon characteristics of the mentor and mentee.

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