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Building a Mentor-Mentee Maturity Model

Leroy A. Alexander

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Building a Mentor-Mentee Maturity Model

by

Leroy A. Alexander

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration
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Keywords: Dynamic Capability, Talent Resources, Organizational Development, Mentorship Program Frameworks, Qualitative, Strategic Management

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ABSTRACT

In an exploratory, qualitative, traditional dissertation, this study proposes a framework for mentoring within federal government contractor firms. It seeks to understand how government contract firms draw value from their mentorship experiences and which aspects of mentorship programs are more important for this market segment. Two key issues have been identified: (1) government contractor firms are applying incompatible mentorship frameworks; and (2) managers responsible for developing their organizations’ capabilities through the implementation of mentoring programs are unaware of the characteristics unique to work groups within their firms. Observance of a federal government contractor firm struggling to implement a mentorship program, coupled with over 20-years of personal mentorship experiences inspired this qualitative interview study. Ensuing discussions with federal government industry subject matter experts and review of the strategic management literature helped describe the applicability of mentorship as a capability for the firm and develop a semi-structured interview protocol. Participant responses were analyzed using inductive coding methods and thematic interpretations. Insights gleaned from the interviews revealed mentorship programs can bridge professional networks and enhance cross-functionality within the firm. The study also revealed there is an abundance of tacit knowledge within organizations, which formal mentoring programs were distinctively suited to maximize and integrate into wider business processes. These insights were utilized to develop a mentorship program framework better aligned to federal government contractor firms.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Organizational mentorship programs are processes that enhance skill and knowledge management within the firm. Developing organizational mentorship programs entail recognizing current or potential gaps, opportunities, and disruptions within a firm or market segment, and aligning resources to address these challenges. Strategic management studies have established when mentorship programs are implemented, they can become a dynamic capability for the organization. For instance, capabilities evolve business practices (Hofmann et al., 2011); high-quality relationships constitute dynamic capabilities for the firm (Salvato & Vassolo, 2017); and mentorship programs are resource-building capabilities for the firm (Vlas et al., 2022). However, there is an overall lack of research regarding how best to manage mentorship program development within federal government contractor firms, where competition is rapidly and continuously evolving. This study aims to discover and evaluate mentorship framework aspects through an in-depth study of mentorship experiences to determine which elements of mentorship frameworks better align. This chapter will introduce the study with background and context. Next, it will provide the problem of practice, objectives, study significance, and the associated limitations.

Federal government organizations seek out private-sector businesses to fill gaps within their mandated structures (e.g., table of organization and equipment, modified table of
organization and equipment, or table of distribution and allowances). Dependent on that organization’s annual budget, decisions are made on the valuation and duration of the service needed. These contract durations typically span either three or five years, which include periods of performance that allow the government to maintain flexibility and control. For example, a five-year contract could have a two-year period of performance and three optional annual periods. At the end of each period, the government could decide whether to retain, reduce, or end the contract. This cyclical work environment presents challenges for businesses and professionals alike in the federal government industry. As a result, there can be little motivation to invest time or resources into professional development initiatives given the short periods of performance, the uncertainty of contract extensions, and the flexibility to reduce or end contracts.

Professional services contracting firms are unique because they provide specialized employee solutions, in highly competitive environments, who require continued professional development and lack clearly defined succession paths. They are comprised of small and large sets of employees who transition with the firm as they obtain new federal government contracts, also known as contract vehicles. These contractor firms are known to utilize teaming strategies, on a cyclical basis, with partner companies to fulfill government commitments. This is evidenced in circumstances where the government organization requires professional services or unique certifications, to scale (e.g., 100+ personnel). While exercising a teaming strategy is advantageous for supporting small businesses, teaming can also provide an environment conducive to establishing mentorship programs unique to government contractors. However, this environment is rarely utilized for exploring its professional development qualities, which can often offer no cost or low-cost solutions. It is likely contractors are encountering rapidly changing workplace environments that require different strategies to better develop
organizational capabilities around mentoring. Two key issues have been identified: (1) agencies are applying incompatible mentorship frameworks; and (2) agencies are unaware of the characteristics unique to work groups within their organizations.

Motivation

Mentoring in the workplace has been a well-studied phenomenon, acknowledging Kram’s (1985) seminal studies and the developmental needs of employees in the workplace have been increasing in focus. Organizational mentorship program development is vitally significant for building competencies to achieve sustained advantages (Bhatt, 2009). Numerous studies have examined the usefulness of mentoring as a strategic tool (Montgomery, 2017); mentoring strategies being used to maximize relationship building (Saidel, 2017); utilization of knowledge sharing strategies enhancing organizational networks (Neeley & Leonardi, 2018); strategic tools creating unique value for employees (Kryscynski et al., 2021); and development program designs fostering networks and collaborative learning (Govender & Adegbite, 2022). There is a need for more studies that capture the underlying meanings of mentorship experiences and their usefulness with enhancing government contractor capabilities. The recent strategic management literature has mainly focused on the individual benefits of mentoring or addressed firm level outcomes for leader development, neglecting the other developmental cohorts (e.g., such as junior and mid-level members) groups across the organization (Montgomery, 2017; Ryu et al., 2020; Wolfson & Mathieu, 2021; Alston, 2021). This presents a problem for industries that must develop their firms in rapidly changing and competitive landscapes, like the federal government contracting industry, where new capabilities and market entrants appear constantly. As a result, the existing strategic management literature has not focused on developing mentorship programs for federal government contractors. Furthermore, contracting firms in these environments lack
the preparedness to adapt their organizational processes to align mentoring strategies and approaches to complement their overarching business goals.

The motivation for this study arose from observing my federal government contractor firm struggle with developing employees and the research focus was heavily influenced by my tenure within the federal government industry, leading and developing members of a team. Mentorship was a key emphasis of my professional growth and development from my first day in the United States Army, well over two decades ago, until the day I retired. Supervisors having an inherent duty to develop their direct reports was engrained throughout my career. The proverbial “mark of a good leader” was found in their willingness to teach, or “take care of” (e.g., develop), others. This mindset was present within each military organization I was assigned to. Furthermore, understanding the leader, the led, and how both required continued professional development fueled my desire for a career in military service, as well as my academic pursuits in the USF DBA program.

After retiring from the military, I transitioned into government contracting and supporting business development for private-sector professional services companies seeking to do business with the federal government. To my surprise, I noticed professional development lacked the same level of emphasis within these firms. Although these firms often secured residual government contracts based on the competency of their employees, there were marginal professional development opportunities besides on-the-job performance.

Organizational mentoring experiences are meaningful and have specific value, which warrants gaining an understanding of the significance of mentorship aspects (Pascale, 2010; van Manen, 2014). Furthermore, incorporating participant feedback into business solutions is not a novel concept (Garg et al., 2021). Yet, organizational leaders in federal government contracting
firms often encounter the pitfall of implementing changes based on anecdotal trends or past industry successes. Designing mentorship frameworks are no exception (e.g., what works for some business segments or workgroups may not realize the same success with others). Hence, mentorship solutions require better understanding of the intricacies and organizational nuances to provide an effective framework design (van Manen, 2014).

**Study Objectives**

Given the lack of strategic management studies regarding mentorship program development in the federal government industry, this study will aim to identify and evaluate a mentorship framework that better aligns by examining the phenomenon of observing a firm experiencing a development program for government contractors in the central Florida region. The objectives for this study are to (1) describe the relevance of a mentorship program as a dynamic capability, (2) explain how mentorship is valued in federal government contractor firms, and (3) design and evaluate a new mentorship program framework that will work better.

In the same perspective, the present study answers the following questions:

- **RQ1.** What aspects of mentoring work better for federal government contract firms, supporting combatant commands?

- **RQ2.** Given the nature of government contract work, how can we design and evaluate a mentoring program for federal government contractors?

The first question addresses the importance of exploring phenomena by identifying any key words are associated with defining mentorship and understanding the various organizational perspectives (e.g., mentors, mentees, and other stakeholders) around mentoring programs. Answering the second question provides a unique benefit to practitioners in a federal government
contractor firm by identifying and examining specific business processes, resources, and mentorship characteristics that can be aligned into a framework design.

**Methodology and Design**

Using exploratory, qualitative interview techniques, this study proposed a framework for developing mentorship programs within federal government contractor firms. The nature of the sampling unit was comprised of workgroups within the organization and a semi-structured interview artifact primarily assisted with the data collection effort. The data was analyzed through the constructivist paradigm and the ontology was perceived as creating meaning of interactions through understandings developed socially and experientially (Pascale, 2010). The intent was to understand which aspects of mentoring were better aligned to federal government contractor firms.

Qualitative approaches are particularly useful with exploring phenomena, discovering the practical essence of experiences, explaining the meaning of relationships between people and their natural environment, as well as the interpretation of complex relationships (van Manen, 2014). However, one should exercise awareness of their unique prejudgments surrounding their area of focus, and share those experiences, as these firmly held opinions could impact the overall rigor, especially in the development and implementation of the research design (van Manen, 2014). As a result, I implemented a systematic approach to verify the data collection and analysis processes, which involved the use of reliability and validation techniques to ensure the accuracy and replicability of the study.

This present study triangulated respondent information from semi-structured interviews, virtual platforms for training and professional development, and discussions with internal and external subject matter experts. The analytic induction technique of data coding was
implemented to organize the collected data and thematic analysis helped identify emerging themes not previously captured during the literature review process. Finally, a coding system and member checking techniques were applied to address researcher bias concerns, validate the interpretation of the data, and ensure the study could be replicated.

**Contributions**

This study proposes a framework for organizational mentoring in the federal government contractor sector of the military industry. The findings of the study will have implications for federal government contract managers who oversee the development of their organizations’ capabilities through a mentoring program. Managers in the federal government can utilize the suggested mentoring framework as a tool to better develop organizational capabilities around mentoring. The study will also contribute to the literature in two ways. First, the design and evaluation of the proposed mentoring program for federal government contractors are consistent with the findings of previous studies that mentoring plays a vital role in developing dynamic capabilities, like the Montgomery (2017) and Saidel (2017) studies which examined the implications of mentoring strategies. Second, this study extends the topic of prior studies regarding mentoring as a strategic tool in organizational knowledge by designing and evaluating a framework with input from organizations working with the federal government (Govender & Adegbite, 2022; Ryu et al., 2022). The framework will be helpful to researchers interested in mentoring from the organizational perspective.

**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

As in the case with any study, this study has limitations in terms of its scope, methodology used, resource availability and generalizability of its artifact to other business industries. First, the scope of this study is limited in its singular focus on mentorship practices
within a federal government contractor firm specialized in professional services contracts. A more in-depth study could consider other types of government contractor firms, as well as other types of organizational processes (e.g., training programs).

The qualitative research design also has limitations in terms of its sample size (Guest et al., 2020) and susceptibility to researcher bias (Morse, 2015). Justifying the validity and demonstrating a rigorous scientific approach required a systematic process for gathering and analyzing sufficient data from a small sample size to answer the research questions. This required reliance on the literature review and a prior validated mentorship study to inform the interview artifact (Carter et al., 2020). Researcher bias is likely injected into the research design, as well as investigating familiar subject matter where it is difficult to maintain a neutral posture (Morse, 2015). In conjunction with exploring a field site which exhibited a struggle with implementing a mentoring program, seeking external reviews from experts assisted with mitigating bias.

The use of one qualitative method to study the phenomenon limited the data collection and analysis phases of the study. Access to additional organizational data such as training records and talent profiles would increase the depth of analysis. Another limitation impacting this study were resource limitations (e.g., time and personnel). As the lone author, coupled with the overall program deadlines, limited the ability to conduct a longer longitudinal study or integrate additional data collection measures like a focus group. Additionally, a more in-depth study would include a study intervention or simulation to test the new mentorship framework. Lastly, the generalizability to other federal government sectors and business industries presented a limitation for the study because the results only apply to federal government contractors that support combatant commands in the military sector.
**Key Terms and Definitions**

For the purposes of this study, organizational mentorship program development has been conceptualized as the collection of the firm’s resources and assets that have been assembled for the objectives of improving employee skills and knowledge (Alleman & Clark, 2000). Notable studies have focused on mentorship structures (e.g., supervisor mentor-mentee, reverse mentors, peers), behaviors (e.g., role-modeling, coaching, networking), and the implications they have on mentoring outcomes which were integral in explaining how the mentorship process continues to evolve (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). Alston’s (2021) study of civil service employees, which reiterated the need to regularly review and modify mentoring strategies to ensure their continued success provides further credence to mentorship’s importance. Yet, in today’s federal government industry, organizational leaders often encounter the pitfall of implementing mentoring design changes based on anecdotal trends or past industry successes.

The structure of mentorship programs was characterized by their basic elements, which transitioned an organization’s development from the initial planning through assessment of the mentoring experience (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). This comprised how to set program goals, select participants, as well as implement and evaluate the program. Next, the mentoring models were operationalized as the behavioral features prevalent in mentoring relationships (Weinberg, 2019). These relationships varied and could be unique to market segments, organizations, and departments within the firm. Lastly, the mentorship phases referred to the movement, through time, of a development program and encompassed approaches to requesting a mentor-mentee, interacting in and maturing the program (Montgomery, 2017). These descriptions helped present the argument for as a strategic tool and provided the basis for redesigning a mentorship framework.
Dynamic capabilities have been operationalized as the organizational systems that, when strategically implemented, can optimize the use of resources, and build competencies to enact strategies in rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). Studies in dynamic capabilities theory have focused on understanding how organizations hone their internal processes (e.g., technological, and managerial) to gain competitive advantages (Teece et al., 1997). Additional key studies have also found that investing in mentoring was beneficial and offered positive returns (Hernandez et al., 2018); talent assets could be utilized to foster mentoring relationships (Guthrie & Jones, 2017); and mentoring programs should be complemented by the firm’s total resource package (Alleman & Clark, 2000).

**Study Outline**

In Chapter one, contextual support for the study was provided. The objectives and research questions were identified, and the value of the mentoring research was presented. Study limitations were discussed. In Chapter two, the existing strategic management literature will be reviewed to identify mentoring as an organizational capability and the approaches to developing mentorship programs, especially in highly competitive environments. In Chapter three, the study methodology will be presented. The adoption of a qualitative, inductive research approach will be explained, and the research design will be discussed to include researcher bias mitigation, as well as the selection of reliability and validation techniques. The remaining chapters will include a discussion of the insights gained from the study, to include limitations and future study directions.
CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature to address why mentoring should be considered an organizational capability. Further, by reviewing studies on mentoring, this chapter shows how mentoring strategies can be aligned with the organization’s goals. Next, this review talks about the theoretical underpinning linking the development of a mentoring program to dynamic capabilities and creating organizational competitive advantage. Articles were identified through searches in Web of Science, ABI/Inform Global, and the EBCSO Host databases using key word searches and abstract screenings. Articles were then manually screened based on their relevance to the research questions and shortlisted for further review.

Mentoring and the Firm’s Resources

This first section provides a review of strategic management and mentoring literature to examine mentoring’s connection to a firm’s resources. The fundamental explanation of a firm’s resources identifies those tangible and intangible assets that a firm has, or can bring to fruition, to improve the organization and adapt to future needs of the marketplace (Blome et al., 2013). According to Blome et al. (2013), the inimitableness of said asset could be deemed as a capability for the firm. To provide context for this study, the firms or organizations used as the subject focus were professional services contractors in the federal government industry. Firms in this certain marketplace are ordinarily comprised of specialized employees such as business
analysts and ranging in levels from novice to technical experts. These firms draw on their performance history, workforce expertise, and ability to develop or acquire new services as a basis for competition. So how does a firm take advantage of their asset utilization to implement a mentorship program?

Guthrie and Jones (2017) investigated the utilization of a firm’s talent assets for creating ideal mentoring relationships and prescribed a guide for optimizing mentoring outcomes. They found mentoring relationships were highest amongst same gender pairings in informal settings and both genders exhibited lower scores when paired in mixed gender relationships in formal settings (Guthrie & Jones, 2017). In other words, employees were more comfortable engaging in informal mentorship settings, provided the mentors and mentees were of the same gender.

Trusting on Guthrie and Jones’ (2017) insights, which focused on resource decisions for public accounting firms, this study explores the generalizability of their findings to the federal government industry. Particularly, seeking to uncover what role, if any, exists regarding talent demographics of an organization’s mentorship program.

Hernandez et al. (2018) examined legacy building in the healthcare marketplace and the implications of competition to attract talent. Their study found mentorship to play a critical role in developing leadership skills and subsequently increased organizational loyalty. Hernandez et al. (2018) highlighted the benefits of investing in mentorship resources that deepened employees’ subject matter knowledge, as well as general business skills. As an important premise to this study, I would advocate Hernandez et al.’s (2018) findings to be similarly beneficial for creating a development program for the federal government contractor marketplace. Due to the junior through senior level experience within these organizations, exploring the bespokeness of mentoring programs to groups within the organization would be a
reportable finding. For example, government contractors can utilize senior level employees’ subject matter expertise to develop the technical skills within junior employees. Comparably, firm administrators could develop their senior level employees’ knowledge of the business aspect to federal government contracting.

Chatterjee (2017) questioned how deliberate investments in improving general human capital could help firms develop superior capabilities. Chatterjee (2017) found that leveraging the firm's technical knowledge, in conjunction with business-domain knowledge, directly correlated to providing solutions and sustaining higher profits. The study posited that in knowledge-based industries, continuous human capital investments are essential for firms to enhance capabilities and sustain competitive advantage. Chatterjee’s study holds relevance because it shows firms have resident knowledge assets and resources that could be utilized to develop a mentorship program capability. Relying on Chatterjee’s (2017) findings, this study explores how a firm's knowledge assets are generalizable to federal government contractors, given their proximity to knowledge-based industries.

Wolfson and Mathieu (2021) surveyed how organizations utilize their human capital for training and development and found that organizations have complimentary individual and unit level resources for training and developing their employees. When those resources are deployed and aligned with situational demands, they can lead to competitive advantages (Wolfson & Mathieu, 2021). Wolfson and Mathieu's study is important because it links the development of employees and teams as critical aspects of organizational performance. Further, one could make the argument to consider talent as a firm’s resource. Drawing on Wolfson and Mathieu’s findings, this study proposes and explores the idea that mentorship is a form of employee development that can be implemented dynamically to meet organizational goals.
Although dated, Alleman and Clark (2000) highlighted some of the skill requirements for a leader charged with designing a mentorship program, which included a thorough background in mentoring and recommended familiarity with the market segment in which the mentorship program existed. Their study found mentoring could improve organizations and offer positive returns on investments within engineering firms. Alleman and Clark (2000) prescribed a hybrid solution where firms acquire consultative expertise to assist in-house staff with designing their mentoring program. Given Alleman and Clark’s supportive findings for expending resources to enhance mentorship program development skills, their study neglected to address sustainability within their mentorship program design. Despite the study’s completion in 2000, I decided to include this article in the literature review since very few articles were published examining the proficiency or qualities of the personnel responsible for mentorship program development, nor sustainability of such programs. This study explores mentorship program sustainability from a practitioner-scholar approach by way of designing a program that can be implemented by maximizing the talent management resources within the firm.

**Mentoring as a Strategic Tool**

A strategy is defined as a process for establishing priorities of what an organization will accomplish and organizing resources to achieve that goal (Baker et al., 2011). Research has shown supplemental business strategies can be created and linked to achieving an organization’s larger end state through its alignment (Baker et al., 2011). To this point, Baker et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive review of the strategic management literature with the goal of developing a tool to measure the degree of alignment, an organization’s history of alignment, and the maturity of the processes that enable IT and business strategies to co-evolve. Baker et al. (2011) found strategic alignment of business strategies was indeed valuable because competitive
advantages could be built from them. Like Baker et al.’s claim of alignment of an IT strategy and overall business strategy as a dynamic capability, this study extends that mindset to the alignment of a mentoring strategy and business strategy. Using the lens of strategy alignment, I investigate the extent of matching mentoring programs to business strategies.

Montgomery (2017) focused on the process for identifying the sources for obtaining mentorship and found that organizationally driven mentoring strategies increased understanding of the overall mentoring framework and career planning practices. Additionally, Montgomery’s (2017) study found the creation of a mentoring strategy added strength to developing an individualized mentoring network and realizing mentoring outcomes. This study is different because it focuses on the organizational benefits of mentoring, which is an aspect of mentoring outcomes that is sparsely addressed in strategic management articles and studies, which mostly hone in on the personal gains. This study extends the strategic management literature by investigating whether aligning the mentoring program and business strategies, as well as the mentor selection criteria, for federal government contractors can lead to a more efficient framework design that address organizational goals.

Griffeth et al. (2021) examined the application of a mentorship strategy as a tool to achieve knowledge transferal and career progression outcomes. To that extent, the authors explored the differences between mentorship and sponsorship for the purpose of enhancing female career progression to executive level positions. Griffeth et al. (2021) posited that while mentorship and sponsorship shared many attributes, the fundamental difference was that mentorship did not usually provide a pathway to career progression. Griffeth et al.’s (2021) study noted some of the key attributes of mentorship, including knowledge, career enhancement and affiliation. Although Griffeth et al.’s (2021) study resulted in the paradoxical findings of
mentorship not being congruent to career progression, their insights on mentorship’s linkages to knowledge are suitable for the needs of federal government contractors. Relying on these findings, this study explores the idea of mentorship as a strategic tool for federal government contractors due to the opportunities for strengthening knowledge.

Saidel (2017) evaluated public and nonprofit managers’ understanding of the dynamic nature of contracting relationships by designing a cross-sector contracting framework intended to enable nonprofit managers to react to changes in medical governance. Saidel (2017) found relationship building, as well as understanding the implications of time and their probable consequences on relationships to be fundamental aspects to develop managerial strategies. While this study examines contracting from the federal government perspective, there are distinct similarities to the fundamental aspects Saidel identified. Specifically, the organizational benefits to be gained from understanding and developing a strategy to maximize relationships (Saidel, 2017). In comparison to the idea of designing a framework that builds competitive advantage from managerial strategies, this study explores mentoring’s dynamic role through developing a mentoring framework that aligns with federal government contractors.

Kryscynski et al. published a study in 2021 that questioned how firm incentives, such as unique perks and benefits, can provide a pathway to competitive advantages. Kryscynski et al. (2021) claimed just as companies implement a differentiation strategy for their products by creating unique value for customers, they can also engage strategic tools to create unique value for their employees. Kryscynski et al.’s (2021) study found compensation-related incentives translated to companies realizing human capital-based competitive advantages over their rivals. While it was no surprise that incentivization could provide a channel to competitive advantage, if the organization has the requisite financial position, I doubt such an avenue would be sustainable
in the federal government industry. Due to the limitations of each contract award, in most cases, simply increasing employee compensation would quickly extend beyond the firm's capabilities. With respect to such a challenge, this study explores the viability of mentoring program development as a more tenable strategic tool.

Neeley and Leonardi completed a study in 2018 which examined how to enact a knowledge sharing strategy among employees. Neeley and Leonardi (2018) posited that a firm's utilization of a knowledge sharing strategy was a critical source of competitive advantage that could foster trust and enhance organizational networks. Neeley and Leonardi (2018) found that social media did impact employee curiosity and participation in nonwork interactions, having an affect quality on building trust and developing connections across the firm. This study is relevant because it links mentorship, a process for passing knowledge, to the categorization of a strategic tool. By exploring how federal government contractors make mentoring decisions, such as mentoring model fit, can provide insights to extend the literature and assist managers responsible for implementing a mentoring strategy in their organizations. The applicability of social media as a mentoring model and the associated pros and cons are discussed later in this literature review process (see Section 2.6. Mentoring in organizations).

**Mentoring as a Dynamic Capability**

This section reviews articles on dynamic capability theory and makes a case for mentorship’s inclusion. A dynamic capability has been defined as an underlying organizational system used to build competencies to manage a firm’s strategic objectives in rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). This noteworthy operationalization of the theory is still commonly accepted throughout the strategic management literature. In 2014, Shuen et al. expanded on the dynamic capabilities theory to provide a comprehensive definition as all the
internal and external processes companies utilize to capture opportunities and navigate competitive business landscapes (Shuen et al., 2014).

Hofmann et al. conducted a study in 2011 that surveyed the capabilities required for firms to evolve their environmental management and collaboration practices. With a foundational underpinning in dynamic capabilities, Hofmann et al. (2011) identified supplier and customer collaboration as a capability. Hofmann et al. (2011) argued the notion that successful collaboration among firms extended beyond producing economic value and required dynamic capability. Hofmann et al. (2011) found firms that invested in enhanced connections with their supply chain and consumers adopted environmental practices at a significantly larger rate. This study embraces a similar premise to the theoretical underpinning by identifying mentoring as a capability. Extending beyond the knowledge management and developmental qualities, I question whether organizations can also advance their strategies and goal attainment through mentorship program development.

Blome et al. published a study in 2013 that conceptualized the difference between a competency and a capability using supply chains. Borrowing from literature in strategic management, Blome et al. (2013) showed how supply chain agility was a dynamic capability that enabled businesses to evolve and impact their external environment. Further, supply and demand competencies were the internal aspects which, when emplaced, would enable a firm to become more reactive (Blome et al., 2013). Chiang et al. (2011) provided another supply chain study which examined the internal competences of strategic sourcing and strategic flexibility that led to the dynamic capability of supply chain agility. Blome et al.’s (2013) and Chiang et al.’s (2011) studies make distinct categorizations of an organization’s supply chain as a capability, as well as compelling cases for the dynamisms of the supply chain that have organizational
benefits. In a similar fashion, this study makes a claim for mentorship as a capability that can enable businesses to evolve and react to changes such as, contract transitions/renewal, employee integration, and professional development innovation. It further distinguishes mentorship program elements, like participant selection and program assessment, as internal competencies of a mentorship program. These elements are explained in further detail in a later section of the literature review. See Section 2.6. Mentoring in organizations.

During the literature review process, one article on the functional implications on mentoring included Bhatt's (2009) study which explained how dynamic capabilities were applied towards an organization’s competency exploitation to achieve sustained advantages. According to Bhatt (2009), competency exploitation utilized functional-level coordination to sustain professional development. Bhatt’s study generates an interesting avenue for investigating the functional ramifications for mentoring in the federal government industry. This study seeks to update the strategic management literature by identifying some of the current functional resource allocation decisions that are prevalent with mentoring federal government contractors (e.g., how business analysts vice supply specialists are developed) since these firms are comprised of multiple occupational specialties and experience levels.

Salvato and Vassolo published a study in 2017 which offered a framework for understanding how dynamic capabilities could be considered sources of sustainable competitive advantage. Further they sought to help managers enhance their firm's capacity through dialogue facilitation (Salvato & Vassolo, 2017). Their study found that firm-level innovation was sustainable when employees were connected through interpersonal relationships founded on constructive dialogue. From those findings, Salvato and Vassolo (2017) provided an updated conceptualization of dynamic capabilities as effortful social accomplishments emerging from
individual employees’ capacity to leverage interpersonal relationships conducive to productive dialogue. Due to the interpersonal nature of mentoring programs, their study is important for exploring mentorship program development as a capability. Relying on Salvato and Vassolo’s findings, this study extends the literature by exploring how mentoring programs impact the quality of relationships within federal government contract organizations, as well as seek to understand and explain what role mentoring plays in facilitating dialogue.

Vlas et al. published a study in 2022 which questioned how mentoring outcomes integrate, build, and reconfigure the organization. Vlas et al.’s (2022) study found that mentoring enhances a firm’s ability to improve learning processes; shape and form the workforce; and indirectly enhances capacities to undertake a wide range of competitive actions. Their study makes the distinct claim for mentoring as a dynamic resource-building capability, highlighting its ability to impact the firm’s competitive position (Vlas et al., 2022). Although exploring a consistent premise of mentoring as a dynamic capability, even to the extent of organizational benefits of mentorship, this study is unique in focus on mentoring frameworks and qualitative approach.

**Mentoring as Organizational Learning**

This section reviews articles pertaining to those unique and leveragable skills that relate to how organizations share knowledge through a mentorship program. Organizational learning is conceptualized as the generation, accumulation, and transfer of knowledge between elements of the same firm (Ryu et al., 2022). By considering how and why organizational members share their experiences, this section gets beyond the individualistic focus of mentoring to explore the larger process implications that can be realized.
Ryu et al. published a study in 2022 which questioned how organizations learned from their experiences. The authors sought to understand the extent to which performance depended on an organization’s own production experience. Their study found that learning-by-doing rates were unique and could reflect the extent to which employee performance relied on inherent experience (Ryu et al., 2022). Additionally, Ryu et al. (2022) found that learning-by-doing was a leverageable skill for organizations that could develop the general know-how and integrate them into other business processes. Ryu et al.’s study holds relevance due to the experiential nature of mentoring programs, where participants share knowledge gained through career experiences to assist others of lesser experience levels. Based on Ryu et al.’s findings, one could deduce that the more impactful mentoring relationships are developed through an exchange of knowledge gained from performance, good or bad. It would not be surprising if other federal government contractors’ decisions on whose advice to seek were impacted by observing and/or imitating the success of others. Comparable to Ryu et al., this study explores the extent to which the mentoring experiences of federal government contractors impacts other business processes.

Govender and Adegbite published a study in 2022 that questioned how to increase the value of learning in the workplace. To that extent, Govender and Adegbite (2022) created a transformational model for evolving the role of a learning and development specialist. Govender and Adegbite (2022) found that development programs could be designed to build networks and foster collaborative learning. Govender and Adegbite (2022) further highlighted the need for organizations to develop competencies and align knowledge management systems with their business strategies. Based on Govender and Adegbite's (2022) conclusion that design interventions promote collaborative learning, I propose that the creation of mentorship programs as a form of design intervention is a form of collaborative learning. Further, when developed
complimentary to the organization’s strategic objectives, mentoring could provide access to
unique employee networks and build strategic relationships as potential secondary or tertiary
effects.

In an earlier study, Neeley and Leonardi (2018) examined the conditions for receiving
knowledge and its relevance to the firm. Neeley and Leonardi (2018) found organizations
learned through observations, which helped employees identify knowledge sources and build
trust for communicating across the firm. Further, Neeley and Leonardi (2018) discovered firms
were increasingly utilizing social media a node to create mentoring networks. By identifying the
knowledge sharing outcomes, Neeley and Leonardi’s (2018) study helps to build the case for
mentoring as a tool for organizational learning. Relying on Neeley and Leonardi’s work, this
study further explores the mentorship experiences of employees to develop an improved model
for mentoring federal government contractors. This study is differentiated in its examination of
how mentoring programs are built and seeks to identify their associated challenges with applying
the mentoring frameworks to a unique federal government market segment.

Mentoring in Organizations: Foundations and Frameworks

This section reviews extant mentoring literature to identify the basal elements of
mentorship, the common frameworks uncovered in the workplace, and how they are combined
into different models to create mentorship programs. Additionally, this section discusses the
challenges and limitations these mentoring models present for federal government contractors.
This study adapts the following definition of a mentoring program from Alleman and Clark’s
(2000) study on evaluating mentorship programs. To this extent, a mentoring program refers to
“The resource package (e.g., training, software solutions, personnel, and expertise) accessible to
an organization for the informational transferal of knowledge to develop the organization and its
people” (Alleman & Clark, 2000, p. 63). This operationalization of a mentoring program is important to the current study because it extends beyond the behavioral actions of the mentor-mentee relationship and considers the holistic value of a program.

**Mentoring Elements**

Bell and Treleaven (2011) conceptualized the basal elements of mentoring as: planning, pairing, accountability, assessment, and improvement in their study of the participant selection aspect of mentoring programs. Seeking to discover the implications for elevating mentoring culture, their study uncovered some of the key responsibilities involved with mentorship program development (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). As a derivative, they provided the following guide:

- Planning the mentoring goals and the type of assistance required for achieving them...
- Pairing mentor-mentee personality or talent traits to the stated mentoring outcomes…
- Employing accountability mechanisms (e.g., developing a feedback loop) to track mentoring progression and goal attainment…
- Conducting periodic evaluations and assessments of the initial plan and relationship dynamics (e.g., What is working? Why? What isn’t working? Why?)… Finally, applying ways (e.g., material and support, expanding network, training, and education) to improve the mentoring program (Bell & Treleaven, 2011, p. 547).

A later study by Deschaine and Jankens (2017) brought awareness to the selection element of designing a mentorship program and highlighted a deeper organizational benefit of recruiting the right mentors. Deschaine and Jankens (2017) explained selection as a process for identifying mentors with relatable experience and provided a framework to address recruiting and validating participants for this critical role within a program.
Planning. Bell and Treleaven’s (2011) work present a stellar example of how to implement a mentoring strategy that is complementary to the organization’s goals. They designed a program to boost employee connections and placed emphasis on the internal processes used to link mentees with their counterparts (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). In doing so, Bell and Treleaven (2011) delivered a tailorable capability that enhanced a process associated with developing their organization. Their study is significant because it further demonstrates the idea of mentorship program development as a capability. Expanding on Bell and Treleaven’s (2011) method for implementing a mentoring strategy, this study explores the generalizability for incorporating strategy into developing a mentorship program for federal government contractors. For example, a firm navigating through an acquisition might design a mentoring program to function complimentary to the organization’s onboarding processes. With the assistance of a mentoring strategy, the firm could likely benefit other internal processes such as strategic messaging and facilitating organizational culture.

Selection. Deschaine and Jankens’ (2017) research questioned how to implement a program for developing future leaders, prescribing guidelines for scrutinizing the mentor recruitment (e.g, reviewing prior supervisory experience and adherence to policies and standards). After their investigation, Deschaine and Jankens (2017) made the call for having a rigorous screening process to ensure that only qualified mentors were approved to participate. This study acknowledges Deschaine and Jankens’ (2017) call for rigor by proposing a framework that integrates talent managers into mentorship program development and exploring the extent to which it can facilitate candidate vetting and evaluating fit for achieving desired goals.
**Pairing.** Bell and Treleaven’s (2011) study, which examined how to advise mentoring relationships, identified three central themes for achieving success: reducing initial awkwardness and uncertainty; providing organizational assistance with pairing; and fostering personal connections. Additionally, their focus groups credited the development of personal connections to being vital in mentee choice and identified the utilization of an academic developer with brokering the mentoring pairs as critical.

Carter et al. published a relatable case study in 2020, which also focused on the pairing element of mentorship programs. Carter et al. (2020) explored learning and development experiences to determine the extent to which pairing increased the ability to achieve mentoring outcomes, uncovering three themes (e.g., awareness, personal growth, and efficacy). Ultimately, Carter et al. (2020) discovered that pairing achieved the following results: increased awareness of different mentoring models; personal growth through learning from others; and increased confidence in abilities to mentor others.

Carter et al.’s (2020) study hold importance because they draw attention to the organizational role in developing and sustaining mentorship programs. Relying on insights gleaned from their work, this study explores some of the main challenges with creating mentorship programs for government contractors, like implementing strategies to maximize resource pairing; creating pathways to build employee networks; and providing consistent leader buy-in for mentoring initiatives. For example, government contractors’ assets (e.g., training platforms, experienced employees, and internal networks for communication) are seldom incorporated into a complementary package that maximizes their benefits. While many organizations offer junior employees access to the experiences of their senior counterparts, these
relationships are primarily left to develop on their own, which can be problematic for many contract employees who are reluctant to individually navigate such landscapes.

**Accountability.** Deschaine and Jankens’ (2017) investigation also addressed the responsibleness of organizational leaders for management and implementation of accountability measures to ensure the sustainability of development programs. Deschaine and Jankens (2017) explored how to develop an internship program and sought to propose a structure and framework for implementing a program amenable to control measures, like a formal mentoring program. The authors found that performance critiques and accountability measures were required to ensure the achievement of focused, purposeful goals and standards compliance. In addition to bringing awareness of organizational roles, their study holds the additional significance by investigating the benefit of implementing program oversight and progress tracking organizational goals.

Relying on insights gleaned from Deschaine and Janken’s (2017) work, this study explores the extent to which applying accountability measures can facilitate goal accomplishment in a mentoring program developed for federal government contractors; advocates for leader buy-in as a critical aspect of sustainability for development programs; and presents a solution for the frequent lapse in oversight of such initiatives within the federal government industry. By exploring how federal government contractors actualize the accountability element, as experienced by their employees, this study will extend the literature by providing insights on the mentorship culture in this distinct industry.

**Assessment and Improvement.** While addressed together, these two elements hold distinct differences, whereas assessment identifies trackable measures and improvement addresses the further implementation of the insights collected from the assessment (Bell &
Bell and Treleaven’s (2011) study also presented a good example of how to evaluate mentoring program development. To this degree, Bell and Treleaven (2011) gathered information on participant experiences utilizing focus groups. The insights garnered allowed for change implementation from self-selected pairings to an assisted pairing model, which increased the success rate for mentor-mentees from 40% to more than 60% (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). Cataldi et al. published a relevant study in 2021 which questioned the importance of evaluating mentoring programs and found similar organizational benefits (e.g., production outputs and certification accruals) when outcomes beyond participant satisfaction were tracked.

Counting on their insights, this study prescribes a mentoring program framework for federal government contractors that incorporates the assessment element (e.g., What is working? Why? What isn’t working? Why?), which extends beyond the direct mentoring relationship outcomes to identify larger organizational implications for maximizing its resources and internal process. For example, a government contractor whose mentorship program was aligned to enhancing technical skills could monitor the quality or acceptance rates of products completed by participants. Lessons learned from the evaluations could be implemented in other business processes.

Mentoring Models

Weinberg (2019) conceptualized mentoring models as the customized, authentic relationship developed by mentor-mentee fit. The predominant mentoring models found in the existing literature includes apprenticeship modeling, friendship modeling, group mentoring model, internship modeling, reverse mentoring model, role modeling, and sponsorship modeling.

Apprenticeship Model. Bourke et al. (2014) defined the apprenticeship model as a professional relationship created for the purpose of building technical expertise. Apprenticeships
were likened to cloning (e.g., fulfilling the same technical responsibilities or certifications) which were deemed appropriate for student development or succession planning activities (Bourke et al., 2014). Based on Bourke et al.’s (2014) exploration of the apprenticeship model, organizational hierarchy would naturally produce the planning, selection, and mentor-mentee pairings in a common framework. This would essentially require little to no input from the mentee. Accountability would likely focus on mentor oversight to ensure the adherence to fairness and equity policies. While program assessment could be achieved through performance evaluations and tracking diversity metrics, the ability to implement timely changes into such a framework is questionable. This mentorship model would likely have paradoxical implications for mentorship program development aligned to federal government contractors, given the following factors: ability to develop novice employees; perceived lack of timeliness for implementing program changes; and lack of a clearly defined path for succession. For example, a framework designed to increase employee qualifications or certify novice employees (e.g., like an initial entry or novice program) would likely align with apprenticeship modeling, as these programs are mainly focused on building skill. Whereas a framework solution that was intended to align with leader development and succession goals would likely only apply to those internal, non-advertised positions within the organization that are typically isolated from the procedural scrutinization of official hiring practices.

*Friendship Model.* Bourke et al. (2014) identified the friendship model by the relationship formed between members who are close to or at the same professional level. Bourke et al. (2014) characterized the friendship model by its lack of hierarchy and found alignment to mentoring among senior level practitioners, drawing similarities to peer mentoring. Neeley and Leonardi’s (2018) study provided an expanded view of peer mentoring by exploring the
increasing use of social media platforms to facilitate this framework. Neeley and Leonardi’s (2018) findings supported the flat structure of peer mentoring and indicated knowledge sharing across the firm as a capability. Based on their insights, it is likely that planning and selection would be difficult to implement for federal government contractors, as these mentoring relationships were noted to develop through genuine social interactions (Bourke et al., 2014). Furthermore, organizations would likely be relegated to a supportive role in mentor-mentee pairing activities. Accountability could be implemented through honest feedback given by peers, but assessment and improvement would likely be difficult to track (Neeley & Leonardi, 2018). This friendship model would likely align well to federal government contractors, given the social nature and mutual respect aspects of the framework. However, with marginal oversight, there is potential for strong negative outcomes to be realized. Managers should take considerable precautions regarding the content and accountability prescribed to internal work-related sites. This is due to the potentially damaging impacts of non-work social media mentoring sites that can work counter to the desired organizational outcomes. For example, non-work sites like "MilitaryWTH" and "Servicemember/Leader/Senior" (pseudonyms) have been utilized as platforms where junior employees can share their experiences and seek guidance from anonymous donors. While this method of peer mentoring can expand individual networks or provide quick fix solutions, such sites also hold the potential to amplify tensions within an organization if unvetted or deliberately negative advice is passed.

Group Modeling. Carter et al. (2020) conceptualized group modeling as a focused, developmental cohort encompassing relative personality or job role fit. Group mentoring was also referred to as network modeling due to its expanded role of gathering advice from more than one mentor figure (Carter et al., 2020). Based on Carter et al.’s (2020) findings, a mentoring
framework utilizing group modeling required strong organizational involvement to facilitate planning and alignment of goals. Selection was achieved through identified positions or titles, which was supported by the firm’s resources such as profile creation, databasing, and networking activities (Carter et al., 2020). While participants could be afforded an opportunity to provide inputs, the final pairing decisions were organizationally driven (Carter et al., 2020). The firm would conduct accountability by facilitating the contact hours for focus group meetings (Carter et al., 2020). Additionally, program assessment was implemented through a combination of group and individual feedback mechanisms (e.g., surveys and interviews), with improvements being integrated into future iterations (Carter et al., 2020). Relying on Carter et al.’s insights, designing a mentorship program with elements from a group mentoring framework could potentially align with federal government contractors. Such an endeavor would likely require strong leadership buy-in, as well as a comprehensive plan to guide mentorship program development and implementation. Finally, utilization of the firm’s resources, coupled with facilitation of meeting venues could be beneficial for developing a mentoring strategy and gaining participants.

**Internship Model.** Deschaine and Jankens (2017) defined the internship model as a program designed to identify academic candidates for transition to practitioner environments. Internship programs were comparable to role modeling because they allowed the candidate to begin mastering the skills and behaviors appropriate for their profession while applying their academic knowledge in supportive, developmental environments (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017). Considerations for implementing this framework in a firm included: alignment of goals to achieve fit; accounting for time spent on work sites through tracking and logging hours; and conducting performance reviews and mentor assessments for overall program improvement.
(Deschaine & Jankens, 2017). Relying on Deschaine and Jankens’ (2017) findings, it is likely collaboration and sustainability would be critical to implementing this framework in the federal government contracting environment and it would not be surprising for internships to have paradoxical returns on investment. This would likely be dependent on whether the internship model was applied to the corporate functions or contract fulfillment responsibilities of the firm. For example, federal government contractors could provide an environment where participants can observe executive level teams while applying knowledge and gaining business administration experience. However, the internship model presents significant challenges for firms whose corporate locations are detached, or lack physical control, from their work sites. This is a common practice among federal government contractors, and it reduces the ability to observe the other experienced employees (e.g., contracted subject matter experts) who perform the contract fulfillment tasks that allow the firm to remain competitive and profitable.

**Nurturing Model.** Bourke et al. (2014) defined the nurturing model as an open and safe-to-fail environment that promoted risk-taking initiatives for the purpose of learning. The nurturing model was further characterized by its ability to preserve a hierarchical structure, while simultaneously allotting for creativity in implementing a mentoring strategy (Bourke et al., 2014). According to Bourke et al. (2014), the nurturing model was amenable to mentees in the early stages of their careers due to the oversight provided by their mentors, who acted as resources and facilitators. Lanzi et al. published a relatable study in 2019 which examined how to balance mentor support with mentee independence. In their study, Lanzi et al. (2019) identified mutuality and bidirectionality of the mentoring relationship as key benefits to initiating a nurturing model. Additionally, growth in the nurturing model was signified by the mentor’s building connections between the mentee and their professional network (Lanzi et al, 2019).
Combining knowledge gleaned from Bourke et al. (2014) and Lanzi et al. (2019), the nurturing model appears to function as a progression from the apprenticeship model where the position of the mentee has transitioned from an academic status to practitioner. Drawing on Bourke et al.’s (2014) findings, planning and selection implementation would likely be challenging for federal government contractors due to the individualized nature of building these relationships. However, the ability to build networks and develop mentee identity would potentially have strong alignment for contractor firms in this industry. Accountability and assessment of a mentorship program designed around a nurturing framework would likely pose similar challenges and require well-defined oversight measures to ensure alignment with organizational goals.

**Reverse Modeling.** Garg et al. (2021) conceptualized reverse mentoring as a relationship where a junior participant serves as mentor to a senior person in a bottom-up developmental approach. Garg et al.’s (2021) study explore how employee-driven job resources impact the organization and found that investing resources in reverse mentoring can have positive outcomes for the firm. Garg et al.’s findings are appropriate due to their finding significant, positive relation to achieving organizational benefits. The extent to which reverse mentoring has been experienced by federal government contractors is novel in the literature and could represent an area keen for exploration. For example, given the technological proclivity of reverse mentoring, it would be noteworthy if the results were generalizable to a professional services firm since they are designed to be tech-savvy.

**Role Modeling.** Weinberg’s (2019) study also abstracted role modeling as an emulation-driven experience where a mentee imitates someone who demonstrates exemplary desirable characteristics, behaviors, and knowledge. By exploring how role modeling occurred in
mentoring relationships, Weinberg’s (2019) study found a participant’s self-image could influence the actualization of the mentoring model. Subsequently, the level of self-image (e.g., high, or low) could impact the decision to pursue a mentor (Weinberg, 2019). Given the mentee-driven aspects, organizations would be likely to assume a facilitating role (e.g., providing access to resources) with the planning and selecting elements of a mentoring program aligned to a role modeling framework (Weinberg, 2019). However, it would not be surprising if there were challenges with pairing, assessing, or improving such a framework due to the varied participant satisfaction responses that are likely to occur (Weinberg, 2019). Based on Weinberg’s findings, it would not be surprising if role modeling exhibited positive alignment responses or emerged as a central theme in federal government contractor experiences. For example, with personal knowledge of military units, one could likely recall countless examples of observing someone perceived to be an exceptional leader, or subject matter expert, and examining how they reacted to different challenges.

Sponsorship Model. Randel et al. (2021) defined sponsorship as a socially-influence relationship in which a mentee is exposed to networks for the purpose of accelerating career opportunities, characterizing it as a subset of mentorship. Randel et al.’s (2021) study explored the extent to which mentoring impacted career advancement, finding sponsorship held vast potential to increase career advancement. Griffeth et al. (2021) published another study on sponsorship which provided a more simplistic conceptualization as the act of backing or vouching for another person. While acknowledging the role of information sharing, Griffeth et al. (2021) made a stark differentiation between mentoring and sponsorship, intimating that developmental relationships aligned to a sponsorship model should have tangible, observable results such as increased compensation.
Based on Randel et al.’s and Griffeth et al.’s (2021) exploration of the individualistic nature of sponsorship modeling, it is likely the organization would fulfill a supporting role through strategic messaging and enacting policy to facilitate an environment conducive to sponsoring activities as an alternative to program development (e.g., planning, selecting, pairing, assessment, and improvement). Although, federal government contracting firms would likely experience severe challenges with aligning a sponsorship program to career advancement opportunities due to contract fulfillment requirements. Relying on Randel et al.’s and Griffeth et al.’s (2021) findings, sponsorship presents another element that could likely yield paradoxical responses for federal government contractors. Drawing on the example of designing a mentoring program aligned for connection enhancement versus succession planning, it would not be surprising if this mentoring element gained better traction with making connections. This is due to the lack a clearly defined succession system in most federal government contractor firms.

**Mentoring Phases**

Examination of the mentoring lifespan has been sparsely captured in the strategic management literature, yet it holds relevancy to all types of development programs (Montgomery, 2017). Considering the idea that mentorship spans sequentially, as the mentee increases in skill and solidifies their professional identity, it is important to explore that progression. Montgomery (2017) conceptualized the lifespan as the trajectory of the mentoring relationship based on strategic goals, and paired with organizational resources, to achieve particular aspirations. While investigating how to design a formal mentorship model aligned to career planning, Montgomery (2017) found that mentoring happens along a trajectory and needs vary as the relationship traverses the lifeline. Although Montgomery’s (2017) focused on the
individualistic outcomes of mentoring, it is likely the mentoring lifespan would have application to developing an organizational program as well.

There is differentiation in the literature regarding characterization of the lifespan, but scholars are primarily in agreement that the mentoring lifespan can explored in phases. For the purposes of this study, operationalization was adopted from Hale and Phillips’ (2019) study which identified the mentoring phases as: seeding, opening, laddering, equalizing, and reframing. This adaptation was selected due to its close alignment to Kram’s (1985) seminal work on developmental networks, which was highly regarded in the academic literature and similarly characterized the mentoring phases.

**Seeding.** Hale and Phillips (2019) defined seeding as the initial discovery period for developing a mentoring relationship. Seeding was signified by prospective mentees realizing the need for improvement and begin the search for a mentor (Hale & Phillips, 2019). Lanzi et al. published a similar study in 2019 which examined the mentoring phases and characterized seeding as the launching phase where expectation management and trust building occurred. Based on Bell and Treleaven’s (2011) earlier insights on the mentoring elements, this initial phase would likely encompass the planning, selection, and pairing elements. Considering mentor-mentee relationships is at its infancy, it would be unlikely that trust building could be achieve so early into the mentoring relationship, as prescribed by Lanzi et al. (2019). To comprehensively apply these aspects to developing a mentorship program, a likely fit could be to integrate the planning element and seeding as a phase that focuses on strategy development and alignment. For example, this initial phase could allot time to clearly identify strategic objectives; inventory and organize firm resources (e.g., training resources, desired experience, and associated infrastructure); and calculate the costs for establishing the program. Determining the
mentoring strategy, alignment, and guidelines would complete the initial phase and set the conditions for transitioning to next phase.

**Opening.** Hale and Phillips (2019) termed opening as testing the feasibility of entering a mentoring relationship, which included the invitation and response to requests for mentorship. Relying on Deschaine and Janken’s (2017) findings, the opening phase would likely be nested with the selecting element of mentoring which identified and vetted potential mentors for the program. The pairing element of mentoring would also be likely to exhibit fit with the opening phase due to the initial developing of connections between mentors and mentees (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). A likely illustration of how to implement this phase in a mentorship program would include support from the firm’s talent manager and/or training developer with building mentoring profiles and screening candidates. From there, the organization could facilitate a mentor-mentee venue or utilize internal social media platforms to assist with the pairing process. Delegated organizational leaders (e.g., talent managers or training developers) could provide further assistance with pairing as required. This would end the opening phase and transition program.

**Laddering.** Hale and Phillips (2019) labeled the laddering phase as the period of reciprocal interactions that led to professional growth and development, to include: creating opportunities to learn, sharing experiences, and preparation for future challenges. Likewise, Lanzi et al. (2019) characterized laddering as the learning stage, which encompassed self-identity building and persistent mentor feedback. This phase was also signified by removing obstacles and navigating issues in the workplace (Lanzi et al., 2019). Based on Deschaine and Janken’s (2017) findings, the laddering phase would likely coincide with the accountability element of mentoring which encompasses the main effort of the mentoring relationship (e.g., goal
achievement, goal tracking, and compliance assurance measures). In contrast to Lanzi et al.’s (2019) earlier characterization of the opening phase, it is more likely that trust building would occur during laddering phase, given the associated dynamics.

**Equalizing.** Hale and Phillips (2019) conceptualized equalizing as the mentee’s maturing and becoming more independent in their professional identity or responsibilities. This phase was noted by a shift in developmental needs (Hale & Phillips, 2019). Similarly, Lanzi et al. (2019) identified equalizing as the independence or separation stage, in which the mentee-mentor relationship began its metamorphosis to a peer status. Based on Bell and Treleaven’s (2011) earlier insights on the mentoring elements, the equalizing phase would likely align to the assessment element of mentoring which evaluated the developmental goals and overall strategy achievement. Relying on Randel et al.’s (2021) labelling of the sponsorship model as backing the mentee for career advancement opportunities would be a likely fit with the equalizing phase due to its emphasis on mutual professional positioning. For example, the practice of acting as referral for and recommending mentees to apply for higher positions is common in the federal government contracting industry. This denotes confidence in the mentees ability to become a stronger contributor within the organization and the profession.

**Reframing.** Hale and Phillips (2019) defined reframing as reflecting on the mentoring experience, which included sense-making and interpreting the overall impact. Lanzi et al. (2019) labeled the reframing phase as peerage, or mutual mentoring, in which the mentor and mentee become colleagues and gain similar professional standing. Bell and Treleaven (2011) likened the reframing phase to the improvement element of mentoring, where feedback from the overall process could be applied back into future iterations of the mentoring program. Applying this concept to developing a mentoring program for federal government contractors, a typical
instance would likely be actualized as a shift in the mentoring relationship resemblant to a friendship model where the mentor and mentee become mutual advice providers. While this could essentially signal the ending of a mentoring relationship, insights gained from personal mentoring relationships indicates these interactions transition into a less frequent developmental network, vice dissipating altogether.

**Conclusion**

The objective of this study is to characterize the federal government contractor mentoring experiences and design a mentoring framework that aligns better with this unique market segment. While there have been significant strides in the strategic management literature, writ large, the subject area is still flush with opportunities to expand our knowledgebase on mentoring programs. In view of the investigation on mentoring as a dynamic capability and the organizational implications for developing a mentorship program, the strategic management literature has mostly demonstrated the individualized benefits of mentoring and provides little findings to address the organizational implications in the federal government contractor marketplace. Even the literature addressing firm level benefits generally focuses on leader development and neglects the mentoring effects across the residual groups or functional aspects within the organization. Other limitations of the current literature include ambiguity in the classification of the mentoring models and mentoring phases, such as the inconsistency between mentoring and sponsoring (Griffeth et al., 2021) or the blurring of group, peer, and friendship modeling (Carter et al., 2020). Such differences can prove challenging when interpreting the findings and applying them across organizational studies. To overcome the shortcomings of the literature, a qualitative study was conducted. The next chapter presents and discusses the methodology used to conduct the study on mentoring government employees.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Research Design

This exploratory qualitative interview study was based on witnessing the phenomenon of a federal government contractor firm struggle with implementing a professional development program. Rossman and Rallis (2017) found exploratory research to be suitable for illuminating the nature of business issues and referred to qualitative inquiry as the approach taken to examine phenomena, which followed the assumption that people develop meaning about reality from their social experiences. Van Manen (2014) found similar benefits using phenomenological qualitative studies to discover the practical essence of experiences while finding new meaning in common frameworks and recurring interactions. The research questions: “What aspects of mentoring work better for federal government contract firms, supporting combatant commands?” and “Given the nature of government contract work, how can we design and evaluate a mentoring program for federal government contractors?” and the focus on exploring the feasibility of mentorship as a dynamic capability, influenced selecting a qualitative research design. The primary objective of this study was two-fold: (1) identify what aspects of mentorship frameworks would work better for federal government contractor firms, and (2) design a mentoring framework for federal government contract managers who oversaw the development of their organizations’ capabilities through a mentoring program. Secondary objectives included: (1) explore the frameworks currently used to mentor employees in federal
government contract firms; (2) define the challenges these frameworks present; and (3) to understand the mentoring experiences in federal government contractor firms.

Research Paradigms

The philosophical assumptions regarding disposition of the environment plays an important role in how information is gathered and understood (Su, 2018). Some of the common research paradigms include, but are not limited to positivist, constructivist, and critical theory. Positivist paradigms view reality as things that are tangible and independent from the participant, where truths can be tested and refuted through experimentation (Su, 2018). Constructivist paradigms view reality as interactive with the participant and truth is developed from perspectives gain through transaction with the environment (Pascale, 2010). Critical theory views reality as the participant’s social values, which are codified over time and examined to justify the extant condition of the environment (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017).

This qualitative inquiry study explored participant responses through the constructivist paradigm or lens. The ontology was perceived as creating meaning of interactions through understandings developed socially and experientially (Pascale, 2010). The intent was to develop novel insights about the value of mentorship in federal government contractor firms by exploring the meaning of mentoring experiences as they occurred in a highly competitive landscape. Pascale’s (2010) findings were important for helping frame the approach to examining how mentorship is valued in contractor firms because it encouraged a focus on exploring what emerges from the respondents to address the research question.

Qualitative Approaches

Selecting a suitable approach for qualitative inquiries should be dependent upon the research topic and the business problem to be addressed (Grenier et al., 2022). Some common
qualitative approaches include narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study research. Narrative research investigates the participant’s life and explicates the research problem through storytelling of individual experiences (Grenier et al., 2022). Phenomenological studies discover the experiential essence of a particular aspect in the participant’s life to provide a rich description of the lived experience (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Grounded theory studies focus on developing rules from data within the environment, basing their findings in the participants’ views (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Ethnographic research provides interpretations of culture and seeks to describe the observed patterns in a particular group (Eisenhardt, 2021). Case study research is defined as an in-depth analysis of a business problem to provide a deeper understanding of the organization, key issues surrounding the case, and potential solutions (Massaro et al., 2019).

This qualitative inquiry study utilized a phenomenological approach to achieve the primary objective of understanding the essence of mentoring experiences, from the basis of how mentoring presents itself in federal government contracting firms. By discovering the essence of such experiences, this study sought to apply the findings to develop a mentorship framework informed by the respondents. Van Manen (2014) wrote about the benefits of phenomenological approaches including being responsive to the details of momentary or temporal experiences; drawing on the sensibilities of the participants, as well as the author; and creating new avenues for describing existent truths between us and our environments. In other words, phenomenological studies are effective helping us examine daily occurrences and present new understandings about their associated interactions.
Approach Limitations

Researcher bias, novelty, and the ability to justify rigor were some of the key limitations and challenges noted with conducting qualitative studies. Morse (2015) examined strategies for determining rigor in qualitative research and found bias injected into the research design, either through the data collection strategy (e.g., interview questions) or the data interpretation, and maintaining neutrality to be common pitfalls. The author also identified study limitations with ensuring the investigation of pure samples due to smaller representation from the populace, which could adversely impact the perception of thoroughness in the overall investigation of the research topic (Morse, 2015).

Other difficulties with studying phenomenology including the ability to discern new knowledge or readily grasp themes; the challenge with demonstrating rigor and accuracy of findings; and the author’s potential lack of self-awareness to prejudgments (van Manen, 2014). To overcome these challenges, the following gradational technique was prescribed for scrutinizing your analysis and interpretations:

…one must evaluate the data by questioning the thought provoke-ness of the findings, …the richness of the experiential material, …the depth of the insights presented, …the constancy of questioning the meaning of the phenomenon, …and the offer ability of deeper original thought into the values of practice (van Manen, 2014, p. 355).

These limitations are directly relevant to my study on mentoring in the federal government and relying on insights from Morse (2015) and van Manen (2014), I implemented a systematic approach to collect and analyze the data. First, the research questions were developed by observing a phenomenon and discussing the event with subject matter experts from the field to verify the relevance to practice and academia. Next, the semi-structured interview artifact
used for the study was informed by an extensive review of the literature and questions were adapted from prior validated mentorship studies. In my examination of mentoring in federal government contractor firms, I chose to explore mentoring where development was most needed – in under-developed segments – so I decided to explore a contractor firm that had struggled with implementing a mentorship program.

How to process information best critically in phenomenological exploration has also been addressed in recent accounts. Gehman et al. (2018) examined qualitative methodology and noted the importance of not reducing our options to a single approach when analyzing complex data, or things that evolve over time, and recommended variance thinking and process thinking strategies to address these challenges. Variance thinking related to describing the factors that are associated with mentorship, while process thinking was noted for its usefulness with explaining the activities mentors-mentees engage to develop goals and complete a mentorship program (Gehman et al., 2018).

This study considers both the variance thinking and process thinking to explore the mentorship experiences of federal government contract employees and, further, design a mentorship framework that better aligns to their market segment. Variance thinking is appropriate because it is important to understand how mentorship is defined by federal government contractors to reduce the chances of misinterpretations when classifying their experiences. For example, it would be important to know if federal government contractors related mentorship to training or drew clearer distinction to just advice giving. Process thinking holds parallel relevance to this study, from the perspective of a practitioner, because federal government contractors seeking to add a mentorship capability may not be familiar with the process for developing a program or understand how mentoring relationships change over time.
From an organizational perspective, the aspects of a mentorship program were dissected to identify a framework that better aligned to government contractors and informed the semi-structured interview artifact (see Appendix A).

*Triangulation and Accuracy*

When conducting a qualitative study, it is important verify the accuracy of the data and the credibility of the interpretations. Guion et al. (2011) provided succinct comparisons and clear explanations of triangulation techniques and their fit in qualitative research, of which, methodological triangulation, investigator triangulation, and data triangulation were considered. According to Guion et al. (2011), methodological triangulation referred to the implementation of sequential or mixed method approaches to conduct a robust study. Investigator triangulation involved the use of an evaluative team, each utilizing the same methods to examine the data (Guion et al., 2011). Data triangulation focused on the variety of information sources used to gather data, and the author recommended capturing multiple perspectives on the examined topic (Guion et al., 2011). The ability for numerous approaches to reach similar conclusions was interpreted as more credible (Guion et al., 2011). As the lone researcher and principal investigator for this study, the use of investigator triangulation was unable to be accomplished to verify the data. Similarly due to timetable constraints, the utilization of a sequential, or mixed methods approach was not feasible.

This qualitative interview study utilized a data triangulation method to increase confidence in data collection and analysis. From the outset of observing the phenomenon, talks were conducted with subject matter experts, internal and external to the event, to gain additional perspectives and verify the existence of a problem with practice (e.g., a disjointed mentoring program) that was equally worthy of academic research. Interviews were conducted with each
group and additional feedback was gathered from all stakeholder groups surrounding the key issue (e.g., contract employees, contract administrators, and their federal government clients) to verify respondent information. Next, organizational processes linked to professional development and learning were examined to provide context to the total resource package available and complimentary to mentorship program development. After the analysis and interpretation techniques were performed, the subsequent framework was reviewed by subject matter experts who were resident and external to the contractor firm. Study protocols were conducted in accordance with the university’s institutional review board.

**Data Selection**

Based on the location of the observed phenomenon, the defense and security critical missions’ segment within the U.S. branch of a multinational contractor firm was selected to participate in the study. Participant eligibility criteria included salaried, federal government contractor employees within the firm, which supported combatant commands in the central Florida region. A combatant command is a joint military command of the defense department that is composed of two or more service branches (e.g., Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines Corps) and conducts continuing missions. Participants were at least 18 years of age and experience levels ranged from junior-level employees (1-5 years) through senior-level encompassing leaders and middle manager positions (5-20 years). Eligible participants were comprised of mentors and mentees with experience in mentoring relationships and/or currently in a mentoring relationship. This study did not consider employees in a trainee status or probationary period, nor employees retiring within 1-year of the study.
Data Collection

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with program managers, military intelligence analysts, and security specialists employed by the contractor firm. Gehman et al (2018) identified interviews and observations as common sources for qualitative data, but other kinds of data such as images and documents can be used as well. Relying on those findings, this study also examined virtual professional development and learning platforms from a federal government contracting firm in the central Florida region, which provided an alternative data source to examine the mentoring program phenomenon.

Interviews

The use of the semi-structure interview approach was prompted by Pascale’s (2010) work that revealed the same phenomenon could be experienced differently by each participant, which seemed a more appropriate fit for exploring how federal government contract firms experienced mentorship programs. The semi-structured interview consisted of designated questions on a research topic, which guided each interview’s trajectory, and the prescribed questions were presented to each participant, in identical fashion, with the liberty for unique responses (Morse, 2015). Following the author’s findings, I retained the discretion to interject follow-up questioning to gather additional details. The structure of the interviews and questions remained constant, and responses were summarized into data sets that could be analyzed with a coding scheme (Morse, 2015). Sample interview questions were adapted from Carter et al.’s (2020) study on learning and development experiences. An example interview question included: “What did you learn from participating in mentorship activities?” (Carter et al., 2020, p. 41). The final interview artifact was created and refined by combining insights from the overall literature review process. See Appendix A for qualitative interview questions.
Prior to enacting the data collection strategy, pilot tests of the semi-structured interview were conducted from March through April 2022, with one active-duty military servicemember and one government civilian from a combatant command headquarters in the central Florida region, mirroring the ideal study participant. The purpose of the pilot testing was to gauge the feasibility of gathering the requisite data in an appropriate timeframe, as well as corroborating the selection of interview questions based on insights gained during the literature review process. The respondent data from the pilot tests were not included in the qualitative inquiry study findings.

The primary data collection activities took place from June through July 2022. Due to the field site restrictions, semi-structured interviews were conducted at an off-site location that could support participant anonymity, as well as health and safety guidelines to mitigate the contraction and spread of the coronavirus. Prior approval for use of the off-site location was gained through written consent from the facility manager. While unavoidable, and due to the field site requirements (e.g., no recording devices allowed on the field site), the use of an off-site location for conducting the interviews may have contributed to the overall participation, or apprehension thereof. Interview scheduling was accomplished based on participant availability. See Appendix B for recruitment e-flyer.

All participants took part qualitative semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions to support 30-minute sessions aimed at understanding the essence of each participant’s experience with their organizations’ mentorship process. The interview artifact focused on the following issues: (1) definition of mentoring, (2) motivation for seeking a mentor or mentee, (3) navigating the mentoring relationship, and (4) recommendations for creating a mentorship program. Prolonged explanations were achieved with each participant, which according to
Meyer and Avery (2009), assisted with uncovering the underlying meanings of transactional engagements within an organizational setting. A sample question included: “In your own words, how would you describe mentoring?” See Appendix A for qualitative interview questions. With participant consent, the interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and automated transcription. The data was recorded and transcribed utilizing the Rev.com artificial intelligence software solution. The recordings were converted into a textual format, which generated a Microsoft Word document for each interview. A participant data sheet was collected to assist with demographic organization of the interview responses. All files were electronically stored on a university institutional review board approved, password-protected database in accordance with the study protocols. See Appendix C for the study approval letter.

Virtual Platforms

I acquired consent from government contractor firm program managers to examine their professional development and organizational training portals to triangulate data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. “The Development Corner,” a pseudonym, was a virtual portfolio used by team members and middle managers to identify professional development goals and track goal attainment progress. Organizational members were provided the opportunity to self-identify areas of focus like leadership, skills, education, or broadening capabilities. During quarterly and annual review schedules, middle managers would evaluate performance and provide written feedback.

The contractor also utilized virtual training to provided courses in lieu of professional certification curriculum. “Learner’s Lane,” a pseudonym, was a combined instructor-led and self-paced virtual training registry with offerings around skills improvement courseware, internal process knowledge management, and general business acumen. Participation in these offerings
were voluntary and independent of any organizational requirements. The virtual registry also included annual compliance requirements like timecard reporting and information security policies.

*Data Saturation*

Gathering ample information on a given topic is the most employed concept for estimating sample sizes in qualitative research and Guest et al. (2020) prescribed an analysis method which applied to empirical studies with homogenous samples. This analysis included tracking the number of themes recorded per interview, either prospectively during the data collection and analysis process or retrospectively, after data collection and analysis were completed. While current operationalizations of saturation in qualitative inquiries vary widely, Guest et al. (2020, p. 13-14) found that typically 6-7 interviews could capture most themes (e.g., approximately 80% saturation), with 11-12 interviews usually needed to reach higher degrees of saturation.

Primary interview data for this study was collected from June – July 2022. Additional interviews occurred in August 2022, with no additional themes emerging from the content. The absence of any new themes was the key indicator that data saturation had been achieved.

*Data Analysis*

Analytic induction was implemented to explore the federal government contract employees’ mentorship experiences. Analytic induction is defined as a research strategy to develop analysis, explain types of phenomena, and organize research findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Their definition evolved from Katz’s (2001) study, which explains analytic induction as scrutiny of distinctive social activities to redefine the conditions through which people learn or make meaning of their environment. As a result, redefinition was achieved
through the studied participants’ own words (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Analysis began with reviewing the transcribed interviews for accuracy. The focus was on verifying the software transcribed the precise wording and gaining a better understanding of the data. Next, the transcribed interviews were imported into Microsoft Word and Excel spreadsheet formats to perform an initial review of the data, as well as coding techniques. Then, the Microsoft Words documents were uploaded to the NVivo qualitative analysis software for further examination and development of themes. Finally, the developed themes were used to inform the reconceptualization of a mentorship framework that would align with federal government contractor firms.

**Coding**

The data analysis for this qualitative inquiry study was accomplished through cyclic iterations of transcript reviews to organize responses (Saldana, 2016). The seminal protagonist for this analytic technique is van Manen (1979), who utilized a two-cycle approach to obtain the centrical codes, followed by a report on thematic inferences concealed within the information. Coding is referred to as the process of labeling and organizing data, traditionally known as deductive or inductive coding. Deductive coding is performed when the focus of your data collection is narrow or there is existing knowledge relevant to your focus area and priori codes apply to your data organization (Saldana, 2016). Inductive coding is performed when there is little known information regarding explored phenomena (Saldana, 2016).

This study took an inductive coding approach to organize and analyze the data, which allowed insights to emerge from the data. This approach to coding was chosen because, although mentorship was a well-studied phenomenon, implications for federal government contractors were a lessor explained subset within the mentoring genre of the strategic
management literature. To implement coding, participant responses were organized by the interview questions. I conducted a subsequent iteration of transcript reviews to identify preliminary coding bins.

The common techniques used to organize analysis of textual data include in vivo, process, descriptive, structured, and values coding methods (McGarvie, 2022). In vivo coding was defined as the use of a participant’s own words to organize data into categories, which were usually illustrated by direct quotes taken from the interviewee (Saldana, 2016). Process coding was useful for describing the procedures or actions associated with a topic (McGarvie, 2022). The author recommended using the key action noted in the text or observation (e.g., talking, teaching, counseling) to organize such data. Descriptive coding referred to the summarization of images and other non-textual data into words (McGarvie, 2022). Structured coding was defined as a technique that was mainly used to organize large data sets and McGarvie (2022) also found them useful with open-ended interviews. Finally, values coding was data that related to the participants’ belief system or interpersonal experiences, which were commonly indicated by descriptions of what the interviewee felt or thought (McGarvie, 2022).

Based on the information required to answer the research questions, I utilized the in vivo, procedure, and values coding methods to analyze data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. In vivo coding was applied to responses that described meaning derived from exact statements. Process coding techniques were used to label data related to the flow in mentoring relationships. Values coding was utilized to tag the data associated with how mentoring aligns with their interpersonal beliefs or culture. For example, participant responses to the interview question “In your own words, how would you describe mentoring,” were analyzed using the in vivo coding method. Applying the in vivo coding method helped to identify the key words that
were unique to federal government contractors and associated with how the participants defined mentoring. Converting the participants’ verbal responses into textual data precluded the need for descriptive codes. Additionally, since all responses to the interview question were relatively succinct data sets and focused on current interpretations of a definition, the use of structured or process coding methods were similarly ruled out for this instance. During this iteration of the transcript review cycle, six preliminary codes were identified from organizing the data based on the literature review and interview artifact: *definition, motivation, self-improvement, perspectives, evaluating reflection, and incentivizing*. Of note, an additional 23 themes emerged from subsequent transcript reviews which provided deeper insight into the variations in mentor-mentee perspectives on organizational mentoring. See Figure 1 for an illustration of the coding methods.

**Table:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Coding Method</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In your own words, how would you describe mentoring?</td>
<td>Identify which key words are associated with defining mentorship</td>
<td>RQ 1</td>
<td>In Vivo</td>
<td>Describe the meaning derived from participants' own words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did you realize a need to improve your skills or performance?</td>
<td>Understand how decisions are made to seek out mentoring solutions</td>
<td>RQ 1</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Explain the factors related to initiating mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe your best mentoring experience, where someone assisted you?</td>
<td>Understand how the mentoring cycle evolves, from the mentee perspective</td>
<td>RQ 1 - 2</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Explain the flow of mentoring relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe your best mentoring experience, where you assisted someone else?</td>
<td>Understand how the mentoring cycle evolves, from the mentor perspective</td>
<td>RQ 1 - 2</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Explain the flow of mentoring relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your viewpoint, what sort of information is important for providing an informed decision on finding a mentor?</td>
<td>Understand the current beliefs held regarding mentoring</td>
<td>RQ 2</td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Describe the participants' interpersonal experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you explain how your organization developed its current mentoring program?</td>
<td>Understand how the organizational mentoring structure is experienced</td>
<td>RQ 2</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Explain the procedures for evaluating mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you make improvements to your mentoring program?</td>
<td>Understand how the organizational mentoring structure is experienced</td>
<td>RQ 2</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Explain the key aspects for designing a mentoring program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** Coding Methods

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study. Depicts the coding processes used for data organization, which provided initial themes. Open codes and subthemes were developed from participants’ own words. Selective coding was used for iterative coding cycles.*
Emerging Themes

To address the research questions, participant interview responses were thematically analyzed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo 12). Themes were uncovered through multiple reading iterations of the transcripts and coding revisions, as recommended by Saldana (2016) for identifying key data codes and their associated quotes. Although dynamic capabilities theory and strategic management literature were used as the foundational lens for this study, analysis of the semi-structured interviews fixated on the participants’ explanations of their experiences with mentorship in their federal government contractor firm.

Designing a New Framework

According to Gehman et al. (2018), a researcher should, then, add a framework to the collected data by considering the overarching structure or processes that can be derived to increase understanding at a theoretical level. Based on the findings from the data, an updated mentorship program framework was developed. The framework prescribes a system for integrating guidance and assistance through talent managers or human resource leaders, assessments from participants and middle managers, as well as internal training resources to enhance organizational development processes. This framework incorporated key insights gained from the literature review with the findings from the semi-structured interviews to prescribe a guidebook for maximizing organizational resources, thus, evolving their mentorship program into a dynamic capability.

Data Interpretation

The constructivist approach to qualitative inquiries requires one to avail themselves to the whims of their participants during the data collection stage and, subsequently, interpretation. Gehman et al. (2018) referred to data interpretation as the process used to develop conclusions
about data, which can promote rich descriptions of the examined phenomenon and aid with
discovery of the underlying key information. Some key roles of the researcher when undertaking
constructivist explorations include the following:

Be cognizant of the existing knowledge, but don’t make participants conform to specific
theory…. The researcher should take a subordinate role and let the participants share their
experiences… The researcher should be receptive and assume the participants know what
they are talking about… Always give voice to the participants (Gehman et al., 2018, p. 291).

During this study, I attempted to follow Gehman et al.’s (2018) advice closely. As the
author, I was mindful of the level of detail provided during the initial participant selection stage.
While providing information about the study protocols, in accordance with institutional review
board standards, I did not expound on the existing literature and theoretical underpinnings unless
specifically asked. During the semi-structured interviews, probing questions were asked to get
participants into prolonged responses. Prolonged explanations were achieved with each
participant, which according to Meyer and Avery (2009), assisted with describing the meanings
of lived experiences. A sample question included: “Can you describe your best mentoring
experience, where someone assisted you?” See Appendix A for qualitative interview questions.
To the fullest extent possible, I became a stringent listener to each participants’ explanations and
resisted the notions to provide confirming facial expressions or verbal interjections.

Reliability and Validation

The significance of a study’s replication ability is tantamount in all forms of research,
which can become apparent through examination the integrated reliability and validation
measures. Morse (2015) identified reliability as the constancy of research to be reproduced
without subjugation to random variation. Validation was described as the degree to which inferences made about a researched phenomenon are accurate and representative of the actual essence (Carlson, 2010). To ensure reliability and validation in qualitative studies, the authors recommended techniques such as a coding systems and inter-coder agreements with additional investigators, member checking, peer reviews, and external audits as forms of checks and balances to verify data collection and analysis processes.

**Coding Systems**

Semi-structured interviews most used coding systems, which included listing all possible codes in a guidebook for comparative analysis by a second investigator (Morse, 2015). The author determined the coding to be reliable if a separate investigation could reasonably produce same definitions or make similar coding decisions. Morse (2015) also found the coding system to be useful for ensuring accurate judgements, provided standardization of the interview artifact had been sustained throughout the data collection. This qualitative inquiry utilized a codebook to track the interpreted participant responses and capture their associated meanings. Although the study included a single investigator, definitions were listed for each code to assist any future studies aimed at replicating the measures utilized to explore how federal government contract employees made meaning of their mentorship experiences. See Appendix D for the codebook.

**Member Checking**

Morse (2015) examined different techniques to verify the accuracy of data collection and found member checking could be achieve with participant reviews, or with different people to determine normal behavior patterns associated with the researched event. Morse’s (2015) goal was to check the stableness of the analysis and ensure the right interpretations were made. Carlson (2010) applied similar member checking to a qualitative study and found increased
trustworthiness of the research. Although useful for reliability measures, Morse (2015) noted some challenges with member checking such as rectifying participant suggested changes and analytic differences in interpretation. Acknowledging the challenges addressed by Morse (2015), the use of member checking was deemed appropriate for this qualitative exploration of federal government contractor experiences. Since the nature of phenomenological studies is to capture the essence of experience through the participants own expressions, especially considering the presence of a single investigator, the opportunity to receive participant feedback an acceptable risk. To that extent, participants were given the opportunity to review the interview findings and provide clarification on any interpretations made. Feedback was incorporated into a final redesigned mentorship framework.

**Internal Review**

The conceptualization and synthesis of data can be influence by bias, which could narrow the ability to generate ideas or detect patterns. Morse (2015) utilized peer review or debriefing techniques, where alternative points of view were provided to assist with testing validity. However, the author noted key issues with soliciting feedback from non-participants who may not be familiar with the study protocols and found that responsibility for the analysis should reside with those who are closest to the data. To that end, the overall mentoring framework was reviewed by three subject matter experts, consisting of program managers and talent developers within the government contractor firm to evaluate and provide feedback (e.g., applicability, differing conceptualizations, ways to implement and evaluate).

**External Review**

The use of external agencies provided another tool for mitigating bias in qualitative studies and Morse (2015) appeared to take a stark position against their usage, nodding to the
perception of reproachable findings dictating a reexamination of the study results. However, as with the close juxtaposition to a dissertation or proposal defense, I viewed the use of an external agency as non-threatening and more of a gate-keeping mechanism for quality assurance and decided to elect subject matter experts from outside the federal government contractor firm to review the new mentorship framework. The mentorship framework, created from the interpreting participant responses, was presented to three subject matter experts who were responsible for developing employees through mentorship programs within their organizations. These experts did not participate in the semi-structured interviews.

The first external reviewer was a 37-year federal government member and leader in the Intelligence Operations Management career field, to include designing and evaluating mentorship programs for civil service organizations in the military industry. The second external reviewer was a Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science and a Joint Intelligence Planner with 6 years of experience as a federal government civil service employee. The third external reviewer was a 30-year federal government member responsible for employee development and advancement programs in their organization.

For the external review, subject matter experts were asked to examine the new mentorship framework and provide insights on appropriateness of the research design, applicability of the framework to industry, and potential ways for implementing the framework within their organizations. Then, the reviewers were asked to provide feedback on how they would conceptualize the components of the framework and ways they would evaluate the framework components. Reviewer feedback was incorporated into a final redesigned mentorship framework and mentee-mentor maturity model. The next chapter presents and discusses the analysis and themes that emerged during the study.
CHAPTER FOUR:
ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Presenting the Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to design a mentorship program framework that aligned better with federal government contractor firms. The study utilized a semi-structured format to engage participants and collect data concerning mentorship program organizational capabilities improvement. The respondents for this study included 10 participants from a government contractor firm in central Florida experienced with organizational capabilities around a mentoring program. Data triangulation and validation techniques were implemented by exploring the firm’s virtual platforms for training and professional development, as well as seeking internal and external reviews from industry subject matter experts.

The underpinning premise of this study was Teece et al.’s (1997) dynamic capabilities theory which defined the integration of competency-building systems as capabilities for the firm. Subsequent authors identified the following parameters that could make a claim for mentoring as a dynamic capability: mentorship strategies have organizational benefits (Montgomery, 2017), sharing knowledge enhances trust and networks (Neely & Leonardi, 2018), and mentorship programs are resource building capabilities (Vlas et al., 2022). Six themes emerged when coding data and conducting thematic analysis defining mentoring, motivation for improvement, navigating mentorships (mentor and mentee perspectives), professional development reflections, and improving mentorship programs.
A report on the interpretations is addressed throughout the chapter, with supporting evidence. Chapter tables include subthemes that emerged from coding, the number of participant sources that addressed each subtheme, and the total number of references to support each emergent theme. Key respondent quotes are included to support the subthemes. To maintain confidentiality, participants were anonymized through the following unique identifiers: A3, A5, B1, B4, B6, C1, C4, D2, D3, and E6.

**Theme 1: Defining Mentoring**

The strategic management literature provided an initial operationalization of organizational mentoring as the total resource package available to transfer knowledge for the purpose of achieving development initiatives (Alleman & Clark, 2000, p. 63). Four subthemes emerged for defining mentorship: guidance, structure, improvement, and roles. Based on the participant responses, hierarchy and responsibilities appear to play key roles in mentorship. This was noted in the high frequency of guidance and roles appearing in the interview transcripts.

**Table 1. Summary of Definition Subthemes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
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<td>Roles</td>
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<td>Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study.

**Guidance.** The guidance subtheme referred to mentorship as a combination of example setting and providing guidance for long-term career success. Participant D3 stated:

“Well, I look at (mentorship) in the traditional sense is that it's a person that can guide or influence, particularly in a career or job on how to be successful in it or perform at a level that you aim to achieve or things you aim to accomplish.”
Participant A5 also noted:

“Mentorship is providing that example, not only through your verbal, but also through your actions that help to propel those around you, to greater levels of understanding enlightenment and success.”

*Structure.* Responses for the structure subtheme revealed federal government contractors were more receptive to mentorship when the format was flexible (e.g., not rigid). Participant E6 explained:

“Mentoring is more career focused, helping you with what you want to do with your life. And maybe not so rigid. It's just, as you are both (mentor-mentee) being able to do and discuss different things.”

*Improvement.* The improvement subtheme identified mentorship as the means for improving skills by providing different perspectives on chosen career paths. Participant B4 stated:

“Well to me, mentorship refers to growth, personal development and thought diversity. Those are the first three key words that come to mind. So that I could take on a different perspective, looking at my own self. Then, I could possibly take some of those key points to improve upon myself.”

*Roles.* The roles subtheme generated mixed responses. Mentorship was defined as a system of distinct roles and actions to challenge and develop a mentee. Although most participants described the roles and responsibilities associated with mentorship, there were detailed examples what separates mentors from coaches. Participant B6 provided the following description:
“It (mentorship) requires a person willing to mentor you, help you, challenge you, and develop you. And it requires the other person to be willing to learn, accept feedback, and grow and develop.”

Participant C1 stated:

“Like I'm guessing, most mentors are not directly over their mentees. But the mentee has questions and needs some advice from someone who has experience in this situation. But (the mentor) is removed from that direct situation.”

Of note, Participant C1 also provided a detailed example of what a mentor is not:

“But I guess in my head, the distinction I made is, a lot of times a coach is directly affected by it (mentee success). A coach's success based on the team success or that person's success or whatever. A mentor is not that. At least in my mind. There may be situations where that's not the case, but generally I think a mentor is not directly tied to a mentee's success.”

Overall, the general tone picked up during the interview process indicated government contractors would be averse to a formal mentorship program. However, the respondents were keen on a defined structure and held clear depictions of what mentor-mentee actions entailed. Their definitions were in line with Guthrie and Jones’ (2017) operationalization of formal and informal mentorship programs, which indicated the participants were aware that different forms of mentoring existed. Further exploration during the semi-structured interviews provided additional insights into how the participants realized a need for improvement and engaged with their mentors (e.g., setting personal and professional development tasks to accomplish).
Theme 2: Motivation for Improvement

Common motivations for seeking mentor or participating in mentorship programs included legacy building (Hernandez et al., 2018), leveraging skills for integration into other business processes (Ryu et al., 2022), and increasing the value of collaborative learning (Govender & Adegbite, 2022). Five subthemes emerged for improvement motivation:

observation, interest, inadequacy, position, and resources.

Table 2. Summary of Motivation Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Observation</td>
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<td>Inadequacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study.

Observation. The observation subtheme produced three key insights including willingness to improve, developing connections, and hinderances in the organization. Interview responses uncovered that government contracting firm members were more willing to improve processes after a period of reflection and internalization gained from example cases. Participant B4 explained:

“So, I stumbled upon someone who could really offer me his level of thinking and his level of guidance. /.../ Then I wanted to actually advance myself and advance my career.

I wanted to take on more responsibilities and take on an innovative thinker role.”

Organizational members developed strong connections to their professional networks, which affect the desire to improve. This desire to improved occurred after observing other high performers in the firm. Participant A3 provided the following amplification:
“I think what has helped me is listening to others and watching what other people are doing and then applying those things that I considered. Like, they may not even know that I'm just by listening to something that they're going through or whatever. I just love to listen. /.../ On the professional level, just learning from the program manager and going through all these different scenarios or dealing with different people.”

Regarding organizational hinderance towards mentorship programs, support and reactions from organizational leadership emerged as a limiting factor to seeking improvement. Participant E6 noted:

“I had a squad commander, a ground guy. I went in to ask him a question and he told me, if you don't know and I have to tell you how to do this, I don't need you here to do the job. /.../ So, I never asked him another question. From that mentorship, I kind of just started doing it internally. /.../ I would say I've never signed up for the formal program and, other than the good Colonel, I never had anybody that I routinely went to and discussed things with.”

Interests. The interest subtheme revealed contractor firm concerns are different at each hierarchical level, which include building professional identity of junior members, professional hobbies of middle managers (e.g., building wealth, business development, entrepreneurship), and improving leadership skills for senior level leaders (e.g., proficiency versus efficiency).

Addressing these organizational differences would require unique topics and focus areas.

Participant B6, a junior employee stated:

“The person that I sat with explained things, Barnie style, in a pretty short amount of time. I was very, very eager to learn the job and grateful for the mentorship that he provided me.”
Participant A3, a middle manager, explained “Well, one thing that jumps to me recently. In the last couple of years, I've been learning about the stock market.”

Participant E6, a senior level leader, shared:

“When I got out the army, everything was focused towards the project management professional program. I had to study PMP and get a PMP certification. So, I did that. Nobody ever said, hey, you need to get PMP certified if you want to continue moving down this field. It's just something I did.”

Inadequacy. The inadequacy subtheme highlighted a tendency to focus on the internal weakness resident in the process, seeking out tools and methods to address such deficiencies. Of note, federal government contractor firms in high competitive landscapes were typically averse to asking for help, and require different approaches at each level. Participant E6 said:

“I've never been a, hey, I need some help. Can you help me with this? Although, I highly encourage asking people for help. I just never do.”

Participant A5 also indicated:

“Then of course, I anticipated that I would have that tasking at some point, and I wanted to be able to meet their challenge. So, he (his mentor) was available and there's no other opportunity other than to formally say, hey, I don't know how to do this. But obviously not close enough for me to tell him what I was really doing (seeking help).”

Position. The assignment to a new position emerged as a subtheme with high frequency and a key reason government contractor firms sought mentorship. Participant responses indicated new organizational members should be linked with peers for development and learning responsibilities associated with being appointed to a new position. Participant B6 stated:
“My contracting experience, in my current job, I came into a position that I didn’t know anything about. /.../ It (mentoring relationship) was a daily answering questions and helping me through.”

Participant C4 stated: “When I first got into a position that I really didn’t have a clue what was going on.”

**Resources.** Access to organizational resources was the final subtheme that emerged as participants explained their motivations for seeking mentorship. Two key insights were uncovered, which included bridging professional network gaps and the gravitation toward tacit knowledge in organizations. To that extent, integrating org resources can bridge gaps between internal networks. Contractor firms naturally seek out tacit knowledge and key high performers as a resource for improving processes (e.g., utilization as direct examples or usefulness for generating ideas). Participant B4 detailed:

“I found out that my company had a mentorship program. So, I used their online tool, a very, very intuitive and user friendly (tool). I enrolled myself as a mentee /.../ I stumbled upon someone who could really offer me his level of thinking and his level of guidance. He was actually well outside of my network at the time, because I was doing reporting type work and he was actually a cyber guy.”

Participant A3 responded:

“I've been lucky enough to where this whole time that I've been a contractor, I've always had awesome people around me. So, for me, people have always been that key factor that has kept me in doing what I do.”

Participant C4 stated: “I picked certain people out once I knew the work area and knew the people.”
Overall, the interview responses to understanding how federal government contractor firms were motivate reenforced the findings to Neely and Leonardi’s (2018) study which examined the relevance of organizational knowledge to the firm. In this case, the pursuit of organizational knowledge encompassed those processes codified in standard procedures, as well as the inherent knowledge found in experienced members. More interestingly, this study showed how government contractor firms were comfortable with observing others and applying self-improvement remedies. This tendency functions counter to a formalized mentorship program and created pockets of knowledge, which can degrade continuity of business processes if not shared through mentorship or other knowledge management processes.

Theme 3: Mentee Perspectives

Understanding organizations actualized mentoring programs shed insights into the flow of mentoring programs in federal government contractor firms and which aspects were deemed more important. Mentorship programs were classified by their basic elements (e.g., planning, pairing, navigating, and assessments), which provided initial codes (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). Participants also responded on the common mentoring relationships that fit this unique segment such as apprenticeships, role modeling, and group mentorships (Weinberg, 2019). Nine subthemes emerged: pairing, planning, frequency, evaluation, laddering, model, reframing, communication, and accountability.

Table 3. Summary of Mentee Perspectives Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<td>Frequency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reframing</td>
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Table 3 (Continued)

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<td></td>
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</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study.

Pairing. The pairing subtheme referred to deciding to initiate a relationship with the mentor (Hale & Phillips, 2019). This interview study discovered a preference for informal techniques within government contractor firms. Programs should allow participants to seek genuine connections and develop trust in their mentors. This can be influenced by prior knowledge, tenure, and demonstrated skill. Participant C1 asserted:

“I asked a couple of people who I would consider in that realm, mentors. /…/ I think the plus to this is I got to pick who I wanted to ask questions to. Who I thought would be good. Who I thought would be receptive to helping me. /…/ In working on the same stuff originally, we built that trust. Then, we had other conversations off of that. /…/ I trust that they're going to tell me what's good for me.”

Participant C4 detailed:

“I like people that are blunt honest, and I don't like people that just talk around things. /…/ A lot of times, that's when I get the colorful language and the personalities. I think that's where I am attracted more to people that are just blunt, honest and don't care what people think. They just say, this is a fact. /…/ That's somebody I could trust.”

Planning. The planning subtheme included setting goals or objectives for the mentoring period (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). The study participants offered a different perspective on the planning by focusing on the associated tasks that provided the most benefit to identifying what needs to happen and breaking those goals down into their achievable parts. Participant B6 explained:
“There were certain tasks that needed to be done. The goals were just to be able to do the daily requirements. But then, it also was just to be able to answer questions, as they come in, that are just ad hoc in nature.”

Participant B4 provided strengthening details:

“So, the tool actually allowed me to put together a summary about myself, where I want to be, say five years down the road. We started with that. I talked about the big picture where I want to be, what I want to do. Then we started drilling down on what kind of job I want, what kind of leadership position I was looking for or what skills I want to develop.”

Model. The model subtheme applied to the nature of the mentoring relationship and the mentor-mentee fit (Weinberg, 2019). The strategic management literature typically classified these transitions according to how mentors preferred to receive guidance (e.g., directive, or supportive in nature) (Weinberg, 2019). Analysis of the interview responses indicates government contractors responded better when mentors made suggestions and identified available options. In light of this, programs should provide training on how to receive guidance early in the process. Participant C1 said:

“One mentor stands out because of the way he handled whether I should stay or go and laid out the situation. He thought it was better and I'd be good in that new role. He was trying to push me to go Government, despite the fact that it meant me leaving his team. He still wanted me to go up. When I went to him initially with this position, he was like don't take it. But you told me to go. Yeah, I know I was telling you to go. But don't. I don't like how it sounds. Don't take it. That stands out to me because it kind of showed me that he really was looking out for me.”
Frequency. The frequency subtheme held similarities to the strategic management literature in that informal mentoring relationships generally afforded more sessions, due to the mentor-mentee fit (Lanzi et al., 2019). Relying on the interview study responses, mentoring programs should focus on the formal sessions and activities (e.g., monthly, or bi-weekly meetings) while encouraging continuous informal communications. Participant B4 explicated:

“We bonded quite well, just through regular communications like once a week, twice a week. Things like that. So, it wasn't a problem at all as far as communicating and it's not like every day, I would call him. We set up a weekly meeting once a week, maybe twice a week. That was our routine.”

Participant C4 detailed a similar experience:

“I think we'd come together at certain times. /.../ If we wouldn't have a scheduled date, he'd always ask me how you doing? Because we saw each other a lot every day. So, if it wasn't a schedule (meeting), it was just usually how you're doing or what you got questions on.”

Evaluation. The evaluation aspect of mentoring referred to the incorporating metrics for program improvement (Cataldi et al., 2021). Evaluation of the mentorship goals was not a key concern among mentees in the government contracting firm. Although, frustration with not receiving mentor feedback was identified as an issue with some of their experiences. Assessments were primarily done through observation of changes in performance or by reflective thinking activities. Participant A3 informed: “So, I have seen how my questions have differed because now (investments) sounds very interesting too.”

Laddering. The laddering subtheme focused on the transition of how mentors and mentees interacted over time. Laddering referred to the series of activities, meetings, and events
that encompassed the development initiatives (Hale & Phillips, 2019). Insights from the participant responses indicated that mentoring programs should begin with more focus on providing direction and basic concepts, then transition to advanced learning, investigating, and contributing to new projects. Participant C1 stated:

“It's different now because I don't work for him. I approach it differently and he approached it differently because we don't talk about work. We talk about work as far as, what might be happening for me and opportunities I have.”

Participant A3 explained:

“So, in the beginning it was mainly like purchasing and selling stocks. We were (communicating) this is a perfect opportunity to buy more (stocks). Eventually, we would kind of go back and forth, like, hey, I've found this stock, what do you think about this? And we kind of bounce stuff off each other.”

Reframing. The reframing subtheme explained how government contractor firms valued mentorship programs. The study and the strategic management literature were in agreeance with the use reflection for identifying how to improve processes (Hale & Phillips, 2019). Key outcomes that emerged for programs in government contracting firms included continuing to pursue careers, and willingness to become mentors. Participant A3 explained:

“This is definitely something that I would want to continue to pursue in my life and make it a part of it. It's to the point to where now, I tell my kids about the stock market. I tell younger folks that I talked to about the stock market and how its influence or affected my life and has made me change the way that I view things and how I wish I would've done it a lot sooner.”
Communication. The communication subtheme highlighted the popular channels government contractor mentees selected for their mentorship sessions or meetings. Participant responses focused on the use of the firm’s virtual resources, which drew similarities to the literature about enhancing networks and the firm’s unique position to facilitate such efforts (Carter et al., 2020). Considering these respondent and literary insights, strengthening communication in mentorship programs requires integrating all the firm’s virtual resources and networks. Participant B4 stated:

“I never actually got to meet him in person. However, I spoke to him, via phone. I communicate with him via email. Back then, it wasn’t really too awkward because we still had video chats and we communicate through emails.”

Accountability. The accountability subtheme described how to perform checks and balances for ensuring objectives were being met (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017). Accountability for utilizing the tools and attaining goals emerged as a subtheme with the lowest recorded number of mentions throughout the interview study. Notwithstanding the reported lack of emphasis on accountability measures, goal achievement should be tracked by mentors and middle managers. Participant B6 detailed how such tracking worked to their benefit:

“We had a daily tracker that was just like a running notes of tasks that were done every day. That was instrumental in keeping both of us honest on the daily activities and stuff like that.”

Generally, the natural dialogue of each participant traversed through the key aspects of mentorship programs identified in the strategic management literature (e.g., mentoring elements and models). However, this study uncovered a common tendency for mentor-mentee pairs in government contractor firms to evolve into mutual sharing of advice through a continuous
mentoring relationship. Whereas the literature typically described the mentoring relationships as having a distinct ending (Hale & Phillips, 2019).

Other common points of conflict in the interview responses were the need for freedom in selecting participants, navigating the relationship, and establishing measures to uphold accountability which translated to the unanswered desire for feedback. While most participants addressed their preference for informal mentoring sessions and expressed appreciation for the quality and relevance of guidance received, each developmental group of the firm mentioned issues with tracking progress. This cause of frustration illuminated a key issue with informal mentorship, which is an area specifically fitted to formal mentorship program development.

**Theme 4: Mentor Perspectives**

Understanding the mentors’ experiences provided similar insights on what federal government contractor firms considered important aspects of mentorship programs. However, there were differences in the seven subthemes that emerged: pairing, model, laddering, evaluation, reframing, frequency, and communication. Surprisingly, planning and accountability did not emerge as subthemes in the mentors’ responses.

**Table 4. Summary of Mentor Perspectives Subthemes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<td>Model</td>
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<td>Laddering</td>
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<td>Accountability</td>
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*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study.*
Pairing. While the pairing subtheme held similar levels of importance for mentors and mentees in the firm, there were key differences in the recalled experiences for pairing. Mentors focused on the tangible characteristics for relationship matching (e.g., work centers and filial ties), whereas mentees were concerned with experience levels and ability to build trust. When remembering desirability to impart knowledge on others, Participant A3 stated:

“I've talked to my two sons. Then I talked to my neighbor, my neighbor's son who's like 18. /.../ there's people that I've talked to about buying different stocks and that had taken that advice and bought a couple shares. /.../ I was hoping that they can feel my passion for investing and I hoped that they would've grasped that.”

Model. The importance of mentoring models was an aspect of program development where both groups of respondents found agreement. The mentor sample of the study most frequently commented on the need for reducing confusion. Their responses drew similarities to characteristics described in the strategic management literature about the group model’s usage to address developmental gaps among levels of the firm (Carter et al., 2020), as well as the nurturing model of removing obstacles (Lanzi et al, 2019). To this extent, mentors noted program capability is enhanced when process ambiguity is reduced; tools are exercised; and mentees are vested in decision-making. E6 described methods implementing when developing their firm’s program:

“I have people from every division in each session. /.../ I felt like I needed to first get them together and do some training to kind of level the playing field. After the sessions we go to a happy hour, get together after to get to know each other and talk. I told them, you may think you have nothing to talk about, but at least you have the hour-long class
we had, you can discuss that. */...*/ We have a training manual and reading list. Go take this stuff and study it and put it in practice. Put in your toolkit and go apply it.”

Participant C1 noted their approach to interacting with mentees:

“I think when I present stuff, I present it as food for thought. I know what they're afraid of and I try to make them okay with that. I know what's confusing them. I try to take that away and just make them feel like, hey, you're not by yourself. */...*/ This is not unusual, and you may want to consider B, C and D to save yourself some pain.”

Laddering. The laddering subtheme provided another aspect where mentors and mentees of the firm felt similar importance, noted through high levels of responses. Yet, they held differing opinions on the focus of progressing through mentoring programs. Mentees resonated on the practical characteristics of demonstrating tasks. However, mentor responses keyed in on the intangible characteristics of relationship building and program enhancement. With this difference, knowledgeable members liked sharing experiences and motivating others to seek alternatives for solving challenges. Participant D3 noted:

“I always share what I always use. */...*/ any time I was approached with an opportunity to provide some type of guidance or influencing somebody in some kind of positive way, towards what they wanted to achieve, I would do that.”

Participant C1 further explained their reasoning for encouraging mentees:

“You've (as the mentor) been through this before. You already know where they're going, what's coming, what's confusing them, what's baffling them. */...*/ So, I'm more apt to talk and give my opinion on what they're doing because they're going to listen. It's not a forced situation. */...*/ They (mentees) want to run something by you or start telling the story. Then, all of a sudden, you see an opportunity.”
**Evaluation.** While evaluating goal attainment wasn’t a particularly concerning area for mentees, mentors held a slightly higher level of importance. This also led to the surprising realization that accountability for ensuring goals were being achieved, resulting in such low mentioning throughout the interviews. Mentors did express programs should track perceptions about changes in capabilities, as well as overall relevancy of events, activities, and mentor-mentee fit. However, they seemingly absolved themselves from the responsibility of acting when objectives weren’t met. Participant D3 responded:

“*Basically, I would see the progress towards what we talked about based on the results that come later on or immediately, depending on what it is that we went over. /…/ if it’s a topic or if it’s something that we talked about and something that can be tracked, then you’ll see the results over time, whether good or bad.*”

**Communication.** The communication aspect of mentoring programs held different focuses between mentors and mentees of the firm. Mentees were more concerned with the platforms used for interacting. Whereas mentors of the organization were drawn to the importance of the relational characteristics. For example, mentors felt programs functioned better when there is mutual listening and feedback. Participant A5 offered the following anecdotal suggestion:

“*But allow yourself to listen before you pass judgment or respond to a situation, allow people to do some personal reflection of their feelings and their relationship toward you.*”

**Frequency.** The frequency in mentoring sessions and meetings were seldom mentioned in mentor and mentee responses. However, both groups agreed that a combined approach of
formal and informal occurrences was essential, and programs require a mixture to enhance capability. Participant E6 described a typical program flow:

“I do the monthly leader training and quarterly employee meetings. /.../ Then, I meet with the division leads to do mentorship and coaching and both together.”

Reframing. The reframing subtheme explained how value was derived from the overall experience. Mentors and mentees agreed that organizations held little influence on how participants internalized this aspect of the program. The mentor sample merely found that achieving outcomes are related to finding value and fulfillment in the program. Participant C4 noted: “So that (realizing goals) satisfies me, and I'll still talk to him (the mentee) once in a while. I'll see how his family's going and stuff, but it's not a continuous appointment or anything like that.”

Overall, the differences between mentor-mentee perspectives on pairing, laddering, evaluation, and communication were unsettled on whether tangible or intangible qualities were more important. However, these differences appeared to be minor since both groups found agreement in the general categories for mentoring program aspects and with most of the strategic management literature. A surprising find on the lack of addressing the responsibilities for holding groups accountable were not aligned with the distinct roles identified in defining mentoring. Especially when both groups recognized the importance of feedback and satisfaction drawn from seeing mentees succeed and develop.

**Theme 5: Mentorship Program Reflections**

| Table 5. Summary of Mentorship Reflections Subthemes |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| **Subtheme** | **Participants** | **Frequency** |
| **Value** | 6 | 20 |
| **Structure** | 8 | 17 |
| Experience | 4 | 12 |
Table 5 (Continued)

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</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study.

Finding value in the overall mentoring experience was identified as a key emphasis for mentees realizing subsequent value in the firm, their careers, and desiring to become mentors themselves (Hale & Phillips, 2019). The reflections of interview participants were designed to collect generalized perceptions on the important aspects tips to provide someone seeking a mentorship program. Six subthemes emerged: structure, value, experience, relevance, preparation, and characteristics.

Structure. The structure subtheme was most frequently mentioned, and participants felt programs that focused on providing adequate events and the right resources would increase participation. Throughout their reflections, participants addressed the importance of having a formalized process that emphasized finding the right knowledge within the firm and scheduling enough mentorship related events to gain awareness and sustain interest. Participant C4 shared prevailing thoughts amongst their current firm:

“Right now, in the environment we have, it's just come to work and do what you do. There's not a lot of social gatherings. /.../ If it was more encouraged to come together and get to know each other better, I think that would be a better opportunity to be more open and have mentors.”

Participant B1 added:

“I think it would be fantastic if we were able to develop something more along the lines of peer-to-peer mentoring. /.../ I think that's one thing that we kind of informally do, but there's no formal peer mentoring.”
Value. As it pertained to reflection on mentoring, value was most notably used to describe the associated costs and expected return on engaging in a mentoring program. Interview participants felt those seeking a mentoring program should expect mutual reverence for the time resource and a requisite level of contribution. These expectations included being supplied with useful knowledge, as well as showing and being showed respect. Participant C1 provided the following explanation: “I mean, it's two-way street. Everybody feel like their time and what they have to say is being respected. Their concerns are being respected, then it'll work.”

Experience. The experience subtheme acknowledged the pockets of knowledge prominent in the firm and the need to maximize integration of that knowledge into organizational processes (Shuen et al., 2014). This insight echoed throughout participants responses and recommendations to find the extant knowledge within organizations. For example, firms have hidden knowledge about performing tasks that should be codified into processes. Participant B6 stated:

“That knowledge will be lost if we don’t get that information and pass it on to people younger than us. It's important for us not to keep that good information to ourselves and get it out to everybody else.”

Participant A3 acknowledged:

“Having that one person that can answer questions who could be there for you, who can kind of guide you so that your path going forward is a lot less uproot than what it would be for you, if you were trying to do everything on your own.”

Relevance. This subtheme offered advisement for program developers to identify the key proposition that mentorship programs offer its participants. This advice drew on the importance
of having a strategy and being to access the messaging processes available to the firm (Griffeth et al., 2021). To this point, programs should identify the unique quality it can offer (e.g., target professions, experience, and how they are applicable). Participant B1 addressed the following benefit:

“So, for me having that other person there as a peer, as a division lead, going through these things at the same time, made a huge difference. That really helped me out because I wasn't the only one that was learning things for the first time.”

Participant A5 further detailed:

“Well, first I would say, if he's seeking a mentor, make sure that the person that you're seeking out is actually someone that can be helpful to you. They have to be qualified to do that.”

Preparation. The preparation subtheme reflections highlighted the importance for organizational members to understand the reciprocal equity associated with seeking mentorship. More directly, there were responsibilities afforded to the firm and the participants for things to operate smoothly. Having an idea of what needs to be improved and available resources was fundamental to program development. Participant D2 provided the following tip for deciding whether to enter a program: “I think the important piece of information is to have an idea of where you want to go, what you want to do.”

Participant B4 added the following prerequisites that should be considered:

“Know what you're looking for. Know where to find, your mentor and then know what tools are available like myself. I mean, I don't know enough about available tools yet, so I'm guilty myself.”
Characteristics. Finally, the characteristics subtheme was akin to the recognition of mentor-mentee fit and ensuring mentorship programs established a plan for monitoring this aspect (Weinberg, 2019). One key observation that repeated itself in the interview was the notion that organizational members must be active and available to networks within the firm. Being an active member in the firm was likened to willingness and identified as a requirement for enhancing professional networks. Participant B6 stated: “I certainly wouldn't be where I am today, if I didn't want to learn from the experience of other people.”

Mentorship Program Framework

Background and Context

The purpose of this restructured mentorship program framework was to develop and evaluate a new process for contractor firms, which was guided by the primary research questions. This mentorship framework design addresses program development gaps through insights that emerged from observation of a mentorship phenomenon, examination of the strategic management literature, and a qualitative interview study which sought to uncover best practices for organizational development. For example, prescribing better aligned basal elements of mentorship programs that addresses key government contractor firm responsibilities and enhances capabilities (Bell & Treleaven, 2011); identifying an applicable resource package for developing contractor firms (Alleman & Clark, 2000); and recognizing which mentoring behaviors are more compatible for organizations within this market segment (Weinberg, 2019).

The framework is important to key leaders and managers who are responsible for developing their organization’s capabilities through mentoring because it promotes maximizing the utilization of resources and gaining efficiencies through integrating organizational processes. It also pushed the boundaries of mentorship program development in prior strategic management
literature by expanding the onus for program design to encompass the larger stakeholder pool (Chatterjee, 2017); integrating a focus on strategic objectives and holistic organizational processes (Montgomery, 2017); and conceptualizing a novel approach more aligned with firms that operate in environments with highly competitive landscapes (Morse, 2015).

A key problem of practice identified, during the present study, was the disjointed approach to mentorship program development. This condition likely stemmed from an idea that since mentoring relationships worked better when formed naturally, focus should primarily be on creating environments that encouraged such relationships without any direct involvement from the firm. Although that type of approach requires minimal investment from the firm, it doesn’t account for variances in experience levels; leveraging complementary firm resources; adequate messaging; nor capitalizing on opportunities to achieve strategic goals. Other likely roadblocks included but were not limited to shortage of the time resource; inability to increase compensation; and general lack of organizational interest. However, developing a mentoring strategy and including key stakeholders (e.g., key staffers, leaders, and early adopters) could probably mitigate the bulk of these issues.

This framework is limited by factors such as ability to implement accountability measures; organizations lacking a clearly defined mission or objectives; resident experience within the firm; ability to gain stakeholder buy-in. A critical component to managing a program is the ability to measure and track progress. This requires firms to implement a new process or integrate mentorship program accountability measures into other existing processes for tracking goal achievement. Next, organizations that function without a clear mission or objectives will likely find themselves in a reactionary position and would need to become more proactive in order to implement a sustainable mentoring program. Resident experience levels can also impact
the sustainability of program development due to the potential high costs of acquiring external solutions. Leaders would need to consider the preliminary investment associated with building organizational knowledge for mentoring program development (Chatterjee, 2017). Finally, communication within the firm is vital to implementing a development program (Salvato & Vassolo, 2017). Organizations that lack strategic messaging processes, or adequate protocols for disseminating information, would need to remedy these issues prior to instituting a mentorship program.

Figure 2. Mentorship Program Pre-Launch
*Information provided by the student for the purposes of this study. Depicts a total resource package view for mentorship program planning and gaining leadership buy-in. Pre-launch activities encompass talent management, finance, communications, and operations systems of the firm.
Decision to Invest

The sustainability of any development program relies on a clear vision of what needs to be achieved, leadership support, and outcomes that enhance organizational capabilities (Wolfson & Mathieu, 2021). Some of the overarching concerns noted through discussions with managers of government contractor firms were identified as the ability to develop effective networks for knowledge management and contract performance, maintaining incumbent contract awards through strong processes, and posturing the organization to adapt and secure new government contract work through existing capabilities refinement. Achieving these end-states, with the assistance of a mentorship program, requires an overarching formalized framework that can be monitored and adjusted to meet objectives.

Figure 2 encompasses critical preparational factors of mentorship program development, which is also an area the strategic management literature does not cover in detail regarding organizational responsibilities. The proposed mentoring program pre-launch approaches development in some novel ways to federal government contractors, as well as the academic literature. Based on evidence from the field, program design has been largely informal, with focus on compensation (e.g., how to pay for participation) and succession (e.g., building depth and knowledge continuity). This was derived from trends in the analyzed themes which revealed leadership concerns with allocating time; the lack in messaging; and a general perception that formal mentorship programs were unnecessarily forced. Additionally, it would be understandably negligible to request federal government contract firms to fund purely informal professional development initiatives with little to no firm-level oversight. By integrating strategic goals into the design, this present approach to mentorship program development
addresses the deeper challenge of what the organization needs to achieve, and how to best integrate resident knowledge within the firm to collaboratively enhance organizational processes.

From a literary perspective, recent strategic management studies have ventured subsidiary paths to investigating ways to implement organizational learning such as gender-based sponsorship in civil service firms (Alston, 2021); reverse mentoring in software companies (Garg et al., 2021); and Ryu et al.’s (2022) study on organizational development in the manufacturing industry constituting a few examples. However, the respective mentorship approaches discussed in those studies did not address implementing complimentary organizational processes, neither did the approaches fully align with federal government contractor firms. The proposed mentorship framework design discussed in this chapter addresses these gaps.

**Strategy**

The mentorship program framework begins with establishing goals or objectives and a vision for how employees will fit into the overall vision for the firm (Montgomery, 2017). This could include items such as key skills employees will need to acquire and develop; desired culture shifts; or posture for key challenges that the organization anticipates encountering. A supplemental mentorship program strategy would be developed to support the overarching goals and objectives of the firm. The emphasis during this initial phase is on key leaders’ deliverables.

**Planning and Infrastructure**

The next phase includes an inventory of the total resource package necessary and available for implementation (Alleman & Clark, 2000). Leaders should identify which existing or non-existent processes would be relevant to actualize the strategy and develop an initial plan. Key leaders, their staff members, and early adopters should outline how organizational processes
can be integrated into the plan. Next, a cost benefit analysis should be performed to identify time and other resource requirements, available locations and virtual platforms, as well as acceptable compensation or allowances resulting in developing protocols for managing the mentorship program (e.g., training, accountability, logistics, etc.). This phase relies on key staffers such as operations managers, talent and human resource managers, financial officers, supply chain managers, and early adopters to combine knowledge of current organizational policies with potential ways and means to accomplish the mentorship program development.

**Messaging**

Understanding communication flows (e.g., how the message will be received, as well as the messenger) is important to consider when advertising a new program and building interest within government contractor firms (Salvato & Vassolo, 2017). This form of messaging extends beyond gauging casual interest levels in mentorship to convey value, share the strategic vision, highlight key parameters of the program, and connect with work centers across the firm. Varied modes of communication should be engaged (e.g., weekly meetings, newsletters, electronic flyers, casual conversations, etc…) and organizational members should be encouraged and invited to participate. The focus during this phase targets middle managers and potential mentors-mentees.

**Connect and Prepare**

Gaining participation in a mentorship program should not be taken lightly, nor should an environment of inclusivity be assumed (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017). This is likely due to the nature of mentoring relationships which involve certain vulnerabilities associated with building trust, acknowledging inadequacies and, most importantly, asking others for help. Additionally, bringing employees within government contractor firms together can be challenging for other
reasons like wide-ranging mission requirements, location availability and restrictions, or geographical barriers. Based on key observations of the study, most respondents were open about personal hobbies. However, they preferred to observe and implement, or take the self-development approach regarding improving their skillsets. As a result, leaders responsible for managing their firm’s capabilities through mentoring programs should employ a combination of physical and virtual recruitment methods to draw participants beyond the naturally extroverted.

Each participation category (e.g., mentors, mentees, and middle managers) should be equipped with baseline knowledge about organizational programs and resources, as well as training aids pertinent to general mentorship constructs. Awareness of internal and external programs like tuition assistance, professional and technical certification, virtual training, and other resources could be beneficial for plan development. Some key topics for general mentorship constructs include but are not limited to understanding common mentorship models, communicating, and providing constructive feedback. Study observations revealed the practice of developing and tracking goals were frequently assumed, but not actualized. Lastly, the creation of profiles for each participant (e.g., career experience, interests, goals, etc…) could assist with the subsequent activities of launching the mentorship program and pairing mentors-mentees. The emphasis of this phase includes key leaders, training developers, talent managers, middle managers, and mentorship program participants.

**Launching the Program**

The mentorship program framework depicted in Figure 3 incorporates best practices and insights on how to best implement a development program aligned to federal government contractor firms. Key factors identified through this qualitative study include the overarching strategy, which is created and refined during pre-launch; the roles and expectations of mentors
and mentees; integrating organizational processes to match participants; developing short and long-term achievable goals; optimizing meeting frequencies and potential activities to take full advantage of mentoring sessions; assessing improvement plans and mentorship program effectiveness; and providing feedback on overarching strategy achievement progress.

**Figure 3. Mentorship Program Framework**

*Information provided by the student for the purposes of this study. Depicts a new framework for federal government contractors that integrates thematic analysis interpretation. Framework begins with understanding responsibilities and continues through matching and navigating the program.*

**Mentor-mentee Roles**

During the interview study, mentors and mentees, alike, delineated participant roles for a mentorship program, to include behavioral characteristics and actions each member for responsible to contribute. This included the appointment of a mentorship program director to provide oversight functions. Having clear, distinctive responsibilities for mentors and mentees is an area where the interview study and the literature review found consistency. Whether modeling the optimal behaviors for emulation (Weinberg, 2019), removing barriers to task accomplishment in the work environment (Lanzi et al., 2019), or recommending mentees for
increased roles (Randel et al., 2021) mentors and mentees were expected to interact in a meaningful capacity. Additional interpersonal obligations included willingness to participate, providing mutual respect, and having a focus area for improvement. Activities to assist with meeting these obligations include complimentary processes like assessing the organization (e.g., evaluations and development plans), administrative policies such as codes of conduct, and information management processes for sharing inferred and organizational knowledge.

Motivation for seeking the knowledge of more experienced team members, as well as the desire to improve organizational processes were important factors that arose from interview participants’ responses. These factors were internal in nature but relied on interactions between organizational members. For example, the participants identified observing high performers, exploring professional interests, or improving deficiencies as key motivators to enroll in a mentorship program. Having an initial plan was seldom mentioned by participants during their initial recollection of mentorship experiences. However, this key step was echoed by nearly all participants during their general reflections as integral advice to provide to someone else seeking a mentor. To address this concern from a capabilities-based perspective, the integration an organizational assessment (e.g., performance evaluations and projections) mechanism could be utilized to develop the initial goals for participants to build upon during a mentorship program experience.

Matching Participants

While the interview study and the strategic management literature came to an agreement on ranging levels of organizational assistance with mentoring pairs, most respondents noted a deeper connection with choosing their own mentors (Carter et al., 2020). The literature also warned of the initial awkwardness of asking for professional help, in which formal mentoring
programs were identified as uniquely effective at mitigating (Carter et al., 2020). Surprisingly, responses showed government contractor firms appeared to seldom have such issues due to a commonly described practice of observing the high performers and gravitating towards perceived success. However, from an organizational perspective, purely natural and informal connections can take longer to develop and foster the disjointed pockets of tacit knowledge within the firm. Implementing a formal mentorship program can incorporate flexibility in the establishment of mentoring relationships and still provide structure that ties into organizational processes for capturing knowledge to ensure continuity.

This proposed framework integrates talent profiles for participants to build a comprehensive summary of experience levels, mentor specialties, and mentee areas of interests and goals. Providing these snapshots for potential mentors and mentees would assist with conducting mentorship engagements. Linking in the interview responses along with the literature, which classified enhanced employee connections as a capability, mentees could still be afforded the opportunity to find their mentor (Salvato & Vassolo, 2017). However, with this framework, mentees who encountered obstacles with finding a mentor could seek assistance from the program developer to facilitate a match. Events associated with matching include firm-level socials around mentorship, formal communication processes, virtual platforms and internal databases, and informal networks of early adopters. Activities include developing mentor-mentee talent profiles, developing initial goals, training on how to communicate goals and expectations, and an overview of the organization’s programs.

Refining Goals

Once mentor-mentee pairs have been established, the next component includes reviewing and finalizing a development plan for the identified goals. Interview responses echoed the
literature review insights, particularly with the importance of building trust and mentor-mentee rapport during these initial meetings (Carter et al., 2020). Most importantly, the effectiveness of interactions during goals component were likely impacted, positively and negatively, by factors such as perceived mutual respect, level of shared interests, and mentee’s perception of their best interests being upheld (Carter et al., 2020). In addition to finalizing the development plan, actions include identifying relevant organizational and other professional resources needed for goal achievement and establishing primary meeting schedules. Sample topics would cover how to register for professional certifications and how to apply for firm programs and resources.

*Meeting Frequency*

Navigating the mentorship program encompasses sharing personal experiences, aiding with general decision-making and problem-solving tools were noted as important factors from the interview study. This area of the mentorship process was a key area of disagreement with the strategic management literature, which championed the use of accountability measures to ensure progress was tracked (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017). Given the informal nature of most mentorship networks in government contractor firms, accountability was usually implemented in performance evaluations from middle managers, who were typically not in the mentorship program. Surprisingly, these organizations noted frustration with challenges to getting feedback, as well as how to deal with motivation issues between participants.

This mentorship framework prescribes a combined approach of mentor and middle manager tracking of goals in order to highlight successes, measure progress, as well as maintain accountability of goal achievement. The mechanisms for tracking goals could also be integrated into any pre-existing virtual platforms for employee evaluation. Bi-weekly meetings with mentors is recommended during the initial plan implementation, which could transition to
monthly based on mentee progress. Monthly meeting with the middle manager is also
recommended to track progress and provide initial mediation should issues with arise between
the mentor-mentee pairing. Finally, a monthly focus group with the program developer was
recommended to capture feedback and provide opportunities for network building.

How to Evaluate the Program

The strategic management literature prescribed assessments and evaluations of the
mentoring program to afford incremental improvements and create organizational measures of
effectiveness (Cataldi, 2021). Grippingly, most respondents neglected to address measures for
tracking goal achievement but referenced attentiveness to performance levels and feedback on
the applicability of shared knowledge as key gauges for evaluating progress. With the evaluation
component, participants genuinely acknowledged the need for tracking and reporting
mechanisms. However, they simply did not have suggestions on how to implement them.
Drawing on the literature, this framework utilizes a combination of focus groups, participant
interviews, and questionnaires to develop performance metrics and identify areas for program
improvements (Bell & Treleaven, 2011).

Maturing in the Program

The mentor-mentee maturity model illustrates a typical career progression for
government contracting firm members. Transition through the models share similarities with the
friendship, nurturing and peer mentoring models identified in the strategic management
literature, which indicated maturing (Hale & Phillips, 2019). However, insights from the
interview responses indicate government contractor firms do not experience a specific model per
group. Rather, the organization traverses a combination of mentorship models throughout the
course of the mentee’s career and tenure within the firm. Based on junior hierarchical levels of
the organization, the figure above shows career progression from high oversight with generalized topics to elevating levels of autonomy is achieved as the mentee becomes more experienced and develops their professional identity. Other levels of the organization with higher proficiency and experience could traverse their career transition at abbreviated rates. For example, senior level members of the organization, likely on an executive path, could feasibly skip the experience model and move directly into the operative model, after completing onboarding activities.

**Figure 4.** Mentor-Mentee Maturity Model

*Information provided by the student for the purposes of this study. Depicts maturing of mentees within junior levels of the firm in relation to the applicable models for each phase of the mentoring relationship. It begins with the continuity model in the onboarding phase and progresses through the experience model into increased levels of independence in the operative and adept models. Hierarchy refers to the degree of formality, which acts inversely on the y-axis with less structure as experience increases. Mentor-mentee ratio is depicted on the x-axis, which explains the mentor to mentee composition.*
Given the various levels of experience and developmental needs of the firm, potential topics to cover during meeting and supplemental training was identified based on interview study insights regarding best practices for equipping mentees, mentor and middle managers, and mentorship program developer and key leaders. Topic difficulty ranged from beginner to advanced, and included focus areas such as business administration, technical skills, and leadership skills development.

**Continuity Model**

The continuity model is conceptualized as the reception and integration into the firm. Continuity model activities consist of the initial onboarding into the organization where data gathering, and overall introduction to primary organizational networks and resources occurs, to include awareness of the established culture within firm. The continuity model draws similarity to the group model identified in the strategic management literature, which acknowledges a developmental cohort aligned in skill level (Carter et al., 2020). However, continuity model characteristics were better aligned with tenure in the organization, as this model focused on activities associated with onboarding and was generally applicable to all work categories.

**Table 6. Sample of Continuity Model Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Onboarding:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Registration for benefits and employee compensation packages</td>
<td>• Code of conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overview of organizational programs</td>
<td>• Interorganizational cultural awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access to systems and acceptable use agreements</td>
<td>• Time keeping and accountability protocols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cybersecurity awareness and acknowledgements</td>
<td>• Emergency response protocols</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study. Topics associated with the continuity model are designed to assist new entrants with completing the onboarding process. The intent is to provide an overview of the firm, along with available resources. Topics focus on introducing new members to organizational processes and networks.*
The continuity model begins with entrance to the firm and pre-decisional participants to the mentoring program. The purpose for implementing the continuity model is to understand the available networks and resources in the firm, register for applicable benefit packages, and receive instruction on organizational protocols. As such, the applicable developmental ration was deemed as one mentor (e.g., firm representative) to many mentees or newcomers to the firm. Continuity concludes with placement in a work center and/or entering the mentorship program and selecting a mentor. Table 6 provides recommended topics for onboarding new members into the organization, improving mentee skills, and increasing awareness of basic business processes. All categories within the firm required knowledge on general business administration and processes. Focus included topics associated with reception and integration into the firm.

Ideal mentees for continuity model fit consist of new hires and/or members of the firm who were part of an acquisition or merger. Another familiar mentee type would be those new to contracting. A common example in government contractor firms is recently separated or retired military servicemembers who transition into the organization. This demographic is usually highly sought for their experience and connections to the firm’s government clients (e.g., through previous employment or affiliation).

Mentors suited for the continuity model would consist of employees that understand the nuances and intricacies of the firm. These members would likely be known in their organizational networks as savants or brain trusts of the firm. They usually know how to connect people due to their understanding of information flow throughout each work center.

Metrics for measuring the effectiveness of the continuity model involve three internal factors: the first being employee engagement in company programs and benefits. For example, firms that offer education benefits and/or tuition assistance could track the quarterly deltas in
program usage. Survey data is another option for evaluating satisfaction with the onboarding process. To this extent, firms could survey participants at the completion of onboarding activities, and then again after the first or second quarter post-onboarding to gauge employee satisfaction. New hire churn would be another potential measure indicating the effectiveness of the continuity model.

**Experience Model**

The experience model is conceptualized as the beginning of the mentoring relationship, once participants have entered a mentoring program. Experience model activities are aligned with the beginning of the mentoring relationship and starting the improvement process, which includes building technical knowledge, integration into professional networks, completing foundational professional certifications, and exploring fit within work centers. Upon entering the mentorship program and implementing the development plan, understanding daily task performance and contract fulfillment processes (e.g., the nature of government contractor firms) emerged as the focal areas that mentees and mentors were motivated to improve. The optimal fit with industry best practices was a model that provided oversight, while promoting gradational independence.

The experience model incorporates characteristics of the nurturing mentorship model for its safe-to-fail environments and genuine interactions (Bourke et al., 2014). The purpose for applying the experience model is to develop and track improvement, identify fit with organizational processes, and establish professional identity of junior members. To this extent, identifying and removing obstacles, providing environments conducive to learning from experiences, as well as providing options and choices that allowed mentees to feel in control of their own career paths hold relevancy (Bourke et al., 2014). Since mentees in this environment
may be relatively new to the organization, a senior-subordinate relationship is appropriate and
coupled with a one-to-one developmental ratio. The experience model culminates with increased
confidence of organizational roles and contributions, as well as a demonstrated ability to perform
desired tasks with decreasing levels of supervision.

**Table 7. Sample of experience model topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentee Upskilling:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Foundational skill certifications</td>
<td>● Leadership position resume writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Business correspondence and behavior</td>
<td>● How to find training resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Cross-organizational &amp; stakeholder correspondence</td>
<td>● Apply for certification / re-cert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Creating technical reports</td>
<td>● Receiving feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study. Topics associated with
the experience model are designed to assist junior members with exploring organizational
processes and functionality. The intent is for mentees to understand how they can impact
processes; build professional networks; and increase proficiency.

Table 7 provides recommended topics for junior members of the organization. Mentee
development would emphasize foundational through intermediate level certifications, how to
conduct professional communications over virtual platforms, working in multinational
environments, improving mentee skills, and increasing awareness of basic business processes.
Focus included awareness of thought diversity, exploring ways to impact processes and team
functionality, and how to strengthen professional networks.

Example mentees for the experience model fit includes participants who are unsure about
their career choices and/or exploring transition into related career fields. An interview study
response captured indications of this archetype when an organizational member detailed their
decision between career advancement or transition into cybersecurity. Members of the
organization who are seeking to sharpen current technical skills would be another likely fit. For
instance, within the defense sector of the federal government industry, inactive military service
members, such as Reserve or National Guard, will typically seek positions in contractor firms that are aligned with their military specialty to gain additional experience.

Mentors in the experience model could be described as high performers within their field and current position. They typically know how to work organizational systems and processes. Mentors in the experience model would likely be regarded as “go to” members of the team because of proficiency. These team members are also likely to perform with little to no oversight.

Measuring progress in the experience model would likely consist of productivity, client satisfaction, and certification completions rates. As mentee become more proficient, organizational members responsible for tracking productivity rates could monitor the change number of product completion and quality (e.g., number of revisions required). Customer or client satisfaction surveys could also provide measures of effectiveness. In addition to surveys, metrics encompassing professional certification rates would provide an evaluation of the firm’s expertise.

**Operative Model**

The operative model is conceptualized as progression into advanced skills development and higher-level contributions to work projects. Operative model activities include a marked change in the type of guidance received from mentors due to realization of leadership potential and appointment to more collaborative roles in the firm. The operative model maintains similarities with the friendship model, as the process of engaging with a mentor and implementing feedback results in less oversight (Bourke et al., 2014). Additionally, the mentees’ developmental focus may shift from being members of a team to address becoming leaders of
teams. This transition was noted in participant responses when detailing how engagements with mentors changed as respect for abilities increased.

The operative model also shared commonalities with laddering, which was identified in the strategic management literature as a sign of reflecting and maturing on the mentee’s part (Hale & Phillips, 2019). As such, mentees in the operative model could have a combinative development dynamic in which they begin to demonstrate technical proficiency and undergo leader training in a one-to-many developmental setting (e.g., instructor led training). The operative model concludes with the mentee’s transition to a leadership position or role on projects.

Table 8. Sample of Operative Model Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management and Leadership:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• How to evaluate performance</td>
<td>• Resolving conflicts / Negotiating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Executive resume writing</td>
<td>• Strategic messaging and vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communicating with stakeholders</td>
<td>• How to analyze statements of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developing multicultural teams</td>
<td>• Interpreting requests for proposals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study. Topics associated with the operative model are designed to assist experienced members, to include new mentors and middle managers. Development emphasis includes becoming a cross-functional member and increasing level of contribution to work projects.

Table 8 includes developing more experienced members of the organization, to include mentors and middle managers seeking to improving leadership skills across the organization. Optimal focus areas include general leadership skills, advanced business communications, conducting skills evaluations, providing feedback, and increasing business acumen.

Ideal mentees for operative model fit consist of newly appointed and/or developing leaders within the firm. Members of this developmental group may be learning how to establish their voice within the profession and/or the organization. For example, an interview participant noted how they encountered significant challenges when passing along knowledge gained from
their own mentoring experience and noted a need for self-improvement. Mentees in the operative model would likely be intrigued by the idea of becoming an expert in their field. This could be observed in members in the organization who continuously seek ways to bring value to themselves and the organization. At this stage, the mentees’ professional identities may be tied to their organizations.

Mentors in the operative model would likely be regarded as highly respected veterans within the firm and their professions. Typically, mentors in the operative model would have enough tenure in the field to retire. However, they still find enjoyment in the profession and/or the organization. These mentors have likely attained considerable experience dealing with challenges in their business landscapes. As a result, they are less likely to be shaken by disruptions in the firm or the profession.

Metrics for measuring the effectiveness of the operative model involve two main factors: the first being diversity and growth of collaborative teams within the firm. Measurements of this nature could be collected through work center climate questionnaires. Profitability of the firm is another key metric which may provide insights on the economic benefits of mentorship program investments.

**Adept Model**

The adept model is conceptualized as maturing to a level of mutual advice and respect between mentor-mentee interactions, as well as realizing how to impact strategic business development objectives. Adept model activities signify a level of proficiency where the mentee becomes a colleague, which is realized by being sponsored into new professional networks, and seeking to become a mentor to others. The adept level holds similarity to the peer mentoring model for its lack of hierarchical structure (Bourke et al., 2014), or the equalizing of mentor-
mentee (Hale & Phillips, 2019). Still, the fundamental difference in the participant responses was the evolution and continuance of the mentoring relationship, where mentor and mentee mutually share advice and collaborate on opportunities. In most cases, the government contractor participants maintain communication with their original mentors well beyond the point of becoming near-peers. Given this dynamic, the developmental ratio reverts to one-to-one and there is no clearly defined culminating point.

Table 9. Sample of Adept Model Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advanced Leadership:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Creating mission statements</td>
<td>• Leading through change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developing corporate vision</td>
<td>• Building collaborative teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Building / managing a brand</td>
<td>• Organizational learning / development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creating innovative organizations</td>
<td>• Case study development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These data were provided by the student for the purpose of this study. Topics associated with the adept model are designed to assist program developers and key staff members. Development emphasis includes increased business development roles, creating new work projects, and becoming thought leaders.

Table 9 includes developing key leaders and managers responsible for developing organizational programs. Senior level issues relative to mentorship program developers and key leaders included developing and implementing strategies, advanced leadership skills, advanced business acumen, business operations, change management and agility, and developing corporate reading lists.

Example mentees for the adept model fit includes participants who are identified as future business leaders in the firm, or up and coming entrepreneurs. Mentees in the adept model may be considered experts in completing work center projects but are looking to create new initiatives or develop their business skills. Adept level mentees may understand how to develop high performers; but not how to develop a brand (e.g., for the firm or personally). Mentees in the
adept model would likely be actively taking steps to establish themselves apart from their position within the firm.

Mentors in the adept model could be described as executives, business owners, and/or board members with experience in business start-ups or developing organizations. These mentors are also likely to be C-suite caliber members with extensive business experience. Adept level mentors may be terminal degree holders and/or experienced executive consultants.

Measuring progress in the adept model would likely consist of a combination of internal and external metrics such as strategic objectives completion, innovative project creation, and request for proposal to completion rates. Focus on adept model outcomes would be determining in what ways leadership was impactful, the general health of the organizational culture, as well as the ability for the firm to sustain and/or gain new government contract work.

**Evaluating the Framework**

The federal government contractor mentoring program framework was structured utilizing insights from the strategic management literature and best practices found in government contracting firms. The framework draws on characteristics found in the group, nurturing, friendship, and peer mentoring models and has been adapted to depict the evolution of mentees more accurately through their careers (Hale & Phillips, 2019).

Evaluation of the framework focused on applicability of the implemented research design and methods, to include framing the problem and research questions, thoroughness of sourcing, lucidness of the conceptualizations, and relevance to the federal government industry. Subject matter experts were assembled from within the government contracting community, and adjacently with federal government organization stakeholders.
Overall, the subject matter experts substantiated the need for such research, found agreement with importance to industry, and highlighted the uniqueness of how government contractor firms make investment decisions. The ability to measure outcomes that clearly demonstrated effectiveness of mentorship programs demonstrated the complexities and associated value of furthering this study. The expert reviewers proposed enhancing the study with analytic techniques to address and determine pure economic value of mentorship programs. Finally, the experts recommended a further comparative analysis of formal and informal mentorship programs.

The next chapter provides a summary of the interview study, as well as how the subject matter expert reviewers’ concerns were addressed. It will include a discussion on the key impacts to practitioners, and ways insights gleaned during this process can advance the strategic management literature as viewed in light of its limitations. It will conclude with areas for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE:
CONTRIBUTIONS

Discussion

This study explored the use of mentorship program development as a dynamic capability in federal government contractor firms. Mentorship programs were formally identified as the totality of the firm’s resources and assets that have been organized around improving employee knowledge and skills, capture tacit knowledge, and achieve strategic goals. This definition expands upon earlier conceptualizations of mentoring which focus singularly on improving employee skills (Alleman & Clarke, 2000; Bell & Treleaven, 2011). This study addressed a direct gap in the strategic management literature, which has previously examined capabilities used to evolve business practices (Hofmann et al., 2011); build internal competencies (Blome et al., 2013); connect employees through high-quality relationships (Salvato & Vassalo, 2017); and build resources for the firm (Vlas et al., 2022). This study revealed that mentorship in the federal government industry could be considered dynamic and the career transition in contractor firms span a combination of four different mentorship models throughout the developmental relationship.

The study corresponded with Carter et al.’s (2020) research which highlighted the deeper employee connections realized when pairing of mentors and mentees was done naturally, as well as the alignment of the nurturing mentoring model’s relevance to early stages of development within the firm due to the cultivation of safe environments. Lanzi et al.’s (2019) study holds
similar agreeance with its finding about the identification and removal of career-related obstacles as a key responsibility and trust building aspect of the laddering process.

Insights gained through implementing thematic analysis procedures revealed the importance of mentorship model aspects shift with each component of the mentorship program. These insights were essential for designing a program that is relevant and addresses the developmental needs of the organization. Extant strategic management literature has shown that motivation for improvement is mostly spurred from internalization and self-reflection (Montgomery, 2017). While this current interview study upheld that assertion, participant responses added vital context about organizational members’ reliance on observing high performance and how the development of personalized connections fuels the desire to seek mentorship.

Next, the prior literature has shaped our understanding of mentoring relationships as singular conceptual models of associated characteristics that are applied to modify behaviors around navigating through professional development (Weinberg, 2019). These models included apprenticeships for entrants to the profession; nurturing for early-stage development; and friendships or peering of senior members (Bourke et al., 2014). Other prominent models included internships to synthesize academic knowledge (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017); reverse mentoring for diffusion of newer technologies (Garg et al., 2021); and role assimilation (Weinberg, 2019).

The nurturing, friendship and peer models represented the mentorship models with the closest characteristics that were like the experiences recounted by interview participants. These characteristics specifically identified the ability for the mentee to decide which advice to implement; the ability to observe and collaborate with organizational members in similar
positions; and environments that offered the freedom to explore and take risks with reducing levels of oversight. Due to inconsistencies with the experiences reported during the study, the apprenticeship, internship, and reverse mentorship models were excluded. While federal government contractor firms were noted to implement to use of oversight by higher experienced employees train lessor experienced members, these encounters lacked focus in building professional expertise. Rather, these experienced members provided awareness of tasks and procedures unique to functioning in the work center, negating the apprenticeship model. There was no mentioning of instances where junior organizational members advised senior members of the organization, until a maturity level had been established where a near-peer relationship developed. As a result, reverse mentoring was omitted from the data analysis. Last, all interview participants reporting having at least a fundamental professional level of expertise and relatable field experience. This was a typical occurrence for new hires in federal government contractor firms, which precluded the internship model.

A reconstructed mentorship program framework was designed through analysis of the qualitative interviews, observations from the field, and a review of the strategic management literature. This framework provided updated characterizations of mentorship models (e.g., continuity, experience, operative, and adept) that were more consistent with the federal government industry. Hale and Phillips’ (2019) study on mentorship programs in clinical nursing provided a comparative model to explain how mentorship programs are realized. To this extent, a typical model illustration would be described as a new member entering the organization, needing guidance on how to perform job tasks. The member would be assigned to a more experience employee to implement one of the mentorship models. The lesser experienced member would learn and increase skills. Once desired proficiency was achieved,
the mentoring relationship concluded (Weinberg, 2019). However, the current interview study has shown that organizational members can experience various mentorship models throughout their engagements with the same mentor and nearly all respondents reported a continued mentoring relationship well beyond the developmental period.

The framework was evaluated by internal and external reviewers for appropriateness of the research design and methods, as well as relevancy of the general business problem. Overall, the reviewers found the subject incredibly topical and important to the industry. The reviewers also noted the business problem was framed in a unique and paradoxical situation, particularly regarding how to gain investment for the professional development of experts and leading contributors from industry. This dilemma is addressed in the cross-functionality of the framework, which suggests that while technical knowledge is plentiful within such levels of the work centers, there is a gap in how experienced contractor firm members can impact the business development functions and processes of the organization. Further, this study advocates addressing that knowledge gap through mentoring. Finally, the reviewers highlighted the need to test the framework and recommended a comparative analysis on the effectiveness of formal versus informal mentoring programs. Other suggestions included the assessed change in retention rates, improved profit margins, and studying varied sample sizes. These suggestions were taken into consideration for future study directions.

**Relevance to Practice**

This study proposed a mentorship program framework that is amenable to contractor firm managers who oversee the development of their organizations’ capabilities through a mentoring program. Leaders with this responsibility can utilize the suggested framework as a tool to better develop their hierarchical levels. The framework is based in literature, provides rich illustration
of how to implement strategy around a formal mentoring program beginning with the pre-launch activities necessary to indoctrinate early adopters and gain key leader support. The integration of internal social networks, virtual training platforms, talent management resources, and general business administration processes can bring to bear the necessary systems to implement a sustainable program. This is accomplished by organizing the resident expertise and resources around an aligned set of goals for the firm.

Next, the mentorship framework serves as a guidebook on how to develop a mentorship program that maximizes organizational processes; deepens professional networks; and establishes a process to capture tacit knowledge within the firm. This task begins with gathering professional summary data on mentoring program respondents and informing participants of their mentor-mentee responsibilities, as well as available organizational resources. Then, participant matching is assisted through formal social events around mentoring, to include direct assistance by mentorship program administrators when potential mentees encounter difficulty with finding a mentor. Developmental goals, detailed plans, meeting schedules, and subsequent mentorship events are established to kindle an improvement process that is jointly tracked by mentors and middle managers to ensure progress and address potential issues. Finally, program measures of performance and areas for enhancements are identified through periodic audits, survey data, and participant interviews to safeguard mentor-mentee fit and general program integrity.

**Academic Contribution**

This qualitative interview study focused on the broader topic of strategic management issues and how mentorship programs should be considered a capability for the firm. The study narrowly concentrated onto the specific concerns of how to best develop mentorship programs
and which aspects of these programs were most important for the federal government contractor market segment. Two significant contributions were identified: explicitly describing the operationalization of mentoring programs, with respect to their relatedness to dynamic capabilities, and explaining how maturing in a mentoring program evolves with career transitions.

The first contribution to the strategic management literature is explaining the components of a mentorship program which led to the novelty of designing a mentoring program framework, from federal government contracting insights, that informs about best practices for developing a mentorship strategy. Additionally, it uses secondary research and interview data to identify how to establish developmental goals and align organizational resources. Montgomery (2017) provided a beneficial framework for mapping the mentoring network and implementing career planning. The findings of Montgomery’s (2017) framework revealed multidirectional factors of reflecting on developmental needs; establishing meeting expectations; fostering bilateral interactions; and periodically reviewing goals as a roadmap for effecting mentorship (Montgomery, 2017, pp. 8-9).

This study goes beyond the individualized method for realizing development goals and prescribes a framework inclusive of comprehensive responsibilities, organizational resources, as well as potential events and activities associated with each component of the mentorship process (e.g., roles, matching, goals, frequency, and evaluation). This mentoring program framework incorporates established processes such as performance evaluations and training, strategic messaging, recognized company events around mentoring, and organizational compliance measures to capture program feedback. For instance, areas marked for desired improvement during performance evaluations would translate to mentorship goals for further development. A
company database around mentoring would facilitate linking mentees with potential mentors containing requisite experience. The use of internal organization platforms and networks provide strategic messaging and supporting communication nodes for garnering interest in developmental programs. Next, a combinative approach of goal tracking with mentors and middle managers could assist goal attainment. Finally, the use of focus groups, interviews and participant questionnaires could gain feedback and determine areas for program improvements.

Second, the study provides the novelty of career transition in government contracting firms, as aligned with participation in a mentoring program. Hale & Phillips (2019) study provided a mentorship model for mentoring up in clinical nursing, which illustrated how mentee confidence was improved over the course of their career and a long-term association with a mentor. During their career, mentees were understood to traverse a cycle of realizing the need for mentoring (seeding); initiating mentorship relationships (opening); accepting and implementing feedback (laddering); improving skill (equalizing); and gradually relinquishing the need for development (Hale & Phillips, 2019, p.166-167). Although Hale and Phillips’ (2019) study proved vital for its identification of the mentorship life cycle and finding the benefits of informal interpersonal connections, the authors noted shortfalls in only considering mentee perspectives in the study design and generalizability.

The diagram of mentor-mentee maturity provided in this study expands the strategic management literature by describing four mentorship models (continuity, experience, operative, and adept) that are applicable to organizational development. Particularly, it shows how mentoring relationships in government contractor firms evolve into mutual exchanges vice a clearly defined end. Utilizing combinative mentor-mentee insights, this diagram can likely assist with developing functionality within a work center. As career progression continues, this
diagram advances to cross functionality within the organization to impact processes supportive of achieving overarching strategic objectives.

For example, a typical middle manager entering the firm would begin in the continuity model, where data gathering about the firm and introduction to internal processes and networks would transpire. From there, the middle manager would enter the experience phase to gain needed certifications, or transition to the operative model for project collaboration; integration into the professional network and the direct work center; and learning about functionality of adjacent work centers. Once proficient, the middle manager could traverse to the adept model and become a project leader or creator. Associated activities could include becoming a mentor to newer managers of the organization and supporting business development or contract recompetes throughout the course of their career and tenure with the firm.

Generalizability

This mentorship program framework and mentor-mentee maturity model were developed with the focus of a typical career progression for federal government contract firm members with junior-to-mid level professional experience. Organizational members with the requisite level of experiences characteristically understand the foundational aspects of their profession and have advanced beyond the probationary period for their specialty. Developmental needs for these members were identified as adjusting to the unique tasks and responsibilities for their current position, understanding how to best fit within a team and develop their professional networks.

Hale and Phillips’ (2019) study examining mentorship programs in clinical nursing offered a comparable field due to its nature of high complexity, uniquely certified members, and competitive business landscapes. While the core aspects of developing the mentorship program were primarily aligned, differences were noted in the developmental focus, as well as the
preferred behavioral attributes of the mentoring relationship. It is recommended that mentorship programs and career paths for firms with similar attributes be studied.
CHAPTER SIX:
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Study Limitations

Even with the voluminous protocols and detail afforded to completing this qualitative study, no research is void of confines. This study encountered three important limitations: the first being participants with experience developing mentoring programs having an association with the firm and potentially exhibiting reluctance to inform on deficiencies with the mentoring in their organizations. The second limitation was the time constraints for sampling ten voluntary respondents with the data collection strategy and the inability to run varied approaches. Last, the phasing of the sampled participants being in a post-mentorship program status versus actively undergoing a mentorship program experience.

While appreciative of the willingness for senior level members and managers responsible for developing mentorship programs to participate in this interview study, I remained cognizant of the markedly positive stories and recounts of the experiences with fulfilling those responsibilities. Morse’s (2015) explored strategies to improve reliability in qualitative research, thoroughly explaining how researcher’s bias can impact the study. While systematic approaches can be applied to data collection and analysis strategies, the participants’ voluntary responses present a unique variable. There is a likelihood that participant bias for wanting to present the organization in its best possible light could impact the study findings. The ability to observe an organizational mentoring program in-progress would likely address such constraints.
The time necessary for this evolving researcher to complete a judicious qualitative interview narrowed to research design to prominent focus on gathering interview data. Undoubtedly, the lone researcher approach serves as an imperative check on learning and a rite of passage, of sorts. From the outset, I arose to this challenge over ambitiously with a determination to make the most substantial impacts. This mindset was somberly fashioned into manageable and equally impactful objectives, with a succinct qualitative approach to demonstrate grasp of the applicable knowledge, skills, and abilities of a novice researcher.

Alston (2021) put it candidly, yet extremely humble, when recounting the stretching experience encapsulated in heightening one’s skills as a researcher during a study of how mentoring strategies are applied to civil service members of the federal government. Without undercutting the value of the current study, having the capacity to implement a semi-structured interview that was informed by a survey of the larger federal government contractor firm sample would likely add deeper insights to the data analysis and interpretation.

Asking the participants to recall their mentorship experiences presents another unique aspect of this qualitative study which requires understanding and acceptance that certain situations may not be portrayed exactly as they occurred. By affording the autonomy for participants to choose which mentorship experiences to elaborate upon, the focus was on capturing details about their most memorable experiences and refrained from limiting the timeframe for the recalled event. This potential issue is described in van Manen’s (2014) exploration of phenomenology in professional settings, and Carlson’s (2010) study questioning the accuracy of recalled phenomena, cautioning researchers to incorporate additional techniques to improve validation of data collection process like member checks. While validation measures can assist with improving the accuracy of the researcher’s data collection methods, there is
inherent difficulty in determining how closely participants responses accurately reflected the intricacies of their mentorship program meetings and activities. As a result, this qualitative study was naturally limited by participant recollection abilities.

**Future Research Directions**

Considering the study limitations, follow-on research paths could elevate the usefulness of the mentoring program artifact in four key areas: first, the creation of a mentoring program intervention with the artifact. The next path would be testing generalizability with different industries. Recreating the study using mixed methods. Further research could also focus on a comparative analysis of geographical areas outside the central Florida region to determine the consistency of participant feedback amongst a larger federal government contractor sample. This section will briefly explore these suggestions, offering ideas for researchers who are similarly vested or interested in the strategic management literature and developing organizational capabilities around mentoring.

The implementation of a mentorship program intervention could be the best option for enhancing the current study. A prime example includes Bell and Treleaven’s (2011) study of how to enhance connections through mentor-mentee pairing. The study examined the effectiveness of a mentorship program artifact by directly observing participants amassing three years’ worth of data, in which collection activities occurred during the course of three iterative meetings and an exit focus group setting (Bell & Treleaven, 2011).

In similar fashion, researchers seeking to expand on this current study could benefit from implementing a mentorship program simulation in a federal government contractor setting to utilize the artifact. In addition to enacting a mentorship program, experimentation with the data sample could include representations of the full organization or a certain hierarchical level such
as middle managers. The insights gleaned from capturing primary data that characterizes recent experiences.

Testing generalizability of the perceived importance to different industries or federal government agencies presents another way to expound on this study. Understanding the importance for each aspect of the mentorship program and the degree of application for the mentoring program framework across various agencies could demonstrate its explanatory value and contribute further to the academic literature. To a certain degree, Cataldi et al.’s (2021) study achieved similar objectives at a micro level by examining fellowship program processes for nine different medical specialties. Future researchers interested in exploring mentorship program implications for federal government contractors could utilize a similar focus level to analyze and compare data from contractors in different federal agencies (e.g., state, defense, energy, and economic). A relatable study using this technique might yield insights to the value of the mentoring program framework and further substantiate the need for continued research involving government contractor firms.

Another potential area for testing generalizability would be with the archetypes identified with each mentor-mentee maturity model. This study focused on characteristics that could be found in federal government contractor firms. These archetype descriptions largely considered the experience level and employee network access of mentors, as well as the mentees’ motivation to seek improvement or contribute to the firm. Hernandez et al. (2018) addressed archetypical characteristics for reverse mentoring during their examination of leader development programs, which focused on the generational characteristics. Future researchers could provide deeper insights to the strategic management literature by conducting a comparative
analysis of mentorship programs, such as the archetypical differences and/or similarities amongst mentees and mentors in medical, academic, and other professional specialties.

As noted in the discussion about time restrictions associated with the current focus on mentoring programs in federal government contractor firms, recreating this study with more approaches to data collection is an extremely important consideration for future researchers to elevate the contributions to the academic literature. Guion et al (2011) expressed the benefit of methodological triangulation to evaluate the consistency of data collection results. To this extent, a future study constructed sequentially with survey or questionnaire data from the field, followed by a focus group and an interview of the participants could present an ideal approach to exploring which aspects of mentorship programs were more important to this market segment. This mixed approach could provide deeper insights and a better-informed mentorship program framework.

Finally, researchers seeking to take this study in other meaningful directions could characterize the implications for mentoring in federal government contractor firms based on different geographical regions. Cataldi et al.’s (2021) study on medical fellowships also provides an example of this approach by selecting medical programs in the United States of America and the United Kingdom, where they found differences in values and access to funding impacted program structures and evaluations. Given the special nuances afforded by different geographical locations, a potential recommendation for future research would be to conduct surveys of federal government contractor firms that operate within and beyond the continental United States. An example would be a comparative analysis of companies with similar attributes (e.g., size, demographics, business area, or customer) and understanding how geography impacts federal government contractor firms’ decisions to implement mentorship programs.
Closing Remarks

I am immensely appreciative of the bonds created during the course of this exit dissertation process. The unwavering support of my family, friends, and co-workers has undoubtedly made getting to the finish line achievable. I am incredibly thankful for the patience and knowledge imparted by my committee members, cohort members, and especially the DBA administrators. Your kindness and efforts will never be forgotten.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a single semi-structured interview. The interview should be no more than thirty minutes. The interview will explore the key factors you experienced during your participation in a mentoring program. A quiet location, suitable to audio recording that is mutually agreeable shall be chosen, at time mutually agreed upon. Only the Principal researcher will have access to the recordings, transcripts, and coded data related to the interview. Your information will NOT be identifiable, the recordings, transcripts, and coded data will be maintained for 5 years after the Final Report is submitted to the USF IRB. After five years, the electronic files and recordings shall be permanently deleted, and all hard copy documents shall be shredded and disposed.

Questions you may be asked include:

Mentoring program development context
Can you explain how your organization developed its current mentoring program?
What aspects were most important during the planning phase?
How did your organization approach recruiting participants?
Did your organization encounter any challenges with pairing participants? Why or why not?
Can you explain the goal tracking mechanism incorporated into your mentoring program?
Can you explain your process for assessing the performance of your mentoring program?
How did you make improvements to your mentoring program?

Initial discovery period and context
In your own words, how would you describe mentoring?
How would your co-workers describe you?
How would your previous mentors describe you?
How and where do you find inspiration?

Invitation and response to request for mentorship
When did you realize a need to improve your skills or performance?
What experiences tipped your decision to pursue a mentor?
How did you introduce yourself to a mentor?
How did you introduce yourself to a mentee?
How would you prefer to build rapport with others?

Navigating the mentorship experience
Can you describe your best mentoring experience, where someone assisted you?
How do you engage with your mentor?
Can you describe your best mentoring experience, where you assisted someone else?
How would you describe your mentorship style (e.g., how you influence others)?
What types of mentoring activities would you do with your mentee?
How would you go about persuading someone to see things your way at work?

Mentorship feedback and goal achievement
Can you give me an example of a time you were able to set a goal and meet or achieve it?
Did you ever notice a change in the type of advice your mentor provided?
Can you give me an example of a time when your mentor was able to meet or achieve a set goal?

Conclusion and Lessons Learned
Did you ever notice your skills were improving? How so?
Have you changed, professionally, in the last three years? How so? If not, why not?
What motivates you to succeed as a mentor?
In your viewpoint, what sort of information is important for providing an informed decision on finding a mentor?
What other information would you like to provide about mentoring?
APPENDIX B:

RECRUITMENT E-FLYER

“Mentoring and the Federal Government Industry”
eIRB #4056

Be a part of a research study about mentorship programs!

To participate in this research study, you would need to:

- Complete a short eligibility questionnaire to determine if you can participate
- Meet with a researcher for a 30 minute in-person interview about your experiences participating in a mentoring program, as a mentor or mentee.
- Due to the in-person interviews, there is a risk of transmission of COVID-19. While precautions will be taken to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19, the principal investigator cannot guarantee that the participant will not be exposed to the virus.
- To protect against coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission, the principal investigator will adhere to Hillsborough County COVID-19 Community Level and MacDill Air Force Base Health Protection Condition guidelines throughout the interview sessions. In Hillsborough County, Florida, community level is low. MacDill Air Force Base is at Health Protection Condition (HPCON) Level Alpha, which indicates a limited health alert. Participants may choose to mask at any time.

You must be at least 18 years old, be a federal government contract employee, and have at least 1 year retainability to be eligible.

Contact the Principal Investigator, Mr. Leroy Alexander, via email at laalexander@usf.edu.
APPENDIX C:

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

May 6, 2022

Leroy Alexander

Dear Mr. Leroy Alexander:

On 5/5/2022, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

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<tr>
<th>Application Type:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>STUDY004056</td>
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<td>Review Type:</td>
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<td>Title:</td>
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<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Protocol:</td>
<td><em>Mentoring_Mar2022_HRP-503a_Social-Behavioral Protocol STUDY_4056_Clean.docx</em></td>
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The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

Approved study documents can be found under the ‘Documents’ tab in the main study workspace.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made.

Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance
FWA No. 00001669
University of South Florida / 3702 Spectrum Blvd., Suite 165 / Tampa, FL 33612 / 813-974-5638
APPENDIX D:

CODEBOOK

RQ 1. What aspects of mentoring work better for federal government contract firms in the central Florida region?
RQ 2. Given the nature of contract work, how can we design and evaluate a mentoring program for federal government contractors?

Interview Q1. In your own words, how would you describe mentoring?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Verbal advice and observed experiences that provide assistance or teachable moments to others for the purpose of increasing skills and abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>The understood parameters that bind a mentoring relationship and sets the tone for interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Desire to increase proficiency in an area of one's life (e.g., overcoming a weakness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>A discrete position and its associated responsibilities or characteristics in a mentoring relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview Q2. When did you realize a need to improve your skills or performance?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>To complete a task or goal with regard to increasing one's knowledge or skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Visual or audible monitoring and knowledge of a task being performed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>Being influenced by a perceived level of someone else's success or proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Hobby or skill not directly-related to one's career responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequacy</td>
<td>Realizing a deficiency in knowledge, skill, or ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Refers to a career field or job title within a field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Availability or access to talent, networks, and assets for the purpose of self-development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview Q3. Can you describe your best mentoring experience, where someone assisted you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pairing</td>
<td>Making a decision to initiate a relationship with the particular mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Establishing goals or objectives for the mentoring period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>The meeting rate (physically or virtually) between mentor and mentee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Determining what level of progress is being made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laddering</td>
<td>General interactions between mentor and mentee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>Behavioral structure or characteristics of the mentoring relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reframing</td>
<td>Interpreting the value of the mentoring relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Modes and means for engaging with a mentor or mentee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Checks and balances for ensuring objectives are being met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview Q4. Can you describe your best mentoring experience, where you assisted someone else?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pairing</td>
<td>Making a decision to accept a relationship with the particular mentee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laddering</td>
<td>General interactions between mentor and mentee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Modes and means for engaging with a mentor or mentee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>Behavioral structure or characteristics of the mentoring relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Determining what level of progress is being made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reframing</td>
<td>Interpreting the value of the mentoring relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>The meeting rate (physically or virtually) between mentor and mentee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview Q5. What sort of information is important for providing an informed decision on finding a mentor?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Knowing what to improve and having awareness of available resources and networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Qualified person that knows your field or shares your interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Having the practical knowledge and capability to perform tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>The understood parameters that bind a mentoring relationship and sets the tone for interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Mutual appreciation for people's time and experience or effort to improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Attributes of mentors and mentees, such as being genuine and attentive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E:

HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH CERTIFICATE

Completion Date 08-Nov-2021
Expiration Date 07-Nov-2024
Record ID 45814128

This is to certify that:

Leroy Alexander

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social / Behavioral Investigators and Key Personnel
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of South Florida

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w42ac64da-b828-4803-b2c3-351ec7f9f3c-45814128
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Leroy A. Alexander is an experienced All-source Senior Intelligence Analyst offering over 24 years of direct military and multi-source analytical expertise. He has 15 years of experience providing operational and strategic intelligence support to counterterrorism and counter insurgency operations. He is also a combat Veteran, having served 3 tours of duty in support of OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM and numerous engagements other hostile fire areas. Mr. Alexander completed his Executive MBA at the University of South Florida in 2019. His awards and decorations include the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Bronze Star, and the Joint Commendation Medal.