

Chapter 7

Problem-Based Peer Group Mentoring and Organisational Learning

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Abstract: This chapter demonstrates how problem-based peer group mentoring in groups can facilitate change and learning in an organisation. This is exemplified by a five-year project at a humanities faculty at a large, research-based university, where the supervisors of master's students discussed their supervision-related problems in groups following a strictly structured method, termed as problem-based peer group mentoring (PPGM). Throughout the course, it became evident that the problems were related to the role of supervision not only at an individual (micro) level but, to a large extent, at an organisational (macro) level. The goal of the project was to encourage a culture of collaboration among the teachers. This goal seemed to be fulfilled during the semester of the PPGM course, though few long-term changes in supervision practices were evident. However, we found that interesting changes took place at an *organisational* level, although this was not the initial goal of the project. We argue that in addition to the peer group mentoring model, bringing participants together from different departments encouraged knowledge-sharing across the institution and contributed to organisational learning. To know if lasting organisational learning takes place, we suggest that structural components must be taken into consideration in the design of PPGM initiatives and that measures are taken to document and evaluate change—for example, in routines and practices. Previous research on organisational learning supports this conclusion (Argote 2012).

Introduction

This study was conducted at the Faculty of Humanities at a large, research-based university in Norway. The faculty is large and heterogeneous with seven departments encompassing rather different disciplines and traditions. This diversity is reflected in both the teaching and research and in the different supervision practices at the faculty. The faculty decided to launch a project focusing on problem-based peer group mentoring in groups for all supervisors of master's students 'to improve the follow-up of master's students, [...] prioritise supervision and the role of the supervisor [and] impart good practices through a culture of sharing' (Faculty of Humanities 2016, p. 5).

We have discovered a number of interesting issues related to supervision through our experience with five PPGM courses encompassing 156 supervisors at the faculty (one of which was given in English, designed for new employees from other academic cultures). To our surprise, many of the issues were not related to the actual one-on-one relationship between the supervisor and student; they ranged from ethical dilemmas associated with specific themes in certain master's theses and difficulty motivating certain students to what we call *structural challenges*; in other words, challenges related to roles, responsibilities, frameworks and decision-making processes locally among a group of professionals, in a department or to the organisational structure at the faculty and university levels.

This chapter reviews structural challenges in the organisation that have been revealed through the problem PPGM model. Bastiansen and Wittek (2023, in this volume)—as part of the same overarching project—describe and discuss the use of this model more comprehensively, addressing the problems revealed at the individual level, as well as the interaction between supervisors involved in the PPGM sessions. They also present the rationale for the strictly structured procedure and different phases of the PPGM model we used (see below).

Our primary objective is to attempt to ascertain what is required for a large and complex organisation to learn from the structural challenges revealed through PPGM. We discuss this by asking the following research questions:

1. What types of structural challenges did this model detect?
2. What role did the model itself play in relation to the course as a whole, including the composition of members in the mentoring groups?
3. To what extent does the project appear to have contributed to long-term change in the organisation?

Background and Previous Research

Peer group mentoring as a method consists of different approaches that also have certain similarities; it has been the subject of a great deal of previous international research under terms such as peer observation of teaching, peer review of teaching, cooperative learning and collaborative learning (see Esterhazy et al. 2021; Hermansen et al. 2023, in this volume; Wittek et al. 2023, in this volume).

To address how peer group mentoring has been applied and has worked at an organisational level, useful perspectives can be obtained from research in areas such as *organisational learning* (Argote 2012; Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011) and *information and knowledge management* (Deja 2019; Hislop et al. 2018). These are interdisciplinary fields that the last few decades have drawn on insights from cognitive and social psychology, organisational behaviour, sociology, economics, strategic management and information systems (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011). Insights from these branches of research add to our understanding of how some organisations seem better at learning than others; provide a framework for understanding how information and knowledge are created, transferred and retained in an organisation over time; address the potential for knowledge changing behaviour; and supplement our understanding of the role that strong and weak network ties play in distributing knowledge between different parts of a large organisation, like the faculty we address here (Burt 2004; Boland et al. 1994; McFayden et al. 2009).

Several authors within higher education research have noted the relationship between individual and institutional dimensions of academic development, practices and structures. Cranton and Carusetta (2002) emphasise how individual development depends on the broader, institutional context, and Wegner's notion of communities of practice stresses that individual and informal practices are neither independent of nor reducible to institutional structures (Wegner 2010). Dorner and Belic (2021) go on to explore how conversations among university teachers may *lead* to institutional development, finding that 'the path of change within institutions starts from individual development of university teachers but moves to broader cultural and institutional transformations' (2021, p. 220).

The aspects that have been highlighted in research on how peer group mentoring (PGM) works include the importance of whether the PGM is a top-down or bottom-up initiative (see Esterhazy et al. 2021 for a review of studies on peer group mentoring). For PGM to succeed, it must be associated with an institutional culture that values reflective teaching (Wingrove et al. 2015). One study implies that employees may be less engaged when there is no follow-up by the institution and PGM is not linked to competence development processes (Chamberlain et al. 2011). PGM further appears to work better in the long term when the initiative is both top-down and bottom-up when compared with when it is initiated and conducted solely based on grassroots initiatives (Bell and Mladenovic 2014; Bell and Cooper 2013; Nash et al. 2014).

Peer mentoring processes are typically initiated by the institution's management, as was the case at the organisation we studied. The initiative by the faculty management can be seen as an attempt to make good supervision a *shared responsibility* within the institution, not just the sole responsibility of the individual supervisor. Thus, it can be seen as an effort to establish 'relational agency', a shared expanded understanding of the task (Edwards 2005, 2011). Problem-based peer group mentoring offered hope that experiences could be shared, which, in the long term, could improve the quality of supervision across disciplines. At the same time, the faculty expected all academic employees with responsibility for supervising master's students to have participated in the PPGM course by 2021 (Faculty of Humanities 2016).

Previous studies have shown that peer group mentoring can be seen as a form of 'surveillance' of employees (Napier et al. 2014) and, as such, may be at odds with PPGM that stems from a desire for colleagues to share and evolve, without being linked to any formal rewards. In our case, PPGM has not been linked to such rewards (e.g., in the form of an increase in salary), even though there may be a small element of this, with participation being compensated by being credited to the employees' academic timesheet.

Further, we have not found specific discussions on what we have termed 'structural problems'—related to the organisation, procedures and guidelines—in the literature, that is, how they are discussed and processed in PGM

models.¹ Nor has there been any discussion on whether this type of problem places different demands on PGM than the type of problem that focuses more on individuals and the relationships between them (e.g., between the student and supervisor). The structural challenges examined in the chapter are linked to a discussion on learning in the organisation at the micro and macro levels. In our case, the *micro level* refers to challenges at the individual level in the supervision situation, such as between a supervisor and student or between colleagues, while the *macro level* refers to challenges at the organisational level—that is, the department and faculty levels.

Our discussion of peer mentoring is specifically linked to the type of peer group mentoring conducted as part of the project at the humanities faculty mentioned above, namely *problem-based* peer group mentoring (PPGM). Throughout one semester, groups of four to six supervisors, deliberately composed across different departments and disciplines, discussed problems related to supervision following a strict, structured procedure. Importantly, the group discussions were conducted in accordance with the Chatham house rule (Wikipedia 2021), with discussions within the group designed to increase openness while also respecting strict privacy regulations, as well as securing the anonymity of students or colleagues mentioned in relation to cases. Each group meeting contained different phases, as shown in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1. Procedure of the problem-based peer group mentoring (PPGM) (Bastiansen and Wittek 2023, in this volume)

Phase 1: Presentation	The group's participants briefly present a specific problem from their own work as a supervisor.
Phase 2: Selecting a problem	All participants take turns to say which problem from phase 1 they want to explore. The problem with the most 'votes' will be the focus of the current session's conversation.
Phase 3: Explanation	The owner of the selected problem explains their case in more detail.
Phase 4: Clarification	Through questions and answers, the participants further explore the nature of the problem. Each group member takes turns to ask one question at a time, and the problem owner responds. After several rounds, and when the participants have no further questions, the situation/problem is clarified. This phase ends with the problem being redefined by each participant.
Phase 5: Owner's suggested solutions	The problem owner explains what they might do about the situation/problem without interruption. The suggested solutions are noted.
Phase 6: Advice	Each group member takes turns to offer one piece of advice. The advice is noted. There may be several rounds.
Phase 7: Evaluation of advice	The problem owner reviews the list of advice and selects what advice may be relevant. The problem owner concludes by stating what advice they will follow up on and how.

As indicated above, in the first meeting, all members presented a problem related to their supervision (phase 1) and decided in turn which problem to explore and in which order (phase 2). Then, they followed the phases adhered to in all group meetings throughout the semester: 3) explanation of the problem by the 'problem owner'²; 4) clarification of the problem through questions and answers, ending with a reformulation of the problem by all participants; 5) the problem owner's own suggestions for solutions of the problem; 6) the group members' advice, one piece at a time in several rounds. Finally, the problem owner reviewed the list of advice and concluded on which ones they would use (phase 7).

The peer groups remained together throughout one semester, with as many group meetings as were needed for all members to present their own problems. In this manner, the members got to know each other well and had the opportunity to establish trust in each other (de Lange and Wittek 2023, in this volume). Each group was deliberately composed of supervisors from different disciplines and departments to share experiences across the entire faculty. The course as a whole included a start-up seminar at the beginning of the semester, with an introduction to the PMM model, as well as plenary discussions on supervision and administrative support services at the faculty. At the end of the semester, a final half-day seminar summarised the groups' experiences with the PMM model. The course was organised by two members from the faculty administration, in cooperation

¹ The literature review by Esterhazy et al. (2021) finds that there has been little systematic focus on the institutional aspects of peer group mentoring in research on teaching-oriented mentoring.

² Using the terminology of the problem-based peer mentoring model, the 'problem-owner' is the person who presents the problem that the remaining peers discuss and solve. For a thorough description of the model and its terminology, see Bastiansen and Wittek (2023, in this volume).

with the authors (who are part of the faculty academic staff) and two members from the academic development group at the university. At the final seminar at the end of semester, representatives from the faculty management were also present.

Material

The material is primarily based on field notes and observation from 18 PPGM sessions that the authors were involved in throughout the five semesters the project lasted, along with subsequent analyses of logs, notes and photos of flip charts from the mentoring sessions from other groups where we were not present in the discussions ourselves. Overall, the data from 26 groups over 104 meetings were analysed.

This material documents the problems that were addressed, how they were redefined and what advice was given. During the review of the material, we focused on problems where one or more of the phases had a structural component. Furthermore, we looked at evaluations from participants on the different courses and plenary discussions regarding the organisation and structural challenges. Because neither the project nor the faculty had planned for any systematic documentation of such problems, we also interviewed the former and current management at the faculty regarding the background for the project, as well as their perspectives on lessons learned, organised a focus group interview with course participants and conducted in-depth interviews with four additional participants. Furthermore, we also studied governance documents from the institution in question (annual plans, annual reports and strategy documents). Based on this material, we examine the extent to which the PPGM model and course design as a whole are suitable as a means of revealing structural problems, along with how this can lead to solutions and change in the organisation.

What Types of Structural Problems Were Revealed?

The structural problems that we present here to answer the first research question adopt a bottom-up approach based on the type of problems highlighted by the participants in the group discussions. They are problems that not (only) relate to a single student or a situation linked to a single supervisor but that cover the broader framework and structures surrounding the supervision situation. However, in several cases, the description of the problem began as something the problem owner originally experienced to varying degrees as a problem at the ‘micro level’—that is, which related to this supervisor and a specific supervision situation. However, after the Q&A round, the reformulations of the problem and suggestions for solutions, it became evident that there was also a structural component that generally concerned the broader framework of the supervision at the ‘macro level’.

Our discussion below focuses on the structural problems that recurred in several groups and cohorts of supervisors and, thus, that appeared to be particularly relevant to the discussion on the organisation’s role and structural frames. This also implies that the *solution* to these problems can be found at the institutional level. The following problems were identified:

4. Challenges associated with the practice of assigning supervisors
5. The relationship between academic and administrative staff and its impact on supervision
6. Special challenges associated with new employees from other academic cultures

As course instructors, we were surprised by the extent of the ‘structural problems’. However, they were mentioned repeatedly in four out of six of the groups that met during the autumn of 2017, which was the first round of PPGM at the faculty (the other two groups did not want us to use their logs in our research project). We also found that the course design afforded good opportunities for providing information and clarifying frameworks, formal guidelines at the faculty and the different conventions and traditions that had evolved at the course participants’ departments (thereby helping to identify solutions to common problems). The course design further offered participants and instructors a new channel for sharing uncertainty and unwanted issues with decision makers at the seven departments and faculty. When the course was repeated for new groups, we were better prepared for the fact that participants would bring up structural challenges and, thus, also explicitly asked for feedback on this in the evaluations we received from the groups during the process. We documented issues related to structural challenges in the organisation in all five courses that formed part of the research project.

Supervisor Assignment Practice

It soon became apparent in the groups that the guidelines for assigning supervisors varied considerably between the different departments, as well as within departments covering several academic fields. Many people were surprised by the great variation in practices throughout the organisation; therefore, insights into this framework was also mentioned as one of the main benefits of peer group mentoring. One of the informants said during an interview, '[...] I had no idea that the supervision culture or practice at different departments was so different. I assumed that everyone did pretty much the same as us'.

The supervisor was assigned by the study administration at certain departments in accordance with established regulations. Other units assigned supervisors in a more informal and 'private' manner, with the students themselves being able to contact the supervisor they wanted and then applying to the administration for approval. There was often a tension between formal and informal procedures and a lack of clarity regarding the rules—for example, a professor on leave could shift supervision responsibility onto a younger new employee who did not feel that they could decline, even though the rules across the faculty stated that supervision must continue when a person is on leave.

In this case, the problem was initially expressed in the following manner: 'I'm unable to provide proper supervision. How do I guide the student through the process?' In the subsequent expansion of the problem, this was reformulated as 'Conducting supervision with several supervisors [who switch in the middle of the supervision process]'. After the Q&A round (phase 4), one of the participants rephrased it as follows: 'The problem is unclear management of the expectations towards the role of supervisor and the administration of this, thereby leading to unfortunate consequences for the supervisor and student'. The problem owner commented that they 'hadn't understood until now' how their original frustration was linked to unclear procedures and practices for assigning supervisors, which had resulted in them (as a young and inexperienced supervisor) being given a responsibility they should not have had in the first place. This example illustrates how a problem that supervisors experienced personally appeared to have clear structural components.

In several cases, it was clear that young new employees were assigned 'difficult' students whose progress had come to a halt for some reason or the other and who needed a new supervisor to move on. Several recently hired supervisors told their groups that this was something they found difficult to master. They felt inadequate but often considered the situation to be something they were expected to manage on their own. They did not want to show that they were unable to do their job. However, during the PPGM process, this was identified as an area in which the academic community needed to stand united so that the focus shifted from being the individual supervisor's responsibility to a problem that had to be solved together (assigning problem students to novices might not be the best solution).

Another challenge many people identified in connection with assigning supervisors was the supervision of students in disciplines that were far outside their area of specialisation. For certain supervisors, this entailed both additional work, such as having to familiarise oneself with completely new areas and a great deal of uncertainty regarding whether they offered adequate supervision. This challenge is partially linked to the overarching practice at several departments, whereby students must be able to freely choose the topic of their master's thesis, regardless of the expertise in the department. Thus, this practice, which has been established at the macro level, has major consequences for supervisors.

During the plenary discussions on these challenges, only a few participants advocated for a complete harmonisation of the principles for assigning supervisors at the faculty, and there was uncertainty regarding whether a single cure-all solution existed. However, it is evident that such decisions are very important for supervisors. The interdisciplinary PPGM provided an arena for discussing this matter and revealed that these decisions must be discussed at several levels of the organisation.

Barriers to Communication Between Groups of Employees

A problem regularly observed in the groups we participated in, the logs written by the other groups and subsequent interviews with participants were obstacles to communication and collaboration across groups of employees and levels of the organisation which could have helped solve the supervisors' problems. Barely any of the participants who mentioned problems that they had experienced during supervision and told the group what action they had taken to solve them had discussed the problem with the management or the administration. Those who had sought help had gone to another member of the academic staff. Any discussions with the administration about supervision mostly revolved around procedures such as health leave or deadlines.

An example from one of the logs was a supervision situation which deteriorated over time, without the problem owner truly understanding the nature of the problem or how much of it was because of personal issues the student was experiencing beyond their studies. The advice that was given and logged—which was to contact

the head of studies or the occupational health service—was interesting in that the supervisor had not considered this a natural or possible solution. This also became evident during the part of the course that dealt with support services for students with special needs—barely any of the participants were aware of the existence of such services or where to seek help.

When we discussed the relationship between academic and administrative staff during interviews, several participants stated that it was neither an option nor appropriate to involve the management and administration, *even* when dealing with matters that were related to structural issues and where they would have liked help to solve a problem or to seek advice. When we asked about communication with the administration regarding supervision, one of the informants responded in the following manner:

To be honest, it is my experience that the administration has very little knowledge about what supervision is about and how it is practised and that they see it as a very abstract job that is performed by academic employees and must be organised in the least inconvenient manner possible from a bureaucratic perspective.

This view was not held by all. A few of the participants stated that they collaborated well with the study administration and felt that they received good help. However, they often felt that the administrative systems impeded their work. Moreover, several participants reported that they found it frustrating that they, as supervisors, did not receive important background information on the students from the study advisers, for example, details of personal matters or their medical history, which would be useful for the supervisor, but which could not be shared because of data protection and other legislation.

Although it is obvious that supervisors and (for example) study advisers must not do each other's jobs, it can be difficult to solve problems when the knowledge that can be shared between these groups is limited and when many supervisors are reluctant to involve or consult with the academic management. This is particularly apparent in relation to the challenges we noted among new employees from other academic cultures, a matter we return to below.

New employees from other academic cultures

The importance of structures and organisation for supervision at the micro level was starkly highlighted when talking to novice supervisors, particularly those from a different academic culture to that in Norway. This was mentioned in several groups with recently hired teachers from abroad, particularly during the semester when the course was taught in English and most of the participants were foreigners. The course in English revealed considerable failings in the faculty's onboarding of and communication with foreign employees, which prevented basic information related to supervision—among other matters—from getting through.

Academic cultures vary considerably between countries, for example, in relation to supervisory practice and form of feedback. Employees from other countries often found Norwegian feedback to be much less direct than they were used to and felt that the way they expressed themselves could create problems and even lead to complaints from students. The following example of cultural differences is taken from an evaluation by a supervisor who has worked in several countries:

When evaluating students' thesis drafts in Scandinavia it is highly recommended to use the following general scale and formulation: a) 'What is good, positive about your text/thesis is..'; b) 'What is less positive about your text/thesis is...'; c) 'What is slightly problematic about your text/thesis is...' which corresponds to, in general, the following [...] American supervising practices: a) 'ACCEPTABLE'; b) 'BAD or REALLY BAD WORK DONE IN YOUR THESIS'; and c) 'YOUR TEXT/THESIS STINKS, CLEAN IT BY CORRECTING THE MISTAKES MARKED IN YOUR DRAFT.'

We found that several of the new employees in our study lacked basic knowledge regarding the Norwegian university system and its practical application at the faculty. For example, the admissions process for master's students and framework and criteria for the master's programmes are, to a large extent, set by the Ministry of Education and/or NOKUT (The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) or the top administrative level at the university. This concerns admissions criteria, number of students, types of exams, numbers and choice of examiners, anonymity concerning exam papers and grades and so forth, which entails that individual employees or subgroups are not free to decide which applicants are admitted or how many. It also limits the ability of teachers to grade students based on their activity in class and whether to allow them to continue with a less than promising master's project or not. In addition, there is also uncertainty among the employees about what prior knowledge (including language skills) students can be expected to have.

A considerable number of participants felt that many of the students' prior knowledge was inadequate, both academically and linguistically, and wanted mechanisms that would allow them to reject such students (also after

they had been admitted). Simultaneously, they had little knowledge regarding which decisions were made where in the system and the distribution of roles between administrative and academic employees and about the different levels and the relationship between them (faculty, department, academic groups, academic management and administration). They were often unsure of their own role in this respect and of what was expected and required of them in relation to supervision and follow-up.

Even though the supervisor in the example quoted above did not think that the American supervisory practice was something to emulate, this illustrates how foreign supervisors are required to navigate nonapparent cultural codes and practices. In addition, we found that many participants felt that their experience, which formed part of the background for their employment, was not valued. They also indicated that there were few arenas in which to share experiences and discuss problems regarding supervision.

Views of the Model Compared With the Course As a Whole

The participants' opinions regarding the specific model of problem-based peer group mentoring were divided in our study. The evaluations revealed that some people thought it was too rigid and, therefore, prevented good discussions. Others, by far the majority, believed that it was precisely the rigid framework for when to ask questions and offer advice that played a critical role in getting to the heart of a problem. In addition, the method neutralised the informal power structures that allow some people to talk more than others. The model itself, with its strict rules, countered inappropriate power constellations, whereby people from different levels of a 'hierarchy of power' (e.g., an experienced male professor vs. a young recently hired female lecturer) were able to—and actually had to—contribute to the discussion.

It cannot be assumed that PPGM will necessarily counter the dynamics that often arise in discussions within an organisation. In one study, the 'novices' played the role of listeners instead of proactive participants (Deni and Malakolunthu 2013, p. 562). The form of mentoring that was practised in that study had no strict rules for turn-taking and questions (*who* can ask *what* and *when*), unlike the way our PPGM model was designed. We believe that a strict method is better suited to improving knowledge-sharing across formal and hierarchical information structures and roles than a looser structure. As mentioned, the logs revealed that what was initially presented as an individual and more personally oriented supervision problem was often redefined during the long and important Q&A round as a structural problem that should not or could not be resolved by individual supervisors on their own.

In the interviews, the participants noted that it was difficult to distinguish between the role the PPGM model offered compared with the design of the course as a whole (including, e.g., the group formation and seminars at the beginning and the end). However, all of the interviewees asserted that the model itself was a very important component because it prevented people from 'becoming passive participants', everyone got a chance to speak, and the rigid structure also helped bring the structural problems to the surface.

Furthermore, several participants also mentioned that having sessions over a period of time helped them become acquainted with not just the model but each other, enabling them to feel more secure and dive deeper into the problems. For many people, this sense of security stemmed from the fact that they were not talking to their closest colleagues but to people from other disciplines and departments and by confidentiality secured by rules governing the group discussions mentioned earlier. Thus, the design of the course, which included a great deal of group work, always across departments and disciplines, helped identify the structural aspects of supervision issues. The vast majority of the participants indicated that meeting colleagues from the whole faculty was an important element of the course. This showed them that problems could be solved in different ways than they were used to within their discipline because they learned about differences in supervisory practices and cultures at the faculty. It appears that it was the combination of the PPGM model and context in which it was used that led many people to consider the course a success.

Changes to Individual and Organisational Practice

There were no plans for a systematic evaluation of the project³ at the faculty level when the project was initiated, nor were supervisors surveyed before or after they took the course. Therefore, our discussion here is based on interviews with supervisors from the first three semesters because some time had passed since they took the course, as well as with people from the faculty management and the administration of teaching and studies regarding any changes they may have observed in supervisory practice and the structural conditions that interested us.

None of the informants reported that they had continued to use the PMM model for group discussions after the course ended, nor had any of them continued to meet each other in the groups once they returned to the pressure of everyday work. However, several people stated that the model *increased their awareness*, particularly in terms of the model's focus on illuminating the issue by asking the problem owner questions before discussing proposed solutions. Even though some people believed that their supervisory practice had not changed much, they also indicated that the model had 'considerably increased their awareness' and had an 'integrating' effect through knowledge-sharing across the faculty and that it had revealed 'certain unwritten rules about how things are done at a department'. Several people also offered supervision in groups because participating in the course and, as one of the informants put it, 'deprivatisation has filtered through from many directions'.

Interestingly, the course also resulted in certain changes to structural conditions and frameworks impacting on supervision. At two of the departments, the practice and procedures for assigning supervisors have changed as a direct result of people participating in working groups and local decision-making processes after the course. At one programme, it has become much easier for students to change their supervisor when there are problems with the student-supervisor relationship; this is a result of the insight gained on the course into practices and solutions in other programmes. However, the changes generally appear to be local for certain programmes and departments, ranging from major changes (like the structure of a master's programme or the practice for assigning supervisors) to minor or no changes.

The project appears to have led to two changes at the faculty level. One is a change to the supervision contracts between all students and supervisors. Even though this cannot *solely* be linked to the PPGM course, the need for change was highlighted in the feedback from supervisors on the contract and discussions during the course regarding 'the first supervision session', as well as clarifications of expectations between the student and supervisor. The dean of studies and administrative head of studies at the faculty used this information in the contract revisions. In addition, the reactions from recently hired foreign employees, as described above, turned out to be real eye-openers for the faculty administration and management. The participants' experiences highlighted the need for better communication not only concerning supervision but across all aspects of being a new employee in an institution with a different language and culture; these were considered when the faculty initiated a new project for onboarding of staff from other academic cultures than the Norwegian one.

Discussion

Currently, 56% of all supervisors (37%–69% of supervisors at its seven departments) participated in the faculty's PPGM project for supervisors of master's students. The primary intention of the course was to facilitate knowledge-sharing and problem-solving related to supervision at the micro level, but it also revealed problems that were primarily linked to structural challenges at the macro level. Numerous participants reported these problems, which were associated with practices for assigning supervisors, communication problems and a lack of contact between academic employees and administration and management, as well as a lack of knowledge of procedures, rules and the distribution of roles in connection with supervision, which was particularly evident in new employees from other academic cultures.

The interviews and evaluations reveal that the objective of facilitating a sharing culture between individuals through PPGM was generally successful. Many people were surprised by the supervisory practices at other units within the same faculty, which also helped reveal tacit knowledge of own practices, as well as within the organisation (Polanyi and Sen 2009). This corresponds well with Dorner and Belic (2021), who find that similar

³ Even though this was defined as a 'project' in the faculty's annual plan (Faculty of Humanities 2016), with a clear end date and key roles, many of the elements usually associated with a project and project methodology were missing (see, e.g., Briner et al. 2000), such as a project plan, risk analysis, project manager, clarification of roles, meeting points and interfaces with project participants, clear definition of objectives and milestones, status reports and evaluation.

conversations in their material ‘may open a path to institutional transformation [...] by virtue of teachers recognising that they are not alone’ (p. 220),

The original aim of the project was to facilitate knowledge-sharing within academic groups, programmes or departments, while the participants themselves emphasised the importance of meeting *others* as opposed to the people they shared a corridor with on a daily basis. Physical presence and ‘corridor talk’ may play an important role in knowledge-sharing within a unit, such as within a department at a faculty (Hurdley 2010). Yet working in the same unit may also become an obstacle to admitting weaknesses and discussing problems openly. Within research on organisational learning, it is well known that ties that bridge ‘structural holes’ or otherwise unconnected parts of a network have been found to increase creativity, as well as knowledge-sharing and institutional learning (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011; Burt 2004). Therefore, one of the key findings is that the interdepartmental meeting structure helped the participants discuss difficulties and problems in supervision while simultaneously contributing to knowledge-sharing. This illuminated differences and similarities, thus leading the participants to reflect on their own supervisory practices. As we have seen, several participants indicated that this made it easier to open up and be vulnerable about their own perceived inadequacies and made it possible to discuss problems related to (anonymised) colleagues or students, without having to worry that what they may have said would follow them in their everyday lives at work.

The importance of ‘distance’ to achieve ‘closeness’ is not something built into the model’s design. The participants were intuitively assigned to interdepartmental groups from the very beginning, which turned out to be important. Experiences and feedback led us to believe that it is unlikely that the model would have been as successful if the groups had consisted of people who already worked closely together.

In addition, bringing together supervisors who worked in different academic fields and departments also made it easier to bring structural problems—and ‘structural holes’ as Burt (2004) terms it—to the surface *as* structural problems. This enabled participants to see that the resource allocation, some of the governance principles and the responsibilities of administrative and academic staff, and the guidelines for issues like the practice of assigning students to supervisors, were different elsewhere. Participants also encountered colleagues who did not have the exact same framework within the same work unit or had found different solutions to limitations and challenges. This also implied that we, as course instructors and group leaders, gained a greater awareness of the importance of the macro perspective, and constantly saw how the micro and macro aspects were interwoven. By adjusting the course design, the project slightly shifted its focus from problems and knowledge-sharing at the *micro level* to recognition that *problems at the macro level* may have a major impact on the micro level.

Another consequence of the structural problems that came to the surface—and the increased awareness of this—was that it gave us the opportunity to involve decision makers at a higher level of the organisation. This enabled them to help solve problems that were (originally) perceived as being *personal* (for the individual supervisor) at the overarching or structural level. Even though the faculty’s management did not plan to participate actively in the PPGM project and primarily considered their role to be that of an initiator, they were brought into the final evaluations and panel discussions with participants as early as the first semester of the course. This gave the management the opportunity to hear what structural (and other) problems arose; moreover, it also appeared important to the participants in the sense that they were given an opportunity to directly report back to management on matters that concerned them.

To what extent did the project contribute to changes to the supervision culture and structural framework? The project’s original aims did not express any expectations or objectives in terms of permanent changes for each supervisor, nor was anything said about how to evaluate these. Having a better understanding of structural components and a ‘baseline’ for supervision practices across the faculty would have made documentation of changes possible and would be advised if the focus of the project was on understanding organisational learning. Hence, we have only been able to touch upon changes indirectly via interviews and interpretations of plans, logs and documents.

In an old legacy organisation, such as that in our case, there are several factors that may *impede* change and development of a sharing culture and communication across and between different levels of the organisation. Part of the reason could be that this academic institution is a large, old and diverse organisation with strong and wide-ranging academic environments that are used to having a large degree of autonomy. There has also been a large gap between the academic and the administrative lines and among the three levels of the organisation (department, faculty and university) that might look different at another institution.

Furthermore, the planning documents and strategies we reviewed generally do not mention a sharing culture, knowledge-sharing or internal communication. For example, internal communication was explicitly excluded from the new strategy for use of digital media at the university implemented the spring of 2020 (UiO 2020).

The university in question has a long history of considerable disparities in power and hierarchy between academic and administrative employees, which is not unlike other universities with a long tradition. Research on knowledge-sharing and learning in organisations reveals that differences in power and status can have a negative influence on the manner in which an organisation learns and lead to less experimentation and development of shared objectives (Argote 2012). Because the institution in our case is mainly a hierarchical and line-managed

organisation, the lines of communication are more rigid than in a matrix organisation or project-based organisation. This was also cited as a problem by one of the participants we interviewed. Therefore, the meeting points and cooperation between different groups of employees and different levels are more fixed over time than in numerous other organisations. In other words, the type of communication arenas that were available to participants over time in the PPGM project are rare at the faculty in our case study.

Further, even though collaboration between academic and administrative employees has improved during the past couple of decades, knowledge remains sparse within both groups regarding the competence each group possesses and the challenges they face at work. Numerous administrative employees have little knowledge of how supervision takes place in practice, what challenges supervisors encounter and how they can help. Similarly, many academic employees have little knowledge regarding how the administration can help them solve problems or improve working conditions for both supervisors and students. Many academic employees also lack knowledge about the legislation and guidelines that the administration is bound by and which prevent the sharing of information on, for example, students' illnesses or the grade a student receives on a master's thesis which an academic employee has spent a great deal of time supervising.

In addition, we asked about change in interviews, and the feedback indicates that numerous people have gained a greater awareness of the role of the supervisor, how it is practised elsewhere and a better understanding of other supervision procedures. However, relatively few changes appear to have been made to the individual supervisors' practices, which varies from one person to the next.

In research on organisational learning, it is often emphasised that change depends on some form of documentation or establishment of knowledge through, for example, procedures or practice:

For organizational learning to occur, the individual would have to embed the knowledge in a repository such as a database, routine or transactive memory system. By embedding the knowledge in a supra-individual routine, the knowledge would persist even if the member who acquired the knowledge left the organization and other members could access the knowledge. (Argote 2012, p. 20).

It has not been possible to perform a systematic evaluation of this type of procedure or practice. This makes it difficult to comment on whether individual changes have also resulted in any other broad and permanent changes in the organisation at a macro level, beyond the examples that came to light in the interviews—such as some changes to programme structure, local practices for assigning supervisors and changes to supervision contracts at the faculty. Nevertheless, an interesting and largely unintentional change sparked by the project was the development of a new programme for onboarding new employees from other academic cultures. To a large extent, this was made possible because the two administrative co-organisers of the PPGM course in discussions with the course instructors were able to quickly pick up on the issues that came to the surface during the PPGM sessions and functioned as 'structural bridges' both between the different hierarchical levels in the organisation and between the perspectives and roles of academic and administrative staff. The onboarding programme for international employees was implemented more quickly because of this knowledge transfer. Thus, we realise that, even though no evaluation of the project was planned at an individual level, nor were there any ambitions for institutional learning at the faculty level, important changes also did take place at the macro level.

Concluding Comments

This chapter has revealed that the sharing of experiences between different levels of the organisation and the micro and macro levels must be incorporated into supervision practices to a greater extent than is currently the case. It should also guide the use and development of peer group mentoring as a model in this context. If an organisation is to learn and change as a result of this type of project, this cannot only be linked to individuals at the micro level but should also be linked more clearly to objectives for the organisation itself and for sharing and storing knowledge generated by the project. From this perspective, PPGM can be considered an important part of an organisation's internal communication and development and not only something that is associated with individual development.

Individuals are better at capturing and transferring nuances and tacit knowledge, while procedures, guidelines, written advice, help menus and so forth are less sensitive to nuances. However, they are also less likely to be forgotten when people leave or their responsibilities change. When attempting to create a better culture of sharing, it is important to bear in mind these prerequisites for knowledge-sharing among individuals and in organisations, as well as the design of physical meeting places and premises (Ambler et al. 2014).

We believe that any further work on PPGM as a method should, at the outset, establish whether the objective is development and change at the micro and/or macro level(s). It is a bit of a paradox that the 'deprivatisation' of

supervision was largely intended to take place ‘privately’ (for each supervisor). By bringing in the macro level and involving faculty management and administration in the course design during the process—which the literature shows to be an important success factor for peer group mentoring—and by exploring this in greater detail in this chapter, we have attempted to ensure that learning at the macro level within the organisation is also part of the postproject discussions and development of institutional knowledge.

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