

Women Mentoring Women: Strategies for Success

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Abstract

Women mentoring women is not often seen in the workplace. Women have found they have to create their own formal and informal relationships in order to enjoy the same benefits that “the old boys clubs” have naturally done for years. Formal and informal mentoring can offer many benefits for women leaders and leaders-to-be, including developing increased leadership skills, sharing problem-solving techniques, and networking for success. This presentation will define some strategies for finding or becoming a mentor and developing strategic mentoring partnerships.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling

The Civil Rights Act of 1991 established a “Glass Ceiling Commission” to conduct a study and prepare recommendations concerning eliminating artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities. The study focused on increasing the opportunities and development experiences of women and minorities to foster advancement of women and minorities to management and decision-making positions in business. The Commission’s full report, “Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation’s Human Capital,” identified seven business practices to break the glass ceiling, including leadership and career development; rotation/nontraditional employment; mentoring; accountability programs; succession planning; workforce diversity initiatives; and family friendly programs.

“A Solid Investment: Making Full Use of the Nation’s Human Capital,” published in November 1995, further outlines these “best practices” as the Commission’s recommendations, specifying that organizations:

...establish formal mentoring programs that provide career guidance to prepare minorities and women for senior positions.

The Leadership Foundation Fellows Program

The results of the Glass Ceiling Commission laid the groundwork for recognizing that mentoring programs for women and minorities were needed. The Leadership Foundation Fellows Program¹ was formed exactly with the Glass Ceiling Commission's recommendations in mind. Developed in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Labor and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the one-year (part-time) Fellows Program incorporates a customized case study program at Harvard, in-service training with various experts, leadership and network development, individual strategic planning and development, and a one-on-one mentoring relationship. In 1995-1996, 11 fellows (including the author) participated in the Fellows Program, after a nationwide competitive selection process. In this Program, now in its third year, Fellows were matched in a one-on-one relationship with a Mentor, who was a member of the International Women's Forum (IWF) and a top achiever in her field, such as health care, education, technology, finance, the arts, philanthropy, community service, entrepreneurs, government, and industry. The mentoring aspect of the program lasted for 14 days, which were scheduled throughout the year by the individual Fellow and her Mentor. These "mentor days" could be used for on-the-job training, leadership development, networking, shadowing on the job, working on specific research projects, etc. In addition to the one-on-one relationship with the assigned Mentor, Fellows had access to the entire IWF membership, which includes women from all across the United States and 16 countries.

This paper outlines some of the author's experiences in the Fellows Program and discusses aspects of women mentoring women and strategies for success.

Was the First Mentor a Woman?

Homer's "The Odyssey" presents the first mentor, who interestingly appears to have been a woman. "Mentor" advised and guided the young Telemachus as he searched for the fate of his father in this epic poem. Mentor, however, was actually played by the goddess Athena (also known as Minerva from ancient Greek mythology) who disguised herself as a man. Today, mentoring affects many aspects of personal development and organizational behavior including leadership, organizational culture, job satisfaction, and performance. The model of a modern day mentor spans the spectrum of definitions: a trusted advisor or guide, a confidante or role model, a coach or teacher, a counselor or friend. The role of a modern day mentoring relationship also comes in many shapes and sizes, such as orienting new employees to a company, introducing someone to a new field, expanding one's professional network of contacts, or actively promoting one's career. Appelbaum et al defines mentoring as a voluntary pairing of two individuals for mutual personal and corporate gain.

¹The Leadership Foundation is the educational and charitable arm of the International Women's Forum (IWF), which is a global association of top women leaders around the world. The purpose of the Leadership Foundation is to use the experience and expertise developed by the IWF members to benefit women worldwide and to educate the public about the contributions women can make, and are making to, society.

Why Do Women Need Mentors?

Research has shown that mentoring, overall, greatly improves career progression, professional development, and job satisfaction. Further, research shows that most corporate presidents had mentors, and that people who had mentors earned higher salaries than those who did not. The Glass Ceiling Commission, in turn, identified that mentoring is a key method of executive development but that few, if any, formal or informal programs existed for women and minorities.

Men have been mentoring other men for years, both formally and informally. In Brian Gay's article, "What is Mentoring?," he quotes research by Levinson et al, stating that "mentoring has been a vehicle for further advantaging the advantaged." Charles Jackson, in his article, "Mentoring: Choices for Individuals and Organizations," also points out that:

...naturally occurring mentoring was likely to exclude women and minorities, because most potential mentors would be middle/senior managers, who were predominately white and male. This would certainly be true if there was a tendency, as was thought probable, to mentor someone in [his] own image.

Further, Barton Cunningham, in "Facilitating a Mentorship Programme," recognizes that only a very small percentage of motivated and capable employees ever receive formal mentoring. This is true particularly for women and minorities, the two groups who, in many cases, most require the assistance of mentors. He continues by noting that consciously or unconsciously grooming specific types of employees with distinct backgrounds for key management positions "...is often undertaken to reinforce the organization's cultural norms, traditions, and underlying values." This form of career succession, enabled by what is sometimes referred to as an "old boys' network," supports the notion that "who you know" is more important than "what you know."

Anyone can benefit from a mentor, and research has shown that both genders benefit positively from mentoring. The issues are to what extent women and minorities have access to mentoring and how can a mentoring culture be developed that gives these traditionally underrepresented groups opportunities for mentoring. In many fields, there have been few, if any, women at the top, not to mention at the working levels, to serve as role models or mentors. So why do women need mentors? Mostly for the same reasons that men do. These many reasons include: to increase visibility, share experiences, learn the ropes, gain access to networks, increase opportunities, have someone to ask for advice and guidance, see an objective viewpoint, diversify, expand resources, boost self confidence, empathize, gain feedback, hear encouragement, and have doors opened that might otherwise have been closed. But perhaps the main reason is to get more women in upper leadership positions by helping them get there through education, resources, connections, and guidance. Joan Jeruchim and Pat Shapiro, in a study of 106 successful business women, found that 77 percent had a mentor. Although the remaining women had achieved success without a mentor, most felt they would have climbed the corporate ladder faster had they had one.

The Leadership Foundation Fellows Program is an example of a program that aims to promote the advancement of women through mentoring by matching top women in their fields with up-and-coming young women. In fact, the experiences of this program have so far identified that a need still exists for women to keep an eye out for each other and to stick together -- both within their own fields and by branching out into other fields -- and to create and nurture both formal and informal professional networks.

Creating a Mentor Culture

A “mentor culture” can be defined as the environment of a particular industry, organization, or group that is conducive to mentoring and to individual development. The mentoring culture varies greatly by the industry, the field, and the organization. For example, a culture may exist in a particular industry or organization that actively promotes the value of mentoring and seeks to match senior and junior staff on a regular basis. A different organization may feel that it hires the best and the brightest, and therefore these people shouldn’t need any help. For women, the culture may also be influenced by the amount of women in the pipeline and their willingness to support other women.

Unfortunately, even if a mentor culture does exist, many women wait to be chosen by a mentor, rather than actively seeking one. Or, they do not realize they have a mentor and instead attribute coaching or advice given by a senior colleague to be friendship. This can result in missed opportunities.

One of the goals of the Leadership Foundation Fellows Program is to establish a mentor culture for women, in which women leaders actively offer their services as a mentor and young women realize the benefits of mentoring early on in their careers. A mentoring culture is developed through the after-program activities of both Fellows and Mentors. Each Fellow made a commitment to passing on her experiences and identifying opportunities for mentoring within her own organization and/or community. [For example, this paper and the subsequent discussions at the Business Leadership Forum in Tulsa enables a forum for discussing mentoring for women and in creating strategies for success.]

Perhaps the most important aspect of a mentor culture, though, is learning how to be a mentor to others and passing this on.

The Mentor Match

So how does one go about finding a mentor, or becoming one? First, one must identify what it is that she would like to learn or gain from a mentor. Finding the best mentor may depend on the stage in one’s life or career and what one’s greatest needs are at the time. Advice, information, and personal support might be a good start or might not be enough. A person just starting out in her career or in a new field or at a new organization might seek a mentor who can introduce her to top management or give her visibility with new clients. A person wishing to change careers might seek a mentor in the new field who can help her identify and develop the skills and the contacts in order to make the change happen. A woman who has a family might prefer a mentor who has children and who can provide a good sense of work/life balance.

Mentoring relationships should be complementary, and don't necessarily have to be conducted within the same organization or even within the same field. If one aspires to write a novel, an appropriate mentor might be a successful author or a publisher. If one is a filmmaker and wants to promote a certain documentary, an appropriate mentor might be a producer or a financier or a foundation that could sponsor the film.

Consider opportunities for career synergy as well. For example, an operations research analyst in the defense industry might wish to translate her career skills to the humanitarian aid sector. An appropriate mentor might be a leader in a disaster relief agency or the United Nations. Or, an engineer with international business experience might be matched with a mentor involved in technology and market development. On the other hand, sometimes mentoring relationships are best suited when they occur within the same field or within similar positions in the field. An example might be a senior administrator in a major healthcare system seeking a mentor who is a CEO or head of a larger system. In all cases, the basis for selecting a mentor is the individual goals and needs of the potential protégée.

As an example of formal mentor matching, the Leadership Foundation Fellows program matched Fellows with Mentors and required the two meet for a total of 14 work days scheduled over the year to meet the individual needs of the Fellow. This match was made using several tools. First, potential Fellows wrote an essay as part of the application process outlining what they would like to learn from a mentor. Then, at the Fellows orientation when the Fellows were introduced to the overall program, each Fellow was interviewed by a researcher to further define her needs and goals for the mentoring aspect. Meanwhile, the Leadership Foundation had developed a pool of potential Mentors from the International Women's Foundation and subsequently sought to match the Fellows with Mentors in this pool, based on the essays and personal interviews with the Fellows and the knowledge of the skills of the particular Mentors. In some cases, a match was easily made, and others took more time. The intent was to develop as "perfect" a match as possible, but sometimes matches might not work out due to personality differences, scheduling difficulties, or changes in expectations.

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

What if a match doesn't work out? Or what if it's time to move on and end the relationship? This can and does happen and, in fact, is a natural progression of most mentoring relationships. If one finds herself in mentor match that is not as successful as she would like, try to understand why. For example, is it because of personality or value differences? Have the expectations of the protégée changed or evolved? Have job or family situations changed? Or, maybe the mentor or the protégée doesn't have the time to commit to the relationship? The best way of handling these differences or changes is to discuss them up front and to communicate. Perhaps something can be worked out, or perhaps it is time to move on. A mutual parting of the ways may be appropriate and is certainly acceptable. One may even eventually outgrow or surpass one's mentor. This, too, can be a natural progression of the relationship but may cause some discomfort on the part of either the mentor or the protégée, especially if they remain in the same organization or end up reporting to one another.

Mentoring Really Does Work!

Numerous examples can be cited of how mentoring helps women achieve greater career progression, job satisfaction, and visibility. Two are cited here. One woman, named Kerry (not her real name), attributes her shift from a mid-level staff position to a faster career track as the result of her working with two female mentors within her company, one whose advice she sought and the other who approached her after hearing she was applying for a new position. The two women mentors teamed to help Kerry understand the environment of the new position. They role-played her future management as well as clients, and ran her through several mock interviews and skill enhancement exercises. Although the company does not have a formal mentor program, it has a culture that highly values mentoring, individual development, and employee training and retention. Kerry notes that through the mentors, she tremendously boosted her self-esteem which prepared her for the interview and the new track she is now on. She also became aware of the potential traps in that part of the company and was prepared to work successfully in that environment.

Another woman, named Phyllis, attributes many of her successes to having three mentors at different stages of her career. An engineer, she found an excellent mentor within her company who supported her activities and provided unending encouragement. Appropriately, this mentor—a retired military officer—was part of the same establishment in which she was searching to fit in. Although he may not have fully empathized with her experiences, he knew the system and the attitudes and thus could provide a perspective from which she could develop approaches to solving problems. Phyllis's second mentor, an older woman she met outside of work, provided personal development, support, and encouragement and offered her insights into the life of an independent thinker and entrepreneur. The third mentor, matched through a formal program, came from a different field and from a different generation. She provided Phyllis with the look “up and out” of her current career and enabled her access to fields and skills way beyond her current visions. Today, Phyllis is a senior executive at a Fortune 500 company.

Strategies for Success

The following two pages offer the author's personal strategies for success, for both those who want to find a mentor and those who want to be a mentor. These strategies are based on the author's own experiences from the Leadership Foundation Fellows Program as well as observations and recollections of her own career. Use these strategies to help yourself or to help others, and feel free to offer your own strategies as well!

So You Want to Be a Protégée: Facktor's Strategies for Success

1. Make it Happen

If your company offers a formal mentor program, do whatever it takes to get involved. If not, start looking for a mentor on your own, whether in your own organization, in a professional society, or in your local community. Seek out someone you respect or admire and ask for their support. Or, ask others for recommendations.

2. Know Yourself

Perhaps the most important item you can bring to a mentoring relationship is yourself. Prepare a self assessment and share this with your mentor. Ask yourself these questions: What are my skills? How do I view them? Where do I view them as having been applied in my current life? How have these skills been successful? What are the skills I would like to acquire and why? What kinds of things (e.g., markets, activities, work situations) appeal to me?

Take one of the personality tests, such as Myers-Briggs or Kiersey Temperament test, to see where your personality style falls on a spectrum. Simple versions of these tests can be found on the internet, and taken and scored within minutes.

Share this self assessment with your mentor and discuss her impressions and perceptions to your responses. Invite her to your office, and visit her in hers, such that you understand each other's work environment.

3. Look Beyond Your Field and Expertise

Mentoring relationships should be complementary, and don't necessarily have to be conducted within the same field. Look for a mentor who might complement your skills or give you access to a portion of your organization, field, or industry or individuals not before accessible to you.

4. Define Expectations

Define the purpose of what you would like to learn from a mentor and how you will develop, obtain, and nurture the mentoring relationship. It is crucial for both you and your mentor to communicate your expectations.

5. Develop a Mentoring Plan and Strategy

After conducting the self-assessment and identifying expectations from the mentoring relationship, develop a mentoring plan and strategy. Identify the activities associated with each aspect and create modules to cover each activity.

6. Make a Commitment

Make the most of your mentoring relationship. Follow through on your mentoring plan and strategy. Respect each other's schedules, commitments, and sacrifices. Prepare for each meeting with your mentor ahead of time. Take the initiative to follow through on suggestions of your mentor, especially if she took the time to identify an opportunity that might be of interest to you or is sharing her contacts with you.

7. Communicate

Find a venue that works with you and your mentor, whether it be conference calls, impromptu E-mail messages, voicemail messages, faxes, or in-person visits. As issues come up, bring them up! If expectations are not being met, or are changing, then discuss them. Above all, don't forget to say "thank you" to your mentor.

8. Be Flexible and Creative

Take the opportunity to try new things and to do something you hadn't thought of before. Broaden your horizons and see what your mentor has to offer.

9. Take Time to Think

So often in our busy daily lives, we just "do" without taking the time to think. A mentoring relationship creates a focus is on your individual development. Take the opportunity to further it.

10. Pass it On!

Be a mentor to others. Pass on your own advice and newfound experiences. Be there when someone asks you to help. Offer your experiences to others. Match up another mentor within your organization. Encourage women to be role models for other women.

So You Want to Be a Mentor: Facktor's Strategies for Success

1. Volunteer

The first step in being a mentor is to volunteer yourself as one! Keep an eye out for new women in your organization. Offer your expertise and insights to a more junior staff member. Role play an upcoming job interview or proposal. Promote opportunities for other women within your organization. If your organization offers a formal program, join it! If not, don't wait or start one yourself!

2. Commit Your Time & Energy

It takes an incredible commitment to be a mentor. One of the biggest challenges is finding the time to do this and having the energy to follow through. Find time to meet with your protégée in person, and take the time to listen, to return phone calls or E-mail messages, or to strategize long-term goals. Perhaps your protégée could accompany you on a business trip. Find ways to synergize your time, such as by traveling or attending conferences together or meeting half-way.

3. Listen

Listening is a skill of any good leader, and a mentor is no exception. Listen to the protégée's goals, expectations, problems and actively find ways to help if you can. Listen to new ideas: you might learn something! Keep an open ear. Provide feedback on what you hear.

4. Team with Other Mentors

Locate or identify other mentors in your organization or community and use each other as a resource. Perhaps develop and offer training for new mentors. Pool your ideas and resources to provide opportunities for other women. Pass on your experiences and lessons learned.

5. Identify Expectations

Identify your expectations for the mentoring relationship, the role you would like to play, or what you have to offer. Understand the tangible and intangible benefits. Perhaps your protégée can help you with a particular project that would enhance her skills or expose her to new ones. Offer up what you wish someone had offered to you.

6. Develop a Mentoring Plan and Strategy

Work together with your protégée in developing a mentoring plan and strategy. What elements will you provide to the plan? Are there people you would like to introduce her to? Are there leadership activities that you would like her to participate in? Point out specific areas of interest or improvement.

7. Offer Your Resources

Share your networks and offer your vast resources to your protégée. Show her the ropes and the pitfalls. Arrange for her to meet your colleagues, experts in the field, or someone who could help her career. Help her build her own network. Work together in expanding yours.

8. Learn from Your Protégée

You may be surprised at how much you can learn from your protégée. Maybe she offers a different point of view, or shows tremendous insight in something you've been taking for granted. Keep an open mind, be flexible. Have fun!

9. Tell Her the Things Her Mother Wouldn't

A mentoring relationship can be very trusting and close. Your mentor will grow to trust you to be frank with her, and you may be the only one to help with certain skills, such as first impressions, public speaking, or even dress. If you see something that needs improvement, point out strategies for correcting it. She'll thank you for it.

10. Pass it On!

As the mentor, you can work toward developing a mentoring culture within your own organization and community, and helping your protégée to become a mentor herself. Your efforts can lead to providing the opportunities for other women to break the glass ceiling; to move up the ranks to executive offices, corporate boards, political appointee positions; to own their own businesses; etc. The mentoring culture can start at any age or any position, from the youngest child to a senior executive. Pave the way for those who will follow you!

Summary

In summary, mentoring can offer many personal and professional benefits for men and women alike. Formal programs for women mentoring women, however, can help create a mentoring culture for encouraging the development of women and promoting them to the highest ranks. The Leadership Foundation Fellows Program provides one such venue.

Remember, anyone can be a mentor or find a mentor, with a little perseverance and a lot of creativity. Seek opportunities to offer your expertise and encouragement to those around you and don't be afraid to ask others to be a mentor.

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