

Mentoring Women Over the Generations:
How has it changed and Ideas to Make it Work Better for Women in the 21st Century?

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Abstract

Mentoring programs are beneficial as a whole, but they are especially helpful in assisting women navigate the workforce and in their ascent to the top of the leadership ladder. A mentoring program's success is defined by the outcome of the relationship, whether formal or informal. The metrics to measure this success rate are typically developed in formal programs, especially women's development programs. This is because of their structure and funding by the third party offering them - typically the workplace organization sponsoring (i.e. funding) them. It is markedly more difficult to quantify a set of measurement criteria in an informal setting due to the lack of formal structure. However, these informal network relationships are a crucial component within the mentoring framework that women need in order to improve their odds of reaching the top of the leadership ladder. More research is needed on informal mentoring "programs" and how to effectively utilize them both as the mentor and mentee to expand on the success of them in helping women reach their potential. Adding to the work to be done by those dedicated to seeing women succeed in navigating the labyrinth is educating and encouraging organizations to address the unintended consequence of the #MeToo movement on mentoring relationships on male leaders who want to see the female leadership pipeline full but are hesitant to engage for fear of backlash.

To increase gender diversity in the workplace just add women and stir! When that does not work, perhaps it is that women are the problem? If so, fix the women to make them more masculine in their leadership characteristics and diversity will be the result. When that approach yields little to no success, one has to ask what does work since it is apparent the one-size-fits-all model approach has effectively failed.

This paper's purpose is to examine formal and informal mentoring program concepts and how they have evolved over the last several decades. The first section will examine the benefits of mentoring programs, the second part will review and assess both formal and informal mentoring approaches. The use of RCT in mentoring relationships to improve mentoring program efficacy and the groundbreaking new theory of intergenerational mentoring and reverse mentoring will be covered in part three. Finally, this paper will give an overview of and recommendations for how to begin addressing the unfortunate and unintended consequences of the #MeToo Movement on cross-gender mentoring relationships.

I., Women in the Working World and the Benefits of Mentoring

Women continue to be underrepresented in management and leadership positions despite the fact that “the gender differences that do exist are perceived” and not a reality when comes to leadership abilities. (Tan, 2024) Mentoring within the workplace or between professionals is the act of creating intentional relationships between individuals that are designed to help facilitate success in one's career, which can help overcome obstacles to achievement of management positions in an organization. “Having a mentor is one pathway around barriers women face along the path to top leadership, and the lack of mentoring may contribute to the disproportionate under-

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representation of women in top positions in business.” (Schipani et al., 2009) Multiple studies support the conclusion that mentoring programs are overwhelmingly positive in the benefits they convey to participants, especially women. (Schipani et al., 2009)

Women now make up a majority of their college and graduate school graduates on average. (Richard V. Reeves et al., 2022) Despite women’s collegiate success resulting from the passage of Title IX in 1972, women are not staying in the workforce or climbing the leadership ladder in the expected numbers. In fact, women are leaving their professions before retirement or “off-ramping” instead of remaining on competitive leadership and management tracks in large numbers within about ten years of completing their education. (Miles, 2013) There are a multitude of reasons from a lack of opportunities within their respective organizations to ingrained structural obstacles within their organizations that conflict with family obligations making a competitive leadership-oriented career impossible.¹

Mentoring programs are often intended to help reduce this off-ramping as well as increase diversity in organizations, and they have been successful to some degree. The number of women climbing the leadership ladder has increased over the last several decades; however, women are not making the substantive gains one would expect to see at this juncture. In 2011, women only made-up 2.2 percent of the chief executive officers in *Fortune 500* companies and held only 15% of the seats on boards or were officers of those entities in the United States. Globally the numbers are not much better and when examining the statistics for women of color, the numbers drop

¹ Women remain defined by the traditional societal expectations defining them as mothers, wives, and homemakers as well as remain responsible for more than double the amount of work related to maintaining a home and raising the children, which directly impacts the number of hours available to climb the corporate ladder outside the standard workday. The result may then that the woman does not seek leadership roles, off-ramps to raise her family, or remains in traditionally feminine jobs in the search for work-life balance. (Miles, 2013)

precipitously. (Ely et al., 2011) In the last ten to twelve years the numbers have not increased significantly or changed altogether that much thus the 2011 statement “progress in women’s advancement achieved over the past several decades has slowed considerably in recent years” still holds true. (Ely et al., 2011)

In addition to the above, the “implicit bias or nonvoluntary associations/ [stereotypical] beliefs” that exist within organizations characterize women as characteristically unsuited for leadership thereby creating an incongruity that hurts women’s advancement. Not just because the incongruity perpetuates false stereotypes, but also because it adversely impacts a woman’s ability to develop her identity as a leader. (Tan, 2024) This second-generation gender bias can be toxic to women seeking leadership opportunities over the course of their careers.

One of the most effective responses to the above dilemmas are well-designed female-centric mentoring programs. Mentoring is a vital component of leadership development since it “allows the protegee to examine leadership as seen in the mentors and this perspective may increase the protegee’s understanding of a key concept in a particular professional world.” The overwhelming consensus is that mentees reap positive benefits. This is especially true for women in their development as leaders. Well-designed female centric programs can help a woman undergo the “fundamental identity shift” necessary “to see oneself as well as to be seen by others, as a leader.” (Ibarra et al., 2013) Specifically, mentoring young or new employees as they progress through their careers has been demonstrated to improve outcomes of those employees, in particular, women. (Ibarra et al., 2013)

Research has further shown that mentored women show increased opportunities for success in their current positions; increased odds of success in advancing up the corporate ladder increased

loyalty to employers; higher salaries and better compensation packages; increased satisfaction with their work-life balance; increased leadership aspirations; stronger networking skills; stronger negotiating skills; and improved mental health. These outcomes are logical results when one considers that “Mentoring is based upon mutual purposes.”² (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016) (Rosenbach & Taylor, 1993 as cited in Fitzpatrick, 1996)

Mentoring’s benefits are not limited to simple career advancement information and guidance. Mentors give their mentees legitimacy in the office, may provide a buffer to discriminatory conduct, and often offer guidance in navigating “politics in the office.” One of the most significant benefits of a strong mentoring relationship is the mentor’s ability to provide “reflected power by signaling that an individual has a powerful sponsor.” (Schipani et al., 2009)

The impact of lack of mentoring has been reflected in studies showing slower upward climbs by women or in some cases, outright failure in a position. For example, one study in the academic arena found the lack of mentoring programs for women can result in setting them up for failure by placing them in positions of leadership before they have developed the requisite skillset to perform the job. This may result in their overall lack of success on the leadership track as well as increased personal difficulties. All of these tend to result in women exiting leadership roles in higher numbers than men as well as suffering from the perception they lack as much power and influence as their male counterparts. (Fitzpatrick, 1996)

² This paper does not address the issues surrounding women’s lack of support or desire to mentor other women or the Queen Bee Syndrome, but these issues do exist and have an adverse impact on women’s advancement opportunities in their careers.

II. Mentoring: Formal Programs and Informal Networks

That said between all the corporate initiatives to build diversity in gender within the workforce and the clear benefits that mentoring programs provide, how is it that there are still so few women in leadership? One variable, but perhaps the most critical, is the structure and makeup of mentoring programs. Mentoring is not something that happens in a “social vacuum” by simply teaching a person the “right leadership skills” that are then executed in the office environment. (Ibarra et al., 2013) Mentoring women as opposed to men needs to be different since a woman’s life and work experiences are fundamentally different than their male counterparts. This, in conjunction with the myopic focus some organizations maintain on what characteristics define a leader, inhibit the growth trajectory of women in leadership.

Formal programs are those designed by organizations and typically involve matching a more senior employee to a more junior employee in a structured program with a set of objectives or skillsets the mentee is expected to acquire over the course of the relationship. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of a formal mentoring program is that it is facilitated (and often) funded by a third party employing the mentee and mentor. The benefits of a formal program are the ability to design a set of goals, objectives, and measurement metrics to gauge its success which enables the program to be consistent in its expectations among the mentors and mentees over a period of time. (Law et al., 2023)

These mentoring relationships and leadership programs are designed to grow an individual over the course of one’s career / set period of time, and for the women-centric programs, they should also include educational components that enable women to educate others about the

negative effect of automatically assuming the traditional male leader profile is in fact, the only profile of a leader.

Given the benefits of formal mentoring programs, it is necessary for organizations to develop and implement women to women programs. It is the intentional pairing component of these programs that is important because there are so few women in senior level positions as compared to men. Importantly, the relationship also serves the valuable purpose of providing not just a role model for a junior woman, but a way to begin developing one's identity as a female leader in a more structured setting. It is critical women understand the need to create and develop their identity not just as a professional woman, but as a woman with leadership capabilities and aspirations.

The benefits of these formal programs is not contested, but they are not without their flaws. In her analysis of women's pathways to leadership in the Duke Law Journal of Gender Law and Policy, Schipani highlights Stacey Blake-Beard's assessment that formal mentoring programs do have drawbacks. She cites to the fact the relationship length tends to be shorter than those cultivated within informal mentoring systems and they tend not to provide the same level, if any of the psycho-social support women seek out in relationships. (Blake-Beard, 2001 as cited in Schipani et al., 2009)

A more recent addition to the formal programs that exist are women's leadership development programs. In their analysis of women's leadership development programs, Ibarra, Herminia, Ely, Robin, and Kolb point out, "most organizational structures and work practices were designed when women had only a small presence in the labor force" and therefore the structure of the systems are designed by men for men. This can result in a "vicious cycle" of disenfranchising women because men are considered to be more qualified or a "better fit for leadership roles" simply because the

system was designed with them in mind. (Ely et al., 2011) For example, networking events are often out of the office outside normal business hours and are a form of second-generation gender bias. Golf, happy hours, and other occasions that enable people to build informal networking relationships – social capital –are often most utilized by men. (Ely et al., 2011) This second-generation gender bias may be unintentional, but it can have detrimental effects on a woman's career trajectory, if not addressed competently and effectively.

Tan concurs with this analysis over thirteen years later by pointing out that the initial research performed in 1973 on gender and leadership, the “think manager-think male paradigm” created role incongruity with women leading to barriers in women's advancement. As such, women's leadership programs needed to address this by creating programs that enabled women to focus on “expanding...[their]...individual and collective capacity to be effective in leadership roles...such as leader identity, self-awareness, leader self-efficacy, and leadership competencies...” all of which are enhanced when presented with development opportunities. Tan further points out that these social identities cannot be achieved in a singular workshop or class but must be interwoven into the working environment. (Tan, 2024)

Thus, the need to also encourage informal mentoring networks for women that work in tandem with the formal programs. An informal networking environment accessible to women can serve as an opportunity to build social capital as well as build relationships that are compassionate in their ability to provide emotional support. These informal mentoring relationships may or may not exist within one's workplace organization but are more organic in their origination.

Interestingly, women tend to build “functionally differentiated networks” obtaining professional support and emotional support from different sources. (Men on the other hand, tend

to prefer multi-functional male-dominated networks.) (Ely et al., 2011) Regardless of the rationale behind why the network format is different, the network(s) serve vital purposes throughout a woman's career by aiding in her career development. "Informal networks can shape career trajectories by regulating access to jobs; channeling the flow of information and referrals; creating influence and reputation; supplying emotional support, feedback, political advice, and protection; and increasing the likelihood and speed of promotion (e.g. Burt 1992; Granovetter, 1985, Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ibarra, 1993; Podolny & Baron, 1997; Westphal & Milton, 2001)." (Ely et al., 2011)

The use of an informal network can extend from small groups that meet for lunch to group message chats to evening/ weekend get-togethers, or all the above. These "networking-mentoring relationships are less intense and entail less commitment...[and]...they are less subject to the principles of homogeneity" but they offer women a variety of role models and leadership styles from which she can begin to develop or refine her own sense of style thereby increasing a woman's independence and self-confidence. This type of informal mentoring relationship may not have undergone the more rigorous studies formal mentoring programs have since the metrics to measure success are harder to quantify, but they are considered to be an important component of women's leadership development. (Rosenbach & Taylor, 1993 as cited in Fitzpatrick, 1996)

Informal mentoring deserves in depth research so its strengths and weaknesses can be measured and improved upon given its ability to highly influence and impact women in such a positive manner.

III. New Ideas and Concepts for Mentoring in the 21st Century

A large part of understanding how women relate requires understanding how women develop and sustain relationships. In the 1970's, psychologists examining the psychological treatment of women determined the traits of "valorization of independent success and competitive achievement" – "becoming one's own man", which were primarily associated with male development were not necessarily the same traits exhibited by psychologically healthy women. (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016) Females, the psychologists observed when psychologically healthy tended to be engaged in "psychologically centered relationships" with others. Central to Relational Cultural Theory, or RCT is the premise that; "...women typically grow in connection with others, and that relationships and connections with others exist in concert with one's culture." (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016) RCT in a therapeutic setting has been shown to empower women by giving them the "tools to grow in healthy connected relationships", which in turn builds confidence and helps ensure psychological health. This therapy takes place in a setting that is culturally similar to the woman's own environment, and the relationship with the therapist is part of the overall process. (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016)

Block and Tietjen-Smith sum up the use of RCT's practical application to a mentoring program as follows:

"The critical aspects of RCT have to do with a person's ability to grow in relationships with others. Central to growth in any relationship is the idea that both people in the relationship are *empathetically attuned* to one another. This "dynamic cognitive-affective process of joining with and understanding another's subjective experience" (Jordan, 1997, p 15) is the critical aspect of RCT that fits so well with the female mentor/protégé relationship." (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016)

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The foundation of this relationship is trust in one another's understanding of who one is, and how and why a person operates in the world in any given manner. Given RCT's positive correlation to successful mentoring relationships, research involving RCT as applied specifically to mentoring and women's leadership programs is a logical next step for professionals redesigning and re-envisioning how to increase gender diversity in the workforce and access to top positions.

A new and more novel approach to growing the ranks of women in leadership as well as helping sustain those in the middle of their climb upwards and for those at the top is the concept of intergenerational mentoring. Amanda Herring, the CEO of Fe League, an organization dedicated to increasing representation and gender equity in the workforce asserts this idea is the next new pathway. Intergenerational mentoring sets aside the intentional manipulation of the differences between the generations for divisionary purposes and focuses on strengthening connections and commonalities between generations. The focus of intergenerational mentoring is on the reinforcement of the commonalities among women while respecting the differences that exist as a result of generational differences. This creates "a sense of support across generations" which will in turn help empower women and sustain their progress "especially in the workplace." Herring, A. (2024, January 23). Beyond Generational Divides-Unveiling Shared Visions of Success Among Working Women. *Newsweek*.

Herring's intergenerational mentoring argument is based upon an in-depth study conducted by the Fe League in 2023. The data collected from the survey conducted by the Fe League of two hundred and eighty-five women (one of which identified as a man) asked a range of questions focused on how success is determined and defined over the course of a woman's lifetime. The participants in the study ranged from Boomers to Gen Z respondents. The study results were consistent that early on in a woman's career, income and advancing up the leadership ladder were

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the priority. These priorities changed as the women aged and advanced in their careers to finding a balance between one's personal life and one's professional life. (Herring, *Redefining Success, Fe League Survey 2024*) Importantly, the results identified a strong foundation of shared values bridging the generations and reinforced the importance of mentoring programs and opportunities for younger generations of women. (Herring, *Redefining Success, Fe League Survey 2024*) Herring, A. (2024, January 23).

The survey also addressed issues ranging from what were the largest obstacles to a woman's advancement to the impact of remote work on advancement opportunities for women. Mentoring in the form of formal programs and informal networks to sponsorship of women for leadership roles consistently ranked towards the top, but not in the expected way of older to younger mentoring relationships. Instead, in addition to the typical mentoring model of senior to junior was the value assigned to the junior female mentoring the senior female. (Herring, *Redefining Success, Fe League Survey 2024*) From these responses Herring draws the conclusion that reverse mentoring helps facilitate knowledge gained at every age and can be a bridge between generations resulting in moving workplaces closer to gender parity. Herring, A. (2024, January 23).

However beneficial these mentoring programs are, formal and informal, these systems are not perfect or all encompassing. Not surprisingly, women cited the lack of network contacts in the form of high-powered women who can serve as mentors, role models, and sponsors with sixty-three percent (63%) of the 2024 Fe Study respondents identifying the low number of women in decision-making positions as a substantial obstacle to the ability to progress in their professional journey. (Herring, *Redefining Success, Fe League Survey 2024*) Additionally, the higher a woman rose within an organization, the more important these networks and contacts became in order to

continue advancing as well as circumnavigate the political pitfalls in getting to the top. Therefore, any mentoring or women's developmental leadership program must address not only how to seek out and develop relationships (i.e. networks) with both men and women, but also how to sustain those relationships. Part of this relationship-building endeavor must also include educating women on recognizing when gender impacts opportunities and relationships as well as training on how to successfully navigate them. Especially when working with and applying to men for mentoring and sponsorship.

IV. The Initial Assessment on the Impact of the #MeToo Movement on Mentoring

Since men inhabit the majority of leadership positions and women want to advance in their careers, women must continue to seek out and utilize men to mentor them as well as sponsor them in their professional career advancement. In many ways this has become more complex and difficult since the #MeToo movement began in 2017. The #MeToo movement (re)invigorated the feminist movement in combatting sexual violence and the outcome has been primarily positive in the advancing women's safety and the right to exist in society free of sexual harassment in any form, especially in the United States.

A study conducted by social scientists at Mississippi State University in 2021 on the global impact of the #MeToo movement by examining social media responses was not all positive though. They point out that seven percent (7%) of the responses indicated a negative backlash impacting women. (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2023) While the Mississippi State study authors do not specifically identify any findings related to a reduction in male mentors for women as a consequence arising from the #MeToo movement other studies address this directly.

Sheryl Sandberg's LeanIn.Org Study conducted between January 2018 and March 2019 directly addresses this adverse effect arising out of the #MeToo movement. The survey of over

eleven thousand employed adults in the United States found that men are pulling back or reluctant to engage with younger women in the capacity as a mentor. This is primarily as due to fear by senior level executives of allegations of inappropriate conduct by the junior female mentee with statistics showing they are twelve times more hesitant to have 1-1 meetings with a woman, nine times more likely to express hesitancy in traveling for work together and six times more likely to hesitate in having a work dinner alone. In fact, over sixty percent of male managers are uncomfortable engaging in a common work activity with a woman now. (Sandberg, 2019)

However, it is not simply the fear of sexual impropriety allegations that leaves junior women in need on senior level guidance and support by the male gender. “If a woman is perceived as a token, a man may not want to be her mentor.” Additionally, men may harbor the professional fear that a more junior woman mentee’s failure to be successful is a reflection on himself and therefore he is also a failure. (Fitzpatrick, 1996 as cited in Rosenbach & Taylor, 1993)

It will not be enough for women to want men to re-engage as mentors and sponsors in order to advance women towards gender equity in the workforce. Women will need to address the reluctance felt by men not by apologizing for it, but by intentionally developing their personal leadership identities as well as having a defined purpose for the mentoring relationship that is clearly communicated. Establishing these relationship boundaries and directly acknowledging the discomfort a senior-level male executive may harbor could help in structuring the relationship and the goals associated with it. Thereby, hopefully opening the door to a productive and successful professional junior female mentee/ senior male mentor relationship.

An additional element to keep women moving forward is the incorporation by women of the necessary educational component by female mentees to male mentors (another form of reverse

mentoring) on second-generation gender bias and how it insidiously operates even in organizations that on the surface appear progressive and have all the right intentions. (Fitzpatrick, 1996 as cited in Rosenbach & Taylor, 1993)

Conclusion

Mentoring programs since the 1970s have evolved and expanded from the idea of the solo pairing of a junior mentee to a senior mentor in formal programs to understanding the need for female-to-female mentoring programs both formal and informal. The development and analysis of the success of these programs and relationships has contributed to progress, albeit at a slow and at times, glacial pace, in women's advancement into leadership. Alongside these formal relationships is the critical component of informal mentoring relationships to the success of women. Perhaps the most exciting research to be done is with respect to the Fe League study results which show the lack of division between generations and opportunities to grow entirely new mentoring networks in the form of intergenerational mentoring. This opportunity for organizations and female leaders to facilitate growth in leadership numbers by designing and implementing intergenerational mentoring programs needs research but offers a new way of approaching women's navigation of the labyrinth in their fight to achieve gender equality in the workplace.

Simultaneously, with researching and advancing new methods in mentoring programs and relationships is the need to address the #MeToo movement's unintended consequences on men's willingness to mentor women. The approach will require women to be creative and sensitive to the concerns of the male gender in soliciting from them for ideas to move forward such that the adverse impact is not permanent. This could result in innovative and successful approaches not previously

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considered for which both men and women can take credit – with the end result of bringing women closer to gender parity in the workforce.

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