



MENTORSHIP: USE IT TO GET THE “CORNER OFFICE”

Research Team | Haley Champion Carter, Charlotte Fausett
Executive Mentor | Kathy Smith
Faculty Mentor | Kathy Korman Frey

Executive Summary

“As a female, had I had the opportunity for greater career guidance or career direction I would have had a greater opportunity to achieve greater accomplishments,” Respondent #1010869188 wrote. This free-form response by a survey respondent mirrored our impetus to conduct a research project about mentorship in the workplace. While there is a rich body of research supporting the link between mentorship and success, little has been done to establish the ways in which mentorship practices and perceptions prepare men and women differently for career achievement. **We sought to analyze two major dimensions of mentorship along gender lines: 1) mentorship practices and 2) perceptions of mentorship’s significance in respondents’ careers.** We set out to prove or disprove the following hypotheses:

- Men and women are both more likely to have a mentor of the same gender than not.
- The most successful mentorship relationships will be those established proactively, not passively.
- Women are more likely than men to attribute their success to mentorship.

A survey of professionals throughout the United States and supporting research about mentorship led us to conclude the following:

- ✓ While most respondents claim gender is irrelevant to their choice in a mentor or mentee, most significant mentorship relationships occur between two people of the same gender.
- ✓ Most successful relationships involve at least one person seeking the other out proactively.
- ☒ Men are more likely to attribute their success to mentorship.

Our goal in performing our research project was to unveil potential weaknesses in the link between mentorship and success for women in the workplace. By examining differences in the ways that men and women use and think about mentorship, we were able to highlight critical breaking points and establish several “Mentorship Best Practices.” Our hope is that our research will provide the tools & tips women need in effectively using mentorship to propel themselves to senior leadership roles, and of course, the corner office.

Major Findings

In mentorship, gender matters. Yet most respondents believe it to be irrelevant.

Of all survey respondents, 76% had their most significant relationship with someone of the same gender. Of those same respondents, 78% claimed gender to be irrelevant when asked “In your mentoring relationships, is gender a factor?” Thus gender is thought to be irrelevant when it is, in fact, a statistically significant factor in the “most significant” mentorship relationships of respondents’ lives. The divergence between perception and reality begs further exploration. Preliminarily, we can hypothesize that it exists for several reasons. First, the perception of gender irrelevance may signal a

recent shift in gender paradigms that is too novel to be mirrored in the actual gender relationships experienced by respondents. This suggests a positive move forward in thought patterns about gender and appropriate advising relationships between men and women. As the majority of high level executives and leaders are male, the belief that gender is irrelevant may provide more opportunities for women to be advised by prominent male leaders.

Second, there may be advantages to same-gender relationships that respondents do not acknowledge enough to claim that gender plays a prominent role in mentorship experiences. This would suggest that respondents may not recognize how gender may help them connect with prominent leaders in order to advance their careers. For example, a woman may benefit from a female mentor if she seeks guidance about gender-related issues such as asking for maternity leave, dressing appropriately for the corner office, or operating effectively in a male-dominated board room. Third, the divergence between perception and practice may result from the ways in which respondents typically form mentorship relationships. Of all respondents that have experienced mentorship, only 28% of them proactively sought out the most significant mentorship relationship in their life. This passivity might lead to more same-gender relationships than not since professionals are likely to bond more easily with someone of their same gender in the workplace.

Pro-activity trumps passivity in significant mentorship relationships.

When asked about the most significant mentorship relationship in their lives, 58% of respondents said that at least one of the two people was proactive in seeking the relationship out. By contrast, 42% of respondents said the relationship “just happened naturally.” This research suggests people with more proactive personalities will be more likely to benefit from a mentor, and that mentorship is more successful when sought out by one person.

Men are more likely than women to say that mentorship is important in achieving career goals.

When asked about the areas in which mentorship has played a significant role in respondents’ lives, 64% of men and 58% say that mentorship has been “important” or “very important” in achieving career goals. Similarly, 32% of men and 22% of women say that mentorship has been important in obtaining a promotion.

The rationale for the differing perceptions of mentorship significance between men and women calls for further research. First, more men may have experienced mentorship than women. This would indicate that the workplace lacks effective mentors for women.

Second, the difference could stem from the differences in effectiveness of mentors for men and women in advancing in the workplace. While both men and women experience mentorship, the fact that more men attribute the relationship to their career achievements might indicate that men leverage mentoring relationships more effectively in the professional arena than women. We find this conclusion to be supported by our research that indicates that men are more likely than women to use mentorship for “Career Advancement – bringing new opportunities to my attention,” “Advocating on my behalf,” and “Challenging my assumptions about my career direction.” On the whole, only 8% of men and 9% of women use mentorship for “Job Preparedness – resume reviews, mock interviews, etc.” Thus men may be more effective users of mentorship for career advancement than women.

Methodology

In order to complete our primary research on mentorship, we developed an online survey that could be circulated and distributed to professionals throughout the United States. Our secondary research about mentorship included reading scholarly journal articles, interviewing mentorship thought leaders, and speaking informally with colleagues.

Conclusion

Throughout our research, several attitudes and habits were found to be recurring throughout respondents' experiences of significant mentorship relationships. From these, we developed a short Mentorship Best Practices list to help women make the most of their mentoring relationships in their careers.

Mentorship Best Practices

- 1) **Interact often.** Most respondents interacted with their mentor or mentee at least twice a month over the phone, through email, or in person.
- 2) **Consider gender.** Most respondents cited their most significant mentorship relationship as occurring with someone of their own gender.
- 3) **Be honest.** You will only benefit from a mentor if you both honestly discuss both victories and challenges.
- 4) **Be proactive.** Mentoring relationships start by reaching out and getting to know others.
- 5) **Leverage your mentoring relationships in your career.** Proactively communicate what is going on in your career and how your mentor can help you in specific instances. Brainstorm for ideas about how to approach critical career opportunities and milestones.
- 6) **Keep an open mind.** Many respondents claimed open-mindedness to be crucial to a positive mentorship experience.
- 7) **Trust each other.** Trust and relationship-building were cited often as keys to a successful mentorship relationship.