

Bringing on the next generation

Susan Hewitt looks at the role of mentoring in nurturing the female talent pipeline

Businesses need fresh approaches to survive in an increasingly challenging and competitive future. There is also a clear case for businesses and boards to reflect their customers and communities. Gender diversity can help to achieve both of these aims¹. More than half of UK graduates are female yet women are still not reaching the most senior ranks of organisations. The Equality and Human Rights Commission estimates that, at the current rate of change, it will take more than 70 years to achieve gender balanced boardrooms². There must be a cultural shift if the current generation of women is not to miss out on the top jobs again.

The Davies Report provides leverage for businesses to address this issue³. Amongst Davies' responses, training and education, including shadowing and mentoring, was the second most popular suggestion for recruiting more women to the boardroom, after legal changes such as quotas. The Confederation of British Industry suggests a number of people-focused ways to develop and sustain the talent pipeline of women. These include enhancing the visibility of role models and mentoring. There is no quick fix answer to bringing on the next generation of women, but mentoring has a significant part to play.

What is mentoring?

The concept of mentoring dates back to ancient Greece. According to Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan Wars, he entrusted the care of his son Telemachus to his loyal and wise friend and advisor Mentor.

Mentoring is still an imperative talent management tool. It benefits the organisation, the mentee and mentor. It improves retention and progression at all levels. It's a highly individual

support system that can grow into a career-long relationship. It delivers on diversity targets and return on investment.

A mentor can be defined as "a trusted confidential adviser, friend, guide, counsellor, tutor, *confidante*, role model; usually an older, wiser, more experienced individual who mentors a younger, less experienced 'student'."⁴ This umbrella term brings together aspects of coaching, mentoring and sponsorship. It is this combination of disciplines that is most helpful for women in gaining recognition and advancement.

The view of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is that mentoring is a technique that allows for transmission of knowledge, skills and experience in a supportive and challenging environment. A more experienced colleague uses his greater knowledge and understanding to support the development of a more junior or less experienced colleague⁵. Mentoring is primarily about developing capability and potential in the role rather than performance and skills. It is a specific intervention that can be used widely in a particular context, including induction and realising a woman's potential for progression.

Coaching is defined as developing a person's skills and knowledge so that his job performance improves, leading to the achievement of work,



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personal and organisational objectives. It targets performance and improvement at work. Coaching usually lasts for short periods of time and focuses on specific goals or skills⁶. Key coaching skills include questioning, listening and clarifying and, at its heart, it is non-directive. Although often delivered by trained professionals, many managers are now being equipped with these skills to carry out workplace coaching.

Sponsorship or advocacy is also very effective at bringing on the next generation. This is when one partner, generally someone more senior or with strong influence within an organisation, assists a *protégée* in gaining visibility for particular assignments, promotions or positions. There is an overall career focus to the relationship, with the sponsor or advocate being accountable⁷. In our extensive work with women, we have found that many of them fight shy of asking for opportunities or highlighting their abilities. Therefore support from an advocate is particularly valuable for women.

Generation Y women at Levi Strauss and Company are reinventing the mentoring model to fit their needs and lives — and to reflect the current realities of technology. Instead of a one-way, top-down relationship, they are using a peer-to-peer, communal exchange of information, guidance and support. They are creating a web of relationships with a wide variety of women who can offer a diversity of life experiences and perspectives, including relationships in cyberspace.

Ninety four per cent of the women said that the best mentors are people with whom they can trade advice. Seventy seven per cent said that mentors can be people their own age, and 89 per cent agreed that they can have more than one mentor. Like a Facebook page, this mentorship is always on, never static and continually evolving⁸.

What can mentoring achieve?

The barriers to women's progression are complex and there is no magic wand that will remove them all. As the Davies Report says, there are things that can be done at the organisational level such as setting aspirational female representation goals and looking at the work of nomination committees. However, this must be underpinned by development work with individual women to help them build the personal skills to navigate the labyrinth of indirect, complex and still often-discontinuous paths towards top-level leadership⁹.

The internal barriers of women's attitudes and behaviour will not be overcome simply through organisational change. Although there has been some progress there is still further to go¹⁰. In delivering single-gender development, we find that women tend to be less positive and less confident about themselves than men. They are unaware of the image they create in the workplace through their attitudes and behaviour and assume they will be rewarded with promotion or advancement simply by working well and hard. They do not put themselves forward for projects, challenges or promotion and are more likely than men to undervalue their skills, abilities and achievements. They do not seize or create opportunities to blow their own trumpet and they exercise their well-developed networking skills mainly in their home life.

Our programmes address these issues and mentoring is an essential element¹¹. A supportive relationship with a mentor who can see in you what you cannot see yourself can be life-changing and research does show that women with mentors are more successful¹². Not having a mentor has been quoted as a barrier to career development more amongst women than men¹³.

A good mentor can help you¹⁴:

- quickly learn the ropes of a new post and reach performance targets
- recognise your own strengths through reflection
- build confidence and self-esteem by providing honest feedback
- widen your network by introducing you to their contacts
- find space to vent feelings and frustrations when all is not going as planned
- get an independent perspective on workplace issues
- analyse and develop your profile at work
- understand the unwritten rules of an organisation
- avoid the dangers of the glass cliff
- reduce risk and advance faster by learning from their experience
- develop your own strategies by being a sounding board

- move outside your comfort zone through challenging tasks and hard questions
- gain access to opportunities through their advocacy or influence
- see what is possible, casting them as a role model
- gain advice on career direction
- gain moral support by making space and time for good listening.

Benefits to women mentees

If a mentoring relationship can achieve all of these things, what are the key results for women? The following benefits were reported by women following a cross-institutional scheme in Welsh universities for both academic and support staff¹⁵:

- increased self-confidence in professional abilities
- improved awareness of strengths and weaknesses
- better motivation
- improved knowledge of the higher education workplace
- help and advice on career planning
- encouragement to fulfil potential.

All mentors in this scheme are women.

A quantitative study in Australia, with academic women researchers, reported that, as a result of mentoring, women decreased their worries or concerns about their work, increased their assessment of their capacity as academics and increased their job satisfaction¹⁶. They got help with specific career development strategies and were promoted. They managed their time better and were also successful in securing grant funding, the life-blood of research. This scheme had a mix of male and female mentors.

One of the limiting factors in the Welsh scheme is the number of applications received from women in very senior positions to act as mentors.

The jury is still out on the differing value to women of female or male mentors. Female mentors may be able to better empathise with a woman's situation and male behaviour might clash with a woman's needs. For example, mentees have reported just needing to talk and have someone listen, but a male mentor then suggests solutions. Female mentors can also provide real-life examples of how to succeed in majority-male environments. Alternatively, working with a male mentor can provide a male perspective on issues, which can stimulate different thinking¹⁷.

Benefits for mentors

Although mentoring schemes are designed to benefit mentees, they also provide benefit to mentors. The Welsh universities scheme recorded the following:





- improved listening and questioning skills
- increased confidence
- recognition of own achievements and experience
- opportunity for self-reflection
- improved relationships with staff
- opportunity to build better relationships with other HEIs.

There can also be tangible benefits for mentors. They are 20 per cent more likely to experience a change in salary in comparison with those not in mentoring relationships. They are also six times more likely to be promoted¹⁸. Single-gender mentoring relationships therefore offer enhanced development, with both mentor and mentee gaining tangible and intangible rewards.

Organisational gains

There are many positive aspects for the organisation from mentoring. It really can grow your own talent in an extremely cost-effective way. Calculating the ROI for mentees gives conservative estimates of around 1,000 per cent¹⁹. As we know that mentors also benefit from the mentoring relationship, the ROI will greatly exceed that figure, possibly reaching 3,000 per cent²⁰.

These figures should be music to the ears of cash-strapped HR and training departments under pressure to achieve diversity targets.

Cross-organisational mentoring such as the FTSE 100 scheme²¹ or that in Welsh universities can deliver wider benefits such as:

- helping to create constructive inter-organisational relationships
- creating opportunities for networking and collaborative working between organisations
- alleviating feelings of isolation for women working in male-majority environments
- raising career aspirations
- encouraging women to apply for senior posts
- enhancing women's career development and enabling them to reach their full potential
- making a positive difference to individuals and organisations.

Both mentors and mentees are 20 per cent less likely to leave the organisation than those not in a mentoring relationship²². This increased retention could have a significant impact on gender diversity where mentoring is available at all levels, not just at the top. It could also help reduce attrition at the break point of starting a family when many women disappear from organisations and from the career ladder.

Getting good PR can also be a great organisational benefit, helping companies attract the best talent.

Websites such as *Where Women Want to Work* allow sharing of real information about organisations. This type of information will influence Millennials – not only what the business does but what its culture is like, what its record on diversity is, how connected its networks and processes are, how it gives back to its community and the wider world²³. There are also opportunities to showcase best practice through awards such as those offered by Opportunity Now²⁴. Its awards ceremony took place in April. Twenty one organisations received awards and, in more than 50 per cent of these, mentoring was part of their offering for women.

What's the alternative?

There are, of course, women who do make it to the top without mentoring. It can be a tough challenge for some of them, as they partition off that piece of themselves that was wife, mother and woman to model male leaders. They might adopt the military, tough-girl act, or go completely the other way, finding a more feminine version of themselves to advance through charm. The relentless pursuit of self-improvement can also be a strategy, the next course, book or seminar giving them the magic bullet to operate on a par with men.

A mentor believes in you and if no mentor is available then you just have to believe in yourself.

Role models have also been found in biographies of successful business leaders. Knowing more about their lives, you can then ask yourself 'what would they do in this situation?'²⁵

Sheer bloody mindedness has also been a contributor to success. Significant numbers of women on our programmes have said that they got to the top because they had been told that it wasn't possible, a woman had never done that job or it was a closed male shop and they'd never get in. Never underestimate the power of a woman scorned!

Get smart, get mentored

The Davies Report recommends it. The CBI recommends it. Its value is recognised by Opportunity Now in its awards. All these august bodies cannot be wrong. Keeping your talent pipeline full through mentoring is highly effective and delivers a great ROI for the use of very little resource.

Getting a mentor is an essential career strategy for women. I would say that being a mentor is also an essential career strategy for women – the data is clear. However you do it, adopting the fuzzy network mentoring of Millennials or the formal structured schemes within organisations, build a mentoring relationship that suits you and fits with where you want to be. **TJ**

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