

THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP

Strengthening Women in Leadership Roles

By Crystal Turner-Moffatt

Women make up almost half of the U.S. workforce and more than half of the students in higher education. However, when it comes to their representation in executive positions, only 32% of high-level or C-suite leaders are women. In fact, some male-dominated industries see no women in their executive positions (Insala, 2017).

In the article, “Training Women for Leadership Positions in Manufacturing, Construction and Engineering,” Stedman (2019) explains the importance for organizations to have gender diversity in leadership:

Construction, manufacturing and engineering fields are attracting more women than ever before: The number of female engineers has more than doubled since the 1980s, women make up 29% of the manufacturing industry, and the National Association of Women in Construction has seen clear increases in employment for women over the past 10 years.

Moreover, Stedman says that women are hired for these roles, but retaining and promoting is not happening at the same rate.

McKinsey & Co. reported that 100 men are promoted to management for every 79 women (60 for women of color), and just 6.4% of Fortune 500 companies are led by women. Although we see more female engineers than ever before, women still make up only 14% of engineers overall. (Stedman, 2019)

Motivation for improving women’s representation in leadership is limited. Another McKinsey & Co. report found that half of men surveyed think it is enough to have 10% of senior leadership roles filled by women and one-third of women agree (Stedman, 2019).

Achieving an executive career is difficult for any gender, but perceptions can often affect the goals of women who are seeking these positions. According to Webster and Kurukulasuriya (2015), “The very fact that there are fewer women in leadership sustains the perception that attaining leadership is hard for women.”

According to Insala (2018a), many women “have broken through the barriers and faced these challenges head-on to obtain top positions.” The author attributes this advancement to

the power of mentoring. “Women are being given the opportunity to not only continue to develop their skills and grow their network, but also to have an example of the possibilities that are out there for them.”

Benefits of Women in Leadership

In 2019, only 5.2% of S&P 500 companies’ CEOs are women, including General Motors Co., Hershey Co., Nasdaq Inc., The Progressive Corp. and Occidental Petroleum Corp. (Catalyst, 2019). Researchers have found that Fortune 500 companies with the highest representation of women board directors are performing better financially (Insala, 2018b). According to Peterson Institute for International Economics, a survey of 21,980 firms from 91 countries found that having women at the C-suite level significantly increased net margins (Blumberg, 2018). According to Insala (2018b), woman-friendly companies outperformed the competition by 53%, companies with women on their boards saw a 42% higher return on sales, and companies with more women board directors turned invested capital into profit 66% more successfully.

Based on the numbers, women should be in more leadership roles and have a more powerful presence in the workforce today. If women are not empowered to be a part of the leadership in an organization, then that organization is missing out on workers who could help it flourish. According to Mackey (2018):

Women in business, including women in leadership, should not be expected to single-handedly change the culture and values of their workplace—this is a near-impossible feat. Moreover, they should not need to mimic men’s behavior to get fair consideration for career advancement. A more effective strategy to increase influence and capitalize on the opportunities they deserve is to find allies and mentors within their organizations.

Mentoring Relationships & Programs Are Key

Organizations are missing opportunities to achieve successes by not bringing diversity to their leadership teams. How can these lagging organizations change? According to Insala (2019):

Women leaders should be empowered through mentoring partnerships. It is important to empower and encourage women as they often face unique challenges in the workplace without the necessary tools to overcome them. Participation in mentoring relationships and programs are brilliant ways for women to acquire these tools. Mentors, whether they are men or women, should guide their mentees through struggles by sharing their knowledge and personal experiences.

When discussing the mentor/mentee relationship with the author, Deidre Helberg, the National Association of Black Women in Construction New York Chapter president and Helberg Electrical Supply LLC president and CEO, stated that “when sharing experiences, mentors should share the positive as well as negative aspects of their journey and successes with their mentees. This will better empower and prepare their mentees for the realities of the workplace.”

Women Experience Specific Workforce Challenges

According to Insala (2017), women face two unique challenges in the workplace that mentors can help them overcome:

- 1) Lack of confidence. An individual’s success relies on the ability to be confident in oneself. Without it, people cannot showcase their ability. “A study on the confidence gap showed that women underestimate both their abilities and their performance,” says Insala (2017). “They simply lack confidence. This challenge to women in the workplace can be overcome through mentoring.”

The mark of a great mentor is that they see abilities even when their mentees do not.

Mentoring sessions that focus on showing women what they can do broadens their self-awareness and boosts their confidence levels. By overcoming their lack of confidence, women are more likely to apply for promotions they previously overlooked and present their ideas in meetings. (Insala, 2019)

2) Poor self-advocacy. To prevent the risk of being overlooked for promotions, self-advocacy is important. However, according to Insala (2019), “Women are happy to advocate for others, but they are often uncomfortable advocating for themselves.” Through mentoring, women can become better advocates for themselves by taking part in exercises such as role-playing. “Benefits from overcoming this challenge in the workplace include the ability to ask questions comfortably and recover from mistakes,” says Insala (2019). “These benefits often inspire women to become mentors to others.”

Mentoring as a Strategy for Empowering Female Leaders

Simply put, mentorship works. It has been proven that mentored employees advance faster, are more productive and navigate an organization’s culture better. Thus, the biggest reason to advocate for mentoring as the answer to empowering women leaders is because it is working (Insala, 2018b). Mentorship benefits women in several ways:

1) Retention: Some women may feel their abilities are undervalued by an organization and may leave a job as a result. Mentorship gives women an avenue to articulate career ambitions and set goals to achieve them. Therefore, their company can retain a valuable employee (Insala, 2018b). According to Racioppi (2017), “when women build mentoring and other developmental relationships, they are able to more easily shift from tactical to strategic behaviors and can come out of the shadows to be noticed by those who can advance their careers.” Racioppi calls the combination of women and mentoring “the perfect match.”

2) Accountability: Mentors hold mentees accountable and on track to achieve career goals. (Insala, 2018b). Racioppi (2017) found that the most successful relationships “resulted from women

who actively prepared for their meetings with their mentors, leveraged the information they received and applied it to corporate relationships.” Through these relationships, women learn to better navigate their corporate environment. “Women need to form a personal board of directors that challenge them to grow and adapt and stay informed about themselves and their companies,” Racioppi says.

3) Networking: Mentorship helps women make connections in a new professional network (Insala, 2018b; Stedman, 2019).

4) Confidence: According to Insala (2018b), “mentoring gives women access to new skills and competencies that help them to build the confidence necessary to be an effective and successful leader.”

Connecting With Mentors

Finding a mentor can be difficult. According to Mackey (2018), following a few tips can make this task easier:

1) Look for allies everywhere in the organization. Often, coworkers share the same goal. Working together can be mutually beneficial.

2) Seek both men and women as allies. Equalizing gender imbalances requires the participation of all people.

3) Be an ally. Connect with coworkers at all levels of the company. This may lead to additional networking and mentorship opportunities.

4) Take advantage of mentorship programs. Many organizations offer mentorship opportunities for employees to network and break down departmental silos. Investigate mentorship opportunities outside of the workplace. This may help connect to new job opportunities.

Expert Advice

The author asked leaders and mentors in prominent industry positions and with inspiring mentoring programs three sets of questions about their experiences and programs.

Doreen Bartoldus is senior consultant program and construction management with Marine Tiger and National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) National Treasurer and Greater New York Chapter president. Bartoldus discusses best practices and keys to success in formal as well as informal mentoring programs. She says both types of mentoring can work and that the most success is achieved typically when both

parties are clear on the goals of the mentoring relationship. “The relationships also have to be flexible,” Bartoldus says. For example, are you looking to meet in person or have phone calls? One person I mentored just met me for coffee every couple of months when it was convenient for both of us.”

About mentorship in her organizations, she says, “I believe firmly there is growth for both parties. It can help to move the mentee forward in their education, leadership position or career. For the mentor and the organization, new leaders can be identified and new ideas can be brought to light that can only enrich the organization.”

When asked about the role of mentorship with regard to leadership development for women, Bartoldus says it is key. “Not having a female mentor until much later in my career created difficulty navigating the very male-dominated field I am in (construction).” She continues, “I had to learn a lot through many hard knocks. I am purposely involved in NAWIC now so that I can mentor others and give them the benefit of what I went through so they can use that experience to understand and hopefully make more informed decisions. It also helps to know you are not alone.”

Develop a Culture of Mentorship

Any organization can establish a mentor program to motivate and encourage employees’ career development. According to Bowling (2018), several tips can help companies in creating a mentorship program.

1) Mentorship must be a team effort: Make your mentoring program “available company-wide to get the most out of it. This opens the possibility of cross-departmental collaboration and mentorship, which builds stronger leaders.”

2) Pair mentors and mentees with complementary skills: Do not assign mentorships based on personality alone. “Match a developer with a marketer so they can exchange valuable skills and insights with each other. This will grow each woman’s talents in the workplace, making her even more valuable,” says Bowling (2018).

3) Create structure for the program: Mentors and mentees should have structure and accountability from the company. “This keeps mentorships on track for better results,” Bowling (2018) says. “Structure also helps with a company-wide buy-in for mentorship



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programs. Create designated spaces and time during the workday for mentorships, solidifying them as a crucial part of your workplace.”

4) Communication is important: Mentoring is a way for all participants to practice communication skills. “Whether mentoring happens in one-on-one or group settings, it encourages women to practice effective, clear communication,” Bowling (2018) says.

Mentoring relationships have benefits not only for mentees, but also for mentors and the company. The following organizational best practices are essential to a thriving mentorship program:

1) An organization must reduce bias.

A recent study done by the *Harvard Business Review* found that gender inequality in the workplace is due to bias, not differences in behavior. To reduce bias in your organization and your mentoring program, it is your responsibility to develop policies that level the playing field for all individuals. These policies can include choosing a more diverse group of high-potential individuals to participate in your mentoring program that focuses on leadership. This gives women a chance to push forward in their careers where traditionally men have been more present. (Insala, 2018a)

2) An organization should offer all employees the same access to opportunity. It is important to encourage employees to network with other professionals in the community. Staff can join industry associations, unions and volunteer positions (Stedman, 2019).

3) Companies should normalize risk. Employees should feel open to taking professional risks without punishment, reprimand or humiliation. Failure is an opportunity to learn (Stedman, 2019).

4) Eliminate gender in the mentoring relationship. Partner a mentee with the most qualified mentor, regardless of the person's gender.

5) Train mentors. It is important to implement training programs for leaders. “Research e-learning solutions, local workshops, and even conferences where employees can develop their professional and leadership skills” (Stedman, 2019).

6) Develop and maintain a culture of diversity and mentorship. A solid unbiased mentorship program can help an organization solve many workplace issues and build a better workplace culture for growth and leadership for all genders. Training women for leadership positions isn't just about women; it is about everyone at the company. Your future leaders will grow best in supportive environments where they feel valued, respected and comfortable taking healthy risks. To create this environment, you must have an inclusive company culture. “Take an active stance against sexism, harassment and other forms of gender discrimination. This is critical to creating an atmosphere in which women can and want to thrive” (Stedman, 2019).

Conclusion

The old leadership model is clearly broken. According to Bowling (2018), if we continue to progress at the current rate, the number of women in management is expected to increase by only 1% over the next 10 years. Women are not as likely to participate in executive positions, and the disparity is affecting the prosperity of companies. Mentorship is the missing piece to the leadership puzzle. With the help of mentors, women can participate in these C-suite positions and ultimately help make their companies more successful. **PSJ**

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