

Moving Up: Role Models, Mentors, and the "Patron System"

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Increasing effort, time, and money are being invested in projects for women. Many are intended to recruit and promote women in traditionally male professions, such as management, science, medicine, dentistry, engineering, and architecture. Much emphasis has been placed on "role models" and "mentors" as prerequisites for women's success. The authors examine these concepts and suggest (1) that role models are of limited effectiveness in assisting women to *gain* positions of leadership, authority, or power and (2) that mentors are at one end of a *continuum* of advisory/support relationships which facilitate access to such positions for the protégés involved. The authors conclude that careful consideration of this continuum will lead to better focused and more effective efforts directed at bringing women into positions of leadership and authority. *Ed.*

The need for female role models has long been proclaimed by women students and junior-level professionals in male-dominated fields, such as medicine, dentistry, management, architecture, science, and engineering. More recently, some of the women who have found themselves forced into the personae of role models have begun to wonder whether mentors are not, in fact, a more critical variable related to upward mobility within a profession than role models. At recent women's conferences, much time has been spent in discussion about role models, mentors, and "moving up" in traditionally male professions. Three key points have begun to emerge from these discussions:

1. Role models are, at best, of limited effectiveness in assisting women to actually *gain* positions of leadership, authority, or power.
2. The concept of "mentor" is at one end of a *spectrum* of individuals in advisory/support roles who facilitate entry and mobility for their protégés.
3. Women often lack mentors or sponsors who can be instrumental in their career advancements.

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These points bear further consideration and research. In this article we examine some of the limitations of the concept of role models in relation to professional mobility and suggest a continuum of advisory/support personae ranging from "mentors" to "peer pals." We focus on women who have already made the decision to enter a profession — i.e. students in professional schools and recent graduates (whom we call "young professionals") — rather than preprofessional women, such as high school students and undergraduates, for whom the salient issues are whether to have a career, which career to pursue, and "getting in" as opposed to "moving up" in a chosen profession.

Role Models: *Sine Qua Non* or Sociological Dinosaur?

Role models may be described as individuals whose behaviors, personal styles, and specific attributes are emulated by others. In a professional setting, such emulation or modeling is a contributory factor in the construction of professional identity. For many women, the concept of role models has been expanded to include life-style issues as well as "on-the-job" behaviors and characteristics. Moreover, it has been assumed by many women that female role models are, if not a prerequisite, at least a key variable in the successful *resolution* of professional identity and feminine self-concept for female professionals in male-dominated professions. On the premise that successful resolution of these issues will facilitate the career progress of women entering the professions, considerable time and money have been directed toward creating and facilitating role model relationships, particularly for women students in professional schools. Many of these young women actually search for a total role model, who they believe will be critical to their future success. Roeske and Lake's study of role models for women medical students illustrates some of the limitations of these assumptions.¹ However, to even begin to accurately assess the importance of female role models for women entering traditionally male professions, we need to jettison old assumptions and ask instead some basic questions:

- Do female role models play a facilitating role in women's advancement?
- If so, what type of facilitating role do role models play and how do they contribute to the future success of young women professionals?
- What constitutes an appropriate female role model?
- Are total role models desirable or possible?

Haseltine has described the concept of role modeling as a "sociological dinosaur" and argues that role models may be at best irrelevant and at

¹ See Roeske and Lake [11].

worst destructive — that female role models actually may inhibit women's advancement.² She points out that a basic dynamic of the role model relationship is passivity; being a role model is, for the model, an essentially passive role. Moreover, it may be dangerously misleading for young women to search for a role model, for a person who exemplifies totally the kind of life one wants to lead. It is often impossible to find that exact combination that constitutes a desired role model for a specific individual. For women physicians, for example, relevant characteristics might include specialty and sub-specialty choice, practice style, practice type, marital and parental status, as well as personal solutions for childcare and housework. In those few cases in which the gross specifications are met, the details often are not congruent with the idealized image: the role model has an unsatisfactory social life (if she is married, has children, and is working full time, she may have no social life at all), her husband is a male chauvinist, her work habits are unpleasant, her manner is abrasive, etc.

Furthermore, professional women who have "made it" (at least to some extent) and who therefore can be role models, usually did so under circumstances significantly different from those facing women now entering the professions. The compromises made by successful women professionals may not seem relevant to each succeeding generation of women. When younger women look to the women ahead of them as models for their lives, they are often disappointed — and sometimes frightened — by what they see.

It is important therefore to think of role models in the plural, of multiple role models illustrating ranges of options and solutions available to women professionals. In this conception, role models demonstrate what can be and what is possible for women professionals, without insistence on fidelity to a set of solutions adhered to by one particular model. Moreover, recent research by Bucher and Stelling indicates that students and young professionals (male and female) often engage in *selective* role modeling using multiple "partial" role models, picking particular traits they desire to emulate and rejecting others.³ In fact, of the types of role modeling documented by Bucher and Stelling, the *most prevalent form* involved partial models. Bucher and Stelling also found "negative" models — individuals with characteristics that the trainee actively chooses not to acquire — to be a common type of role model used by the young professionals in their study.

Bucher and Stelling's research discusses some of the general processes involved in role modeling, regardless of the sex of the role model or the fledgling professional. Their findings, which indicate the selective nature of this process, are liberating, and illuminate the fact that students and young

² See Haseltine [6].

³ See Bucher and Stelling [1], Chap. VIII.

professionals take an active role in the creation of their professional identities by picking and choosing, exercising judgment, and deliberately constructing ideal models for themselves. The insights gained from their work should free the woman student from searching for a holy grail, for the ideal role model who uniquely embodies all the attributes, achievements, and characteristics the student wishes for herself. Moreover, those insights should free senior women from the expectation that they must be complete role models — the total professional woman. Senior women will thus be allowed greater individuality and more room for personal choice and growth, and will experience less pressure on their life-styles and values.

Women entering male-dominated professions face special obstacles, such as the formation of an identity as a professional and as a woman professional. The presence of senior women who have "made it," or role models in the broadest sense, can be a facilitating factor in the formation of such an identity. However, Bucher and Stelling's work on role modeling and White's work on androgyny⁴ lead us to suggest that the current narrow emphasis on female role models for female students may be inadequate or perhaps inappropriate. Generally women and men share most skills. To the extent that women and men have traditionally developed somewhat different skills, it is useful to remember that most professionals, in order to be maximally effective, need to be both interpersonally adept and instrumentally creative. Women and men entering the professions should be encouraged to use both men and women as "partial" role models, selecting and rejecting traits to create for themselves a composite ideal that represents the kind of professional toward which they aspire.

In summary, we have argued that although female role models can be helpful for aspiring women professionals, they do not represent a panacea for women's advancement, as has often been assumed. We have further argued that the search for a role model who uniquely represents the ideal woman professional incarnate is destructive to both student and role model alike, enmeshing the student in a hopeless search and the would-be role model in a prison of unattainable expectations. We have suggested that it is more useful to think in terms of multiple "partial" role models. We conclude that role models, both as general examples of what is possible and as models for particular traits, are important ingredients in the development of professional identity and commitment. As a prescription for "making it" — for attaining leadership, authority, or power — role models are not sufficient and in some cases may be counterproductive.

The Patron System: Mentors, Sponsors, Guides, and "Peer Pals"

As the inadequacies of the concept of role models have become more evident to those actively concerned with the advancement of women within

⁴ See White [15].

male-dominated professions, the concept of "mentors" has received increasing currency and advocacy. Rowe has urged women to "go find yourself a mentor," and Grant has recommended the creation of structured "preceptorships."⁵

Estler, examining the "filter points" at which disproportionate numbers of women are screened out of progressively higher managerial levels, identifies three critical factors in this screening process: competence, compatibility, and mentorship.⁶ Levinson has described male fledglings with male mentors; Sheehy, and Hennig and Jardim have explored some of the dynamics of female fledglings with male mentors.⁷ Epstein, Lorber, and Hall have described how what Lorber calls the "system of professional patronage and sponsorship" operates in a profession such as medicine.⁸

We propose that this system of professional patronage and sponsorship, what we call the "patron system," is comprised of a range of advisory/guiding personae. We use the term "patron system" deliberately, despite its possible negative connotations, because these advisory/guiding personae function literally as patrons—protectors, benefactors, sponsors, champions, advocates, supporters, and advisors. No pejorative judgment or implication of gender of the patron is intended.

We suggest further that such personae form a continuum with "mentors" and "peer pals" as end points, and postulate that "sponsors" and "guides" are internal points on this continuum. We define "mentors" as the most intense and "paternalistic" of the types of patrons described by this continuum. These are the "godfathers" or "rabbis" that Kanier describes at "Indseo."⁹ "Sponsors" serve as the two-thirds point on our continuum; they are strong patrons but less powerful than mentors in promoting and shaping the careers of their protégés. We describe the one-third point on the continuum by using the term "guides." These individuals are less able than mentors and sponsors to fulfill the roles of benefactor, protector, or champion to their protégés, but they can be invaluable in explaining the system. Their primary functions are to point out pitfalls to be avoided and shortcuts to be pursued, and generally to provide valuable intelligence to their protégés. In this respect, secretaries and administrative assistants are often overlooked as potential and actual patrons for young professionals. Finally, we use the term "peer pals," coined by Lynne R. Davidson, to describe the relationship between peers helping each other to succeed and progress. The concept of peers as patrons belies the notion that patrons must be more senior and more powerful than their protégés. While peer pals clearly cannot be godfathers

⁵ See Grant [4] and Rowe [12].

⁶ See Estler [3].

⁷ See Hennig and Jardim [7], Levinson [9], and Sheehy [13] and [14].

⁸ See Epstein [2], Lorber [10], and Hall [5].

⁹ See Kanier [8].

to each other, the reciprocity implicit in the relationship can provide a powerful boost toward success for each of the participants. Through sharing information and strategies and providing sounding boards and advice for one another, peer pals help each other while helping themselves.

Within the patron system the mentor-protégé dyad is a special kind of relationship. It is intense and usually charged with emotion and has a basically parental dynamic structure (what Sheehy calls "professionally paternalistic"). Describing the end points of the continuum of patron relationships in bold strokes, the mentor-protégé relationship is restrictive, comes with strings attached, and, in the final analysis, can result in the greatest boost toward success. The "peer-pal" relationship is often a bootstrapping operation, usually but not always between peers, and can result in incremental steps toward success.

We suggest that those patron relationships that fall toward the mentor side of the continuum tend to be more hierarchical and parental, more intense and exclusionary, and therefore, without value judgment, more elitist. Correspondingly, those that fall toward the "peer-pal" side of the continuum tend to be more egalitarian and peer related, less intense and exclusionary, and therefore potentially more democratic by allowing access to a larger number of young professionals.

How does this continuum of patron relationships relate to the upward mobility of women? We would suggest several areas of inquiry and analysis, again taking the two ends of the continuum as our examples.

We suggest that the mentor relationship can perhaps be facilitated but not legislated; to "assign" mentors to women would probably be an exercise in futility. Moreover, the number of protégés is directly limited by the number of mentors (most mentors would have no more than two or three protégés at one time), so that finding a mentor is not a realistic option for all women entering a profession. Here Grant's notion of preceptorships is useful to consider, because it provides a way of structuring patron relationships for women that fall toward the middle of the continuum, toward the sponsors and guides. Mentors are clearly a variable related to success and mobility, but not everyone (male or female) will choose to be or will be chosen as a protégé. Mentorships are not democratic.

How mentors choose their protégés, or how protégés find their mentors, needs further investigation. Gender is likely a variable, but we would speculate, in line with Hall's observations, that social class and race may be of at least equal importance.

There is also the related question of sexual dynamics — heterosexual and homosexual — within a mentor-protégé relationship. Sheehy postulates "a confusing male-female attachment" between male mentors and female protégés. We would speculate that looking at the sexual dynamics without taking into account other significant variables may lead to a distorted view. A more useful analysis would result, in our view, from a theoretical matrix

that reflects the various possible dyads in a mentor-protégé relationship: male mentor-male protégé, male mentor-female protégé, female mentor-male protégé, and female mentor-female protégé.

Beyond its use in analyzing the sexual dynamics of mentor-protégé dyads, this theoretical matrix also allows one to look at the important variable of gender in dyads in a systematic fashion, particularly in terms of the mentor-protégé matching process, the internal dynamics of the relationship, and the transition out of the mentor-protégé relationship. For example, Kanter, Hall, and others have suggested that mentors may tend to choose protégés with whom they identify or who are at least socially similar to themselves. What does this mean for male mentors with female protégés or for female mentors with male protégés? More importantly, one can hypothesize (as we have in this article) that an essential dynamic of the mentor-protégé relationship (including the transition out of the relationship) is *parental*, although it is usually described in terms of fathers and sons. The matrix can also be useful in analyzing the often traumatic transition from protégé to colleague (and from mentor to colleague). Again, one can speculate that mentors will react differentially to same-sex protégés, as opposed to opposite-sex protégés, "leaving the nest."

Turning to the other side of the continuum, we suggest that peer pals and guides, whose accessibility is far greater than that of mentors and sponsors, are more congruent with the feminist notion of women helping other women within an egalitarian framework. While mentors frequently introduce (and introject) their protégés to established networks, peer pals often create their own "new order" networks, such as the so-called "old girl networks." The young professional can take a much more active role in finding one or more guides or peer pals, and guides can accept more protégés than can mentors because the guide relationship is less intense, time consuming, and exclusionary. Moreover, relationships on the peer-pal side of the continuum provide greater latitude than mentor-protégé dyads, and they can be more easily created or restructured to meet the needs of particular women. While in the mentor-protégé dyad the mentor is always the patron, in peer-pal relationships each participant acts sometimes as protégé and sometimes as patron.

In conclusion, we suggest that careful consideration of the continuum of what we have called "patron relationships" can lead to better focused and more effective efforts directed at bringing women into positions of leadership, authority, and power. Rather than touting code words such as "role models" or "mentors" as panaceas for downtrodden women professionals, we urge examination of the implications of these terms so that thoughtful solutions can be developed. The continuum of patron relationships we have described is presented as a step in this direction.

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