

Building Mentorship Frameworks as Part of an Effective Equal Opportunity Ecology

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Educational institutions, government agencies, corporations, and other organizations can help build mentoring frameworks for women and men. This paper discusses five major points in building institutional devices that help women find the multiple sources of help which many people think of as mentorship and which are now seen by many people to be indispensable for career success.¹

Each of these points may be seen as necessary, but not sufficient by itself, to establish the supportive ecology in which excellent mentorship is available to women (and men). My own view is that the barriers to adequate mentorship for women are sufficiently high that a successful framework requires energy from many sources: creative support of top management, women's networks, close relation between top management and the networks, receptive individuals seeking helping resources, and specific programs tailored to each kind of worker in each kind of organization. Each of these energy sources

Mary Rowe could not be present at the conference. Her paper was read for her by June Fessenden-Raden of Cornell; discussion afterwards was led by Fessenden-Raden and Bernice R. Sandler.

1. In this paper, I use mentor in its widest possible meaning to refer to coaching, guidance, sponsorship in the context set forth by Garrison and Davis, master's thesis, MIT Sloan School, 1979, and by Shapiro, Haseltine, and Rowe in Sloan Management Review, spring 1978.

has its own role to play; all are needed for an effective equal opportunity ecology.²

LEGITIMATION AS WELL AS LEADERSHIP

Whatever the institution or agency or corporation, the top administration must announce and then exemplify commitment to equal opportunity. In formal and informal situations top management must be seen to have a coherent, consistent policy. This policy should appear frequently: in annual reports, in policies and procedures or the by-laws, in recruitment manuals, in after dinner speeches, and in hallway conversations. The policy should explicitly include discussions of providing multiple helping resources for women as a matter of organizational policy.

This frequently announced commitment from the top is important for several reasons. Obviously all important organizational policies will be enunciated from the top in every significant organization, and equal opportunity must be seen to be important if it is to work.

Appropriate male-female relations at work must be legitimated. Traditionally socialized men and women may have very mixed feelings about whether it is really moral and proper for women to succeed in paid employment. Moreover whether or not an individual feels women should be equally successful as men, there may be discomfort or hesitancy about equal paths to success. A senior man (or woman) may cause adverse comment if he (or she) takes on a person of the opposite sex as a protégé. Senior people will feel free to become excellent mentors on a cross-sex basis only if their own bosses expect this to occur as part of excellent work performance.

Responsible, effective leadership in encouraging senior people to be mentors of course requires that a top administration encourage mentorship of all junior people. I do not recommend a separate special guidance program for women. Special programs of this kind are of questionable legality and morality and often lack long-term credibility and influence. What women do need is an explicit legitimation of their equal right to guidance and sponsors. They also frequently need the

2. Elsewhere I have written of two other institutional structures I consider indispensable to establishing an effective equal opportunity ecology: nonunion grievance procedures and a 1:1 recruitment system.

extra supports provided by women's networks and specific attention to women within general programs.

FOSTERING RESPONSIBLE NETWORKS OF WOMEN

As part of the organizational policy on equal opportunity and as an integral part of building mentorship frameworks, responsible women's networks should be encouraged. Grass roots networks of this kind have been repeatedly shown to be indispensable to sustained progress for blacks and women. Intraorganizational and interorganizational networks share information, provide mutual support, teach skills, and function as informal channels for inquiries and grievances. Such networks may provide the only reliable information on equal opportunity concerns that reaches top administrators. They will let top management know quickly which helping resources are most needed and where. Women's groups tend also to cool out socially irresponsible members, while providing leverage to those with responsible concerns and complaints. Finally, these groups are efficient at providing role models as well as sponsors for their members, even in organizations where there are only a very few senior women.

MAINTAINING CLOSE RELATIONS BETWEEN WOMEN'S NETWORKS AND TOP ADMINISTRATORS

Networks of women do grow, whether or not they are encouraged. Where they are fostered and respected and consulted, they are a powerful force for nonpolarized and steady progress. Covert, defensive groups, on the other hand, tend to polarize issues because they can see no alternatives. Then mentorship, coaching, and role models can become quite negative factors as polarization increases. Polarization often leads to backlash, and damage from backlash, of a kind many people would prefer to avoid. Moreover, covert networks cannot function efficiently to prevent trouble by an orderly presentation of concerns and grievances. Individuals who have serious complaints need clear channels for presenting their concerns if they are not to turn to the courts and other methods of taking things in their own hands.

Maintaining close communications between the top and the women's networks permits each group to learn from the other. Male managers learn what women want and need and what their special concerns are. Women learn

what is realistically available to them, about budget constraints; they learn how to focus and balance their own issues in a general perspective, and how the system works.

TRAINING OF WOMEN TO FIND THEIR OWN SOURCES OF HELP

Feminists have long discussed the importance for women of their taking responsibility and having some control over their own careers. In practice this is also the only effective way of finding adequate mentorship for women. The best framework for women to learn what they need to know about productive and successful careers requires that all junior women be specifically taught and encouraged to seek their own guides and sponsors. Junior women will be able to find adequate mentorship much more easily if it is legitimated and fostered by top administrators and women's networks. But it is also critical that they themselves be receptive, that they seek out the guides, sponsors, and coaches they need to reach their goals. Junior women can be taught to do this by written guidelines, workshops, senior people, supervisors, and each other. (See Appendix A: Go Find Yourself A Mentor, for an example.)

BUILDING SPECIFIC MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Specific programs to encourage sponsorship, guidance, and coaching are vital for employees everywhere, and for faculty and students as well, in educational institutions. Mentorship programs should be designed:

1. for everyone, male and female, minority and nonminority, good performers and poor performers, faculty, staff, students, and employees, and there should be specific safeguards to be sure such programs work at least equally well for women and minorities;
2. around a performance evaluation program;
3. with a component to be sure someone is teaching women and minorities to seek and be receptive to mentorship, so that mentors and protégés are seeking each other simultaneously;

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4. uniquely for the needs of each different institution, each different pay classification, each type of student.

A good mentorship program should be for everyone. For example, in a university the concept of mentorship needs to be developed for employees, especially support staff, as well as for faculty and students. Mentorship must be a part of the local ecology, an attitude toward everyone, a part of a systematic framework of support for career development and lifetime growth for everyone, or it will not be effective for minorities and women, who are usually located in inferior positions. Eroding occupational segregation requires that powerful levers for change, like mentorship programs, extend across pay classification lines.

Programs need to be for white males as well as for minorities and women. Most people find general programs more acceptable, more likely to be considered legal, and more easily understood. General programs are also necessary to create a systematic framework for emphasis on career development. Also, the most effective mentors in any given environment are likely to be people who are indigenous to that environment. White males are probably the most influential mentors in a research university, black females may be the best mentors in an inner city day care center, and so on. Thus the enthusiastic support of white males for the mentorship program in a university will be very important for everyone. Equal effectiveness for minorities and women can be fostered by having programs designed and monitored by minority and female staff as well as others, but the programs need to be general.

Programs should be for poorer performers as well as good ones. For example, it is vital to provide guidance for junior faculty who are good enough to be promoted and tenured, but it is even more important to provide excellent mentorship for junior faculty who will not be kept. Every such person should leave the college or university to a good job, having been helped by mentors to plan realistically and successfully for the future. Such support means that those who leave will continue to speak well of the original institution, which is important for recruiting. Peaceful severance means lower costs for the original institution, and, most important, going to something, rather than being

rejected, enhances the life of the individual who must leave, instead of causing pain and damage.

A good mentorship program should begin with a discussion for every junior person with his or her supervisor, e.g., faculty advisor, department head, twice a year. Corporations usually have some kind of regular performance appraisal system; universities often do not provide even this much feedback and support to junior people.

An adequate performance appraisal or mentorship discussion should include at least the following points:

1. Where has the junior person been doing well?
2. How could he or she do better?

3. Where does the supervisor or department head think the job is going? (What will the needs of the department be?)

4. What does the junior person want from the future? What skills are being used? How would this person like to grow on the job and in future jobs?

For faculty members, these discussions should include frank appraisals of the possibilities for promotion and tenure, sources of grant funds, identification of possible mentors around the country or around the world, and so on. For administrative and research and support staff, these discussions should be specific and detailed as to strengths and weaknesses, other possible sources of help, potential career ladders.

Supervisory feedback should thus form the backbone of mentorship programs in every institution. Few institutions and especially few universities have made sure that career development for junior people is a major and mandatory component of performance evaluation discussions.

Institutions should identify people who can work with junior members of the community, to teach them how to seek adequate advice and mentorship. Women and minorities particularly need to have someone who will legitimate and foster their search for adequate guidance--a dean, an assistant to the president, a vice president for personnel, or any other senior person.

The purpose is to create an atmosphere in which the institution requires senior people to give guidance and encourages junior people to seek guidance. It is only in such circumstances that cross-sex, cross-race diffidence on both sides will be transcended, and that minorities and women will get adequate sponsorship.

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Some institutions simply assign mentors on a first-year or permanent basis. Temporary assignments can be very helpful, but I believe long-term mentorships work best, at least in universities, if they develop naturally in a context where both parties are supposed to be looking for each other. I recommend that, instead of assigning mentors, an institution assign a few people to teach the acquisition of mentorship to juniors while monitoring performance evaluation by seniors.

Good mentorship programs should be built around the specific needs and customs of each organization to specifically accommodate different kinds of employees and students. For example, guidance and support to people in postdoctoral positions must occur within the customs of each different discipline and be tailored to a specific university's expectations of principal investigators. Mentorship for administrators in a small college may require someone with considerable knowledge of the regional labor market. A person who is teaching junior faculty to develop their own mentors must be finely tuned to different practices in each discipline. Custom tailoring in this way is not particularly difficult; in fact it is easier than trying to graft a mentorship program from one institution onto another. Usually there are very successful people in each field who are glad to be able to advise on how programs should develop in their own laboratory or department or agency.

Institutions that show leadership in this new area have everything to gain. Doubling the available pool of skills and abilities is vital to the success of most organizations. In addition most institutions employ and serve women. They can do so more profitably and efficiently by understanding better their female employees and clients. If they do so ahead of their competitors they can gain an enviable reputation that lasts for generations and helps to continue attracting the ablest faculty and employees, students and clients. As we plan for coming years, the practice of true equal opportunity is patently less costly, in terms of litigation, emotional damage, and other problems. Since mentorship frameworks appear to be as important for women as they always have been for men, institutions stand only to gain by building such frameworks in an orderly, responsible fashion.

DISCUSSION

Support for Junior People. One participant noted that MIT differs from many other institutions of higher education in its philosophy of hiring. Because there is no fixed number of tenured positions at MIT as there is elsewhere, each person appointed to an assistant professorship could potentially achieve tenure. The question is how can that person's colleagues help him or her make the grade. At other institutions, in contrast, the six-year trial period is often just that, a test to see whether or not the person can make it. This makes an extraordinary difference in the kinds of help extended to a junior person.

Bernice Sandler concurred. "If a person is hired with the expectation that he or she will make it, then the mentor relationship is much more likely to develop between that person and the senior colleagues," she said. Sandler observed that mentors are not appointed or, as a rule, appointed. The protégé has to take the responsibility for finding a mentor and asking for help. Also, she noted, sometimes no mentor can be found. Either the people are too busy, or you can't find them, or there is some other obstacle. There are alternative ways of getting information and help, she said. In the women's movement, women advise one another as equals, sharing technical information on proposal writing, for instance. There are other support groups and sources of information, as well. She suggested that perhaps the first step is to define the kinds of things one needs to know. One can approach a mentor to help answer that question, to say, "I'm going to be here for the next couple of years. What are the kinds of things I ought to know and learn?" You could list some and ask if you missed any, Sandler said.

Sex Roles and Mentors. A participant noted that older males are sometimes leery of taking on a young woman as a protégé for fear their relationship will be misunderstood. Fessenden-Raden and Sandler concurred that this can be a problem. Fessenden-Raden pointed to the emphasis in Rowe's paper on legitimizing the relationship to avoid that kind of criticism. Every person at the conference, Fessenden-Raden guessed, had had the experience of having lunch with a member of the opposite sex and having a colleague come along and make some kind of wise remark. We have, also, the dramatic case of Mary Cunningham whose meteoric rise to a vice

presidency caused such upheaval at the Bendix Corporation. This underlines the importance of the top managers saying, "We expect this kind of interaction." Fessenden-Raden added that it seems important for a protégé to get to know his or her mentor's family. (Several participants noted here that Mary Cunningham had in fact done that and it had not helped her any.)

Sandler also commented on the Cunningham case, noting that (1) she was not fired because she had a mentor. She resigned because she moved up through the ranks very very quickly and that had engendered hostility and political struggles among those she had overtaken and passed. (2) The second interesting aspect of Mary Cunningham's resignation was the amount of controversy it provoked. The Washington Post and the Washington Star both had articles by Gail Sheehey; there were letters to the editor; editorials were published. Interesting questions (perhaps not interesting to Cunningham but to others) were raised, such as "If she had been ugly, would this have happened? What happens to a woman who becomes the first woman promoted to that level?" Both women and men have been talking about these issues and that's good. Cunningham herself is sturdy and she has had, Sandler noted, many, many job offers.

Other Problems with Mentors. What do you do, one participant asked, if your mentor is a dud? Sandler responded that your mentor does not have to be a star. Mary Rowe mentioned "multiple resources" in her paper; one can also think of "multiple mentors," Sandler said. If a person can give you advice and help on some subject that you care about, you should make that person your mentor even if nobody else thinks his or her expertise is worth anything. To be sure, that person can't give you counsel on how to move up in the system since he or she hasn't gone that route. But that person may have some valuable insights because he or she has seen the system from a perspective different from those of people who are desperately trying to make it in the system. It isn't always good to choose a mentor because he or she has the appearance of success. The issue is, What can that person tell you that will help you? And how can you repay that? Not by giving it back to your mentor, but by being a mentor to someone else.

Sexual Harassment. A graduate student brought up the problem of establishing a relationship in an all-male department trusting enough to discuss problems such as incidents of sexual harassment. Both Fessenden-Raden and Sandler acknowledged this as a real problem. Fessenden-Raden suggested looking outside one's own department for a woman faculty member--even if she is not tenured--for counsel or, alternatively, turning to a male faculty member and getting to know his family. Sandler advised defusing the sexual aspects of a relationship by not going to a mentor by oneself. Two or three or more women could go to a male faculty member and ask him out for a beer. Once out, you can convey to him that you need his help professionally and that you are not interested in him as a sexual object. A second possibility is to choose a faculty man who is both (1) respected in the department so people will listen to him and (2) sufficiently sensitive to be educable in these matters. Two or three of you go to him and tell him the problem. You might begin by saying that you know the department cares about women because you are there, but that the women need and want the kind of help mentors give. Ask his advice on how to approach the department on this issue.

The student responded that she felt that, if one has a problem with sexual harassment, one would feel most comfortable in going to a woman for counsel as to how to handle it. Sandler concurred, noting that one probably shouldn't seek out a male mentor to resolve this problem. If one has a mentor already, he could give comfort and advice, however. Her project, she noted, has written a paper on this subject.³

Multiple Mentors. A tenured woman noted that she had never had a problem finding mentors in part because she defined the issue the way Rowe's paper advises: multiple sources. She approached her department (in a college of home economics that had, at that time, all male full professors except for one female who had come through the extension division) in the belief that individuals would be willing to help her. They were. She had some mentors

3. This paper and others on related subjects are available from the Project on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges, 1818 R Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20009.

who provided technical assistance with papers and research, she said, and others to whom she turned for help when in emotional trouble or when needing advice on strategy and tactics. A tenured male faculty member commented that the mentoring relationship had never been studied from the perspective of the mentor. Who are these mentors? he wondered. This question is addressed by the Garrison and Davis master's thesis for the MIT Sloan School. The faculty member also cited a book by Levinson, The Seasons of a Man's Life, that defines mentorship as a stage in one's development.⁴ An interesting question might be the "rise and fall of a mentor," he noted. How do mentors learn to be able to let their protégés go?

A particular problem for which mentorship might not be a viable solution is the way in which women's studies research is defined, one student noted. Sandler concurred. When she had wanted to undertake studies of women, she was told that that was not "real research," she said. An individual mentor cannot perhaps help one to solve that systemwide problem, she said.

Mentorship should provide information about jobs available, one participant noted; a second said another key component is the sharing of information about financial resources available. Fessenden-Raden noted that an individual can have mentors in different departments, in different universities, even in different countries. Sandler added that some mentor relationships can be short-term and others longer. One could meet a mentor just once or perhaps only several times--or one could turn to him or her for the rest of one's life. Mentorship is, a participant concluded, teaching in the very highest sense. A conference like the present one provides an opportunity to not only find a mentor but to be one.

4. Daniel J. Levinson et al., The Seasons of a Man's Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).