



Career Coaching

Men Can Improve How They Mentor Women. Here's How.

Advice for guys, from guys. **by David G. Smith and W. Brad Johnson**

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Last year, Nobel scientist, [Tim Hunt](#) remarked that he had trouble working with “girls” because “three things happen when they are in the lab; you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticize them, they cry.” After being widely criticized in the media, he responded that he was just trying to be honest and meant no harm.

This could be written off as an isolated situation except that it followed a [news report](#) on congressional staffers contending with unwritten rules restricting female aides from one-on-one sessions with male members of Congress, including meetings, driving, and staffing out-of-office events. These congressional staff rules were intended to maintain a level of separation between male lawmakers and female staffers “out of sensitivity to the politician’s wife or to protect a congressman from allegations of sexual harassment.” However, most people also understood the insinuation that congressmen or their female staffers couldn’t be trusted to be alone with each other. In both of these examples, junior women — a distinct minority in both scientific research and politics — pay the price. Denied access to power-holders — and potential career mentors — these women are excluded and marginalized.

So what is it about cross-gender professional relationships that flood some men with anxiety? Partly, these guys are rattled by the prospect of close, caring, but nonsexual developmental relationships with women

at work. They're not alone; one 2010 survey found that half of junior women and almost two-thirds of senior men shied away from one-on-one mentoring relationships due to concerns that someone might perceive a sexual relationship where there was none. But there's something else going on here, too, that's causing these guys to back away from mentoring women. The net outcome is unsatisfactory for women and for the companies and organizations that hire them.

Men are more self-aware and effective in mentorships with women if they understand and accept their evolved male brains, the neuroscience of sex and gender, and the equally powerful impact of gender socialization. Although brain studies reveal only slight distinctions between men and women in most areas of the brain, with as much variation within each sex as between them, these differences are often used to validate stereotypical behaviors and attributes we ascribe to each gender.

Consider the case of emotional expression. Women are usually considered to be more emotional compared to men but fMRI brain scans indicate that men and women both experience negative emotions associated with pictures designed to evoke an emotive reaction. However, men and women outwardly express this experience differently based on neurologically-rooted distinctions in the regulation of emotions. When comparing neural activity in the brain, women are better at reframing negative emotions using positive feelings whereas men use less neural activity in responding to emotionally-laden stimuli and are more inclined to control, even mute, emotional expression.

So how do we explain the popular belief that women are more likely to cry when they express their emotions? Again, neuroscience offers part of the explanation. In one study, women reported shedding tears as much as eight times more often than men. And when women cried,

they reported that the duration of crying was three times longer than reported by men. Explanations for these differences can be traced to evolved neuroendocrine distinctions. While women have higher levels of the hormone prolactin, produced in the pituitary gland and responsible for tear production, men have higher levels of testosterone which limits tear production. Yet, there remain differences across cultures indicating a social effect on the proclivity to tear up at work. In cultures such as the United States where it is more acceptable to express emotions, women are socialized with more permission to cry, and women experience less shame when crying than men.

These sex differences in emotionality can translate to misunderstanding, miscommunication, and relational fails if guys aren't attuned. In understanding how men and women relate to each other in a mentoring relationship, men should appreciate women's neurological tendencies to absorb and retain more sensorial and emotive information, be verbally expressive in connecting memories and current events, and be more analytical of relational feelings.

How can male mentors learn to appreciate these tendencies? As two examples, men can be more effective mentors for women if they practice listening skills with the goal of showing empathy versus trying to quickly problem solve or "fix" things for her. In the process of listening, male mentors may find that they develop and appreciate enhanced interpersonal skills, access to larger networks, and insider knowledge of their organization that makes them more effective leaders.

Many male mentors we interviewed stated that they often learned more from their female mentee than she did from him! Second, men must take it in stride if a female mentee cries (get over it already, dudes). Men should appreciate the research showing that greater prolactin

levels, human evolution, and socialized permission are at play here, not weakness or distress. Men who mentor must appreciate that passion and conviction may be intertwined with tears for some women. Rather than run for the exit at the first teardrop, confident mentors stock up on Kleenex, take emotion in stride, and get on with the business of championing promising women.

And men can't lose sight of the ways their own evolved habits interface with the powerful effects of gender socialization to fuel male behavior that can diminish the value of cross-gender mentorship at work. Take the testosterone-fueled tendency for men to compete—sometimes fiercely—in the workplace. One-upping other dudes is ubiquitous in male-centric environments. Some studies have shown men do this even when it's not to their benefit; a study by Muriel Niederle and Lise Vesterlund [found](#) that even when men would make more money being paid by the task, they preferred to compete in a winner-take-all tournament. Women showed the opposite behavior, avoiding competition even when they were likely to win. These competitive differences are largely associated with socio-cultural differences related to gender socialization in [cultural comparison research](#) and [effects of single/mixed gender schooling research](#). Regardless of your appetite for it, competition is nearly always counterproductive in a healthy mentoring relationship, which should be based on power sharing, mutuality, equality, cooperative learning, and integration of personal and professional lives.

Confidence offers another example. Men are often socialized to [over-estimate](#) and [over-report](#) their potential and subsequent achievements. The opposite is often the case for women. Excellent mentors for women persistently affirm that they belong (particularly in male-centric organizations) and coach them to take full ownership of their accomplishments and their contributions to team projects.

Now, let's get back to that elephant in the room whenever male-female mentorship is discussed. How shall we frame that evolved, hard-wired attraction that men and women sometimes experience? Biologists and evolutionary psychologists have all kinds of theories about how men and women experience sexual attraction, and it makes for pretty interesting reading. But to cut to the chase, research suggests that men are more likely to be attracted to their female friends than those female friends are to be attracted to them. Moreover, other research has found that when you're attracted to someone, you are more likely to mistakenly assume the feeling is mutual. So in other words, largely due to men's misinterpretation of attraction cues, they can overestimate the mutuality of any attraction in play. Time to face facts, gentlemen: if you're attracted to a woman at work, there's a very good chance she's *not* equally into you.

Effective heterosexual male mentors will have a solid appreciation of Darwin. Thoughtful cavemen understand attraction cues. They refuse to shame themselves for occasionally finding a female mentee attractive, yet they take full responsibility for employing their frontal cortex. A man's evolved frontal lobe — should he choose to use it — allows judgment, prudence, self-regulation and impulse control. Self-awareness means not pretending to be invulnerable to feelings of attraction, but also not giving into them and thereby putting the mentoring relationship, the female mentee and themselves in harm's way.

A healthy understanding of attraction and cross-gender relationships is vital in fostering an inclusive workplace where talent management is foundational. Self-aware and thoughtful male mentors who intentionally and conscientiously mentor both women and men will find that their mentees enjoy more promotions and higher salaries,

more job satisfaction and commitment to the organization, and ultimately more self-worth and career eminence.

Similarly their organizations are better positioned for future success, enjoy more creativity, and find their bottom-line outperforming the competition. If that's not convincing enough, productive cross-gender mentorships help men to be more effective leaders and valued rainmakers in their industry. And in the end, more self-awareness and a wider range of interpersonal skills may make them better husbands, fathers, and men—and what man doesn't aspire to that?

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