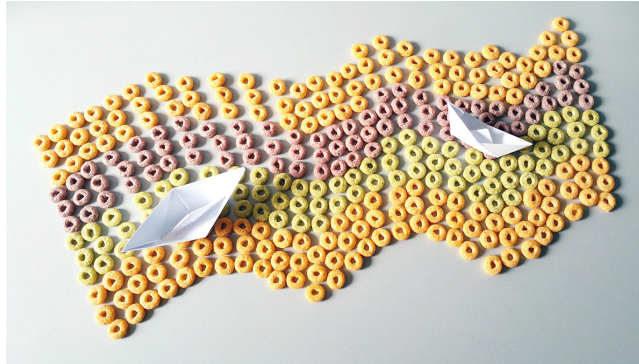


Mentoring Women Is Not About Trying to “Rescue” Them

by W. Brad Johnson and David G. Smith

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Summary. Male mentors and sponsors are essential for helping talented women get ahead. But for a lot of senior guys, it's tough to mentor junior women without falling into tired old “white knight to the...” [more](#)

We know that male mentors and sponsors are essential for helping talented women get ahead. When women are mentored by men, they make more money, receive more promotions, and report greater satisfaction with their career trajectories. Although advantageous for all employees, mentoring is particularly helpful to women for addressing the myriad barriers to career advancement. But in the wake of the #MeToo Movement there are growing whispers among some men that it just isn't safe to mentor women. We've also heard from some men who are having the opposite reaction, determining to mentor and “save” more women. While we applaud their good intentions, this attitude is also unlikely to have the results they want.

Let's just start by saying the obvious: *of course* men should mentor women. It's wrong (and illegal) to exclude half the population. But taking a save-the-day approach won't work very well, either. Even the standard mentoring approach of the mentor as all-knowing guru, dispensing knowledge, implies a hierarchical, one-way relationship that can frame men who mentor women as *champions, heroes, even rescuers*. In this model, the mentor shares wisdom, throws down challenges, and when necessary, protects his *protégé* from all malignant forces in the organization. Enter the chivalrous knight-damsel in distress archetype. As Jennifer de Vries has astutely observed, painting male allies and mentors as heroic rescuers actually strengthens the gendered status quo, inadvertently reinforcing male positional power while framing women as ill-prepared for serious leadership roles.

So what's a decent guy to do? Happily, there is a promising alternative to the traditional, hierarchical, unidirectional mentoring model. We call it reciprocal mentoring. Cross-gender reciprocal mentorships are essentially partnerships in which men and women play complementary roles leading to career *and*

personal development for both parties, and ultimately, greater gender equality in the workplace.

In her research on reciprocal mentorship, [Belle Rose Ragins](#) discovered that mentorships with the greatest life-long impact are more mutual. In these relationships, there is greater fluidity in expertise between members. Although mentors, by definition, have more experience in the profession, mentees bring their own insights, life experiences, and talents to the table. Mentors in these high-quality partnerships value and are influenced by their mentee's perspective.

By entering mentoring connections with real humility and curiosity, male mentors may find that they [learn more about](#) the experiences of women in their organization, diversify their networks and enhance their interpersonal skills. For example, many of the male mentors in our interviews on [cross-gender mentoring relationships](#) concluded that they learned and benefitted more than their female mentees.

High-impact reciprocal mentorships have some distinctive elements. Here are some characteristics that define the best mentorships between women and men:

- **Mutual listening and affirmation:** In high-quality mentoring, both members learn and grow from the relationship. There is fluid expertise between members. This requires men to keep an open mind, maintain a learning orientation, and recognize that expertise may shift depending on the specific mentoring episode or phase of the mentorship. Generous listening, avoiding assumptions, and patiently drawing out the other person's authentic self and genuine aspirations are hallmarks of reciprocal mentorships.
- **Humility:** Truly transformational mentors are humble. They recognize that their own vulnerability and imperfection serves as an empowering model, levels the playing field, and opens the door to building their own empathy and wisdom. Although it can be a challenge for senior men to check their egos at the door, demonstrate transparency about what they don't know, and express real curiosity about a mentee's unique experience in the workplace, such humility is a key reciprocal mentoring skill.
- **Shared power:** Genuine reciprocity requires even high-ranking mentors to reject hierarchy and emphasize power-sharing. Acutely aware of privilege conferred by gender and race, men in reciprocal mentorships are deliberate about sharing social capital, including influence, information, knowledge, and support with mentees.
- **An extended range of mentoring outcomes:** Reciprocal mentorship partners are interested in helping one another find success beyond mere career advancement and compensation. Less tangible but equally salient mentoring conversations may center on concerns such as professional identity, work-family

integration, and personal confidence. The finest reciprocal mentors are interested in helping mentees hone things such as self-efficacy, emotional intelligence and resilience in the face of stress.

Inclusive leaders are learning that women (and men) perform better, advance faster, and choose to stay in their organizations when they have effective mentors and sponsors. And because women report a preference for less hierarchy and more reciprocity in their mentorships, companies are doing more to develop and equip reciprocal mentoring pairs.

As one example, Greatheart Consulting has launched a [Reciprocal Mentoring Lab](#), an approach to advancing high-performing women and equipping gender-savvy men. In Greatheart's Lab, new or existing cross-gender mentoring teams join several other teams for two days of intensive learning and reciprocal skill development. The goal is to create strong schemas or mental maps for reciprocal cross-gender mentorship that can then be exported back to the dyad's organization, ultimately serving to change the mentoring culture.

Ultimately, any mentoring program for women must address organizational and cultural change. Sure, strong mentorships may help women to overcome individual challenges with the existing organizational hierarchy and power dynamics. However, unless mentors also target the workplace status quo, biases and stereotypes will continue to reinforce gender inequities. Promoting a mentoring culture where talented men and women engage in reciprocal developmental connections may finally create change agents and allies capable of truly moving the dial on gender inclusion.



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