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Lilly Hanko

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Gal Pals: The Importance of Mentorship for the Advancement of Women in the Workplace

Submitted by: Lilly Hanko

Most of the past studies conducted on mentoring are not specific to the experiences of women. More and more research is starting to focus on women in particular, and this allows us to better understand the importance of mentoring on the career development of women. Women often struggle with finding and leveraging mentors. A woman-to-woman mentoring relationship is one of the most valuable and impactful resource a woman can have in terms of her career growth and success. This paper will review the benefits of mentoring women, what women seek in mentoring relationships and the key components of effective mentorship, why woman-to-woman mentorship pairs are so necessary, and the barriers that hinder women from seeking out and developing mentoring relationships.

The benefits of mentorship are plentiful and prove just how important mentorship is. According to one study that followed nearly 200 participants in a six-month formal mentorship program, mentees reported higher levels of job satisfaction, self-esteem, career mobility and opportunity, and a stronger sense of organizational commitment (Fowler et al., 2021). Shifting our focus to mentoring women in particular, mentorship opens the door to more opportunities for women, such as high-visibility projects or promotions, and provides a path into leadership and more senior positions (Elting, 2018). The advantages of mentorship extend far beyond just the impact mentoring has on a mentee's career, as there are benefits also for the mentor and the organization(s) through which the two parties are connected. For those serving as mentors in one study, higher levels of job performance and job satisfaction were reported, along with less intention to leave the organization and improved leadership and managerial skills (Fowler et al., 2021).

With women in more senior positions serving as mentors, women in junior roles have additional opportunities that allow them to pursue leadership roles, and they directly witness gender representation by seeing their mentors and other women in these positions. With the encouragement and support of their mentors, there is an increase in women seeking leadership roles, which leads to an increase in the number of women who fill those positions. This cycle of mentorship continues, and the result is more women in executive roles and greater diversity in more senses than just surface level (Elting, 2018). An increase of women in the C-suite leads to diversity of thought, thus creating an environment where companies are more socially responsible, more open to change, less open to risk, and more profitable (Post et al., 2021). To round out the organizational benefits, companies experience an increase in employee engagement when a formal mentorship program takes place (Fowler et al., 2021).

Understanding how important mentorship is and the many benefits is crucial to understanding why women are so intentional when seeking out potential mentors. In a study conducted by Dustin et al. (2019), nearly 40 women in the commercial real estate industry were interviewed about their experiences with positioning themselves to receive mentorship and guidance as their needs change throughout their career. After conducting these interviews, the authors concluded that women view seeking mentors as a strategic process, during which they evaluate potential mentors based on their anticipated commitment to the mentoring scenario, the expected reciprocity of the relationship, and motivation of each party to maintain the partnership. Additionally, the mentees were motivated to build relationships with other women in the industry as a means of elevating and advancing their careers (Dustin et al., 2019). The strategy utilized when finding a mentor directly ties into some of the key aspects of an effective mentoring relationship. According to a study that spanned STEM-

related disciplines from twelve universities in the United States and Puerto Rico, there are eight main components that both mentors and mentees found to be crucial to mentorship: “open communication and accessibility, goals and challenges, passion and inspiration, a caring personal relationship, mutual respect and trust, exchange of knowledge, independence and collaboration, and role modeling” (Eller et al., 2014).

Knowing what women seek in mentoring relationships and the benefits therein, one might wonder why women struggle to find professional mentors. Attempting to gain access to the same opportunities and knowledge as those in the “Old Boys’ Network” can be difficult due to a number of factors. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.) the “Old Boys’ Network” is commonly defined as “an informal system in which wealthy men with the same social and educational background help each other,” typically in the sense of using their connections and influence to provide opportunities to elite schools or executive positions. This definition is not limited to those who are wealthy, as these sometimes unspoken or unofficial connections are upheld within companies. As Janice Omadeke (2019) describes in her TEDx Talk, her male counterparts would get drinks or play golf with high-level men in the company and return with tips for networking and expanding their skillset to be considered for upcoming open positions within the company. When she asked the same executives and high-level employees for the same advice, she was met with remarks related to her appearance and clothing.

This bias and the inability of women to crack the “Old Boys’ Network” combined with the barriers perceived by women when seeking mentors provide an explanation as to why women struggle to find professional mentors. According to the study conducted by Ragins et al. (1991) that compared the “gender differences in perceived barriers to gaining a mentor,” women perceived more barriers than men despite being controlled for factors like age, rank, and tenure (p. 939). Women reported higher levels of other additional barriers, such as the lack of institutionalized mentorship programs, the lack of opportunities to meet potential mentors and gender bias. Most notably, women responded that they feared their attempts to connect with potential male mentors would be misinterpreted as sexual advances and could also cause additional office gossip (Ragins et al., 1991).

This fear is one reason why women tend to prefer other women as mentors. While having male sponsors or advocates within an organization can be advantageous, this type of relationship is different from having a mentor who has similar experiences and can empathize with the mentee’s reality. Having mentors with similar career experiences and personal interests who are also women provides additional benefits and an opportunity for a more personal connection to develop between the mentor and mentee. In one study that examined the experiences of members of the Women’s Dermatologic Society, 75 percent of the respondents who participated in female-female official mentorship relationships preferred having a female mentor, and 80.5 percent of those in spontaneous mentoring relationships preferred a female mentor as well (Lin et al., 2021). This demonstrates just how prevalent the desire for a woman-to-woman mentoring relationship is, no matter if the partnership is joined formally or informally.

With the wide range of benefits provided through mentoring women, it is easy to understand how woman-to-woman mentoring relationships are one of the most valuable resource a woman can have in her professional career. Women are very intentional and strategic with their endeavors in seeking a potential mentor, especially due to the fears, biases, and perceived barriers that women face over the course of their careers. As research conducted on the effectiveness of mentoring and how these connections directly impact professional career development continues, it is imperative that we focus on the experiences of women.

Annotated Bibliography

Dustin C. Read, Patti J. Fisher, & Luke Juran. (2020). *How do women maximize the value of mentorship? Insights from mentees, mentors, and industry professionals*. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 41(2), 165–175. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-02-2019-0094>

In this article, 39 women were interviewed and their responses analyzed to find common and central themes in their attitudes toward mentoring relationships. This study found that mentor relationships are quite strategic, and women tend to focus on "commitment, reciprocation, and mentee motivation" when seeking out and positioning themselves in mentor and/or mentee relationships. The most important takeaway from this article is the strategic manner in which women enter into these mentor/mentee scenarios in order to better position themselves to ascend into a more superior or more senior role. This directly supports my argument that woman-to-woman mentorship scenarios are crucial to a woman's advancement in the workplace and over the life of her career.

Eller, L.S., Lev, E.L., & Feurer, A. (2014). *Key components of an effective mentoring relationship: a qualitative study*. Nurse education today, 34 5, 815-20.

This study spanned various STEM-related disciplines from twelve universities in the United States and Puerto Rico, there are eight main components that both mentors and mentees found to be crucial to mentoring relationships. This study showed common themes among those participating in mentorship relationships, which provides insight into what is most valuable and important in these partnerships. I intend to use this in my paper to describe what women seek out in mentorship relationships.

Elting, L. (2018, November 26). 4 Ways Women Mentoring Women Can Change the World. Forbes. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizelting/2018/11/26/4-ways-women-mentoring-women-can-change-the-world/?sh=116102273813>

This article from the ForbesWomen section of Forbes details four main benefits that arise when women mentor other women. Author Liz Elting points out the opportunities that are created for mentees through these woman-to-woman mentoring relationships. These will serve as primary benefits that support my argument as to the benefits of mentoring women. I intend to include these along with other, more measurable benefits gathered from other sources.

Fowler, J.L., Fowler, D.S. and O’Gorman, J.G. (2021), *Worth the investment? An examination of the organisational outcomes of a formal structured mentoring program*. Asia Pac J Hum Resour, 59: 109-131. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12252>

This recent study follows nearly 200 participants in a six-month mentorship program to determine the impact of mentorship on self-reported levels of self-esteem, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and other additional topics. While this study includes both men and women, it provides important information regarding the benefits of mentoring for not only mentees but also mentors and for the organization. This is crucial in supporting my argument that mentorship is rewarding for all parties involved in the relationship.

Lin, G., Murase, J. E., Murrell, D. F., Godoy, L. D. C., & Grant-Kels, J. M. (2021). *The impact of gender in mentor–mentee success: Results from the Women’s Dermatologic Society Mentorship Survey*. International Journal of Women’s Dermatology, 7(4), 398–402. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijwd.2021.04.010>

This study conducted a survey that amassed nearly 300 responses, of which a majority were those identifying as women. The survey asked respondents about both formal and spontaneous mentor relationships and the preferences of having a mentor who is gender-similar versus one who is dissimilar in terms of gender. An overwhelming majority of respondents preferred having a gender-similar mentor regardless of whether or not the relationship between the mentee and mentor was formal. Gathering this type of information aids my argument that, in particular, women participating in a mentorship relationship with another woman is crucial to her success in the workplace. This study provides empirical evidence that mentees find gender-similar mentors as having a greater positive impact on their mentorship.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Old boy network. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved March 14, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/old%20boy%20network>

This source provides me with the definition of “old boy network.” This is crucial to my argument as a segue into the perceived barriers to finding mentors and the different ways men and women view mentorship. This allows me to further develop my argument that woman-to-woman mentoring relationships are so crucial to help provide women the same opportunities that men in this network have the ability to experience.

Post, C., Lokshin, B., & Boone, C. (2021, April 6). Research: Adding Women to the C-suite Changes How Companies Think. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved November 7, 2021, from <https://hbr.org/2021/04/research-adding-women-to-the-c-suite-changes-how-companies-think>.

The research conducted for this article from the Harvard Business Review dives into the tangible and visible ways in which companies are affected by having women in high-level roles. In this study, several metrics were tracked among roughly 150 companies to see exactly how adding women in executive roles impacts their strategies and decision-making processes. This article in particular will provide me with important metrics related to women in C-suite roles, which allows me to demonstrate how having women in high levels of leadership improves the career advancement for women at that company. Having women in leadership positions who serve as high-impact decision makers provides other women in the company with powerful mentors and advocates in their workspace, which in turn allows for those women to take on greater responsibilities and/or move onto higher positions themselves.

Ragins, B. & Cotton, J. (1991). *Easier Said Than Done: Gender Differences in Perceived Barriers to Gaining a Mentor*. Academy of Management Journal. 34. 939-951. 10.2307/256398.

The research conducted in this article is crucial in understanding the perceived barriers to finding a mentor. This study compares how men and women view seeking a mentor and the reasons why they may struggle to find a mentor. One factor that I did not consider was the fear that attempts to create a mentoring relationship may be misinterpreted as a sexual advance by coworkers as well as the potential mentor. This is something that is unfortunately too common in the workplace, yet I hadn't thought of this as a barrier until reading the study. The information and statistical evidence here provides me with critical data to include in my project to support why finding a professional mentor is more difficult for women than it is for men.

TEDx Talks. (2019, March 6). *Mentorship & Workplace Equity Takes Work | Janice Omadeke | TEDxGraceStreetWomen* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_gRbvHntSw

Janie Omadeke's TEDx Talk highlights her own struggle with seeking advice while witnessing the advantages of the Old Boys' Club in her former corporate position. She details tangible ways that we can make changes in our own organizations to improve workplace equity, help other

women in their own professional journeys, and improve both our organization's culture as well as performance. This provided great insight that is directly applicable to my research, as Ms. Omadeke has founded The Mentor Method to provide mentorship and workplace inclusion consultation and solutions to other organizations. The statistics and anecdotes shared in this talk are invaluable to my project.