

WOMEN'S MENTORING WISDOM: EFFECTIVE MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS FOR MID-CAREER WOMEN

By Dr. Rosina L. Racioppi

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Over the last 10 years, the body of knowledge surrounding the incomparable value of mentoring for the advancement of women's careers has increased exponentially. Courses, books, articles, seminars and programs abound. Mentoring has become a mantra for success...and rightly so.

As President and CEO of WOMEN Unlimited, Inc., (with the M in our name standing for Mentoring) I have paid a great deal of attention not just to the formal literature on the subject, but to what the mid-level career women who attend our programs have to say about mentoring and, more importantly, what they're doing about it. As I listened to hundreds of extremely talented mid-career women from a cross-section of Fortune 500 companies, I discovered a trend which I came to believe was contributing to why women (who comprise 54% of the workforce) make up less than 15% of top management.

The simple reality was that despite their talents and skills, most women were not actively engaged in the kind of mentoring relationships that supported their career growth and leadership development. Unlike their male counterparts, they did not have a "personal board of directors" to guide them through their organizational landscapes. Bottom line: they become frustrated with their lack of progress and with being stalled in place. In addition, the companies that partner with WOMEN Unlimited also frequently share with me their frustrations. For example, while they actively hire women in entry level positions, they are "hemorrhaging" women at the mid-career level.

As the evidence kept mounting, I decided I wanted to both help break this log jam and contribute a new perspective on mentoring to the literature. I enrolled in the doctorate program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School Executive Program and made "Women's Mentoring Wisdom" the subject of my dissertation, with an exclusive focus on talented mid-career women and their approaches to mentoring. My research found, that despite the enormous amounts of information on mentoring, there was painfully little research from the women mentees themselves. Knowing the important role mentors play for mid-career-level women, I focused my research on understanding how women engage in mentor relationships to support their growth and development as top-level leaders.

Of course, my dissertation had to follow the strict rigors of an academic endeavor. While many in the field will hopefully find it valuable in its entirety, for most, a synopsis of the background, methodology and critical findings will be sufficient. And that's the purpose of this paper: to shed light on how both mid-level career women and their organizations can reap the benefits of an effective mentoring process.

I look forward to your comments, thoughts and experiences. Email me at rracioppi@women-unlimited.com



Rosina L. Racioppi, Ed.D., President and CEO of **WOMEN Unlimited, Inc.**

Background and Introduction

Much has been said and written about the importance of mentors for career advancement. However, there is a huge gap in the research regarding how women engage in mentoring relationships and how their actions affect their career aspirations and their ultimate success.

This study aimed to shed light on this under-researched area with the ultimate objective of helping mid-career women more effectively engage in mentoring relationships to their benefit and the benefit of their organizations.

To this end, the study focused on two critical questions:

1. What are the elements of the mentoring experience that contribute to mid-career women's leadership development?
2. What impact do mentoring relationships have on how mid-career women form other relationships that support their leadership development?

Why Successful Mentoring Matters for Organizations

It is obvious that successful mentoring strategies work to the advantage of mentees as they seek career advancement. However, it is critical to emphasize the equally important benefits of mentoring for their organizations.

Research is replete with facts, figures and findings on why organizations should be populating their top ranks with talented women. The absence of top-level women puts organizations at a serious competitive disadvantage and impedes their ability to be innovative and agile in a changing global marketplace. Here are just a few examples from the myriad of evidence supporting the correlation between diversity and improved corporate performance:

- A study by Michael Ferrary of France's Skema Business School tracked companies on the Parisian stock exchange. Overall the CAC40 lost 34.70% of its value from 2007-12. However, during that same period, companies on the exchange with 35% or more women on their management team lost only 5.28% of their value.
- A Pepperdine University study tracked 200 Fortune 500 companies over a number of years. According to the lead researcher, Roy Adler: "the correlation between high-level female executives and business success has been consistent and revealing."
- A McKinsey Report compared the top quartile of companies in terms of women on executive committees vs. no-women on executive committees. McKinsey found that companies with women surpassed no-women committees by 41% in return on equity and by 56% in operating results.
- Over the past five years, nine Indian companies run by prominent women managers have out-performed in year-on-year growth the 30 leading firms listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange.
- According to a Catalyst *Bottom Line* Report, Fortune 500 companies with the greatest number of women on their boards "attained significantly higher financial performance"— 53% higher return on equity, 42% higher return on sales and 66% higher return on invested capital.

Additionally, Harvard, Wharton, the Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times and numerous other leaders in their fields have either researched this corporate reality or reported on it in detail. Why do women make such a difference? Predominantly because diverse groups provide diverse points of view which make for better decision making. Research conducted by Anita Woolley at Carnegie Mellon sums it up this way: "if a group includes more women, its collective intelligence rises." That's not to say women are smarter than men, but that the group itself, when diverse, becomes a smarter, more impactful one.

Effective mentoring for women at the mid-career level is a key strategy for increasing the talent pool available for C-suite positions. Both in analyzing the formal research and in my experiences as President and CEO of WOMEN Unlimited, I have found that talented mid-career women are likely to be looking at options outside their current organization. They are frustrated with their lack of progress and struggle to understand how to evolve their skills and behaviors so they can advance their careers. Mentors are a key resource in this process and provide a catalyst for mid-level career women to more effectively navigate their organizations and foster key relationships. With these valuable insights, their frustration level decreases, their visibility to those in the organization who matter to their career advancement increases and their corporations are significantly more likely to have a talent pool ready for promotion to the highest levels.

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research methodology focusing on in-depth interviews with 26 alumnae of the WOMEN Unlimited LEAD program. One of the key components of the LEAD program is Matrix Mentoring in which participants engage in mentoring relationships with peers and with men and women in senior leadership positions.

Women who graduated from the WOMEN Unlimited LEAD program were contacted by email to assess their interest in participating and 26 participants were selected. All were in the mid-career stage when they attended the LEAD Program, from Fortune 500 companies and reflected a broad spectrum of positions and industries, with no two women from the same company. Semi-structured interviews lasting 60 minutes were conducted over the phone. The interview protocol was prepared to ensure consistency of questions among participants, to leverage the allotted time and to customize the interview to the specific experiences of the participants. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by an independent transcription service.

The research did not aim to compare and contrast mentee experiences. Rather, it sought to gather those various experiences and categorize them thematically for a meaningful understanding of the mentee's perspective of her mentoring experience, the influence of the mentor relationship on her leadership development and the manner in which she conducted her mentoring activities.

Insights from Interviewees

One of the distinct advantages of qualitative research with a semi-structured interview methodology is the opportunity to garner information from interviewees in their own words. Here are a few comments that came out of the open-ended portions of the interviews. They reflect the successes that ensue when women act **intentionally** in their mentoring relationships.

“Through these relationships, I understood that if I wanted to be the GM (general manager) of this business, I needed to act like the GM of this business.”

“I don't think I would feel as confident in making career changes without mentors, because they are people to whom I can say: this is why I think I want it. This is why I think I would be good at it. Here's where I am scared that I am not good enough for it and getting advice on that. I do not think I would be changing positions, or growing myself as much as I am without mentors.”

“One of the key benefits of these relationships...is providing you a resource of knowing things that are not in your frame of reference.”

“...I get feedback and coaching from them that builds my confidence. I leverage this on a day-to-day basis from a leadership perspective. It's validation that my approach, that what I am looking to do, has a chance of working.”

“My focus was to shake off the strong technical piece of my work and continue to show up as a broad thinker. I would raise issues to talk through with them [mentors] and share what I was thinking of doing. They would provide validation along with a question, ‘Have you considered x?’ They would make me think through a contingency plan.”

“I thought of questions about developing myself and developing my career that I felt had not been fully answered by other mentors; or questions I felt more comfortable asking somebody outside my own company.”

The Findings

The operative word in the findings is “intentional.” It proved to be the key to success for mentees. For our research, “intentional” meant deliberate actions by the mentee to positively affect a desired outcome. The women mentees were most successful when they were “intentional” in three specific areas:

1. Intentional preparation for their mentoring relationship

The most effective preparations were multi-faceted and involved the mentee’s clarifying her own goals so that the mentoring could be focused on her aims and ambitions. Successful mentees also spent time clarifying how they were viewed by the key influencers in their organizations so they could share those insights with their mentors. Additionally, developing in advance, a strategy to ensure the relationship was open and productive enhanced the mentoring experience.

2. Intentional leveraging of their mentor’s insights

Applying their mentor’s insights and perspectives to their organizational behavior allowed mentees to “show up” in new ways that advanced their growth and development. Among the many benefits: they enhanced their visibility...better navigated the corporate landscape...pinpointed the right time to take the right risks...and developed an effective style that was true to themselves. After applying the “mentor lessons learned,” the mentees would debrief their mentors and gain even further insights for honing their organizational behavior. In short, successful mentoring was about a mentee’s “turning learning into leadership.”

3. Intentional relationship building

Mentees who transferred what they learned from their mentor relationships to building organizational relationships enjoyed increased success in their careers. They better understood how to develop relationships with key people. They were less reluctant to approach those who could be of help to their advancement. They tended to reach out more within the organization, allowing them to get a “better line of sight” on the bigger picture.

“I didn’t just say I have a problem, what should I do? I asked a lot of questions that I did not know the answer to that lead us down a path. She helped me understand what senior leadership was looking for to make a unanimous decision to support my advancement to the next level.”

“It’s okay to open up, to expose yourself. If you don’t, you are not going to get enough out of it (the relationship). People are willing to share, people are willing to help, and give their advice.”

“During my conversations with my mentor, I shared that I was struggling with embracing the commercial mindset. My mentor helped shift my mindset when he shared his experiences and perspective. He helped me see the importance of building relationships. Next week, I am meeting with a vice president of operations to establish the next phase of mentoring.”

“Her guidance gave me a different level of confidence where I was able talk with my boss... A few months later, a role opened up and my boss recommended me for the position. I would not have had the conversation with my manager without my mentor’s support and guidance.”

“I have learned that when you approach the leadership team and ask them, can I meet with you for 15 minutes to get guidance on a certain topic; I really value your opinion? They love to share their knowledge, background and offer advice.”

“Through the mentoring relationship, I understood that I do have something to bring to the table and that I could call and ask questions and would get a positive response.”

“Helped me understand what top talent was, and I was able to craft a plan to be viewed as ‘top talent’”

Research Implications

Providing an environment in which mid-level women can actively seek out and develop mentor relationships is an important strategy for organizations wishing to increase the number of women in senior leadership roles. It is equally important for mentees to prepare for these relationships, act on the insights provided by their mentors and apply what they learn about relationship-building to their organizational behavior. Research indicates that organizations, mentors and mentees must all acknowledge that finding a mentor is only the first step to achieving long-term success individually and corporately.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to existing research regarding strategies for women to advance their careers beyond the mid-career stage. It is one of few that has delved into how women, as mentees, experience mentoring relationships, and how their experiences support or thwart their leadership development.

During the course of this research, several women shared that they struggled with their independence. Up until the mid-career stage, they were able to achieve strong results on their own. The women learned, through their mentoring experience, “the opportunity that you have every day at your company, to reach out and connect with others.” Through these connections, the women gained valuable insights into themselves and their organizations that were critical for their career success.

Mentoring is just one of many strategies in the development of organizational leaders. However, if structured and approached well, it can be one of the most vital. For their continued success and that of their talented women, organizations need to support and encourage development experiences that ensure women gain the insight and guidance needed for their rise to senior level positions.

About the Author



Rosina L. Racioppi, Ed.D.

As President and Chief Executive Officer of WOMEN Unlimited, Inc., Dr. Rosina Racioppi spearheads her organization’s initiatives to help Fortune 1000 companies cultivate the talented women leaders they need for ongoing growth and profitability. By overseeing the management of programs and services nationwide, Dr. Racioppi helps organizations meet the challenges of a continually changing global economy. Additionally, she works with corporate partners to assess and update offerings to their high-potential women; and ensures that WOMEN Unlimited is in synch with the needs of its present and potential partners.

Dr. Racioppi earned her doctorate in education from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School Executive Program. Her dissertation, “Women’s Mentoring Wisdom” focuses on how women use and fail to use mentoring at the all-important mid-career level and has been a springboard at the national level for discussions on tools and techniques for improving the mentoring process. She is also the co-author with Jean Otte, WOMEN Unlimited’s Founder, of the book: *Women Are Changing the Corporate Landscape: Rules for Cultivating Leadership Excellence*.

About WOMEN Unlimited, Inc.

WOMEN Unlimited Inc. has a 20-year track record of partnering with Fortune 1000 companies. Its three-pronged approach of mentoring, education and networking allows corporations to prudently allocate their OD resources for the development of C-suite ready female talent. With over 750 attendees a year and 10,000 alumnae, WOMEN Unlimited is continually creating a vibrant pipeline of diverse talent equipped to handle current and future business challenges.

WOMEN Unlimited’s commitment to encouraging appropriate risk taking and fostering needed shifts in behavior by both participants and their organizations has positioned the organization as a premiere player in the training and development of female corporate leaders.

Mentoring Links

- To request a copy of the complete dissertation, please [click here](#)
- [Catalyst Webcast](#)
- www.women-unlimited.com
- [Creating a Safe Environment for Women's Leadership Transformation](#)
- [Dialogic Mentoring: Core Relationships for Organizational Learning](#)
- [Prejudice against Women in Male-Congenial Environments: Perceptions of Gender Role Congruity in Leadership](#)
- [A Few Good Women — On Top Management Teams](#)
- [Reconceptualizing Mentoring at Work: A Developmental Network Perspective](#)
- [The Relationship Between Transformational Leadership and Emotional Intelligence from a Gendered Approach](#)