

Mentoring Women Matters

To advance, high-potentials need to build new skills and attitudes • BY ROSINA L. RACIOPPI



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All contributors to Perspectives are current students or alumni of the PennCLO Program, the University of Pennsylvania's doctoral program for senior-level talent and learning executives.

George Washington University professor Gelaye Debebe found that internal change is a critical aspect of fostering women's leadership development. Her research, titled "Creating a Safe Environment for Women's Leadership Transformation" and published in 2011 in the *Journal of Management Education*, showed that women must get past deeply ingrained habits and behaviors including: believing job performance is enough to get ahead, avoiding risk, keeping a low profile in seeking out feedback, or volunteering for high-profile assignments.

In that context, mentoring relationships matter and making these kinds of changes is never easy; it's virtually impossible to do alone. As experienced corporate executives and trusted advisers, mentors are high-potential women's ideal resource to understand how to use their strengths and identify development opportunities that support their career goals.

There are three areas that can be vital to ensure long-term mentoring success: transformational learning, intentional mentees and a mentor's openness to change. To ensure mentoring takes hold and succeeds, mentoring programs need to create an environment that allows transformational learning to occur; and it begins with both parties feeling safe to share their perspectives.

In this trust-based environment, rooted in honest conversation, the mentee discusses career goals and concerns, and the mentor provides the needed feedback to help the mentee develop an action plan. Through these interactions, both mentor and mentee assess the mentee's progress and deal with setbacks. Then, the transformation is underway.

My research, which focused on understanding how midcareer women used mentoring relationships to support their career growth and leadership development, revealed that mentoring worked best when it was intentional in these three areas:

1. Preparing for their mentoring relationship:

The most effective preparations were multifaceted and involved the mentee clarifying her own goals so the mentoring could focus on her aims and ambitions. A strategy to ensure the relationship was open and productive also enhanced the mentoring experience.

2. Using their mentor's insights: Applying mentors' insights and perspectives allowed mentees to "show

up" in new ways that advanced their growth and development. 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 them.

3. Building relationships: Mentees who transferred what they learned from their mentor relationships

Mentoring programs should create an environment that allows transformational learning to occur.

to build 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.

Research from Debebe and others like the late American professor and sociologist Jack Mezirow support my observations that growth, development and transformational learning are rarely a one-way street. When the mentoring relationship is effective, ongoing and resilient, both mentors and mentees feel comfortable discussing their experiences, their successes and their setbacks, and both parties almost always benefit as they learn from each other.

Male mentors are especially affected by these mentoring relationships as they gain a better understanding of the subtle differences in how women experience organizations and how, as male executives, they can help female talent better navigate the corporate landscape.

The bottom line is mentoring does matter. It matters to corporations who need an ongoing and vigorous pipeline of diverse talent, especially as the numbers keep telling us that organizations do better across the board when there is diversity at the top. It matters to the women themselves as a cornerstone to change, grow and achieve their goals. It matters for all mentors, who hone and grow their own relationship building skills as a result of their mentoring. **CLO**