



MENTORING AND THE POWER OF WOMEN HELPING WOMEN

She stood at the sink, frustrated, staring out the window at the new 1963 Dodge parked at the curb. She needed to get to the store, and they had just purchased the car so she could get around during the day. The problem was her husband hadn't had time yet to teach her how to handle the stick shift, so she remained stuck at home with the baby and a toddler playing on the floor behind her. Finally, throwing the car one more glance, she dried her hands on a dish towel and reached for the phone. Her best friend answered on the second ring. "Sue, I want you to come over here and teach me how to drive this car. I need to get to the store before dinner."

by **Wendy Pitts Reeves**

The rest, as they say, is family history. Mom took matters into her own hands, and from what I hear dinner was great. She went after what she needed that day, calling a woman friend for help because the men were at work. Growing up and hearing that story, I learned about determination and drive, about asking for help, and about going after what you want. That story was also my first lesson in the power of women mentoring women.

Why Mentoring Matters

In the corporate world, successful companies know that mentoring programs improve the bot-

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tom line. One study of Fortune 500 firms determined that mentoring more than *doubled* their employee retention rate. In another survey of Fortune 500 CEOs published in *Workforce* magazine, *seventy-five percent* cited mentoring as one of the top three factors in their own career success (*HP Technology at Work*, May 2004). Clearly, mentoring makes a difference for everyone involved, something men have known for years. In fact, what's commonly referred to as "the good ol' boy network" is no more than an informal mentoring practice that's been perfected over time.

So how important is mentoring for women? Extremely. In fact, finding a variety of teachers is critical to women's career success. Those who do so experience greater satisfaction throughout their lives, both personally and professionally. Because they're more useful to their employers, they're more likely to be promoted and to earn higher salaries. Because women are uniquely attuned to the value of relationship, they often blossom under the careful attention of a good mentor.

What Mentoring Is and What It's Not

Not so long ago, it was common practice for grandfathers to counsel grandsons on running the family farm or for grandmothers and great aunts to teach young mothers about newborns. Formal apprenticeships were common for trades like blacksmithing, carpentry, or printing. Today, we call such teaching "mentoring," what is essentially a helping, learning relationship between a protégé, or student, and someone who's "been there."

Mentoring relationships can be formal or informal, structured or unstructured, paid or unpaid. A mentor may be someone older and wiser or someone younger with more experience in particular areas. In business, mentors may offer practical career advice and introductions to important contacts or role model success in varied forms. In that and in other areas of life, mentoring may be more about instilling confidence and courage in someone seeking growth.

Mentoring is not about being someone's banker, chauffeur, parent, or babysitter. It's not even about acting as her supervisor or manager. Though successful mentoring focuses on the identified goals and developmental needs of the student, it is primarily a relationship of mutual respect and equal responsibility.

How to Find a Mentor

So how does one find a mentor? Do they just drop into your life? Do you put an ad in the paper? A sign in the yard? Of course not. All you

really do is pay attention and ask. As a favorite saying suggests, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." If you're eager to learn and experience as much as you can, your teachers will indeed appear, over and over again.

Look around at work, at church, or in your community. Notice who stands out. Make a list of the women or men who impress you in some way and why. They may have a technical skill, such as computer work or graphic arts. Their gift may be managerial, as in how they run a meeting or plan events. It may be interpersonal, such as how they handle conflict or practice leadership. It may just be practical ("She has six kids and still has a life. How does she DO that?").

Look over that list. Who among those are most where you would like to be? Who has the skill you'd like to learn next? Keep in mind you're likely to develop many mentors throughout your lifetime. Don't think you have to learn it all RIGHT NOW. Choose the person you most want to learn from next, and contact her. Tell her you admire her and why, and then ask if she'd be willing to talk with you—whether by phone, by e-mail, or in person. You might even offer to take her to lunch in return for her time.

When you get there, be prepared to ask specifically about those areas in which you most want to grow. How did she reach this point in her career? What obstacles has she overcome, and how? Where did she learn those skills? How did she pull off that feat? Afterwards, tell her about your own dreams and aspirations and what you hope to do. Tell her what you want to learn.

This simple act of interviewing those you admire will add much to your knowledge of the world. You will come away inspired and encouraged and usually with one or two bits of advice that stick. If you want to develop specific skills, ask your chosen mentor to consider working with you for a period of time, and then define what that means. Do you want to work with her on a project so you can follow her lead? Or would you rather have her serve as advisor to a project of your own? Would you like to meet with her on some regular basis? Or would you rather come to her with questions as needed?

For example, I recently found myself traveling with a respected community leader. Road trips are great for conversation, and I was determined not to miss such an opportunity. After gathering my courage, I told her how much I admired her and why, then asked for guidance in a specific area with which I'd struggled. With grace and refreshing honesty, she willingly shared her observations of my performance. Her words were both comforting and challenging. Some were hard to hear—and yet I am

**"My real motto is:
There's a special
place in hell for
women who don't
help each other...."**

**"To have economic
stability and health
and political
development,
women have to be
fully employed and
part of the system—
politically and
economically
empowered."**

— former Secretary of State
Madeleine Albright
in an interview with the
American Association
of University Women
(*Outlook Spring 2005*)

grateful. The best mentors tell us what we need to hear, not always what's easy to hear.

Mentoring may come in the form of a single conversation, such as my road trip, or an ongoing relationship, as in a job-training program. It can be formal or informal, brief or long-term, paid or volunteer. What you're looking for determines where you go next. Ask potential employers about in-house mentoring programs. Check with your local chamber of commerce or professional organization for similar resources. Finding a mentor really isn't that hard. Usually, all you have to do is ask.

How to Be a Mentor

Mentoring benefits everyone involved.

Though the benefits for protégés are obvious, they are equally powerful for mentors. In fact, we often teach what we most need to learn. For example, listening respectfully helps increase our own self-awareness. Coaching someone in her career forces us to hone our own professional skills. (After all, how can I teach you to do something unless I'm up to date on it myself?) Learning to get our ideas across sharpens our communication skills, which we often need in all areas of life. I know that my experience mentoring college women, teens, and other professionals has strengthened my own leadership skills.

Perhaps most important, I have found that mentoring offers us a great way to give back. As women fight for equal footing with their male counterparts in the corporate world, we all have a duty to help those coming behind us. In my own experience as a business owner and community volunteer, I've seen what happens when women are fully engaged. One of our greatest strengths lies in our ability to collaborate rather than compete, and mentoring is a perfect example of that reality.

If you're interested in mentoring others, start by looking around at the people you work, live, or volunteer with. Notice the younger or less experienced person who shows some potential and initiative. Go beyond the usual "How are you?" Instead, make it a point to ask about her passions, goals, dreams, and plans. Such questions lead to pretty interesting conversations in places you might not expect.

For example, my kids tease me every time we go out to eat. "You haven't asked her yet, Mom!" they'll say when we get the check. They're referring to a habit I've developed of asking certain questions of any members of the wait staff, male or female, that we meet. I almost always ask whether they're in school (high school or college) and, if so, what they are studying and hope to do after school. Though they're usually taken aback by the question, they also enjoy answering. I, in turn, get the

chance to offer some encouragement along with my tip.

Once you've identified someone you believe in, look for areas of common interest. Invite her to work with you on a task or project. Ask if she'd like to have some help in her own professional development. If she says yes, take her up on it, and set aside time to get better acquainted. Find out what she needs, what she'd like to learn, where she hesitates or struggles. (Remember: mentoring is about helping her reach *her* goals, not yours.) Look for opportunities to teach her how to play the game and how to hold on to her own power in the working world. Challenge her to grow into her potential.

A Few Examples

There are as many ways to offer mentoring as there are people to mentor. Mentoring can be offered in an individual or group format, on a short- or long-term basis, by person, by phone, or online. Traditional programs such as SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), in-house corporate mentoring, or job training programs have always offered mentoring support, and new ideas are springing up across the country.

The Babson College Center for Women's Leadership (www.babson.edu/cwl) offers a short-term, highly structured mentoring program pairing community businesswomen with female graduate students. The Department of Labor Women's Bureau has pioneered online mentoring for girls through GEM-SET (Girls' E-Mentoring in Science, Engineering, and Technology) and GEM-Nursing programs. The Tennessee Economic Council on Women offers a variety of mentoring initiatives, including one-day career conferences for high school girls. The Blount County (Tennessee) Chamber of Commerce hosted a Career Development Day in which economically disadvantaged women attended brief workshops on job-hunting skills, then received professional makeovers and a new suit!

In Closing

Whether it's as simple as driving a stick shift or as complex as running a multidimensional company, we have much to offer each other. Mentors TEACH us the skills we need to get where we want to go, SEE in us a promise we haven't yet seen in ourselves, and CHALLENGE us to grow in ways we never thought we could. Companies that recognize and support the impact of such relationships on the workforce—and the bottom line—will reap rewards beyond counting. ■

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