GROWING WHERE THEY’RE GOING:
THE TRUE ROLE OF MENTORSHIP
Have you ever wondered where you would you be today without the invaluable guidance of mentors?

“Without a doubt, things would have turned out differently for me without them,” said Matthew Fehling, president and CEO of the Better Business Bureau Pacific Southwest, headquartered in Phoenix. “My first mentor took a dumb kid under his wing and allowed me to make mistakes—a lot of them. My second mentor gave me a voice.”
For women, mentorship can make a lasting impact on their level of confidence, which is critical to their success. “I needed some guidance,” said Jennifer Openshaw, CEO of Girls With Impact, based in Greenwich, Conn. “Young women who come from low- or middle-income homes, like me, most likely have zero connections into corporate America or government. When I was a student at UCLA, a leader there taught me how to negotiate, helped toughen me up, which gave me the confidence to ultimately land a couple of key internships. I don’t know where I would be today without his help and support.”

“I went to a book signing for The Fix,” said Deborah Hyman, senior vice president and head of employee communications and employer brand for Wells Fargo. “The author speaks about white women being the best allies for Black women because they are the most empathetic. The next day I went in to work, and I was telling my white female boss (whom I adore) about this, and she began to talk about her struggle. She took my conversation about me and made it about her struggle. She clearly couldn’t talk to anyone else about it, so I listened. When she was done, I said, ‘OK, now take your experience and imagine that as a Black woman, looking to navigate all of that without support.’ She paused and then said, ‘I get it.’ I told her that I needed her to be an advocate and an ally for me. She shifted immediately and started advocating for me and mentoring me, and my career growth at the company accelerated.”
Executives have an opportunity to not only mentor their executive teams but reach down and mentor a young person, either inside or outside the organization. “One young man I mentored [outside the organization] told me years later, after he became quite successful, that he credited his entire career to me,” said Hyman. “I gave him a chance when no one else would. His words humbled me.”

The word “mentor” comes from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Mentor was an old family friend of Odysseus, and when Odysseus left to fight the Trojan War, he asked Mentor to look after his son, Telemachus. Mentor was a father figure to Telemachus, nurturing, supporting and guiding him in his father’s absence. It is this type of relationship that transforms careers—and lives.
“When I got to the AAMC and started working for Bernard [Jarvis], I found somebody I could look up to as a mentor, somebody who was invested in my career,” said Amir Mesarwi, CFAO of the Association of American Medical Colleges, based in Washington, D.C. “He was honest with me, which is something I needed. He provided me with that ‘If this is where you want to go with your career, this is what you need to invest your time in.’

“What I admired most about Bernard’s leadership was his trust. He was available to give advice and help where I needed it, but I had the freedom to grow, to make my mark. That trust factor is so important in a mentor.”
The Importance of Mentoring Women

The latest *Women in the Workplace* report from McKinsey & Company shares some alarming facts.¹ Senior-level women are leaving their workplaces at critical rates, and there are insufficient numbers of women to take their place. Only 87 women are promoted from entry level to the management for every 100 men. Because there is such disparity at the first rung of the ladder, women never catch up: Only 26% of C-suite leaders are women, 5% of whom are women of color.

According to another study, 63% of women in senior roles never had a formal mentor.² This is partly because women are less likely to ask to be mentored; they often need to be sought out. Why? Because women may lack the same level of confidence as men from the time they step into the workforce. “Women and girls have fewer role models than men, and if you’re Black or Brown, even fewer,” said Openshaw. “Driving their confidence is critical. From ages 8-14, girls’ confidence drops 30%.”³

Mentoring women in the workplace is a highly effective way to close the gender gap in organizational leadership. The right mentor can help increase a woman’s confidence, develop her leadership skills, boost her emotional intelligence and help her navigate the obstacles women face to career advancement.
Consciousness in Mentoring People of Color

Are there considerations to keep in mind when mentoring a person of color? “Yes,” said Hyman. “Microaggressions are ever-present in everything that we do. If you can accept the fact that it’s happening to everybody, then imagine the experience of a Black person in big old corporate America.”

Black, indigenous and other people of color make up just 17% of C-suite leadership. But the difference that mentorship can make in the career of a person of color can be life changing. And it goes beyond guidance, support and nurturing. “The coaching is different; the listening is different too,” said Hyman. “As a white person, you need to turn on a different level of listening to hear it and see it. Know that what’s happening to them is real.”

What is happening is racism, and the “different level of listening” Hyman refers to is antiracism.

How can you help your mentees overcome racial bias in the workplace and achieve success?
There are three acts of connection that research shows are invaluable:⁵

1. **Form reciprocal relationships.** Asking a person of color, “What can I do?” implies a power dynamic. Instead, see their talent and actively help them apply those talents more effectively. When both parties benefit from the relationship, there is greater trust and authenticity.

2. **Have those uncomfortable conversations.** Too often, white supervisors feel uncomfortable giving critical feedback to Black subordinates and peers—but you’re actually doing more harm by saying nothing. Helping people of color navigate racial roadblocks and making them aware if their actions or approaches are being perceived negatively are necessities of mentorship. Not only do these difficult conversations help facilitate a young professional’s upward mobility, but they can also lay the foundation for trusted, lifelong relationships.

3. **Get a cup of coffee together.** It’s a lot easier to champion someone when you know them. Plus, it means a lot when an ally wants to get to know a person of color as a person. Getting a cup of coffee together, having your mentee over for a homecooked meal—these acts of social connection foster relationships and break down stereotypes. You may or may not become friends, but that’s not the goal. The goal is to break down the psychological distance that too often separates coworkers along racial lines.

Harvard Business Review advises mentors to take it one step further: **sponsorship.**⁶ Sponsorship is the use of your social capital and influence on behalf of a protégé. By using your influence to create a positive relationship and perception of your mentee with the organization, you can open doors and break down barriers to leadership.
Yes, Gen Z Has Different Needs

Supporting and nurturing the youngest generation requires a different approach. “Gen Z definitely has different needs than we did at that point in our career,” said Mesarwi. “They’ve changed the game a bit in two ways: how they interact with technology, and also with the world. They’ve landed in a place where the structures that we’ve set up over decades, and even centuries, don’t make sense to them.”

“Thereir expectations are pretty wild,” said Hyman. “For example, saying they think they should be able to work from home 24/7, and I say to them, yeah, that would be great, but what you’d be missing out on is great too. A lot of us learned from watching others, how they did it. We learned what great looks like. So if you’re always working from home, you miss out on that. You don’t even know what you don’t know.”

“I love Gen Z,” said Fehling. “They have the curiosity I had; they want to know why. They aren’t afraid to tell me what they think, and I like that.”

Experts agree. When Generation Z is told why, when the pros and cons are explained, when you share stories of the “bumps and bruises” you took along the way, they gain so much more.

This is a generation that, for the most part, appreciates the room and opportunity to think things through—which also makes them prime candidates for mentoring.
Creating a Successful Mentorship Program

According to The Wall Street Journal, 70% of Fortune 500 companies have some sort of mentorship program in place. However, this doesn’t mean they work. If not executed properly, mentorship programs don’t translate into meaningful change.

Research reveals some key elements of a successful mentorship program. Chief among them is mentor training. Johns Hopkins University excels in this area where others struggle thanks to a program it developed called Master Mentor that makes mentoring a competitive process.

The Master Mentor approach creates a pipeline of well-trained and seasoned mentors who are not only exceptionally effective at helping their mentees but are also available to coach and support less-experienced mentors.

4 Key Steps to the Master Mentor Process at Johns Hopkins

1. Through nominations, the university seeks out the people to whom everyone already flocks.

2. Once the selection is made, the chosen mentors (there were 21 professors in the first cohort) commit to a 20-hour training program that includes meetings with subject-matter experts, skill-building workshops and DEI discussions.

3. Training complete, these leaders then take on the majority of the mentoring for their school (e.g., School of Medicine, Carey Business School).

4. This cycle is repeated every year to ensure a ready group of trained and skilled mentors.
Use a Mentee-Focused Approach

Understand that this relationship is about your mentee—their needs, passions and goals. “Mentorship is about meeting people where they are. You need to build your solution around their needs, which may be very different from ours,” said Mesarwi.

“Be approachable and authentic,” said Fehling. “Authenticity is critical. Be willing to share where you failed, and where you perceive your shortcomings to be. It doesn’t make you less credible; it makes you more credible. And remember: Somewhere along the line, somebody took a chance on you. Look for that person who impresses you, and avail yourself.”

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“Make yourself available to a broad range of mentees, and not just those who approach you,” said Hyman. “The extroverts are going to reach out, but what about the introverts? I ask my leadership team, ‘Who should I be speaking to that will never reach out to me?’ Go find the people who need to be mentored. Openly listen to understand where they are; don’t assume you know.”

“Allow women to see you in action, and allow them access to high-level meetings,” said Openshaw. “And set a goal. Is it to help her land a job or an internship? Strengthen relationships? Move into a role traditionally held by men (e.g., product development, finance)? Setting a goal helps the mentor use their sessions to move their mentee forward and check in on progress.”
Translating Individual Action to Culture

Mentoring must become a cultural value for your organization. That is why approaches like Johns Hopkins University’s Master Mentor program are so important. Successful programs require support, resources, prioritization and participation at all levels. Mentoring should be celebrated through annual awards and recognition, and being selected for the program should be considered a privilege and an honor.

While one person can absolutely make a difference in the life and career of another, when mentoring is regarded as a cultural value, it expands and enhances the entire organization. Mentoring also creates intentional space to uplift and create a diverse workforce where everyone has a seat at the table.


