

# How Men Can Excel as Mentors of Women

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## Abstract

Most male professionals have more experience mentoring men than they do mentoring women, and their male mentees progress further than their female mentees. Yet, in academic medicine, men have few forums in which to discuss the gender-related issues that they encounter. To address the gender-related questions that commonly arise, the author of this commentary offers perspectives and recommendations,

consolidated from over 25 years of experience leading career and talent development programs, to assist men in successfully mentoring women. Her recommendations are organized around three questions: (1) How do women's and men's experiences in mentoring relationships tend to differ? (2) What interferes with the accurate evaluation of women's skills? and (3) Is the current generation of female trainees still at a gender-related disadvantage? She argues

that men's ability to effectively mentor women depends to a great extent on their understanding of the challenges that women disproportionately face in developing their careers. Mentors who are skilled in adapting to the gender-related needs of mentees will contribute to women's retention and development in academic medicine, enhance the leadership capacity of their organizations and the profession, and extend their own legacies.

**M**any men in academic medicine have more successfully mentored men than women. Yet, men who have questions such as "Why do so many women underestimate themselves?" have few forums in which to discuss gender-related issues that they encounter. When men do make a gender-related observation, their intentions are often misinterpreted.

A continuously expanding literature demonstrates that women's professional development continues to fall short of men's professional development, in ways that are unconnected to parental responsibilities—for instance, even women without children garner fewer promotions and leadership roles and are paid less than their male peers.<sup>1,2</sup> Because a resource designed to help men excel as mentors of women is missing from this growing literature, I offer the following perspectives and recommendations consolidated from over 25 years of experience leading career and talent development programs. I have organized my recommendations around three questions: (1) How do women's and men's experiences in mentoring relationships tend to differ? (2) What

interferes with the accurate evaluation of women's skills? and (3) Is the current generation of female trainees still at a gender-related disadvantage?

While reading this commentary, please keep in mind the following two caveats: While gender makes a difference in virtually all aspects of social experience, any gender-based generalization is precarious because of the complex interrelationships between gender and race, age, sexual orientation, and a variety of situational factors unique to each individual. Also, some mentors are so skilled at offering personalized assistance that they excel at mentoring both genders.

### How Do Women's and Men's Experiences in Mentoring Relationships Tend to Differ?

For many reasons, women tend to benefit less than men from mentoring relationships.<sup>3</sup> Relationships form most naturally between individuals who have a lot in common and, in mentoring relationships, when the junior person reminds the senior person of her- or himself. I have observed that men who have less success mentoring women than men inadvertently are less open and less likely to work through difficult issues with female mentees. Another largely unconscious contributor to the differences in women's and men's experiences in mentoring relationships is that some mentors who are comfortable in paternalistic relationships withdraw their support when female mentees seek

more independence. In my experience, other manifestations of paternalism also interfere with mentoring relationships; for instance, some mentors assume that female faculty with small children will be unable to succeed on the tenure track or to take charge of an important project or group.

In addition, men are more likely than women to attract a career sponsor—a senior person who publicly endorses and champions a more junior person and who helps her or him gain visibility, plan next moves, and transition into new roles.<sup>4</sup> Studies from the corporate world have found that the more senior the mentor or sponsor, the faster the junior person advances.<sup>5</sup> Women report having to work harder than men to find such sponsors.

Women also tend to have less "social capital"; in other words, their informal networks are less extensive, provide less support, and are less likely to include influential individuals or colleagues from previous institutions.<sup>6</sup> Studies have found that social capital is more predictive of career success than actual performance at management tasks.<sup>7</sup> This finding is not surprising because individuals come to know organizational structures and access opportunities through their relationships with colleagues. Moreover, influence and credibility are tightly linked to visibility, so without a robust network, colleagues may find it difficult to judge if a professional faculty member has the "right stuff" to advance. All these disadvantages accumulate, such that

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fewer women than men achieve their career and leadership potentials.

A greater awareness of these differences will enable men to improve the quality and frequency of their mentoring and sponsorship of women. Assisting women to form professional networks is particularly important for bolstering their resilience and persistence.<sup>8</sup> For example, by coaching female mentees on strategies for expanding their networks and by connecting mentees to their own colleagues, mentors multiply their impact with relatively little effort. In addition, nominating mentees when possible for professional growth opportunities will help the mentees to acquire organizational savvy and visibility.

Some mentors are too easily discouraged when a female mentee does not immediately respond with enthusiasm to an offer of professional support. She may not share the mentor's estimate of her potential (see below) or may not be able to relate to the mentor's career trajectory. Here, I recommend that mentors consider mentees' entire career paths, not just their immediate future. For instance, a mentor could respond with "Let me know when you're ready for me to nominate you." Even in highly competitive fields, many ways to build a career exist, and the fastest way is not always possible, nor is it always best.

### **What Interferes With the Accurate Evaluation of Women's Skills?**

Cognitive shortcuts are built into our brains. Concluding that everyone is biased and that these biases are not readily overcome, Daniel Kahneman,<sup>9</sup> in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, recommends that individuals improve their ability to recognize the situations in which they are likely to overlook key data. Then, he argues, they should slow down and pay closer attention to the situations at hand.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, perceptual bias is most likely to occur when evaluators are under time pressure and when they lack specific decision-making criteria—the very conditions under which many mentoring relationships are built and search, selection, and promotion decisions are made.

Hundreds of studies demonstrate that cognitive shortcuts commonly translate into the undervaluation of women. For example, a recent randomized double-

blind study found that science faculty of both sexes (who pride themselves on their objectivity) unintentionally downgraded the competence, hirability, salary offers, and mentoring of women compared with those of identical male candidates.<sup>10</sup> In a second study, with a unique methodology, a transgendered Stanford neuroscientist arrived at the same result—he reported that the obstacles he had to overcome as a woman were much greater than those he faced as a man.<sup>11</sup>

Another area of asymmetry is the way in which men and women are perceived—men are expected to be agentic (assertive and decisive) and women to be communal (nurturing and egalitarian). When men demonstrate agentic behaviors, they are thought to be confident, analytic, good at details, open, and passionate. Yet these same behaviors may earn a woman the following labels: conceited, cold, picky, unsure, and controlling. In addition, women who do not demonstrate communal behaviors are penalized more than men who do not; for instance, students judge female faculty who are not nurturing more harshly than they do male faculty who are not. Thus, success and likeability correlate negatively for women, creating a classic double bind because, to be successful, one needs to be likeable.<sup>12</sup>

Accurate assessment of a mentee's potential and performance is critical to a mentor's effectiveness. For example, the actions of a mentor whose lens is constricted by gender stereotypes abets women's internalization of cultural expectations that women should stay behind the scenes, thereby undermining their actual skills and ambitions.

How, then, might men take into account that many women have internalized such cultural messages, which unnecessarily limit their growth as professionals? First, they can keep in mind that, unlike men, many women have or will be penalized for self-promoting or agentic behaviors. By recognizing women's tendency to underestimate themselves, mentors can be ready when necessary to bolster mentees' self-efficacy (i.e., the belief that one can achieve a goal); for instance, a mentor could remind a mentee of the goals she already has achieved.

Mentors also can recommend to mentees approaches that combine agentic and communal behaviors and

then role-play these techniques until mentees can combine them. This practice is especially important with regard to the increasingly critical skills needed to negotiate for resources. Women already are at a disadvantage because negotiators tend to offer women lower salaries and fewer resources than they do men.<sup>13</sup> Thus, mentors also can coach mentees on developing versatile communication styles, keeping in mind the cultural limits placed on the agentic behaviors of women. As part of such work together, mentors can give mentees feedback on how they come across (and encourage them to ask for this feedback) and recommend additional role models who possess the skills that the mentees need to develop.

### **Is the Current Generation of Female Trainees Still at a Gender-Related Disadvantage?**

Even now that women make up almost half of medical school classes, fewer female medical students than male students see themselves as leaders.<sup>14</sup> Once they reach clinical clerkships, many women still default to stereotypically feminine behaviors (e.g., apologizing and doing the work of support staff), and they are less able than their male peers to negotiate uncomfortable situations with attendings.<sup>15</sup>

Many female medical students also perceive that they are not as likely as their male peers to be invited to participate in male-dominated networks and that female mentors are less able to provide access to key networks. They also expect female mentors to be more relational and supportive and male mentors to provide more data-driven or informational advising.<sup>16</sup> Thus, even though female medical students express a desire to move beyond gender stereotypes, they still fall prey to them. Each generation of women seemingly reinvents a knowledge of gender bias; hence, they remain unprepared when they encounter gender-related disadvantages.

Emerging from training with fewer relationships with powerful individuals, female professionals tend to begin falling behind men as soon as they leave school.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, they still start off with lower pay and garner fewer promotions than men. These outcomes may reflect women's belief that hard work and talent are enough to ensure success.

How might mentors better coach women to overcome the gaps between their expectations and the realities of building a career in a highly competitive field and overcoming continuing gender-related obstacles? Doing so requires offering an individualized balance of support and challenge.<sup>18</sup> Good opening questions for mentors to ask include “What’s most important to you right now?” and “How would you define success at this juncture?” If a mentee answers that “finding competent child care” is most important, the mentor need not assume that she lacks career potential. If the mentor can accept her where she is (without assuming that he is responsible for addressing the needs that fall outside his expertise), their relationship still can progress.

Mentors also can suggest activities that are likely to encourage mentees to take more responsibility for their professional development. Many women need encouragement to cultivate professional relationships and a more sophisticated understanding of organizational cultures, rather than relying on what is “fair.” Being aware that women often need more validation of themselves as professionals and leaders, mentors also can watch for opportunities to coach mentees to respond with “I want to do that, and I’ll learn by doing” rather than “I can’t” or “I’m not ready.” When mentors view mentees’ entire career development (remembering that many of these women will be healthy and potentially working into their 80s), they will appreciate that their support likely will be put to good use.

### In Conclusion

Men’s ability to effectively mentor women depends to a great extent on their understanding of the challenges that women disproportionately face in developing their careers. Mentors who are skilled in adapting to the gender-related needs of mentees will achieve both greater impact in the limited time available for mentoring and an expanded legacy of positive influence.

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