



CAREER CONNECTION



Women Helping Women: How Mentoring Can Help Your Business

[By Nancy D. O'Reilly, Psy.D.]

Corporate America spends millions of dollars each year to make the workplace more efficient and productive. Finding and retaining talented and experienced workers is key to reducing turnover and high operational costs. Mentoring new employees and helping them become successful on the job is one way to reduce turnover. Women can benefit from a female mentor who has knowledge and experience and can show them "the ropes." The mentor can be a guide, a role model, and a good advisor.

Michelle always wanted to be a reporter and dreamed of working for a television station. She was fresh out of school and had some experience working in the newsroom. When she entered her job as a research specialist, Michelle was surrounded by reporters she idealized and admired. One of them was Joan. Joan had been at the network for 10 years as a news anchor and reporter. She was the perfect mentor for Michelle. The two hit it off immediately, and Joan spent time helping Michelle gain the necessary skills to fulfill her dream. Joan admitted that when she started, she had to go it alone and often felt like no one was there to support and advise her. Things changed for Joan when a co-worker offered suggestions and helped her to find the confidence to apply for a job as a reporter. Joan got the job and to this day thanks her mentor for giving her support. Like her mentor, Michelle vows to help other women in the workplace.

Women need mentors, specifically, other women who are willing to take the time to help them make it on the job. Recent research from the WomenSpeak project shows that women of all ages can be extremely competitive and negative to younger women entering a profession. In this study, women reported feeling isolated and alone on the job. They also reported that they could not burden others with their workplace issues and concerns. This attitude makes it difficult

for women to mentor and be mentored, even when the opportunity is there for the taking. If employers do not use mentoring techniques, they can face the costs of high turnover rates and ineffective job performance.

Fortunately, women today are becoming aware of the importance of being helped as well as helping others. By watching good role models, women have learned how to be good mothers, good wives, and good friends. But what about the myriad of other areas that women are involved with, such as jobs or career moves, investing or health care issues? Where can the average woman share her feelings? Who will answer her hard questions? Women need to find a mentor, a role model to offer advice on career, education, parenting, or any other life skill. A good mentor or coach can make the job rewarding and productive.

Having or acting as a mentor in the workplace does not involve an exchange of money. Instead, a mentor provides free advice and a relationship based on mutual respect. A mentor can prevent a world of headaches, and it is worth searching for someone with the knowledge and experience one needs.

Volunteer mentors can be in short supply in some areas, and this has given rise to the new and trendy position of a life

coach. A coach can help with business, executive challenges, sales, academics, management, and any aspect of personal life. They can help attain goals and deliver maximum performance on the job.

To find a mentor, look at your community. Is there someone you admire for her skills or success? Invite her to coffee, or on a walk, or just call and ask her advice. Everyone likes to feel admired. Developing this relationship may take some time and effort, but it will not only help you, but will help your mentor in return.



There's no shame in needing help now and then. A good mentor has so much to offer in experience and training that you are bound to learn, grow, and excel in your field. For more information about mentoring or finding a coach, talk with your friends and colleagues or search the internet.

You can also take the initiative and start a mentoring program in your company. Here are some simple ways to get started:

1. Send out a questionnaire to all the women in your organization to gauge

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the interest in starting a women's mentoring program. This can be sent through the human resources department or by a supervisor or department leader. If there seems to be a lot of interest in such a program, find some leaders who can help put one together.

2. Search the internet for information on local women's professional organizations. See if they have any existing mentoring programs. There is no reason to re-invent the wheel. If there are local programs, you can encourage other women in your organization to come along and join with you.
3. If there aren't any programs in place locally, you may want to consider starting your own. Understand the purpose of such a program and define guidelines and membership policies. This should be a voluntary, supportive group of professional women who seek to help other women coming into the profession.
4. Decide the focus of the mentoring program you create. There should

be regularly scheduled meetings, whether once a week or once a month, or even once a quarter. The meeting place can be as professional as the conference room or as casual as the coffee shop. Create a system or form that will allow members to pair up based on similar interests and needs.

5. Foster the relationships created in the mentoring program by checking in with members for feedback. Encourage them to meet one-on-one, build relationships, and meet outside the office for advice and bonding. Networking parties, local charity events, and organizational meetings are ways that mentors and mentees can learn more about their industry.

Mentoring programs can also help women transition from little to no education or job experience by assisting them with educational needs, clothing, social skills, and overall support. One of the more successful programs is the Suit Yourself Program, run by the United Way. Women are given professional clothing and accessories for job interviews, as well as

training for their GED. They learn computer and communication skills that will help them advance in the workplace. This is a mentoring and assistant program where everyone involved wins.

Mentoring helps build a healthy workforce and ensures that new, excited, and trained women come up through the ranks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy D. O'Reilly, Psy.D., is a clinical psychologist, researcher, and founder of the online resource WomenSpeak.com. A member of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Nancy counsels others on topics ranging from mental health and stress to relationships and careers. She is the author of *You Can't Scare Me: Women Speak About Growing Older in a Youth-Oriented Society*, and will host a radio program on Voice America called "Courageous WomenSpeak" beginning October 2007. For more information, please visit her website: www.womenspeak.com or call: 417-860-5834.

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