Standing on the shoulders of giants

The role of mentoring in accelerating women’s careers

by Norah Breekveldt
The research

In 2017 Norah Breekveldt, Principal Consultant at Bendelta, interviewed ten pairs of mentors and mentees across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors to understand the real-life experiences of women in mentoring relationships, and what made these relationships so powerful. Her findings will be published in her upcoming book “Me and My Mentor”.

Turning sparks into flames

Kate found it challenging returning to work from maternity leave. She felt she lacked “match-play” and would have settled for returning to a job she knew well and was in her comfort zone. She said if not for her mentor, Adam, challenging her thinking, she would have probably missed out on taking one of the best job she’s ever had.

As Sophie’s mentor, Jodi has been her greatest cheerleader as well as her toughest critic. There were times Jodi encouraged her to go for stretch roles, times when she openly advocated for Sophie within the business; then there were times she told Sophie to just “suck it up”, stop complaining and get on with it.

Bec was a 16 years old dancer when she first met Jerril and got a glimpse of what life as a performing artist could be. “I want to be just like her” she decided, on the spot. Jerril knew she had found a kindred spirit in Bec and committed herself to guiding Bec through the difficult professional decisions and life choices a performing artist must inevitably make.

A mere friend will agree with you, but a real friend will argue.

Russian proverb

Mentors play a crucial role for women in the workplace. In male-dominated workplaces, mentors – whether male or female – can level the playing field and lift barriers to career advancement, raising their visibility amongst senior leaders and helping them identify strategies for overcoming inherent biases and stereotypes that continue to hold women back. High visibility and exposure to senior leaders is critical for women. Evidence shows that the strongest predictor of success in women’s advancement is the number of women working in that area.¹ It makes sense. As women become more visible and more women succeed in non-traditional, senior decision-making roles their presence will become less remarkable, stereotypes will shift and there will be a greater willingness to hire more.

¹ Sideways to The Top – 10 Stories of Successful Women That Will Change Your Thinking About Careers Forever, N. Breekveldt, Melbourne Books, 2013, p. 224
What is mentoring?

Textbook definitions often describe mentoring in terms of a professional relationship between an older, wiser, senior mentor sharing their work experiences and wisdom with a younger, junior and inexperienced mentee. This concept has its roots in Greek mythology, when Odysseus, commencing his journey to Troy, entrusted his house and his son’s education to his friend, Mentor. “Tell him all you know”, Odysseus said, and from then the definition of mentoring was firmly established.

Many formal corporate mentoring programs are established around this structure, where a senior decision-maker is assigned to a more junior high-potential individual. They often meet at regular intervals, follow a prescribed process with a structured program of activities, and work together for a fixed period. These programs can be a rewarding, empowering and invaluable experience for younger talent navigating the world of work.

The real-life experiences of mentors and mentees interviewed in this study, however, indicated that the practice of mentoring has moved beyond a top-down construct of a great philosopher or teacher imparting her wisdom and knowledge to a protégé. Mentoring is an evolving process, often with shifting boundaries and changing landscapes, zig-zagging in and out of boundaries and definitions.

Mentoring may follow a conventional top down approach, yet it could also extend to peer-to-peer mentoring, reverse mentoring (where mentors seek out upward guidance and counsel from their mentees), or mentoring by the mentee’s direct manager. Some relationships are for a fixed period, others are open-ended and may last a lifetime. Some mentors find that mentoring other women enables them to reflect on the way their own working life panned out and better understand the decisions they made along the way. Many mentors cross the professional divide and become firm friends with their mentees without compromising the integrity of the mentoring relationship.

Mentors may embrace a coaching style at appropriate times and sometimes including advocacy or sponsorship to accelerate success. Some mentors counsel and directly advise their mentees, others use a more indirect coaching approach, adopting an inquiring, questioning style to assist their mentee discover their own path forward.

There are many faces to mentoring, there is no definitive right way to mentor, and no one-size-fits-all approach. This flexible approach is often the secret to its success, as the relationship evolves to meet the mentee’s emerging needs and different circumstances. Structure is important and clarifying expectations at the commencement of the mentoring relationship is critical. Then, if the relationship is allowed to evolve naturally, magic happens.

Perhaps it is time to broaden the definition of mentoring, and put aside unhelpful boundaries. David Kay and Roger Hinds come close when they describe mentoring simply as “one person helping another to achieve something…that is important to them.” The experiences of women in our research do just that – they demonstrate the many faces of mentoring, with each relationship finding its own meaning, purpose and process.

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Three forces and six Cs

How mentoring can support critical leadership capability development

Bendelta is a top strategic leadership advisory firm in Australia and New Zealand, dedicated to developing market-leading and values-driven solutions.

Based on years of academic and qualitative research, Bendelta has identified two major drivers of competitive advantage for organisations that will dominate the world of work in the 2017 – 2020:

The discontinuous and disruptive nature of change

Once-proven, conventional business models are suddenly becoming obsolete, while others are rapidly rising to prominence. Just consider how the likes of Uber, Facebook and Airbnb have become dominant industry players overnight.

The exponential rise of machine intelligence

Will redefine what it means to be a valuable human asset in the business world of the future.

While these forces will impact industries, businesses and roles in different ways, there is no doubt that the role of people, leaders and organisations will be massively reshaped in the coming years. In this new world, jobs structured around procedures and routines will no longer add value and will disappear, to be replaced by new roles and capabilities.

The characteristics of world-class leadership will also be vastly different. To discover how different, Bendelta invested one million hours, and over 15 years, in developing Potentiology™, the science and art of realising human potential. Bendelta held think tanks with the world’s leading experts in human potential and reviewed and crystallised the most robust research and academic publications to understand the leadership challenges in this new competitive landscape. Bendelta directly studied the mental representations and learning routines of those who are world-class in the relevant capability area, from famed prodigies like World Chess Champion, Magnus Carlsen; Chinese American cellist and child prodigy, Yo-Yo Ma; and Olympic gold medal swimmer Sarah Sjostrom, to eminent Australians such as six-time Ironman Trevor Hendy and imprisoned journalist Peter Greste.

The research uncovered a combination of leadership skills – namely the 6 c’s – that, when present, cultivate professional empowerment and help steer organisations to success.
The six Cs include:

Capacity (the resilience to deal with demands of being a leader in a contemporary business environment)

Change agility (the ability to “turn on a dime” and reorient the organisation as needed)

Collaboration (breaking down silos and bringing together multiple perspectives)

Connection (empathy to help people understand their team and customers)

Choice (high quality decision-making)

Creativity (operating in an imaginative way and doing lateral thinking)

For the average organisation, the application of these six C’s enables a 30% uplift in realisation of people’s potential. This can be the difference between leapfrogging the sector and becoming irrelevant.

While the relative importance of these six Cs will be dependent on the overall strategy of the organisation, leaders and individuals will benefit enormously from cultivating these six Cs.

So how can we apply these insights into the design of mentoring interventions that unlock and realise human potential? Let’s look at each of the six Cs in turn.

1 Capacity. Mentoring programs provide the optimal environment for individuals to understand and realise their potential, creating lasting benefits at the individual and organizational levels. Great mentors regularly challenge their mentees to think big, and provide critical feedback and encouragement that they may not receive from others. They are intuitively able to surface issues, barriers or self-limiting beliefs that the mentee may not have considered or is reluctant to face.

2 Change agility. Mentees can use the insights they gain from a mentoring experience to ensure their capabilities remain relevant in a disruptive and changing competitive landscape, and continually adapt to remain aligned with human business value. For mentors, the ability to reflect on their mentee’s stories, experiences and challenges enables them, as leaders and influential decision-makers, to adapt and reshape their organisations in an informed manner. Excellent mentors observe and understand the mentee’s current situation, can understand what is going on beneath the surface and will adjust the relationship appropriately. They will dip in and out of a coaching style, mentoring, sponsorship or advocacy, they know when to become close and when to give tough feedback. They recognise when they need to cut through and steer the mentee in a specific direction, and also when to step back, encourage their mentee to arrive at their own conclusions and think through problems independently.

3 Collaboration. Positive mentoring is built on a relationship that is reciprocal and enriching for both the mentor and mentee. Excellent mentors openly share lessons from their own career journey – not just sharing successes but also revealing their stumbles and weaknesses, from which their mentees can learn and apply to their own situations. They will also regularly reflect on the journey, situations and insights her mentee offers and learn and grow from the experience.
4 **Connection.** The ability to connect with mentees, to inspire, excite and motivate, is at the heart of excellent mentoring relationships. Effective mentors are fully invested in the success of their mentees, and hold a genuine concern for the mentee coupled with a non-judgmental approach to conversations. Crucially, excellent mentors know how to manage the tensions between being emotionally close, providing support and affection – and exposing the mentee to uncomfortable situations, calling out limitations in thinking or acting, providing tough feedback and refocusing mentees on goals – without destroying the bond. Effective mentors also foster a broad range of relationships in their professional community. They are influencers at a number of levels and are generous in sharing and opening up these networks to their mentees, to people who could further their career or broaden their thinking. Mentees, too, build their own circle of mentors – cultivating a network of influencers who meet their varying needs at different career stages. They listen to the voices of these mentors to gain perspective and make informed choices. They often reflect on “what would my mentor do?”

5 **Choice.** Being caught up in the rigors of daily operational challenges can seem overwhelming and distract mentees from looking at the big picture. A mentoring program elevates mentees above the daily operational demands and challenges, enabling them to take ownership of their career, proactively focus on new way of thinking about their career options, and take personal responsibility for moving their career forward.

6 **Creativity.** Having access to a mentor who can be an objective and confidential sounding board creates a safe environment in which mentees can disclose weaknesses and self-doubts, be creative and develop the courage to experiment explore new and innovative ideas. Great mentees aren’t afraid to experiment with courageous action and make bold career choices.