



[Print Page](#)

Tips to Use Mentoring and Mapping to Advance a Career

"The male model of mentoring emphasizes masculine characteristics like hierarchy, while the female model values nurturing and support."

In her book *Composing a Life*, author Mary Catherine Bateson posits that women approach life as if it were a symphony. There are different, distinct movements yet each one contributes to the whole.

An orchestra needs a conductor to lead musicians through the twists and turns of the score, but the conductor also needs an orchestra to make the music happen. The relationship is symbiotic, just like it can be for a mentor and her protégé.

At the NASPA/ACPA conference held in Orlando in April, three women from James Madison University in Harrison-burg Virginia spoke about their mentoring experiences from both sides of the aisle. They were: **Anna Lynn Bell**, coordinator of advising in the major; **Melissa McDonald**, assistant director in the office of residence life and **Dr. Teresa Gonzalez**, vice provost for academic affairs.

Mapping and mentoring are two tried-and-true strategies that can help women achieve career success. Mentoring helps open doors and connect people together, encouraging the use of power in a positive way. Mapping is a tool to identify skills, abilities and experiences that enable one to choose an appropriate mentor.

Mentoring is a relationship that transcends supervisory structures and titles. A good mentoring relationship can result in: career advancement, an exchange of skills and knowledge, and professional and sometimes even personal support. Professional support can help the protégé adapt to the workplace and by assisting the protégé, the mentor can recommit to her career. Personal benefits generally include an increase in self-esteem, confidence, understanding and skills on the part of the protégé. The mentor gains satisfaction from the protégé's progress and gains a new understanding of another's issues.

Why do women benefit from mentoring more than men do? For us, work is only one of many hats. But for men, a career is central to their identity. Having a family can hinder a woman's career progress, while it's a positive force for men. Our career path looks more like a tree with many branches. We make many lateral moves and are more apt to take off time to care for children or parents over the course of a career, while men's careers are more linear and hierarchical.

It probably comes as no surprise to most of us that we face more barriers in getting a mentor than do our male peers. There are fewer women in academic administration, and most are in the lower levels.

But sometimes we're our own worst enemy. We discount the value of a mentor because of the female assumption that hard work and talent will equal success. Then there's the Queen Bee syndrome: Some women don't want to mentor because they want to be the only women in the department or on the committee. One of the roles a mentor can play is that of a nurturer. But we generally don't seek nurturing because we, as women, are socialized to provide it.

Male mentors are more likely to control access to them, since there are so few of them. The male model of mentoring emphasizes masculine characteristics like hierarchy, while the female model values nurturing and support.

Career mapping

If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. But if you're headed to the top, a career map will help you identify those who might be willing and able to provide a leg up or a hand out.

Career mapping is a very organized process that's useful throughout your professional career, not just at the beginning stages. For Bell, a combination of a mentor and a map has helped her advance in academe. "In the 1980s, I thought I needed a mentor," she said. "I had no goals or methods. I got lucky with Teresa Gonzalez over the past 20 years."

The mentoring relationship can be redefined as it goes through stages. Sometimes it's intense and other times less so. But just as you never outgrow the need for a mom, a long-term mentorship provides trust and safe harbors. "We never outgrow the need to connect with each other," said Bell.

Career mapping identifies career goals and job components. It outlines a person's knowledge, skills and abilities. What do I need and what can I give? It's also useful in outlining both parties' expectations.

Mentoring is an exercise that goes both ways. The protégé needs to be able to give something back to the mentor. But as women, we often undervalue what we have to offer. We worry that the relationship will be one-sided because we are at a lower career level than the potential mentor.

One way of conquering that fear is to jot down a few of your achievements. What have you gained from those experiences and the social connections you've made? Then identify your short- and long-term goals. Ask yourself, "Where am I today?" and "What do I need?"

Take an inventory of your experiences and identify those potential mentors who have mastered the areas that you want to develop. If you want to be a better public speaker, look for a mentor who does it well. If you need to be a more political animal, look for a person who plays the game.

Before approaching a potential mentor, you need to determine if you want to move laterally or up in your career. Identify the contributions you want to make to your field and the competencies you'll need.

Determine what you need to do to get to the next step by listing what you value in the work environment at a personal level, departmental level and organizational or institutional level. Are family and friendships of high value? Or do you prefer autonomy and challenges? After you've identified the non-negotiable values, prioritize them to avoid choosing a position that's a bad fit, which can lead to increased stress and dissatisfaction.

Finally, take an inventory of your knowledge, skills and abilities. Remember to be kind to yourself. You don't have to be perfect or competent in everything.

Finding a mentor or two

Looking for a mentor is like looking for a reliable car. They're out there; you just have to know where to look.

Sometimes it's easier to find a mentor if you've been in the same organization for a while. Graduate students understand the existing social networks and know the faculty they've connected with at their schools. There are professional organizations that they can join.

If you've been in the workforce for a while, invite your colleagues on campus to lunch and ask them about their career paths and the challenges they've faced. Realize that it takes time to find and develop a mentor. And when you do, it may be only a short-term relationship. Your mentor may just want to focus on helping you learn new skills or helping you move up to a new position.

Sometimes women mentor unknowingly. If you're good at leading a meeting, you are unconsciously mentoring those there who want to improve their leadership skills.

There is no right or wrong way to find a mentor. It's a process like earning a degree. Before approaching a potential mentor, determine what you expect of her. What are you willing to do in the relationship? "Mentoring is not just 'fill me up,'" said Gonzalez. "What are you asking and what will you give?"

The relationship can be viewed like one with an adult child. You need to admire the person you're asking to be your mentor. Do your research and determine why this person is important to you.

Okay, so you've identified a potential mentor. The next step is to approach her and ask if she is interested in mentoring you. "Most of us in positions of responsibility are flattered to be asked," said Gonzalez. "Don't be scared."

There's a negotiation component of how much time is involved, how formal the relationship will be and whether there be regular meetings. It's okay to start the relationship informally before you ask to formalize it.

Meeting with a mentor two or three times a year may not be enough contact to make progress. Without objectives and a map, the relationship can become vague. If this happens, you need to re-center yourself and list your needs. Perhaps it's time to end the relationship; if you choose to do so, be ready to explain your reason to the mentor.

There is truth to the adage of the more you put in, the more you get out of something. At every meeting, bring a list of questions and a clear idea of what you want to get out of it.

Having more than one mentor is fine; one person won't fulfill all of your needs. Additional mentors bring new insights to the table.

Whether it's a new or established relationship, the key is to aim for balance and insight, and take care of yourself.

Contacts: Bell at bellal@jmu.edu or 540.568.7350

McDonald at mcdonamm@jmu.edu or 540.568.4663

Gonzalez at gonzalta@jmu.edu or 540.568.3704

Copyright © 1998- 2012 Women In Higher Education, all rights reserved.
Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Close Window](#)