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Women Mentoring Women: Holding the Corporate Ladder for Future Leaders

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Everyone was abuzz when LinkedIn published a [study](#) last October revealing that one in five professional women has never had a mentor. Honestly, those aren't bad stats. Beyond the headline lies the truly alarming data. Of the Gen X and Gen Y women polled, only half reported that they'd been mentored by a more established woman during the course of their career. Another statistic from the study: 67% of women stated that they had never mentored another woman simply because they had never been approached to do so.



Why is mentorship so crucial for the next generation of female professionals? For one, there is a shortage of female leadership. Currently, only 15 Fortune 500 companies are run by women and only 20% of global senior management positions are held by women. A 2011 Grant Thornton [study](#) indicated that the number of females in global senior management roles has remained fairly stagnant for the past decade, and actually decreased 4% from 2009 data. Mentors can propel their protégés through the ranks by holding them accountable to their goals; helping them form advantageous organizational relationships; and by offering insight into their own way of thinking, allowing mentees the opportunity to become better strategists and problem solvers.

Corporations like DuPont, Cisco and AstraZeneca have recognized the need for developing their up and coming [female leaders](#). Through formal mentorship and training programs, these companies regularly identify and develop high potential women from their mid-ranks. Xerox went as far as launching an e-Harmony style mentorship match-making site to help women in the organization find mutually beneficial mentor/mentee relationships. Though geographical barriers often prevent these women from meeting face to face, they log significant time building bonds and discussing valuable career strategies via email and IM.



Where does this leave ambitious young women whose organizations have no formal mentoring plan in place? Well, mentorship doesn't have to be such a formal affair. Indeed, the most successful relationships develop naturally. Even if your company does have a formal mentorship program, these matches are often not as beneficial as a closer relationship to someone who has taken a special interest in you and your future. Such relationships are often coined "sponsorships" in large organizations, and extend beyond a mentor giving feedback and advice. A sponsor will use their industry connections and influence within an organization to [advocate for their mentee](#) to have added exposure and advancement opportunities.

So how does a young woman go about finding a mentor or sponsor outside of an organized corporate program? The following will get you started:

- Be seen as a leader. Do your job well, complete assignments on or before schedule, raise valid points in meetings and offer to pitch in on projects outside your scope of

responsibility. The more value you add to your organization, the more you will stand out as someone worth developing.

- Cultivate your image. Use a firm handshake, make eye contact and choose the best available seat at the conference table. A potential mentor needs to see that you have the right personal characteristics to rise to the top of an organization.



- Don't wait around. Is there a woman whom you admire, respect, or seek to model your career after? She may be part of your alumni chapter, your aunt's best friend who also happens to be a VP in your industry, or the executive you enjoy talking with in the elevator. Whoever she is, let her know you'd be interested in hearing her thoughts on your career options, departmental plan or the like. It will be easy to tell whether she's receptive to developing the relationship.

- Have reasonable expectations. Be mindful of your mentor's busy schedule and foster a collaborative, give and take relationship. As a level of trust evolves, your mentor will likely to seek your input on her own work occasionally. Treating these requests seriously and thoughtfully further develops your skills, offers your mentor a fresh perspective, and is often the best way to show gratitude for her investment in you.

Likewise, if a young woman in your organization shows talent that you'd like to help cultivate, give her some strategic guidance when the opportunity presents itself. If you're met with thanks and a thoughtful incorporation of your suggestions, she's likely thrilled that you've shown an interest in taking her under your wing.

Tell us what you think!

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