



Women's Ways Of Mentoring

Call it "wo-mentoring"-- a new approach that's more about commitment and learning than about chemistry and power. And, by the way, it also works for men.

BY CHERYL DAHLE | 12-19-2007

Lourdes Townsend is a career-focused businesswoman who knows exactly what she wants. At 35, Townsend is an international marketing manager for Stride Rite, based in Lexington, Massachusetts, where she has worked for the past six years. Born in the Philippines and raised in Michigan, Townsend describes herself as having "a midwestern work ethic" - but what comes across when she talks about herself is a kind of restless energy. "I'm the kind of person who likes to learn," Townsend says. So when her most recent promotion interrupted her pursuit of an MBA at nearby Suffolk University, Townsend asked for advice from Denise Lockaby, 39, Stride Rite's director of professional development.

Lockaby recommended a mentoring program run by WOMEN Unlimited Inc., a New York City-based, four-year-old career-development company for women only. The program paired Townsend with a senior executive outside of Stride Rite who would be her mentor for a year - but it also gave her something she never would have thought to ask for: 20 peers-as-mentors who taught her more than either her MBA courses or her formal mentor would.

"I never thought about learning from someone on my level," Townsend says. "I always looked two to four levels above me and wondered what I had to do to get there. But the people who have the best solutions to the problems I face are often the people facing those problems themselves."

By attending monthly workshops with smart, ambitious women from various companies in the Boston area, Townsend discovered a new style of learning. And she found out about the new world of mentoring - a world where the old rules, written and practiced largely by men mentoring men, have been redrafted by women mentoring women. Call it "wo-mentoring" - a natural reaction to a system that was so badly broken, it no longer worked for either sex.

Consider the problem. The way mentoring used to work, a senior male executive would anoint a younger version of himself as his protege. The operative assumption: Mentoring was all about chemistry between two people who had a lot in common. It was also about connections - the mentor, who was several rungs higher up the ladder, could steer the lower man toward career-enhancing projects or plum assignments.

Fast forward to the present. Women have poured into the new world of work, and they've found they aren't welcome in the old boys' club of mentoring. They can't rely on men to pick female proteges. They can't depend on being able to socialize in the old style - on the golf course or

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over a cigar - to form personal bonds. So women have changed the rules. They've invented formal practices where none existed before, making mentoring more organized and focused.

Women's mentoring is also more about commitment than about chemistry. It's about personal growth and development rather than about promotions and plums. And it's more about learning than power. Says Jean Otte, 59, founder and CEO of WOMEN Unlimited, "It's not about who you know. It's about who knows what you know."

You don't have to be a woman to practice the new way of mentoring. But if you want to see it in action, look at how women do it.

Old Rule: Mentors and proteges should have a lot in common.









New Rule: The best matches are mismatches.


In the old style of mentoring, the best relationships between proteges and mentors were built on commonalities. Not so today, says Gayle Holmes, 51, founder, president, and CEO of Mentium Corp., a Minneapolis-based mentoring service. Mentium, founded in 1991, offers its Mentium 100 program - matching mentors and "mentees" from different companies - in six cities. "If you're matched with someone like you," she says, "the potential for discovery is negated. You should pair with someone who, by her very nature, will challenge you."

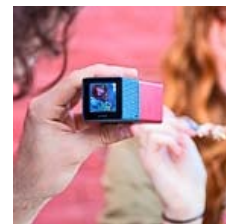
Take the example of Kathy Higgins Victor, 42, who was matched as a mentor to Ann Latendresse, 47, by Mentium in Minneapolis. After the two met for the first time, Higgins Victor had just one question: "What were they thinking?" The two could not have been more different. Higgins Victor has always put her career first. Latendresse, on the other hand, had begun her career almost by accident. And the two women couldn't have been more different in style and personality. Higgins Victor has two small children at home. Latendresse has four grown children and recently became a grandmother. "We would never have found each other in a crowd," Higgins Victor says.

Despite the lack of instant chemistry, the two stuck it out - and ultimately discovered that their differences were the best part of the match. "Kathy helped me see how I could be more objective and do what I needed to do to succeed," says Latendresse. "I tend not to be open to others' feedback," Higgins Victor says. "Ann was so unconditionally open, she made me see that I could gain a lot from being more like her."

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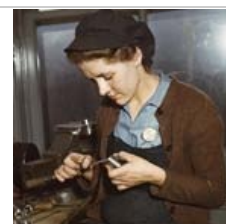
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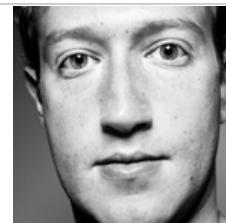
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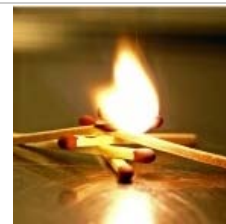
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