

The Meaning of Mentoring

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Programs help women chemists advance into management roles.

Whenever experts discuss strategies for increasing the presence of women in all levels of the workforce, mentoring is mentioned. The importance of mentoring has even attracted attention at the highest level, with the establishment in 1996 of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring.

Clearly, mentoring is a hot topic. But perhaps it's just one of those management fads that make a splash and then disappear.

Not likely. Mentoring has been around for many years. In fact, it's been around for millennia, and women and mentoring have been linked since the very beginning. The first recorded mentor was a woman—sort of. Nearly 3000 years ago, in the Greek classic *The Odyssey*, Homer describes how the goddess of wisdom, Athena, took the form of a respected male elder, named Mentor, to provide advice and counsel to Telemachus, the son of Ulysses. Thus, such nurturing relationships were given a model and a name: A mentor provides a protégé with guidance to promote his or her success in the wider world. With a pedigree like that, mentoring is much more than a management fad.

The Scientific Version

In the world of scientific research, the traditional image of a mentor is that of a professor mentoring his (or, occasionally, her) graduate students. But in the chemistry community of 2003, mentoring has come to encompass a much wider range of relationships and approaches to learning. Mentoring can happen face-to-face or via e-mail. It can take place one-on-one or in groups. Mentoring can occur within an organization or across organizations. It can emerge across generations (from older to younger scientists), among peers, or even in reverse (from younger to older scientists). Mentoring relationships usually develop informally, but they can be established through formal programs.

If it embraces so many different rela-



Athena, in the guise of Mentor, leads Telemachus toward Pylos in search of his father, Ulysses.

tionships, for so many different purposes, just what exactly is “mentoring?”

Linda Mantel is past president of the Association for Women in Science, an organization that received the Presidential Award for Mentoring in 1997. Mantel describes

The Mentor Factor

“The single most important reason why—among the equally talented—men tend to rise higher [in the corporate workplace] than women is that most men have mentors and most women do not.”

This strong statement from author Sheila Wellington (*Be Your Own Mentor*, 2001) is based on more than 30 years of research by Catalyst, a nonprofit research organization founded in 1962 to advance women in the corporate workplace. In one in-depth Catalyst study of 30 women scientists employed in industry, more than half of the women acknowledged that a mentor helped them in their progress up the corporate ladder. These women also repeatedly pointed out that lack of mentoring is one of the key barriers to advancement of women in science. (See *Women Scientists in Industry: A Winning Formula for Companies*, Catalyst, 1999.)

mentoring simply as serving as a trusted counselor or teacher, especially in professional settings. “Mentoring is something people do and don’t realize it—like speaking prose,” she says. “If someone says, ‘I’ve been helping so-and-so a lot since he or she got here,’ what they’ve been doing, probably, is a lot of mentoring. Just think about it in the context of what’s important for this person to do in order to be successful. It’s a lot of common sense.”

If mentoring is just common sense and has been going on informally for millennia, why has it become an issue of special importance for women today?

According to Bernice Sandler, a nationally known expert on the subject of mentoring and a senior scholar with the Women’s Research and Education Institute in Washington, DC, informal mentoring can often put women scientists at a disadvantage. “We tend to mentor our clones,” says Sandler. “Consequently, white men are less likely to mentor women or minorities. So members of these two groups fail to get the feedback and attention crucial to their professional development.”

Individuals Benefit

Among the many benefits received by the protégé or “mentee”, the one most frequently cited by women scientists in a Catalyst study (see box, “The Mentor Factor”) was

“learning to understand and navigate corporate politics.” According to one executive manager of R&D quoted in the report, “He mentored me in, I would say, political nuances. Often when we’re trained as scientists, we look at things from logic and facts, but we have to realize that there’s a whole population out there that doesn’t make decisions based on facts and logic.”

Ka-pi Hoh, a polymer engineer and research manager at Lubrizol Corp., describes how mentoring can help scientists work more effectively: “A lot of success is not what you know, but who you know, and what makes them tick.”

Whether selling a technical idea or a product, you have to know how to work with people. And mentors can really come in handy. You can ask them, ‘How should I approach this person? What’s worked? What’s bombed?’ Having that information can be very helpful.”

Women scientists find mentors especially important if they want to move into management roles. Going through the transition from bench chemist to manager requires different skills, and a strong

mentor can help make the transition a successful one.

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, a mentor may provide a protégé with

- greater visibility within the organization;
- introductions to key people and groups;
- access to information, resources, and networks;
- feedback on personal and professional performance;
- career path advice; and
- advice on work–life balance issues and options.

Not only does mentoring provide these qualitative benefits, but there can be some very quantifiable benefits, too. Another study, *Women of Color in Corporate Management* (Catalyst, 1997) found that, over the three-year period of the study, 69% of the women with mentors had received a promotion (compared to 49% of the women without mentors). This study also illustrated the value of multiple mentors, because women with a greater number of mentors also received a greater number of promotions.

Organizations Benefit

While it’s no surprise that individuals can gain a great deal from having a mentor, more and more organizations are realizing that mentoring can bring organizational benefits as well. Among the specific benefits that organizations have achieved through mentoring programs are improvements in the following areas:

- cultural change,
- establishment of a diverse workforce,
- succession planning,
- recruitment and retention of employees,
- orientation of new employees,
- development of employees with high potential, and
- transitions to international assignments.

Procter & Gamble (P&G) provides an example of how an organization used mentoring to accomplish cultural change. P&G leaders noticed that, as in many corporations, women are more likely to advance through “staff” positions instead of “line” positions, making them less qualified for eventual movement into senior management positions. To speed cultural change throughout P&G and bring more women

into line positions, they created the "Mentor-Up" program. In this program, midlevel women were assigned to mentor senior-level men on issues related to diversity. This program, which received a Catalyst Award from Catalyst, Inc., in 1998, allowed senior managers to discuss gender issues in a nonthreatening forum, and it created an opportunity for midlevel women employees to gain the perspectives and knowledge of influential, senior-level men. As a result of the Mentor-Up program and a series of related initiatives, the number of women at the general manager/vice president level more than tripled from 1992 to 1997.

Lubrizol wanted to create a corporate culture that encourages mentoring, especially in its function of orienting new employees. Today, all new Lubrizol employees, at every level within the company, are assigned a "New Hire Buddy" to ease their transition into the organization. The company also offers training workshops on mentoring and has established various networking groups that facilitate mentoring relationships. Lubrizol maintains a "mentoring database" that lists names,

Resources on Mentoring

A Hand Up: Women Mentoring Women in Science; www.awis.org
American Chemical Society's Women Chemists Committee; <http://membership.acs.org/w/wcc/wccmentor.html>.
Creating Successful Mentoring Programs: A Catalyst Guide. This booklet can be ordered at www.catalystwomen.org.
MentorNet, the e-mentoring network for women in engineering and science; www.MentorNet.net.
Wellington, S. *Be Your Own Mentor*; Random House: New York, 2001.

interests, and strengths of those willing to serve as mentors. The database makes it possible for anyone in the organization to search for and identify a potential mentor.

Mentors Benefit, Too

Mentoring brings benefits to the protégé and to the organization, but it also can bring benefits to the mentors themselves.

Mary Fillmore, director of Changing Work, a consulting firm specializing in employee development, has worked with federal agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institutes of Health. She observes, "Mentors often change as much as the protégés. Being forced to articulate a lot of unconscious experience they've accumulated over the years gives them a much greater awareness about their own career development and their own skills."

Mentoring can clearly be a win-win-win situation for the protégé, the organization, and the mentor. If you would like to find a mentor, become a mentor, or set up a mentoring program, see the box, "Resources on Mentoring". Following in the footsteps of Athena is a pretty smart strategy.

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