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# Realizing Unrealized Potential Through Cross-Gender Mentorship

By David R. Perry

## Abstract

Much has been written on the concept of mentorship yet relatively little focuses on cross-gender mentorship (defined in this article as men mentoring or sponsoring women) and the benefits to the advancement of women.

This article addresses the question: *To what extent can cross-gender mentorship enable female leaders to realize their full leadership potential and help their organizations achieve their objectives?*

By integrating learning from personal experience, published research, and the application of Lewin’s force field model, I address ways for professionals of Organization Development and Change to transform organizations by realizing the full potential of their female (and male) leaders.

**Keywords:** mentorship, cross-gender mentorship, change theory, Lewin’s force field model, systems thinking

Unrealized potential represents a significant opportunity for employees and organizations (Wodon & De La Briere, 2018). The benefits to organizations include improved recruitment and retention, higher employee engagement, productivity, market value, and revenue growth (Dhanalakshmi, Gurunathan, 2014). Although there are numerous ways to address unrealized potential in the workplace, including talent management and development programs, this article focuses on a specific strategy that is more interpersonal than programmatic—**mentorship** of women. The emphasis here is on a particular form of mentorship: cross-gender mentorship.

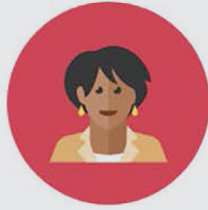
Examples of mentorship in business date back to the early 1900s when James Cash (JC) Penny introduced a store management training program based on mentorship (Roche, 1979). After World War II, many programs based on an apprenticeship model were introduced (Vickerstaff,

2007). These programs were primarily developed for men by men who dominated the management ranks at the time. They offered limited access to women and were slow to evolve to meet the needs of the growing number of women managers in the workforce. As a result, both real and perceived obstacles to the mentorship of women remain (Johnson, Smith, 2016; Neal, et al., 2013).

In this article, I pose the question: *To what extent can cross-gender mentorship enable female leaders to realize their full leadership potential and help their organization achieve their objectives?*

Motivated in part by my own experience as a male being mentored by women, I argue that the answer to the above question is, *to a great extent*.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, most of my supervisors or clients have been women. My first job out of college was at Procter & Gamble where I reported to a



- **67% rate mentorship as highly important in helping advance their careers**
- **63% have never had a mentor**
- **78% mentor other women**
- **88% want to help women advance their careers**
- **56% aren't sure how to help**
- **49% want their female colleagues to tell them how to be a better ally**

**87% of mentors & mentees feel empowered, have greater confidence & career satisfaction. Mentors & mentees are promoted 5-6X more often**

Sources: Neal, S., Boatman, J., Miller, N., (2013) Development Dimensions, Intl. (DDI); Kraner, A. (2021), Forbes

Figure 1: Female and Male Views on Mentorship and the Upside

dynamic woman who mentored me. After earning my MBA, I worked at Microsoft, where two of my early supervisors were women. One was the influential Melinda French Gates and the other, a brilliant leader who helped introduce Microsoft Office and became one of the first female vice presidents at Microsoft. More recently, I have worked directly for females who were the president of a top business university and the CEO and the dean of a nationally recognized academic health system. I benefitted greatly from working with these female leaders and seeing how they viewed and framed challenges and opportunities. I also benefited from observing the power dynamics and the inherent obstacles they encountered in their male-dominated organizations. Through this experience, I learned that mentoring could lead to an exchange of different perspectives on leadership and that there is an opportunity for senior men to use their positional power to help elevate future female leaders through cross-gender mentoring.

#### A Historical View

Two significant events in the advancement of women were the Women's Suffrage movement and the Title IX legislation. Two men, George Francis Train, and Senator Birch Bayh were influential in these movements and together they provide examples

of how males have, in the past, used their positional power in either supportive roles or to advocate for women.

In the early 1900s, George Francis Train, in his support of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and their efforts in securing women's voting rights, developed, launched, and funded *The Revolution*, a women's rights newspaper. Train, who was a contrarian, was willing to challenge tradition, stand up for his beliefs, and used his power as a wealthy, connected male leader to promote women's suffrage (Holland, 1987).

In 1972, Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana helped to author and introduce to the United States Senate the Title IX legislation that secured equal rights in women's collegiate sports. His empathy for women in sports was informed by his own experiences as an athlete and importantly, those of his wife, Marvella Bayh, and the inequities she had experienced as an aspiring female in a male-dominated world. Senator Bayh realized that male leaders in positions of power would need to become advocates for change (Johnson, 2022). By using his position of power for the purpose of listening and involving other stakeholders, Bayh employed a diplomatic and consensus-based approach that is a model for male advocates and mentors to study.

#### What is Cross-gender Mentorship? Why Pursue It?

Cross-gender mentorship is defined primarily as males mentoring females. While senior women's mentorship of junior women can be very effective and should be encouraged, there are a limited number of senior women available for mentorship. In one study, 63% of women reported never having had a formal mentor (Neal, et al., 2013). For more women to have mentors, more men in senior-level positions need to serve as mentors or sponsors of junior women (Johnson, Smith, 2016).

Mentorship, particularly cross-gender mentorship, can accelerate the development of a young, diverse pipeline of female leaders. By connecting senior male leaders who occupy most key leadership roles to high-potential female leaders, mentorship programs can leverage senior male leaders' knowledge and experience while concurrently providing greater exposure to women's challenges in the workplace. Both groups benefit from an interpersonal relationship that can produce a mindset shift through which they gain a broader perspective (Moser, Branscombe, 2021).

Results of a survey on mentoring among men and women (Neal, et al., 2013) provide compelling reasons to invest in these cross-gender mentoring (see Figure 1).

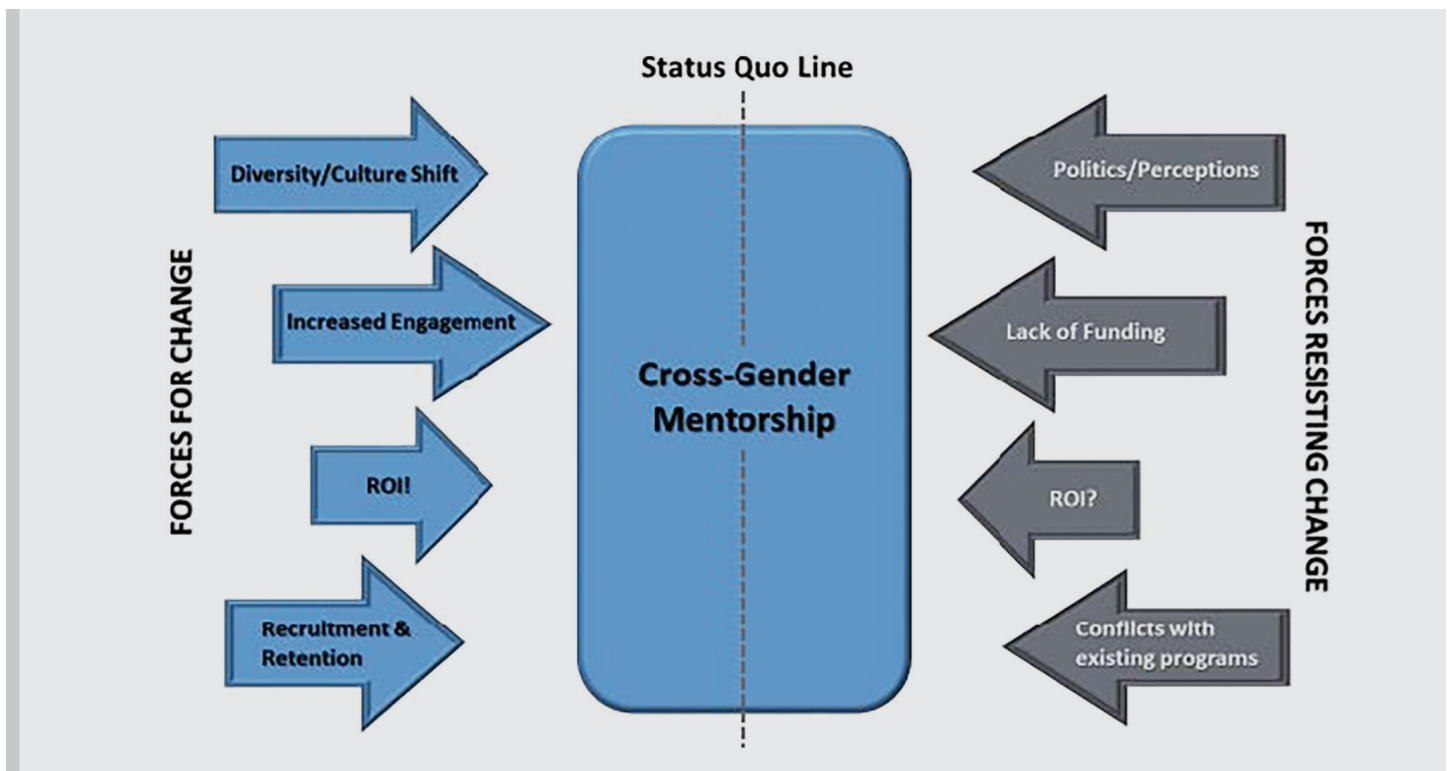


Figure 2: Lewin's Force Field Model Applied to Cross-Gender Mentorship

Researchers have identified the difficulties encountered in cross-gender mentoring. Kram (1983) and Clawson and Kram (1984) used the mentor role theory to outline nine mentoring roles divided into two sets—psychosocial and career development—and the related perceptions including stereotyping, intimacy, and public scrutiny. Other studies have examined the perceptions, infrequency, and barriers to cross-gender mentoring relationships for women in the workplace (Ragins, 1989, 1996; Ragins et al., 1990, 1991, 1994). Ragins (1989) offers steps organizations can take to help female managers overcome barriers to mentoring, including creating opportunities (networking, events, etc.), training, cultivation, and institutionalization.

### Looking at the Opportunity Through a New Lens

Despite the insightful research on cross-gender mentorship and the advancement of women into leadership roles, there have been few meaningful changes to mentorship in the last 40 years. Many of the barriers identified by Kram and Ragins remain. Furthermore, it can be argued that the barriers have been amplified in

recent years by high-profile cases of sexual harassment that led to the #MeToo movement. Women fear being targets of sexual harassment or other inappropriate behavior, while men with good intent fear risking the perception of undue influence or becoming the target of an unwarranted accusation. These challenges inform and support taking a fresh, OD&C-informed, systems-thinking view of the problem using a lens that incorporates new workplace norms and policies, and evolved attitudes and perceptions of a new generation of women and men in the workplace.

By transforming a compelling concept into something actionable, this OD&C-informed change approach could increase the probability of realizing potential in the form of three desired outcomes that contribute to but go beyond financial ROI:

1. **Cultural mindset shift:** Elevating mentorship (informal and formal) to a core element of the organizational culture that benefits mentees and mentors of all genders
2. **“Baked In” Integration:** Linking mentorship to HR policies—recognition and incentives for mentors/mentees, incorporation into performance reviews, criteria for promotion,

alignment/incorporation with development systems and DEI goals

3. **Advancement:** A pipeline of women moving to higher levels of leadership that cultivate greater diversity of gender and thought and improved overall outcomes.

### A Change Roadmap to Desired Outcomes and Cultural Change

The opportunity to realize the unrealized potential of both female and male leaders through mentorship is an unresolved challenge that requires some form of organizational change. Professionals in Organization Development and Change can be integral in introducing cross-gender mentorship approaches and developing organizational programs.

Lewin's force field analysis (Lewin, 1951) provides a useful framework that identifies enabling forces for change and the corresponding forces that resist change. It provides a strategic approach to introduce, evolve, and potentially transform existing mentorship relationships and programs.

The force field model, as illustrated in Figure 2, serves as a diagnostic framework that allows leaders and teams to: a) identify

and assess the current driving and restraining forces of change that are motivating or hindering the status quo of a cross-gender mentorship culture; and b) prioritize focus areas to impact desired change(s). This analysis could lead to using more focused frameworks (i.e., Lewin's three stage model of change, etc.) to address resistance to change or leverage positive forces respectively.

## Conclusion

Realizing the unrealized potential in the workplace is an intriguing but elusive concept that ultimately requires putting theories into actionable practice. In this article I have explored how mentorship could be used to realize the potential among women in the workplace and identified cross-gender mentorship between men and women as a more focused way to help advance and elevate women and to provide senior men with a broader perspective.

Existing research confirms strong interest among women and men in mentorship. Still, challenges exist, such as women lacking mentorship experiences and men lacking the knowledge of how best to support their female colleagues (Neal, Boatman, and Miller, 2013). Beyond the benefits to the mentor and mentee, the organization can realize more comprehensive advantages in improved recruitment, retention, higher employee engagement, productivity, market value, and revenue growth (Dhanalakshmi, et al., 2014).

Introducing cross-gender mentorship, with the goal of integrating it into the existing practice and programs within an organization, should be viewed as a significant change initiative requiring a change model approach. Thus, it will often involve professionals of Organization Development and Change serving as agents of change in introducing concepts, models, and frameworks to help organizations introduce or expand cross-gender mentorship, with Lewin's force field analysis as a change model serving as a framework for identifying and addressing positive and restraining forces of change.

The perceived need and lack of cross-gender mentorship is a challenge. A challenge that presents a unique opportunity for OD&C professionals to add significant value. With select change models and frameworks such as Lewin's force field analysis, OD&C Professionals can help transform organizations by realizing the full potential of their female (and male) leaders.

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