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by Wendy Murphy

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Many senior male managers are [reportedly](#) responding to the #MeToo movement with a better-safe-than-sorry attitude and are pulling back from mentoring women. This backlash has little basis in reality. [False accusations of sexual harassment are about 2%](#), the same as any other crime. Aside from being biased, this reaction is also shortsighted: Repercussions of depriving female employees of the counseling, developmental opportunities, exposure, and visibility that come from mentoring relationships have serious consequences for the future of the organization.

It's quite simple: If we want more women leaders, we need men in powerful positions to support their ascension. As a professor at Babson College, I conduct research, speak, and write about mentoring. Mentoring by definition may include career support (sponsorship, coaching, exposure, challenging assignments) and psychosocial support (encouragement, counseling, friendship). Protégés (or mentees) earn higher salaries, are promoted more quickly, are more satisfied with their job, and, most importantly, learn more to improve their performance, their career, and their workplace.

After countless conversations with well-intentioned senior, male executives, it is clear that we need to address one question. How should men approach mentoring in today's workplace? Here are five suggestions:

1. Intentionally seek out women mentees. Mentors should pursue developmental relationships purposefully with respect to differences. Evaluate your current network of protégés and consider how diverse it is. Do you engage with men more than women? Why? What is your key challenge? [David Clutterbuck's research](#) on mentoring suggests that strategies such as open dialogue, suspending judgment, and identifying common interests and values can help.

These *internal relationship challenges* mean that you may need to risk some discomfort to make the relationship work. We are naturally attracted to people like us, a sociological principle called [homophily](#), which means that we have a tendency to bond with people similar to ourselves. This also means that young men will be more comfortable approaching their senior male colleagues for mentoring. Thus, the challenge is to ensure that you are actively managing mentoring opportunities beyond the people who show up at your door.

2. Be transparent in your developmental practices. The key to diversity mentoring is to be transparent about the relationship and its professional nature. When do developmental discussions occur? Are they in your office, in a conference room, or traveling to a client site? Reflect on your typical mentoring conversations and consider both the timing and the context of these impactful moments. If dinner together feels inappropriate, you need to ask yourself, "Why"? Do you have one-on-one dinners with junior men? It is fine to choose to meet over lunch rather than dinner, but you have to make that choice with *all* of your protégés.

These *external relationship challenges* mean that you need to ensure that perceptions of your colleagues are managed. Sharing elements of your private life — including spouses/significant others, kids, or community involvement with people in the workplace — can reduce the chances of inadvertent damage to anyone's reputation or career. It is imperative that senior men take the lead in creating professional dynamics in which it is seen as the norm for mixed-gender relationships to develop and thrive.

3. Listen with empathy to ask good questions. Good mentors identify opportunities, open doors, and connect mentees to challenging assignments so they learn and grow. You will only be capable of

doing so if you ask questions and then *listen, listen, listen* to understand, affirm, and validate what your mentee needs. Cross-gender mentoring requires that you make efforts to learn about one another and empathize.

[Relational empathy has both cognitive and emotional dimensions](#), meaning you must be attentive with your head and your heart. Listening with empathy also means identifying and managing your own emotional reactions and discomfort. The experience of empathy will enhance your mentee's positive sense of self and facilitate self-disclosure, which increases trust and will enable you both to share your unique experiences. Honing these skills will enhance your mentoring practice across your network as well as your ability to build developmental relationships with anyone.

4. Acknowledge gender issues exist. Your protégé knows that gender may be a factor in her career; after all, it has been a big part of the mainstream media conversation since the publication of [Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*](#). The issue is to recognize the role of gender and consider how it may or may not impact opportunities at your workplace. If you need to educate yourself, HBR has published several articles, including this [study demonstrating that men and women are treated differently at work](#), which has links to several other resources.

A key benefit of mentoring women is the potential to learn from one another's perspective and experiences. Be open to this conversation. Ask your protégé if/how gender has impacted her career. Ask her how she experiences the culture of your organization, if she experiences the policies and practices as supportive. Ask her what opportunities she sees for improvement. Help her navigate job and career challenges using your knowledge of the people, processes, and culture of your particular organization.

5. Actively sponsor her and help her connect with other sponsors. If you are in a position of influence, think about how to raise your protégé's visibility. Expose her to the complexities of your role and introduce her to other leaders in positions of power. Raise her name as a high potential candidate for promotion in *both* formal and informal conversations. Women are more willing to ask their managers for [stretch assignments](#) if they have a sponsor behind them. Be that sponsor. Spend the time you need to develop a meaningful relationship so that you understand her potential and help her find leadership opportunities that she might otherwise overlook (or be overlooked for). Encourage other men to diversify their own sponsorship networks so that when conversations happen, there are [multiple women to consider](#) for promotion. If it is the norm for powerful leaders to have a diverse set of protégés, then the culture of the organization will begin to reflect these practices.

Mentoring both women and men is worth the investment in time and resources. We know that mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial, meaning that both mentors and protégés reap rewards. Further, men who publicly promote and sponsor women get better end-of-year evaluations and are seen as champions for diversity as David Smith and Brad Johnson found in their [study on the military](#). Unfortunately, senior women who mentor women may get lower evaluations and be seen as

showing favoritism. This highlights the persistence in inequities between genders and adds urgency to the argument that senior men must get engaged in this important work.

Wendy Murphy is an associate professor of management at Babson College and author of [Strategic Relationships at Work](#). Follow her on Twitter [@wcmurphy](#).
