

# Women and Mentoring

## Debunking the Myths

By Ida O. Abbott

Mentoring plays a key role in women's professional advancement, but many women lack the mentors they want and need. Some difficulty finding mentors is caused by myths that surround the mentoring process. Debunking those myths, and clearing up the misunderstandings they create, makes it easier for women to find the mentoring relationships so important for their careers. Ten of those myths are set out—and set straight—here.

**Myth # 1. A mentor ensures career success.** A devoted mentor can be a huge help, but it is unlikely that one mentor will be the ticket to success. Career-making mentors are—and always have been—extremely rare. Especially in today's fast-paced and highly mobile workforce, it is difficult to form the kind of long-term, intense mentoring relationship with a powerful individual that is necessary to guarantee professional advancement. Even if a woman is lucky enough to find a single mentor who champions her promotion, it is risky to rely on one person for career progress. Being known as someone's protégée can be exhilarating—but it can also be stifling. A better approach would be to cultivate a network of mentors who are interested in career development and can help in different ways. Having several advisers and supporters to call upon as needed allows a woman to get the guidance she

needs, while leaving control in her hands.

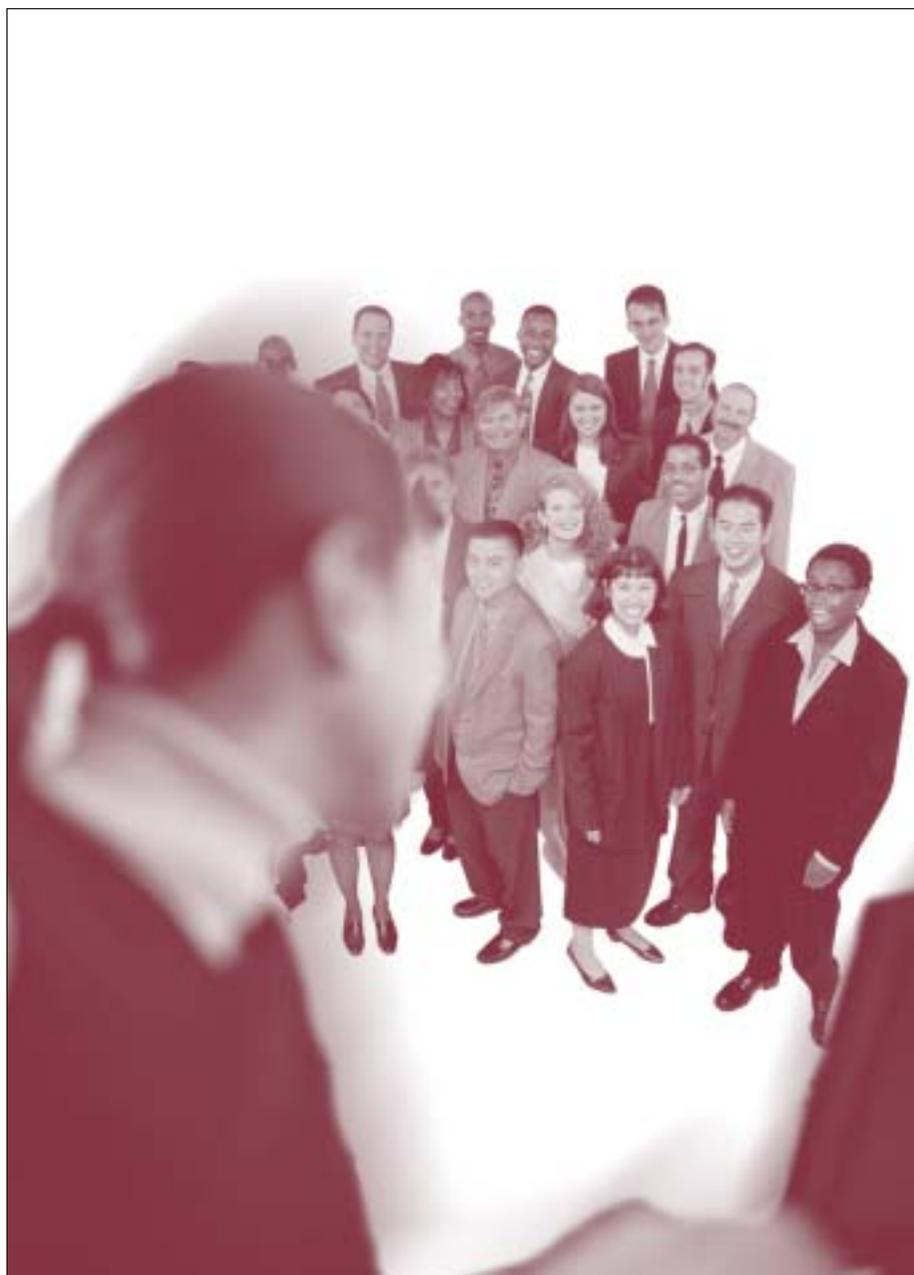
**Myth # 2. A mentor must be a woman.**

Many women believe that the only worthwhile mentor is someone whose gender, life choices, and lifestyle align with their own. This myopic perspective restricts the pool of potential mentors and limits the diverse offerings of the mentors they find. It is true that a female mentor may share gender-based experiences, including work-life conflicts, discrimination, harassment, and day-to-day problems in workplace relations with men. However, a woman can learn a great deal from a male mentor or a woman whose life choices and style differ from her own. Remember that mentors do not just support choices; they also illuminate the negative aspects of those choices. They do not always agree with a position but challenge the status quo and provide perspectives that might not have been considered. So, yes, look for women mentors who can be sup-

portive and make good role models, but expand the pool to include a variety of perspectives.

**Myth # 3. Do good work, and a mentor will find you.**

Women must take the initiative to find a mentor. It is true that outstanding performers are more likely to attract mentors, but too many hard-working, high-powered women go without mentors. Some women work so hard that they don't leave themselves open to mentoring. They may appear so self-sufficient and self-confident that potential mentors are intimidated or assume they do not need or want mentors, and turn



away. To attract mentors, be receptive to others who want to help—and let them know how they can.

**Myth # 4. Mentors should also be friends.** Women often confuse mentoring with friendship. Mentoring and friendship are not mutually exclusive, and many personal relationships do embrace both, but friends are sometimes ineffective as mentors. They may lack the professional insights necessary for mentoring, may be too close to see what is needed in a professional context, or may not want to jeopardize a friendship by giving feedback or advice that is critical. Likewise, mentors may be excellent at guiding and supporting a career but be unable or unwilling to deal with personal dilemmas. Workplace mentors, after all, assist with career development; they are not expected to socialize.

**Myth # 5. Mentoring programs don't work.** Mentor-mentee pairings assigned in structured mentoring programs often are compared to arranged marriages and given little likelihood of success. This comparison reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of mentoring programs and often leads to disappointment. Unlike marriage, a mentoring program does not imply a lifetime commitment; it does not even require that the mentor and mentee become personal friends. It simply pairs two people for a limited period of time to work toward the program's stated objectives. If those people share a mutual commitment to the mentoring goals, the relationship can work. Even if the mentor and mentee lack the professional chemistry necessary to develop a deeper relationship, the mentoring process can still be worthwhile. It can provide valuable insights and knowledge that enhance professional development and a better understanding of what to look for in future mentors or mentees.

**Myth # 6. The best role models make the best mentors.** A role model is someone who pos-

esses a characteristic, quality, or style an individual admires and wants to emulate. Role modeling is based on observation and study of someone else in action; it does not require a personal relationship. A woman may never interact directly with many of the role models she admires. In contrast, mentoring is based on a personal and mutually respectful relationship. A mentor fosters career development—in large part through

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interaction. There are many role models, but only a few of them would be good mentors.

**Myth # 7. Good mentors are hard to find.** Potential mentors are all around, but finding them requires being alert and prepared. Quite often, a person at work will casually offer advice, insights, or information that can benefit a woman's development or advancement. This individual may be making mentoring overtures. Alternatively, a woman can make the first move, but she should have an action plan that clarifies why she wants a mentor and how a mentor can help her. The plan should be very specific: the kind of help the woman is seeking; the traits, qualities, or connections a mentor ideally would have to provide it. This kind of information is valuable in identifying prospective candidates both inside and outside the firm.

**Myth # 8. Mentoring is controlled by mentors for the benefit of mentees.** This myth misinterprets two important points about mentoring. In truth, good mentoring relationships are partnerships, with both parties sharing the relationship and enjoying its benefits. Although the mentee's needs drive the mentor-

ing agenda, both mentor and mentee can learn, develop, and derive satisfaction from working together. The second misconception is that, because mentoring focuses on the mentee's development, the mentor is the active teacher and the mentee is the passive student who only watches and listens. Passivity does not work in today's law firm. Mentees must be proactive in the mentoring process, by initiating contacts with the mentor, setting goals, asking questions, soliciting feedback, and inviting themselves along to meetings and professional events.

**Myth # 9. A mentor must be older.** This is not necessarily the case. Mentors can be any age, even quite a bit younger—so long as they are interested in helping others learn and advance and can move people toward their professional goals. The biggest

source of mentors is in fact a woman's peer group—peer mentoring is the most common type.

**Myth # 10. Mentoring takes more time than busy lawyers can afford.** Given the important role mentoring plays in women's career advancement, busy lawyers cannot afford *not* to engage in mentoring. Mentoring is essential to develop and retain capable women. It does take time, but less than many people imagine. Mentoring does not always require a lunch or scheduled meeting; it can occur in any encounter that offers the potential for learning. Lessons can develop over a period of months or in just a few moments. To maximize a limited amount of a mentor's time, a woman can define the scope of the mentoring relationship, set specific goals, and monitor progress toward those goals. 📌

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