Unbreakable? Using Mentoring to Break the Glass Ceiling

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Abstract

This paper reviews the current research available on mentoring women managers, particularly through the "glass ceiling", in order to inform the most effective design of mentoring initiatives supporting women into more senior roles within organisations. It concludes with a schema for mentee development based on the concept of a skilled mentee.

Introduction

Many studies, some of which are discussed below, have shown that women are often disadvantaged in the workplace. They are often not paid as much as their male counterparts when performing similar roles and women continue to be vastly underrepresented in senior management positions in proportion to their representation in the workforce. The Equal Opportunities Commission (2004, p1) report: Almost 30 years since the Sex Discrimination Act was passed, there are still fewer women than men in positions of power and influence. Open the door of any boardroom or council chamber and the chances are that most people round the table will be men. For years there have been plenty of talented women coming up in business, public life and politics, but those who reach the top are still the exception."

In terms of career progression, the barriers to entry into higher management position are often referred to as 'the glass ceiling'. As Akande (1994, p22) has pointed out, "there is considerable evidence that women encounter a 'glass ceiling' in management, whatever their industry". The underlying causes for this include "discrimination in the workplace, the inability of women to penetrate the 'old boys' network' and the tendency of executives to promote others like themselves" (op cit).

This so-called 'glass ceiling' has been described as "a barrier that is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women from moving up the managerial hierarchy" (Linehan and Walsh, 1999, p.351) and as "an invisible barrier to advancement based on attitudinal or organisational bias" (Ragins, Townsend & Mattis 1998, p.28).

Many writers (e.g. Farris and Regan, 1981; Kanter, 1982; Collins, 1983 Burke and McKeen, 1994) have argued that mentoring may well have a positive role to play in breaking down the glass ceiling. Building on this, Linehan and Walsh (1999) have argued that mentoring is particularly important for women:

"Mentoring relationships, whilst important for men, may be essential for women's career development, as female managers face greater organisational, interpersonal and individual barriers to advancement" (p.348).

In particular, their research reveals that women who fail to reach senior management levels cite the absence of mentors as critical to their failure. This work is supported by that of Burke and McKeen (1994), White et al. (1992), Ragins (1989) and Clutterbuck and Devine (1987).

Monks (1998) also shows a positive relationship between female career advancement and mentoring. Of particular interest in Monks' research is the finding that the women had learnt the political skills of organisational life more quickly with a mentor, they had increased in self-confidence and mentoring supported women with their promotions or identifying them as suitable candidates to be promoted.

Mentors appear to be a particular asset to women in male dominated industries. In this context, Scandura & Ragins (1993) stress that mentoring is seen as particularly important, as the women can become isolated and face gender-based barriers to advancement. However, it may be more difficult for them to find a potential female member and it increases the likelihood of them having a cross-gender relationship. We will now explore this particular aspect of mentoring and its implications for 'shattering' the glass ceiling.

Male versus Female Mentors

It might be reasonable to assume that mentoring relationships – predicated on assumptions of empathy, trust and open communication – may work best with same sex pairs, particularly when a key issue is under-representation of a gender within an organisation or sector.

However, we would argue that successful mentoring pairs work because they have the appropriate balance between similarity and difference. If mentor and mentee are too different, then there is little opportunity for rapport and making connections. On the other hand, if there is too much similarity, there is little added value for mentee and, indeed the mentor. Exploring this principle with regards to cross gender mentoring pairs reveals some useful insights.

A female mentor can disadvantage a female mentee for several reasons. Following Clutterbuck (2001), the following points can be made:

- Minority group mentors (in this case, women) are less likely to be in senior positions, so they may not be in a position to provide either the depth of understanding of the organisation or of the industry.
- Women mentors in a male dominated industry may be more likely to reinforce attitudes and behaviours that are not valued by the organisation.
- Male mentors in senior management positions might be in a better position to provide role models for behaviours that are valued within the chosen industry or organisation.

Lewis and Fagenson (1995)'s research seems to support some of Clutterbuck's (2001) claims. In this work, they examine the disadvantages of a female only mentoring programme. Their research shows that male mentors are perceived by their mentees as having more power than female mentors. In male-dominated organisations they have proved this to be true even when taking rank and position into consideration. Therefore, even though female mentors have been found to provide their protégés with more psycho-social mentoring (Kram, 1983) than male mentors, they do not wield the same amount of organisational power as men. As a result, they may be less able to perform a networking role (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 1999) than their male counterparts.

However, following on from the work of Cooper and Hingley (1983), Linehan and Walsh (1999, p.349) report on six interviewees in their research who had been mentored by females only and who believed that these role models helped them to maintain a female managerial style of management. One of the mentees said:

"Of the two women mentors that I had, one has children and I believe that it has been really refreshing for me to see that she is very senior, that she has kept a balance in her life and she hasn't become macho. It is refreshing to see that you can get there and not sacrifice yourself in getting more like men."

Similarly, Ragins & Cotton (1993, p.97) have argued that it is particularly important for female mentees to have access to female mentors, because "these mentors can provide critical role modelling functions and will not elicit the detrimental sexual issues common to female protégé-male mentor relationships".

 This resonates with similar conclusions drawn in the work of Clawson & Kram (1984), Fitt & Newton (1981), Ragins & McFarlin (1990).

However, other research reveals that the issue is not as simple as this.

For example, Scandura & Ragins (1993) put forward the idea of some researchers that the sex of the mentor itself is too simplistic and that understanding common factors underlying men and women's behaviour is a better indicator of the success of relationships. A key concept they explore, drawing on the work of Bem (1974) was that of androgyny, which

represents a balance between male and female behavioural characteristics that "allows individuals the freedom and flexibility to exhibit male or female-typed attributes in response to a given situation." (p252). Based on these arguments, they make the following claim:

  "Gender role orientation is a better predictor than sex for such outcomes as career orientation, career achievement and career choices for women in non-traditional, male-dominated, occupations." (p252).

The key findings that emerged from their study are as follows:

- They found gender role orientation to be a stronger predictor of mentorship functions than biological sex.
- Women were as likely as men to describe their mentors as providing functions relating to career development, upward mobility, personal support, nurturance and role modelling.
- Women and men who described themselves in androgynous terms reported more career development and psychosocial support than individuals with feminine (i.e. dependent, passive, nurturing, helpful) or masculine (i.e. independent, aggressive, competitive, self-confident) behavioural attributes.

If we accept therefore, that there are good arguments for having either female or male mentors paired with female mentees, some of the issues still remain in terms of access to senior management expertise, finding appropriate mentors and dealing with the different challenges these relationships present. These issues will now be further explored.

Issues & Challenges

As suggested earlier, one of the barriers to women being mentored is finding a suitable mentor. Linehan and Walsh (1999, p. 349) identify a shortage of suitable women in senior positions to act as mentors. With the shortage of senior women role models available, women may be faced with having to approach a man to ask them to be their mentor. This can put a woman at an immediate disadvantage as cross-gender mentoring relationships can be more difficult to develop than same gender relationships due to the possibility of them being misunderstood.

This is usefully summarised by Ragins & Cotton (1996, p. 39):

"Women were more likely than men to report a lack of access to potential mentors, that mentors were unwilling to mentor them, that supervisors and co-workers would disapprove of the relationship and that the initiation of the relationship might be misconstrued as sexual in nature."

Furthermore, research by Linehan and Walsh (1999), Ragins & Cotton (1996) and Ragins (1989) suggests that, where appropriate senior women are present, they may be faced with an overload of requests to be mentors.

These studies suggest that this problem may be exacerbated by female executives having less time than their male counterparts available to be a mentor. This can be due to greater job demands or other discriminatory factors facing women in organisations. On the other hand, Ragins & Scandura (1994, p.966), found that women executives were as likely to be mentors as men but that relative lack of senior female mentors was due to their "relative absence of women at high ranks rather than of gender differences in intentions to mentor."

Electronic Mentoring (e-mentoring) has been argued to represent a useful way of dealing with these issues. For example, Hamilton and Scandura (2002, p.396) favour e-mentoring in mixed gender mentoring for several reasons:

- The reduced level of social cues over electronic media may allow greater opportunities for women and minorities to interact with mentors relatively bias-free.
- They acknowledge that women may feel more comfortable having a male mentor, as their interest will not be misinterpreted in an e-mentoring relationship.
- The emphasis will be based more on shared values and interests than social characteristics.

- Because women are more reactive to visual cues, they may respond to domination cues exhibited by men and let them take over the conversation. Electronic communication can equalise access by allowing everyone to speak simultaneously without interruptions. Cues that may favour one gender or one individual over another are diminished in electronic format. As a result e-mentoring may increase the ability of being heard, especially for women.

Similarly, Bierema and Merriam (2002, p. 220) view e-mentoring as holding the potential to erode some of the traditional power dynamics that tend to structure mentoring relationships due to its potential in terms of rendering "the cultural baggage and stereotypes that accompany race, gender and social class … invisible in a virtual form, freeing the mentoring to become the focus."

However, as previously suggested, this 'cultural baggage' may be the most important feature of the mentoring conversation and its absence may indeed be detrimental to the efficacy of the mentoring relationship.

The preceding debates raise some issues and challenges. Firstly, if we accept that mentoring can help aspiring female managers to break down the glass ceilings, what is the best way of doing this? The evidence seems to suggest that female mentors who have 'broken through' may offer the best chance of help in terms of a role model for a mentee, both in terms of psycho-social and career progression. However, due to the paucity of women in such positions, they may prove difficult to find. However, our preliminary research findings are providing tentative support to suggest that male mentors may be able operate "androgynously" and pay attention to both of these aspects of mentoring. This refers, in particular, to the career progression aspect of mentoring (Kram, 1983) as they may well be able to role model those behaviours and attitudes favoured by the organisation or industrial sector. Whilst this may provide some initial difficulty for the mentee in terms of adapting these behaviours to their context, there may indeed be some value for the mentee in terms of developing this competence. In other words, if female mentees are compelled to actively transform behaviours exhibited by their male mentor into behaviours that they themselves are comfortable with, this 'skilled mentee' may well be able to apply this competence in a range of different situations and may indeed be more flexible and resourceful as a result. A model of role model mentoring that goes some way to addressing mentee skills within a mentoring relationship is the one put forwards by Clutterbuck & Megginson, summarised below:

A Model of Role Modelling in mentoring relationships

Stage	Features	To move on
Acceptive awareness	Based on reputation, observation from a distance; recognising role model as a source of learning	Seeking out the mentor or being sought out
Admiration	Development of regard based on the role model's values, impact and (sometimes) interest in mentee	Dissatisfaction with aspects of oneself, which the mentor appears to have mastered
Adaptation	Conscious and unconscious process of change to adopt role model's behaviour, ways of thinking, values	Tune in to the mentor's behaviours, ideas, strategies, motives; commit to personal change
Advancement	Integrate mentor's mental models with one's own; practise new behaviour and observe results	Step back and look at the mentor more critically
Astute awareness	Mature evaluation of the role model – warts and all; reassert and also develop own values and mental models	Seek new sources of learning/role models; become more selective in distinguishing what to accept/reject

Source: Clutterbuck & Megginson (1999,p144).

In this model, they chart a progression from acceptive awareness through to astute awareness, which places more emphasis on the mentee's skill development, as they become more self aware and able to critique the mentor as well as themselves. In our view, one of the key strengths of this model is that it draws attention to some of the key stages in mentee behaviour and begins to acknowledge the way that the mentee themselves can move the relationship forwards. It is also draws our attention to the importance of integrating mentor mental models with mentee mental models. Our wish is to take these ideas forward and to develop a framework which helps shed light on the skills a mentee might have in general and how this might help in 'shattering' the glass ceiling in particular.

The Skilled Mentee

It is our contention that much of the literature on mentoring has tended not to focus on the skills needed by a mentee. Most published peer refereed journal articles on mentoring have tended to focus either on the dyadic relationship, the scheme, the benefits of mentoring to the mentee (or protégé in the US literature) or the skills of the mentor. For example, Strong & Baron's (2004) work on mentor teachers, which analyses 64 mentoring conversations seems to focus on developing advice for mentors in terms of developing their skills. A simple search on the Business Source Premier database reveals that of the 1764 articles on mentoring, there are only 3 that have mentee in the title; even if the term 'protégé' (the US preferred term) is used, only 150 articles are revealed.

It is interesting to note that, whilst much of this literature acknowledges the importance of empowering mentees to take action (rather than encouraging dependency on the mentor), there is relatively little emphasis on the skills **a mentee** needs to develop to do this. It is our view that, ironically, this imbalance in the literature has the unintentional effect of downplaying mentee agency and potentially presenting the view of mentees as passive receivers of wisdom from the mentee. One notable exception to this general trend is in the work of Colley (2003). In her rich accounts of engagement mentoring, she discusses how some mentees were able to influence the mentoring relationship to move outside scheme boundaries to address the emotional and social needs of the mentee, often despite resistance from the mentors. This is particularly pertinent to our discussion of the glass ceiling and to attendant issues of power, access and career progression.

We feel there is a significant gap in the mentoring literature in terms of modelling how mentees learn and develop within organisations. Therefore, we are proposing a conceptual model of the skilled mentee (see figure 1) drawing on organisational learning theory following the work of Argyris & Schon (1978, 1996).

Argryis & Schon (1996) identify three broad levels of learning which they call single loop learning, double loop learning and organisational deuterolearning. Single loop learning is defined as "instrumental learning that changes strategies of action or assumptions underlying strategies in ways that leave the values of a theory unchanged" (Argyris & Schon, 1996, p20). Applying this mode of learning to mentoring, this might refer to a female mentee learning from a male mentor how to write a politically acceptable internal audit report; in this example, there has been a knowledge transfer from one to the other which has otherwise left the capabilities of the mentee unchanged. Double loop learning, however, refers to "learning that results in a change in the values of theory-in use as well as in its strategies and assumptions" (op cit, p21). In other words, double loop learning starts to occur when mentees begin to question their own assumptions and theories in use, as well of those of others, *including their mentor*. The third level of learning is what Argyris & Schon, 1996 call organisational deutero learning. They define this as "the second order learning through which the members of an organisation may discover and modify the learning system that conditions prevailing patterns of organizational inquiry" (p28).

Putting this in simpler terms, deutero learning when applied to mentoring refers to the impact that the mentee's learning can have on the way the whole organisation learns.

Following on from our previous work on mentor development and supervision (Merrick & Stokes, 2003), we have taken the categories developed there and applied them to the

mentee. This has enabled us to develop a continuum of mentee development along the following lines:

Novice Mentee – someone who acquires **content** knowledge and/or skills from their mentor and applies that to a problem or issue e.g. how to complete an audit report

Developing Mentee – someone who acquires **process** knowledge and/or skills from their mentor and is able to consistently apply that to a certain problem or issue e.g. thinking through the feasibility of a construction project

Reflective Mentee – someone who is able to **critically reflect** on the process and content knowledge/skills acquired from others and adapt it for their own purposes e.g. critiquing their mentor's model of career progression in order to develop their own view

Reflexive Mentee – someone who is able to use the developments in their own learning process to **influence the way the organisational inquiry learning system operates** e.g. drawing on the challenge within the mentoring relationship to challenge the organisational tendency to cover up mistakes or not to promote women beyond a certain level in the organisation.

Clearly, there are linkages between the mentee development stages and Argyris & Schon's categories. A novice mentee is engaging primarily in single loop learning. If, for example, a female mentee is being mentored by a senior female mentor and the latter helps the former to develop a report that addresses the points that she knows the senior team are concerned about, there is clearly some knowledge transfer going on here. However, unless the mentee is able to gain access to the process, this will have little effect on career progression. Therefore, the mentee will need to try and understand the mentor's mental models and processes in order to move forwards. At the developing mentee stage, the mentee begins to acquire that process knowledge and to understand the mentor's approach. However, this will still be single loop learning if the female mentee is unable to begin to critically reflect on that knowledge. In order to engage in double loop learning, the female mentee will begin to adapt/reject aspects of her mentor's behaviour that she finds helpful/unhelpful. This is where the mentee starts to question her own theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996) and become a more reflective mentee. To move into deutero learning, the female mentee must extend her reflections to engage in critical reflexivity regarding her place within the social system within which she operates. This might involve her beginning to identify and challenge the organisational defensive routines (Tranfield et al, 2000) that inhibit learning. It might also involve harnessing the enabling learning routines (op cit) which might start to put cracks in the glass ceiling.

We feel it is important to recognise that, within our schema, single loop and double learning do not stop as the mentee develops. Rather, it is important to recognise that, as the mentee develops, their strategies of single loop learning become augmented by other approaches, which enable the mentee to develop as a semi-autonomous learner within a mentoring relationship. We believe it is this flexibility in learning and growth in reflection, which can be encouraged and cultivated through the challenge and development provided by a well designed mentoring programme, which can inform the most effective design of future mentoring initiatives in this particular field of mentoring.

Conclusions: Cracking the Ceiling

Ragins, Townsend and Mattis (1996, p.36) have argued that although the logical solution to breaking this glass ceiling barrier is to "fill the pipeline with women and then passively wait for their advancement", this leaves the burden of change with the woman and assumes a level playing field up to senior management positions. Their research points to an "exclusionary corporate culture as the primary barrier for women's advancement… and identified a playing field that was not level, but represented more of an obstacle course" (op cit). They recommend changing the corporate culture by either active planned interventions or the women themselves adapting to the culture. Our suggested model of mentee development offers another route to culture change by supporting the mentee into a stage in her development where she will engage in deutero learning and challenge the system she is operating within. This identification and challenge of the organisational defensive routines and harnessing of the enabling learning routines (Tranfield et al, 2000) may also be supported by

her senior male mentor. Any further cracking of the glass ceiling is going to occur as an ongoing process of organisational and societal culture change. We believe this process will be accelerated by developing skilled women mentees who can utilise their skills in transferring leadership behaviours taken from her role model mentor, but also challenge her mentor's mindset and her own organisation's learning.

Vinnicombe and Colwill (1995, p.56) suggest that most research in the area of women in management centre on either a person-centred or organisation-centred approach:

 "The person-centred approach, tends to focus on blaming the victim, on placing the responsibility for organisational change squarely on the shoulders of women. The organisational-centred approach would focus on organisational policy and strategy."

What our suggested approach offers is a combination of the two approaches and our continued research will be to discover the impact of a developed female skilled mentee on both her own career progression and the organisational learning culture she is operating within.

To summarise, we have discussed the issue of the glass ceiling that, in the view of many commentators, prevents women from progressing into senior positions within organisations. Mentoring has been put forward as a possible solution to this, but our analysis included the possibility of 'androgynous mentoring' which avoids the usual dichotomy of male or female mentors. However, rather than focusing on the mentor's skills as does much of the literature, we call for more attention to be focused on the skills of mentee, as by ignoring mentee agency and autonomy, this discourse disempowers the mentee. Our model of mentee development is intended to start a conversation within the mentoring community about the concept of the skilled mentee as it applies to the advancement of women, as well as to provide us with some sensitising concepts for empirical research into these issues within organisations, which, at the time of writing, is just beginning.

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