

Establishing mentoring programs for the advancement of women in the workplace

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Abstract

Women make up almost half of the workforce, but only a small percentage are ever promoted above middle management (Zarya). Although more women are working now than ever before, the numbers of high-level management positions still are primarily occupied by men, and the reason for this imbalance is still unclear. Why are women not able to break that glass ceiling? What is keeping them out of positions of power and decision making, and what might be done to assist women with professional development and promotion? Formal mentoring programs designed specifically for women have been in existence for many years, and they have great potential to be beneficial for career advancement. Although these programs are not new, most women have never participated in them (Montazavi). From a human resource development perspective, formal mentoring programs, especially effective formal mentoring programs, should be encouraged for women. Establishing effective formal mentoring programs can help to reduce the barriers that women face when trying to succeed in the workplace. Formal mentoring programs are the answer in how to break through that glass ceiling. They can provide encouragement and foster the self-advocacy needed to overcome career barriers and succeed.

KEYWORDS

career advancement, formal mentoring programs, women in leadership

Many women have the education and the will to make great leaders. However, because they generally do not conform to the image of an ideal worker (working long hours, self-promotion, being willing to take on new projects, and always available), they are often not considered for leadership (Bierema, 2016). In the past, being a woman was seen as an asset in dealing with problems and humanizing organizations. Today, companies are not woman-friendly. Women get excluded from important meetings, and men are promoted on the basis of potential while women are promoted on the basis of achievement (Bierema, 2016). On the rare occasion that women do become leaders, they face discrimination, pay disparity, and segregation. Mavin (2008) explained that women who advance to a leadership role, are encouraged to be cautious not to appear too masculine or too feminine to try to meet unrealistic expectations placed on them. They have to be overly cautious of how they are perceived by their male counterparts and other women.

Women were once thought of as temporary employees, but they are now a permanent part of the workforce. As baby boomers exit, women stand ready to fill the gaps left by vacant positions in every organizational tier. Although the number of women in certain echelons of the workplace has grown, access to senior positions remains limited. Women and other minorities account for less than 5% of senior management positions in *Fortune 500* companies (Zarya, 2017). The problem is that employing women in corporations is not the same as moving them up. The majority of US women are employed and many women are in middle management jobs,

but they are almost never found in top decision-making positions. The lack of executive coaching has also been noted as a major factor in women's underrepresentation among corporate executives (Mortazavi, 2017). Many known male business leaders have publicly attributed their success to having a mentor (Entis, 2015). Thus, the concept of mentoring is not new. However, it has been primarily utilized by men, who have reaped the most benefit. Women often find themselves adrift within a corporation, lacking inside knowledge that could empower them to be most effective (Mortazavi, 2017). Formal mentoring programs present the opportunity for women to fill these gaps and break through the glass ceiling of corporate advancement. The social networking and support mentoring programs offer can also provide encouragement and foster self-advocacy in women to help overcome career barriers and thrive professionally. The use and implementation of mentorship programs should be considered for corporations and human resource development to help ensure the professional success of women.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Disparity in the workplace has led to barriers to success, such as a woman's lack of self-efficacy (Germain et al., 2012). Women often receive little encouragement from others to succeed and have few female role models to emulate making advancement a goal difficult to imagine. This can significantly contribute to a lack of self-efficacy. Women should be encouraged to act purposely to contribute to their own professional success, such as networking and self-promotion. However, this is difficult for many women. In a study about confidence, women reported high levels of self-confidence only 50% of the time, whereas men reported high confidence 70% of the time. In the same study, 50% of women reported feelings of self-doubt about their performance as compared with only 31% of men (Bierema, 2016). Based on these results, the lack of confidence can have implications on risk-taking. Men and women have different confident levels, which translates to their willingness to take risks. When it comes to women applying for jobs and promotions, they are likely to have less self-confidence to take the risks needed to support their career development.

To address women's lack of confidence and feelings of isolation, mentoring programs have the potential to be very beneficial. Mentoring programs are opportunities for women to connect with each other and with professional women's associations. These programs should be available with mentors who have organizational influence. Studies show that women with mentors feel more empowered and influential within their departments than women without female mentors (Germain et al., 2012). A good mentoring program will assist women in building skills and knowledge needed to elevate to the next level. It can initiate a network of resources available to give advice and guidance at each stage of employment. A strong mentoring program should support women by making them feel engaged, productive and emboldened.

SUCCESSFUL MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Successful mentorship programs are more than simply pairing up the mentor and mentee and providing a time or space for them to meet. Instead, a successful program requires complete support across the entire organization and to be embraced entirely by those in leadership positions (Bierema, 2009). Only through this integrated support can employees, especially women, feel connected, engaged and heard within the program. Mentorship programs are particularly beneficial for women as research has shown they view career development and success through the strength of relationships built, while men connect their development through autonomy and individual achievements (Bierema, 2009). Thus, the connections built from mentoring allows women access to resources through relationships further their careers. If that professional network is not given the proper support from the entire company; however, those benefits may not be as pronounced.

If organizations cannot support structured internal mentoring programs, external mentoring programs are an alternative. An external program can offer one on one and peer networks that can provide different types of guidance and support for different needs. It should be noted, however, that a study found that women who were mentored through a formal program were 50% more likely to be promoted than those who were mentored outside of a formal program (Schnieders, 2017). Given this statistic, it seems logical to conclude that formal mentoring programs are what we should strive for. Additionally, Murray et al. (2012) conducted a case study at Massey University about women seeking promotion to leadership positions and utilizing formal and informal mentoring groups, as well as employee workshops on self-promotion and networking for women. The case study determined these resources resulted in an increase of women in leadership (Murray et al., 2012). Consequently, it demonstrated the positive effect that mentoring programs can have on the advancement of women in the workplace. The women in the study took risks, applied for promotions and advanced in the company at a higher rate than before the implementation of the mentoring program.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Mentoring falls under two main concentrations in the field of human resource development: career development and organizational development (Hezlett & Gibson, 2005). As an organizational development strategy, mentoring can help companies identify biases in its culture and work environment, and develop systematic approaches for eliminating them. Eliminating barriers to the advancement of women is something that has to be made a priority by corporate leaders in order for real change to occur. Women can find it difficult to obtain support on their own, which often leads to a sense of frustration and ultimately defeat (Neal et al., 2012). Consequently, mentoring can provide direction and offer a support system guiding future opportunities. Through mentoring, women have an opportunity to develop leadership skills, tackle tough subjects like negotiations and promotions, and initiate networks facilitating the progression into leadership.

In an effort to increase employee retention and satisfaction, many organizations in public, private, and not-for-profit sectors have already implemented formal mentoring programs as a human resource development strategy (Allen & O'Brien, 2006). A formal mentoring program is a prearranged program managed by the company that typically uses a systematic selection and matching process for mentors and mentees. These programs can look different from company to company. Some programs may prefer to have a senior level employee mentoring a new or less-experienced employee 1–1, while others may prefer group mentoring programs and have a group of employees mentoring each other (Allen & O'Brien, 2006). However designed, formal mentoring programs allow women access to guidance from peers providing a supportive network for career development. Working with a mentor can provide women better advantage for moving forward and combating obstacles that hinder them (Schnieders, 2017). When companies have a formal program in place, it eliminates the need for women to actively seek out mentors on their own and promotes equality and support of women in the workplace.

SUPPORTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Although equality and the support of minorities in the workplace should always be a priority, a mentoring program created merely to fulfill a diversity quota only gets you halfway. A program that is setup but with no follow-through will not help improve women's self efficacy or promote women's professional advancement. In fact, it could leave women employees even more unsatisfied in the workplace. Human resource development specialist need to recognize these possibilities and plan programs that are contextualized to address the issues faced by the women in their organization.

It has been found that the vast majority of women believe that a mentorship would be highly beneficial for career advancement; however, almost half of women report that they have never had a mentor (Neal et al., 2012). Seeking mentorship can be especially problematic for women, since it has been determined that women have trouble seeking out their own mentor relationships (Mavin, 2008). Whether it is not being sure how to establish mentoring relationships, or being hesitant of the response they will receive, women can shy away from mentorship. Working with a mentoring program may be unprecedented for most women and organizations. This makes it even more challenging for women to connect with mentors. It has been determined that only 56% of all organizations have a formal program for mentoring (Neal et al., 2012). Even though many mentoring programs do currently exist, many provide no training or support and are typically ineffective (Mortazavi, 2017). Having a mentoring program does not mean that they are effectual, but they can be considered essential functions when organizations recognize their full potential. Hegstad and Wentling (2004) explained that mentoring programs are important career development tools that should be integrated into a company's organizational culture. As it relates to the advancement of women, human resource developers should be encouraged to not only promote formal mentoring programs, but effective formal mentoring programs for women. Establishing effective formal mentoring programs can help to reduce the barriers that women face when trying to succeed in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Mentorship programs need to be implemented as a standard within corporations and across the field of human resource development. When employed properly, mentorship programs for women have the potential to mitigate problems and barriers toward long term success. These barriers include a loss of self-efficacy, women being looked over for career advancement opportunities, and systemic differences in how women are perceived in the workplace. Mentorship programs for women that are encouraged and implemented within agencies are a

potential solution to these problems as they provide the resources necessary to help put women on equal footing with their male counterparts.

The solution is beyond merely instituting a mentorship program, but to institute a successful mentorship program. To have a successful program, care must be taken in developing a robust procedure that supports women beyond just assigning a mentor and then moving on without follow-through. Care must be taken by both the organization and the participants to engage with the program fully and provide adequate contact development, training, and leadership opportunities.

Proper mentoring programs have the potential to help to advance women in the workplace all together. With more women in senior leadership positions acting as role models, other women may be inspired to pursue their own leadership roles and career advancements. Through mutual support and appropriate resources, women can advance into the positions they deserve to occupy.

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