

Equity-minded mentorship in not-for-profit and association management

When “good intentions” aren’t enough

Many mentoring programs in our sector grow informally: a senior leader takes a “promising” younger person under their wing; board members “coach” new directors; experienced volunteers guide emerging ones. These relationships can be generous and meaningful. They can also quietly reproduce the same patterns we see everywhere else:

- Mentees selected because they “fit the culture,” not because they bring different lived experience.
- Mentors positioned as experts and saviours, with little attention to power, identity, or bias.
- Invisible barriers for Black, Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, disabled, and newcomer leaders, who are often over-mentored and under-sponsored.
- No data on who is actually being supported and who remains on the margins.

Goodwill is not the problem. The problem is when goodwill is the *only* design principle.

What makes mentorship equity-minded?

Equity-minded mentorship is not a brand-new model; it is a way of doing mentoring that explicitly names and addresses inequity, power, and systems. A few core commitments:

1. **Conscious of power and identity.**

Mentors and mentees talk openly about how race, gender, class, disability, age, and role shape their experiences and access. They acknowledge that the playing field is not level and that “advice” that ignores this can do harm.

2. **Centred on the mentee’s goals and context.**

Instead of preparing mentees to fit existing norms, equity-minded mentoring supports them to define success on their own terms and navigate or transform systems—not just accommodate to them.

3. **Mutual learning, not one-way help.**

The mentor brings experience and networks; the mentee brings lived experience and insight

into how policies, culture, and power are actually working. Both commit to listening and change.

4. **Linked to structural change.**

The relationship is connected to concrete shifts: more equitable recruitment and promotion, better board pipelines, stronger voice for under-represented groups, changes in policy and culture—not just “personal growth.”

Practical design moves for non-profits and associations

You don’t need a huge budget to make mentoring more equitable. You do need to be intentional. Here are practical shifts you can implement over a planning cycle.

1. Clarify purpose through an equity lens

Move from vague goals (“support emerging leaders”) to explicit ones, for example:

- Increase leadership pathways for [specific under-represented groups] in staff, board, and volunteer roles.
- Reduce barriers and isolation for equity-deserving leaders in our association’s membership.
- Build two-way learning about how our policies and culture impact people differently.

Write these purposes down. Use them to guide design decisions—and later, evaluation.

2. Rethink who mentors whom (and how)

- **Broaden the mentor pool.** Include leaders from equity-deserving communities, mid-level managers, and community leaders—not only senior executives or board chairs.
- **Avoid “onlys.”** Don’t expect the one racialized or disabled leader to mentor everyone with similar identities. Spread the load, and compensate where appropriate.
- **Support peer and group mentoring.** Triads or small groups can flatten hierarchies, distribute power, and reduce dependence on one gatekeeper relationship.

3. Build equity into intake and matching

Move beyond “chemistry” and “fit,” which usually mean “like me.” Practical steps:

- Ask mentees about their goals, access needs, and what safety looks like.

- Ask mentors what identities and experiences they feel equipped to support—and where they need learning.
- Consider power dynamics: pairing someone with their direct supervisor may not be ideal for honest conversations about bias or culture.
- Intentionally create some cross-difference matches (e.g., senior leaders paired with early-career leaders whose lived experience differs significantly), *with* training and support.

4. Use shared agreements that name power and boundaries

Co-create a short mentoring agreement at the first meeting. Include:

- Purpose of the relationship and what success would look like for the mentee.
- How you'll meet (frequency, format) and how you'll give each other feedback.
- Confidentiality and its limits.
- How you'll address harm, microaggressions, or discomfort if they arise.
- A reminder that the mentee is not responsible for educating the mentor about all aspects of their identity.

This makes equity part of the *container*, not an awkward side-conversation.

5. Train mentors to be equity-minded

Offer a brief orientation that covers:

- Listening to understand versus “fixing.”
- Recognizing and naming bias (including your own).
- Asking good questions about systems, not just individual choices.
- How to use your influence to sponsor mentees—opening doors, not just giving advice.
- Responding when you get something wrong: how to apologize, repair, and learn.

Even 60–90 minutes of focused preparation can significantly change the quality of the mentoring.

6. Connect mentoring to real opportunities

Equity-minded mentorship should lead to more than conversations. Examples:

- Invite mentees to observe or co-present at a board meeting, committee, or conference session.

- Include mentees on working groups where decisions are made.
- Recommend mentees for stretch projects, interim roles, or committees.
- In associations, nominate mentees for chapter leadership, task forces, or speaking slots.

Ask mentors explicitly: “What doors can you reasonably and ethically open for this person?”

7. Collect data that shows who is benefiting

Keep the data light but meaningful:

- Track who participates (role, gender, race/ethnicity where appropriate and safe, disability, age range, location).
- Ask a few outcome questions:
 - “I feel a stronger sense of belonging in this organization/association.”
 - “I can see a path into leadership here.”
 - “My mentor helped me navigate barriers related to my identity or context.”
- Disaggregate results. If certain groups report lower benefit or don’t participate, that’s a signal to adjust design, outreach, or supports.

8. Close the loop between mentoring and organizational change

Equity-minded mentoring should become a feedback channel into your systems:

- Create a de-identified “learning log” for mentors and program leads: What patterns are mentees naming about culture, policy, or practice?
- Share themes (not individual stories) with leadership and boards: e.g., barriers in hiring, microaggressions in meetings, inaccessible processes, unclear pathways.
- Use those insights to inform policy changes, training priorities, governance reforms, and strategic planning.

This is where equity-minded mentorship stops being a nice add-on and starts acting as a lever for structural change.