



Generating Routes for Women's Leadership Project (GROWL)

GROWL Enquiry Tool 3/6

**Mentoring and Sponsoring to
Generate Routes for Women's Leadership**

ADVICE

GUIDANCE

GROWL is Manchester Metropolitan University's Toolkit of Enquiry Tools, an Ideas Bank and a Network that supports organisations to engage with research evidence to Generate Routes for Women's Leadership.

We are taking research evidence out to organisations to create a dialogue about how they can Generate Routes for Women's Leadership (GROWL). Our approach involves supporting you to draw on five GROWL Enquiry Tools, a GROWL Ideas Bank of 'better practice' and a GROWL Network to reflect on your context and Generate Routes for Women's Leadership that fit with your organisation. We are learning about engagement as we go and invite you to learn with us and our network.





Mentoring and Sponsoring to Generate Routes for Women's Leadership

Summary

- Women in leadership roles consistently cite mentoring and sponsoring relationships as key to their career success. There has been a lot of focus on mentoring but this may not be gender sensitive or transformative. Women are also under-sponsored.
- To develop diverse leadership, organisations need to think creatively about how mentoring and sponsoring can support or subvert the challenges women face in navigating their leadership pathways, and how organisational structures and institutional practices can create conditions to embed more transformative mentoring and sponsoring for women.

Stretching the Comfort Zone – Pushing the Boundaries

- Well-intentioned mentoring and sponsoring relationships may perpetuate the idea that women need to be 'fixed' to fit into masculine workplaces, or even supra-perform in comparison to men, rather than challenging gendered stereotypes and structures.
- By making space to hear women's stories, mentors and sponsors can reflect on their own preconceptions and behaviour and the organisational practices that disrupt women's routes to leadership. This may subsequently encourage mentors and sponsors to adopt the identity of *'Tempered Radical'*, someone who works from within organisations to advocate for change to create better routes for women's leadership.

Innovating Mentoring and Sponsoring to Generate Routes for Women's Leadership

- Research has shown that mentoring and sponsoring can be particularly beneficial at certain times in life courses but at these times women are less likely to be visible as 'rising stars' and so may miss out on informal support.
- There are complex interactions between the sex of mentors and mentees, with various dynamics for your organisation to consider.
- Mentors or sponsors could provide targeted support for returners, women pursuing career advancement while working flexibly or part-time, women juggling senior roles with demanding care responsibilities or women working under their potential. Such interventions would enable organisations to innovate rather than just reproduce themselves through mentoring and sponsorship.

Why Mentoring and Sponsoring are Key to Generating Routes for Women's Leadership

What are Mentoring and Sponsoring?

'A mentor talks with you and a sponsor talks about you' (Catalyst, 2014).

Mentoring

Kathy Kram's seminal work on mentoring at work in the 1980s paved the way for years of research and professional development aimed at supporting career advancement and personal development.

Mentoring is a relationship between a more senior and experienced (often older) mentor and a less experienced (often younger) mentee. While the emphasis is on supporting the mentee, there is considerable evidence that both parties can gain from the relationship.

More recently, new and innovative forms of mentoring have emerged including e-mentoring (conducted virtually) and reverse mentoring (where the older or more senior employee is the mentee and they are mentored to develop skills such as using social media).

Dispute surrounding the exact definition of mentoring has led researchers to focus in on the functions that characterise a mentoring relationship. Kram (1985) identified two broad categories:

- **Career functions** are those that influence professional advancement by helping mentees learn how to work within the system, develop capability, handle organizational politics, gain exposure within their organisational environment and obtain promotion.
- **Psychosocial functions** develop a mentee's sense of competence and self-confidence and are achieved through practices such as role modelling and supportive listening.

Organisations have attempted to replicate the benefits of informal mentoring by implementing formal programmes.

The distinction between informal and formal mentoring is important because there are fundamental differences in the context, process and outcomes of these relationships.

Formal relationships develop with organizational assistance and adhere to organisational needs. They tend to be shorter in duration and are more visible.

In contrast, informal mentoring is not always recognized or articulated as a mentoring relationship by both members and it is not usually focused on, or embedded in, organizational goals and processes.

Mentoring facilitates career progression and personal growth in a developing career

Coaching

The terms mentoring and coaching are often used interchangeably but research shows that it's important to be aware of the differences.

Coaching can be performed as a discrete intervention focused on skill development in the here and now, or as part of a mentoring relationship that is also concerned with longer-term career development

Sponsoring

Although mentors may at times display elements of sponsoring, sponsors go beyond the traditional career and psychosocial support provided by mentors. Sponsorship has been described as active support by someone with a powerful position who is willing to use some of their influence and reputation to champion the career

advancement of a sponsored individual (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Research evidence suggests that whilst women enjoy mentoring relationships and it enables career development, they **need** sponsorship to accelerate career progression.

Sponsoring is intentionally utilising influence to help others advance

Incorporating strategically developed mentoring and sponsoring in a framework that seeks to generate routes for women's leadership is powerful because:

1. Women are too often excluded from informal and formal mentoring and sponsoring relationships.
2. Mentoring can empower women to successfully navigate the extra career challenges they commonly face, not due to situations of their own making but due to gendered workplace and family contexts.
3. Through mentoring up-and-coming women, senior leaders are made more aware of the additional challenges women still face in developing their careers and are often motivated to create more inclusive workplaces.



Girling the Girl and Manning the Workplace

Both culture and social structures are at work in creating slower and truncated routes to leadership for women. **These social processes create contexts that are not of an individual woman's making but which they must, nevertheless, navigate to achieve career progression.**

From childhood, girls are still given gendered messages about the kinds of jobs they should pursue (not IT or construction, for example), how they should behave (e.g. caringly, not assertively) and the clubs they belong to (not the rugby or cricket clique).

Women also face very strong expectations that they will take the lead role in domestic work, childcare and eldercare and that their competence as a woman will be judged by these roles and their feminine appearance.

Male partners and the state have been slow to respond to women's increased uptake of paid work with more support in managing domestic and care responsibilities.

Women face a double burden of work, or know that this prospect is on the horizon. At the same time, organisations tend to value and reward jobs, behaviours and appearances more typically demonstrated by men and equate leadership with willingness to prioritise work over family.

Women navigating organisations and careers do not require mentoring and sponsorship because they are inherently deficient but because they face a context that is less favourable to them than men, with socialised ideas about themselves, gendered power play and a double burden of work. They face real dilemmas about 'how to get on' that are of society's making, not their own.

Dilemmas include:

- When (if ever) should they take up the behaviours of men?
- When can they act as pioneers in demonstrating that productive leadership can be flexible and feminine?

Mentoring and sponsoring targeted at women ensures they have the same access to career progression as men. It also has the potential to enable women to craft leadership pathways through identities, responsibilities and contexts that are gendered and to change those contexts.

► **Enquire: First, work out what data you have on formal mentoring programmes and how you might collect data about informal mentoring in order to track whether women have the same access to mentoring as men.**

Second, discuss with your senior team how an empowering mentoring and sponsoring programme could enable women to excel in leadership pathways by equipping them with increased skills to navigate gendered conditions.

Stretching The Comfort Zone – Pushing The Boundaries

How Does Mentoring/Sponsoring Support or Subvert the Challenges Facing Many Women in their Routes to Leadership?

Through the course of the mentoring relationship, mentees hear about their mentor's experiences, and benefits from their wisdom.

Mentors share their triumphs and disappointments and help the mentee to develop resilience at work. In doing so, mentors expose mentees to appropriate leadership norms and teach them how to survive and progress in the corporate environment.

The nature of this interaction is complex and mentoring research has some way to go to understand it more thoroughly.

Is Gender the Elephant in the Room?

The messages that female mentees either consciously or subconsciously receive and internalise through the mentoring interaction can raise challenges for women developing their leadership identities.

Considerable research highlights a lack of congruence in the value placed on the skills and attributes that men and women more typically bring to the workplace.

If, for example, female mentees receive messages from mentors that leadership is done in a stereotypically masculine way, and that career progress depends on adopting those behaviours, they may feel their career prospects depend on adapting to the dominant masculine norm or feel excluded from the leadership pipeline.

Similarly, if women receive messages during the mentoring relationship that synchronising organisational needs and family life is problematic (e.g. they learn that the organisation is not amenable to promoting people who work flexibly or part-time), they may be discouraged from pursuing leadership careers.

In this respect, well-intentioned mentoring relationships may serve to perpetuate the narrative that women need to be 'fixed' to progress, or even supra-perform in comparison to men, rather than challenging underlying gendered stereotypes and structures.

- **Enquire: Have an open conversation with informal/formal mentors in your organisation about how far their mentoring or sponsorship is focused on shaping staff to traditional expectations and roles, leaving gender as the elephant in the room that goes unaddressed.**

Stretching The Comfort Zone – Pushing The Boundaries (continued)

Gendering: The Mentor's Dilemma?

Mentors who recognise the workplace and family challenges experienced by many women in navigating their routes to leadership may find themselves in a dilemma if they are required to prepare mentees to perform to organisational expectations. This dilemma may be more apparent in some formal mentoring relationships where a specific organisational outcome is expected from the mentee such as long work hours or linear pursuit of promotion.

The mentor's dilemma creates a space in which a mentor may be motivated to challenge the status-quo and unpick discriminatory ideas. Both the academic and practitioner literature tells us that mentoring is not a one-way-street and that mentors as well as mentees learn from the relationship (Woolnough and Fielden, 2017).

By making space to hear women's stories, mentors can reflect on their own preconceptions and behaviour and the organisational practices that disrupt women's routes to leadership. This may encourage mentors to adopt the identity of '*Tempered Radical*' (Meyerson, 2001): someone who works from within organisations to advocate for change to create better routes for women's leadership.

For example, a mentor may work within the mentoring relationship to empower a woman to overcome her own internalisation of stereotypical preconceptions that disadvantage women. And, through sponsoring, they may convey the message that their mentee, and other women, have powerful support.

They may also tackle stereotypical ideas where they encounter them and coach a woman in how to deal with negative power play.

Such Tempered Radicalism has significant potential to effect change, particularly at times in the life course when women are vulnerable to being stereotyped, such as when they are young or have become mothers.

Crucially, mentors require *safe organisational systems* in which to practice their Tempered Radicalism. Equal opportunity policies provide a bedrock on which a practice of consistent, quiet challenge can be advanced.

Ideally, mentors should witness Tempered Radicalism among their senior executives so that creating spaces for mentees to flourish becomes normal and embedded.

- **Enquire: Discuss the identity of Tempered Radical with your senior team. How motivated are they to become more visible in generating routes for women's leadership by mentoring and sponsoring women and shaping a workplace culture that empowers mentors as change agents?**

Making Safe Spaces for Women's Voices

It is worth highlighting that making space to hear women's stories requires a commitment to providing a safe environment in which female mentees feel able to engage in open and honest discussion about the challenges they face, without fear of career penalty.

This requires confidentiality and trust within relationships. Without this, mentees are likely to hold back and provide only 'edited disclosure' of the challenges they face. Research points to the way in which

authentic leaders are positive and genuine, value input from others and promote openness. Perhaps it is when mentors exhibit and champion authentic leadership that female mentees are empowered to speak freely.

Equally, however, we must reflect carefully on whether our organisations are ready to hear about gendered challenges before we ask individual women to risk sharing their experiences.

- **Enquire: Work with mentors and mentees to develop a 'contract' for mentoring that will enable confidential and frank exchange. Should your mentors be out-of-line-management or from a different division or organisation, for example, or are your divisions ready to respond to women's experiences? Should sponsors be within-division to enable influence but exposed to fewer of the challenges women face to protect women from the risks of disclosure?**
- **Enquire: Develop your mentoring programme with authenticity in mind – how do you create a relationship close to the intimacy of informal mentoring in your formal programme?**



Who Gets a Mentor or Sponsor?

Rising Stars or Invisible

The 'rising star hypothesis' suggests that individuals who are noticed as demonstrating motivation and leadership ability are more likely to attract mentors (Singh et al., 2009). Sponsors, too, will only champion people excelling at work and who they are confident will continue to do so.

Considerable research evidence highlights that women have less opportunity to showcase their talents – for example, women are less likely than men to be offered challenging or high-profile assignments or to be acknowledged for their ideas. If women fall under the radar, they may not be selected by mentors. Research also tells us that women who self-promote are often viewed less positively than those who demonstrate more stereotypically feminine characteristics such as modesty.

Women can face a double-bind of needing to demonstrate ambition and likeability. Change to organisational culture is required to ensure their attempts to become visible do not backfire.

- **Enquire: Discuss with your senior team how you know who is and isn't accessing mentoring/sponsoring in your organisation and who is ready for mentoring and sponsorship. What kind of monitoring/evaluation could you do, and what targets can you set, to explore this further through hard data and to make opportunity more inclusive?**
- **Enquire: As a mentor, can you reflect on what motivates you to deliver support and whom you agree to mentor or sponsor? Do you inadvertently overlook some women because you focus on the more visible 'rising stars'?**

Why You Need A Formal Mentoring/ Sponsoring Programme To Ensure Women Are Fairly Included

The process of consciously or unconsciously gravitating towards and favouring people like yourself disadvantages women because senior leaders (and therefore potential mentors/sponsors) are more likely to be men.

Moreover, senior leaders are most likely to be white, middle-class men.

Women from different ethnic backgrounds and classes are very unlikely to attract an informal mentor who selects their

'prodigy' through the process of homosocial reproduction.

Mentoring researchers argue that reliance on professional growth and progression through informal practices can serve to perpetuate the status-quo.

Consequently, they recommend investment in formal mentoring and sponsoring arrangements that can promote diverse and inclusive leadership pathways.

Does the Gender Composition of the Mentoring Relationship Make A Difference to Women?

Research evidence suggests complex interactions between the sex of mentors and mentees, with various dynamics for you to consider:

1. Some research suggests that women should have female mentors because they are likely to have shared understandings of the issues women face – and that women gain strength from talking with other women who are further along. There is also evidence that women mentors give more psychosocial support than men.
2. As there are relatively few women in ‘further along’ positions, women mentors are relatively scarce (particularly in male dominated careers) – so we cannot limit the supply of mentors for women to women.
3. There is evidence that male mentors tend to provide more career related resources in their mentoring. Male sponsors may also be more senior and so better positioned to sponsor women along leadership career pathways and to change conditions that hold women back.
4. Women are often better placed to access male mentors within formal programmes as these make them visible and legitimise cross-gender relationships, helping to negate potentially damaging sexual innuendos.

Ultimately, matching mentors and mentees is a sensitive business that must relate to the needs of specific mentees.

Some women, at certain points in the career life course, may favour a female mentor or sponsor for the camaraderie and psychosocial support this fosters. At another time, a woman may welcome the legitimacy and advice of a male sponsor or mentor.

And let's not stereotype. Mentor and sponsor practices will vary, regardless of sex. Through *gender sensitive training*, mentors can also develop psychosocial *and* career support practices, and apply these with insight.

Should Women Have a Mentor or Sponsor, or Both, and When?

Despite the problems with accessing mentors as indicated by some literature, it has been suggested that one of the causes of leakiness in the leadership pipeline is that women are over-mentored and under-sponsored (Hewlett, 2013).

Even when organisations invest considerable time and resources in mentoring and other developmental opportunities, they continue to see women exit, particularly at mid-to-senior levels.

According to research, that's because women are not actively sponsored in the same way as men, particularly as they reach higher levels in the leadership hierarchy.

Women need sponsors who may or may not also be mentors, particularly to break through the upper glass ceiling.

➤ **Enquire: To what extent are women mentored but not sponsored in your organisation and who are you sponsoring to enter the highest echelons of leadership?**

Who Gets a Mentor or Sponsor? (continued)

Mentoring and Sponsoring Through Gendered Transitions and Challenges

Most people, particularly women, don't relentlessly progress the career ladder via full-time work. Modern careers include dips, plateaus and breaks.

As women are still doing more domestic and care work than men, they are more likely to experience ebbs and flows in their careers. That is why some people don't like the analogy of the 'leaky pipeline' of female talent.

In the GROWL project we use the idea of pathways to leadership that occur across career, organisation and family life courses. We deliberately use the plural 'pathways' to indicate that there are various ways of developing a career.

Research has shown that mentoring and sponsoring can be particularly beneficial at certain times in life courses. For example, when starting out, experiencing transitions and seeking to break into a senior role.

Innovative forms of targeted mentoring are emerging. For example maternity mentoring or coaching. Mentors or sponsors could also support returners, women pursuing career advancement while working flexibly or part-time and women juggling senior roles with demanding care responsibilities.

These interventions would defy the norm of providing mentoring and sponsorship to 'rising stars' who resemble the (male, white) leaders who went before them, *enabling organisations to innovate rather than just reproduce themselves*.

- **Enquire:** Discuss with senior teams how career breaks and flexible working patterns influence access to, and experience of, mentoring and sponsoring. Perhaps you could have a programme targeted to support talented women working flexibly or under their true potential?

PLEASE HELP US BUILD THE GROWL IDEAS BANK

Do you have a 'better practice' idea that relates to one of our GROWL themes?

Please get in touch so we can add it to the GROWL Ideas Bank and share it with the GROWL Network!

Just drop an email to Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk to get started.

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References to research are published on our website at www.mmu.ac.uk/growl.

GROWL is led by Professor Julia Rouse, Dr Helen Woolnough and the Sylvia Pankhurst Gender Research Centre at Manchester Metropolitan University. It is sponsored by Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor Julia Clarke, and the Governing Body.

GROWL is passionately supported by Northern Power Women and advised by academics and practitioners.



(From left to right) GROWL project leaders Dr Helen Woolnough and Professor Julia Rouse are joined by Lindsey Watkin, Associate Head of the Department of Management at Manchester Met Business School, at the Northern Power Women Conference 2017.

We are interested in researching all issues covered by GROWL and the process of engagement. Get in touch to talk about commissioning research or consultancy in your organisation by emailing Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk.

To join the Network, find out more about the rest of the Enquiry Tools, and contribute to the Ideas Bank, please email Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk

For more information on GROWL, visit our website at www.mmu.ac.uk/growl.

