

# Toward a More Expansive View of Mentoring

► **Yesim Richardson, president of Cornerstone Research, and Lisa Claussen-Adams, the firm's senior talent advisor, explore the ins and outs of mentorship and break down the concept itself into four separate behaviors that allow for effective mentoring.**

Mentoring has increasingly been recognized as a critical ingredient of success in many endeavors in individuals' lives. In many instances, however, mentoring tends to be depicted as a relationship where a senior leader takes a junior professional under their wing and imparts the "formula" for success. Thus, mentoring programs often focus on pairing each junior employee with one senior person who is designated as their mentor.

Our firm's mentor surveys and interviews indicate that while such pairings can lead to desired outcomes, investing in building and maintaining a more expansive view of mentoring is likely to be even more effective. Cultivating a shared understanding that each individual can be an effective mentor in their area(s) of comparative strength encourages long-term mentoring relationships that emerge and evolve organically, and enables an organization to make the most of its mentoring resources.

While there is widespread consensus that mentoring is critical to the long-term success of an organization, defining mentoring is more challenging than it seems at first glance. When asked, each of our firm's leaders defined it slightly differently, as a "process," "form of leadership," "opportunity," "mindset," "set of actions," or "ability," among other things. Realizing all of these responses are valid, we find it helpful to focus not on what mentoring is but rather on the behaviors that are involved in effective mentoring. We organized our approach by segmenting mentoring into four distinct elements—feedback, opportunity creation, connections and counsel, and role modeling. We discuss each of these in turn, including specific

recommendations for both mentors and mentees from our mentor surveys and interviews.

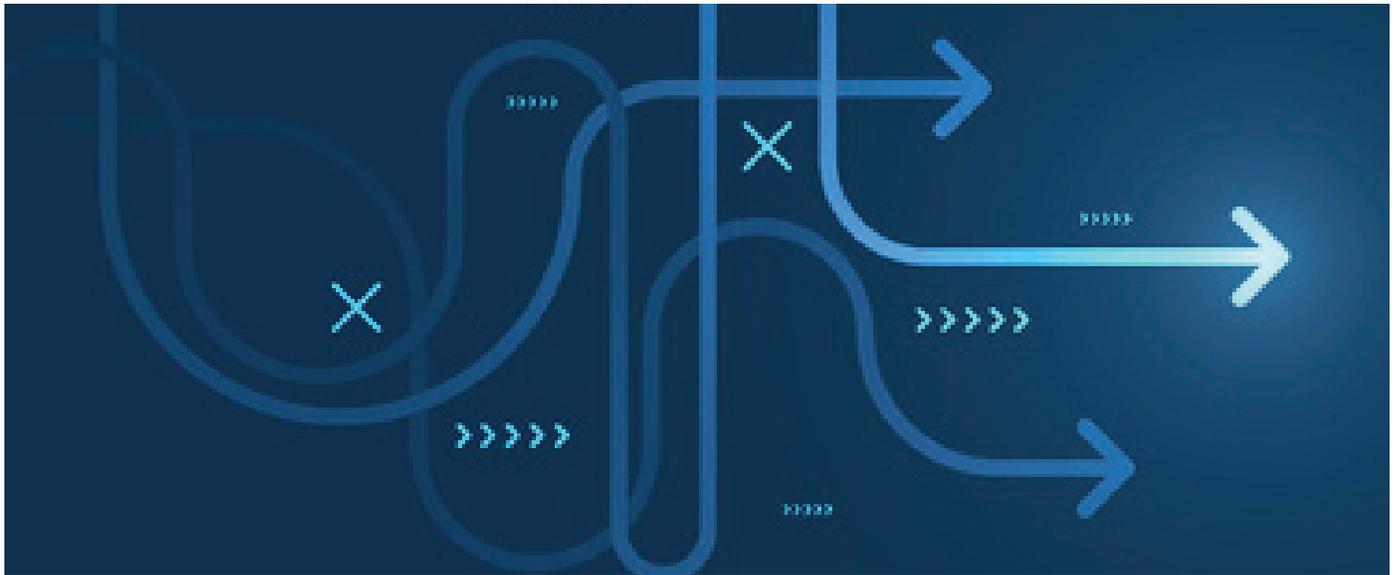
## Feedback

Mentors play a critical role in recognizing positive contributions, offering specific coaching on work-product or delivery, and providing direct, clear, and actionable feedback to mentees. Assigned evaluator roles for performance review purposes can be the basis for mentoring relationships to take hold. However, our data indicate that the most effective mentor relationships are not based on an assigned evaluator role. Many of our survey participants indicated that working together on projects provided the best opportunity for feedback. To take advantage of that opportunity, a mentor should "give real-time feedback, discussing what is the best way to handle a given situation and why."

## Opportunity Creation

In developing future leaders, it becomes increasingly important for mentors to proactively identify opportunities that not only enable the firm to serve its clients or customers in the best possible way but also align with mentees' career plans and create "stretch roles" to accelerate their career development. It is valuable to "be explicit when you are providing an opportunity to an individual. For example, when you would like to staff an individual on a project that will help them develop expertise in given area, don't just ask them to work on the project—explain why this is an opportunity." Mentees benefit greatly from a targeted approach to opportunity creation: "Think of providing specific opportunities to specific people ... for example, staff individuals on repeat projects with the same clients so that they can develop client relationships."

Mentors should not see their role as limited to personally offering opportunities to mentees but rather take a broader perspective. For example, they should "watch out for opportunities for their mentees, inform them of opportunities



they may not be aware of (because mentors have a more firm-wide view than mentees), and make the connections they may need to take advantage of such opportunities.” Mentees have to share this responsibility, in part by being specific about what opportunities they are interested in, such as opportunities involving a particular topic, a stretch role, or a particular client. This allows the request to have “the benefit of triggering a memory when an opportunity arises, rather than leaving it to chance for a mentor to make the connection.”

Effective opportunity creation can also take the form of the mentor sharing their network with the mentee, making introductions, and/or creating visibility for others who do not have exposure to the mentee. Mentors should “help others around the organization get to know their mentees, their strengths and their contributions.”

Mentees should “ask their mentors for ideas and help in creating connections to other potential mentors.” In this context, the emphasis on the importance of female-to-female mentoring represented the only discernable dis-

tinction in comments we received from female and male participants in our mentor surveys and interviews. As one female survey participant commented: “I need female mentors to ask about things such as how to assert myself while being genuine.”

### **Connections and Counsel**

Mentees often seek information about how to navigate the organization and career development in general, or a complicated situation in particular. Acting as a thought partner in providing career counsel that is both specific to the individual and actionable is critical to the development of future leaders: “Rooting for an individual and helping them with specific problems is great, but not sufficient. Your mentees also need partnering to help them think through their career goals and how to achieve those goals.”

In addition, mentors should “remember that just telling mentees the variety of things they can do to advance in their careers is not sufficient. Mentees need help figuring out how to prioritize the various things they can do. Mentors

---

should ask questions that identify areas where their mentees ‘don’t know what they don’t know.’ They should share what they can to demystify how things work, with a client or expert, within the firm, or within our industry.”

This involves “recognizing and sharing patterns mentees may not see. One of the benefits of experience is pattern recognition. Often, the things mentors take for granted due to experience are very illuminating when shared with mentees who have less experience.” As a corollary, mentees “should be specific in asking questions that mentors can react to, as opposed to broad questions like ‘what should I do with my career?’, which is hard to respond to in a meaningful way.”

### **Role Modeling**

Role modeling as a mentor is most effective when it goes beyond leading by example. In its most complete form, role modeling includes actively mentoring future mentors, rather than assuming that mentees will naturally invest time in mentoring others. Senior leaders can explicitly ask those in managerial roles to “talk to their team members who have management responsibilities about expectations and strategies for mentoring on teams.” Leaders can “create a culture of accountability for mentoring on teams by regularly asking about how team members are doing and how the team can be effective together in developing each other.”

In addition, one of the most powerful levers for effective mentoring—and one that can be used without much incremental investment of time—is providing opportunities for mentees to learn through observation or osmosis. A quick follow-through that makes the observation explicit is all that is required. For example, “after a client call or meeting, take a few minutes to explain why you handled things as you did to enable your mentees to learn how to serve the client in the best way possible so that they can benefit from the wisdom you have developed through experience.” In parallel, mentees should “identify the opportunities to learn through osmosis and recognize that as an opening.

When you observe something you want to emulate, ask the mentor how they thought about it, prepared, and learned how to become skilled at the behavior you observed. When you have gained insight from observing a behavior, acknowledge the value and describe why it was helpful. This will encourage mentors to be more explicit in the future.”

It is rare for any one mentor to be equally adept across the four elements discussed above. As one survey participant suggested, “The bottom line is that mentoring is not a one size fits all. We should all ‘mentor’ in a way that is natural and comfortable—and perhaps stretch a little beyond that.” This suggests that a single mentor will rarely be able to fulfill a mentee’s needs across all four elements. The experience of another survey participant highlights the importance of cultivating a network of mentors with different experiences and styles who each excel at different elements of mentoring:

“I’ve had multiple excellent mentors. For example, I learned a lot about the nature of our work from Alice. Being in the room and watching her interact with clients has been extremely helpful. Also, she thinks aloud and it was very helpful to learn how she thinks. But Alice is not a good business development mentor. She says “just go have lunches.” She’s not helpful to me about how to navigate the firm, who I should be connected to, and how to most effectively connect with them. Bob is great at that. He tells me the specific things I can do. He thinks a lot in advance, then provides clear direction and targeted advice about next steps.”

The recognition that different people excel at different elements of mentoring prevents viewing individuals as either categorically strong or categorically weak mentors. Instead, it allows an organization to make the most of the comparative strengths of each individual, expanding overall mentoring capacity and the pool of potential mentor relationships.

Segmenting mentoring elements into four discrete areas is not the only way to broaden the available set of connections. Our mentor surveys and interviews also highlight

---

the importance of peer and “reverse” mentoring relationships. Connections among peers are critical to integrating new staff and creating a sense of shared affiliation with the firm, which supports retention. We see enormous value accruing to those who “initiate and maintain peer mentoring relationships; building trust-based relationships with colleagues who have similar experiences benefits their careers in the short and long term.”

“Reverse” mentoring refers to instances where someone more senior identifies a mentor who is less senior to them. Senior leaders of our firm often identify reverse mentors as part of their mentor network and suggest that input from junior colleagues enables them to become better leaders.

Cultivating a well-established mentor-mentee relationship requires mutual awareness of the connection as a precursor to commitment by both parties. While our surveys show extensive mentor relationships identified by both mentors and mentees, the connections are not consistently named as such by both parties. We refer to instances where an individual identifies someone as a mentee and the mentee identifies the individual as a mentor as a “matched pair.” However, we also find a substantial incidence of “unmatched pairs,” suggesting that all too often, the connection between a mentor and mentee is left unstated. This may be in part because not every individual views mentoring in the broad terms described above. Especially in those situations, both mentor and mentee would benefit greatly from a shared understanding of available mentoring opportunities.

The solution is simple, but often will not happen without being prompted. Mentors should tell mentees that they see them as a mentee, explain why, and share how they can act as a mentor, which may include things the mentor has already been doing on the mentee’s behalf, but did not naturally think to share. Similarly, mentees should explic-

itly tell mentors that they see them as a mentor, explain why, and indicate which specific elements of mentoring they would appreciate mentoring from them.

In sum, focusing on cultivating a network of mentors who play different roles based on natural strengths and expanding our view of who can be a mentor is likely to be much more effective in realizing our highest potential, for both developing people and building firms with strong mentoring cultures.

---

Note: The quotes used in this article have been redacted to preserve anonymity and edited for clarity. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors, who are responsible for the content, and do not necessarily represent the views of Cornerstone Research.



**Yesim Richardson** is the president of Cornerstone Research. Dr. Richardson has worked with clients in a variety of financial sectors as well as other industries, such as energy, telecommunications, high technology, and pharmaceuticals. She is the former head of the firm’s financial institutions practice. Reach her at [yrichardson@cornerstone.com](mailto:yrichardson@cornerstone.com).



**Lisa Claussen-Adams** is the senior talent advisor for Cornerstone Research. In her role, she advises the talent strategy for the firm across the career life cycle, including recruiting, training, professional development, performance, and compensation. Reach her at [lclaussen@cornerstone.com](mailto:lclaussen@cornerstone.com).

---