

NCWIT Mentoring-in-a-Box: Technical Women at Work

Mentoring Basics - A Mentor's Guide to Success

Prepare for mentoring by learning more about mentoring and the qualities and activities of a mentor. Learn why technical women need mentors, and how to find a promising protégée. Find out how you benefit from the mentoring relationship, and learn basic Do's and Don'ts of mentoring.

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a process through which an individual offers professional expertise as well as support to a less experienced colleague. A mentor serves as a teacher, counselor, and advocate to a protégée. Mentoring results in a mutually beneficial professional relationship over time.

The intent of mentoring is not to remediate weak performance, but rather to shape a career that shows promise. Remind yourself and those who ask that mentoring is an opportunity to give back to the company and the industry by teaching the next generation of leaders and innovators.

What Does a Mentor Do?

A mentor works on two levels, both supporting the protégée in meeting essential job duties and helping her envision and take steps toward the career she desires.

A mentor combines instruction in professional behavior and tasks with affective support.

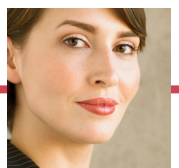
A mentor may fulfill all or a combination of roles. The mentor:

- Advocates – Offers sponsorship, provides exposure and visibility within the organization.
- Acquires resources – Brings critical readings, opportunities, or experiences to the attention of the protégée.
- Acts as a role model – Offers insight on how he or she “made it” in the organization.
- Advises – Shares institutional and professional wisdom, critiques performance, makes suggestions.
- Coaches – Helps a protégée learn new skills and practice new behaviors.
- Protects – Helps a protégée find new and challenging opportunities within the organization while protecting her from adverse forces and “dead-end” job assignments.
- Supports – Listens with a sympathetic ear, explains unwritten rules, and acknowledges disappointments and triumphs.

Why Should I Mentor?

It makes business sense. The demand for skilled IT professionals has been growing steadily since 2000. Companies cannot afford to lose their top talent. Mentoring is crucial to a company's ability to remain competitive by retaining and promoting their best employees. Research shows that mentoring leads to higher job satisfaction, career advancement, work success, and future compensation. Employees who are mentored are less likely to leave the organization.

Mentoring also plays a powerful role in getting young employees up to speed on the organizational culture, accelerating their integration into the organization and enhancing their effectiveness.



You will reap leadership and career rewards.

- Mentoring younger protégées opens up new informal networks across functional units and departments, enhancing your visibility within the organization. Through their relationship with protégées, mentors may obtain new work and organizational information.
- Young technology employees are likely to be more in touch with new and upcoming technology. Mentoring provides you a window on what is on the mind of the younger generation in terms of new products, innovation, and work aspirations. Some companies have recognized this benefit and are actively engaging their executives in relationships with younger employees.
- Mentors experience learning benefits from reflecting on how they got to their current position and articulating the vision of what they want next from their careers.
- Through mentoring you help your organization strengthen its workforce. It is worth noting your contribution during your own performance review.
- Mentors gain valuable interpersonal communication skills through the process of mentoring.

You will experience personal rewards. Many mentors, at the top of their professional careers, find an increased sense of purpose through giving back through mentoring and establishing a legacy as leaders. Mentors also report feeling rejuvenated and energized through interacting with their younger colleagues.

The rewards are worth the investment. Contrary to popular belief, mentoring does not require a disproportionate investment. Research shows that people who become mentors report significant benefits and few costs. Mentoring comes in many forms. If you cannot commit to frequent formal meetings, you can still be a mentor by agreeing to be available for more informal and ad-hoc guidance sessions.

Why Mentor a Technical Woman? Because of sparse representation of women at the higher echelons, women in technology lack ready access to role models and mentors, and they tend to be excluded from informal networks that are critical to career advancement. Lack of access to mentors for women results in reduced effectiveness, work dissatisfaction, and missed organizational talent.

Mentoring has been recognized as an effective practice to increase the representation of women in technology, and mentoring programs have been successfully implemented by leading technology firms.

Who Should Be a Mentor?

Any woman or man in a position of responsibility or influence may be the right mentor for a technical woman. It is important that a mentor be committed to leveraging the talent and furthering the career of protégées. A good mentor:

- Recognizes how a diverse workforce enriches the organization's "gene pool" from which creativity and innovation spring.
- Is aware that women in technology face additional barriers to advancement and is dedicated to further breaking down these barriers.

Whom Shall I Mentor?

Consider these different circumstances or opportunities when identifying your protégée. She may be:

- Someone who asks for your help – An individual may ask you to be their mentor, but more likely, she will request your help on a project or ask you to explain an organizational process. Capitalize on her initiative and discuss how consistent mentoring may help her in significant ways.
- Someone within or beyond your work group – A promising protégée might be in a cubicle nearby or in another work group or building. Ask colleagues, human resources staff, or managers who might benefit from mentoring. You should not be in this person's direct management hierarchy (for example, the protégée's manager reports to you).
- The born leader – Watch for women you come across in meetings or whose work you notice. Ask yourself whose ideas are creative, who collaborates well, and who is competent and productive and would benefit the most from what you have to offer. Women with these characteristics may not consider themselves candidates for mentoring, but they might warm to the idea if you suggest it.
- The quiet achiever – Some very capable women may seem invisible next to their more assertive colleagues. Be aware that some women including those from different cultures may interact in a less demonstrative manner. Keep your eyes open for the “unsung” but productive and talented women who with your guidance can advance into positions of influence and leadership.
- Someone facing change – Shifts in the organization or work assignments may signal a time to step up as a mentor. Watch for women who are facing change, as in the case of reorganization. This is a time when a protégée especially needs guidance and wisdom.

Also consider mentoring from a different vantage point. Look beyond your immediate work group for an employee in a different division, at another site or even on another hemisphere. Telecommunications makes virtual connections practically as effective as face-to-face meetings, and learning about each other's unique work situations can benefit you both.

Consider mentoring someone doing a different kind of work in the company. You and your protégée may have complementary skills you can exchange. For both of you this arrangement may also open new networking possibilities, broaden your views about different fields of expertise, and build an appreciation for how each contributes to the mission of the organization.

Consider ad hoc mentoring. In order to help a protégée get the most and best advice, you might recommend that she seek support from several senior staff. This spreads the cost of mentoring and makes it okay that you are not all things to your protégée. Informal chats with senior staff help the protégée build rapport, visibility, and professional networks.

Finally, while common, mentoring does not have to be limited to two individuals at different career stages. Consider starting a peer mentoring relationship. Your common experiences and similar goals might serve as a helpful reference point from which to plan your next career steps.

Is my Protégée Ready?

Your protégée is ready if she:

- Has ambitions to advance and increase her contribution to the organization
- Is interested in being mentored
- Actively seeks constructive feedback and acts on it
- Is able to commit time and effort to professional growth
- Is willing to explore new behaviors and skills

The best mentoring relationship results come when the protégée “owns” the process and drives activity toward the results. If your protégée is not able to clearly articulate a goal for the relationship or has trouble creating the meeting plan, have her prepare accordingly before you start into formal mentoring.

What Are the “Dos” of Mentoring?

These tips are designed to help you think about what mentoring is and is not. Look for best practices in mentoring in the Mentoring Activities Guide.

Do: Be clear on where the line is drawn between your responsibilities and those of the manager.

Do: Agree on goals for the mentoring relationship from the outset, and put them in writing. (A Set the Stage template is provided for this purpose.) Frequently go back to your goals to measure progress.

Do: Act as a colleague first, an expert second. A know-it-all approach to mentoring is intimidating and will limit your successes. Strike an open and warm tone so your protégée will feel she can ask you difficult questions and take risks. Listen as much as you speak so her questions and aspirations are always the central focus.

Do: Set realistic expectations. You can provide your protégée access to resources and people, but make it clear you do not wield your influence over others. You may be a senior executive but that does not mean you fix problems for the protégée – you coach as you can but the protégée does the heavy lifting.

Do: Keep a time limit as part of the goal, and evaluate your progress periodically. Every mentoring relationship has phases – including the end to formal mentoring. This doesn’t necessarily mean the end of your relationship, but a change in how you interact and how often.

Do: Remember that mentoring is a process with a goal. Have a fun relationship but don’t get off track and lose sight of goals.

Do: Expect high performance from the protégée and accelerate her learning. Research suggests that the most beneficial mentoring is based on mutual learning, active engagement, and striving to push the leadership capabilities of protégées.

Do: Listen, listen, and then listen some more. Hear the concerns of your protégée before offering advice and guidance. Establish trust and openness in communication from the start.

Do: Strive to protect the protégée from what you see as major professional errors or missteps, but also leave room for her to learn from her own experience and mistakes. Remember that a successful mentoring relationship is one where the protégée eventually advances and no longer needs your support. Make sure the protégé is not overly dependent on your advice.

Do: Recognize that the protégée's goals are her own and that she may have career goals that differ from the path you chose. Your role as a mentor is to guide; it's up to the protégée to decide what to implement in her career.

Do: Recognize that women and other minorities within the organization face additional barriers to advancement. Educate yourself about the issues (resources are included in Mentoring References). If you experience difficulty, ask your organization's corporate diversity department for resources and support.

Do: Keep an open mind. If you are a man mentoring a woman, or if a protégée is from a different ethnic group, be aware and respect her experiences, ideas, and goals. Cross-gender and cross-cultural mentoring relationships can be very enriching and successful but it requires open dialogue about the ways gender and culture influence your protégée's work in the organization and the mentoring relationship itself.

Do: Educate others within the organization about the advancement of women. Approach managers and stakeholders and mentor them on being effective managers to technical women. Consider instituting a "reverse mentoring" program where older leaders are educated about specific issues faced by younger staff, and in diversity issues such as race and gender.

Do: Teach your protégée how to become a mentor herself – by example and by encouragement.