



# Mentorship: A Game Changer for Women

**By Rita Stanziale, MAEd**

## **Introduction & Background**

Statistics demonstrate that the percentage of women entering the workforce continues to rise each year. At the end of December 2022, women made up 58% of the total U.S. workforce (Forbes,2023) but only 35% of those women hold a senior leadership role (Zippia Team, 2022). In addition, women continue to be underrepresented in the highest ranking senior executive positions (the C-Suite) with only 20% occupying a C-Suite position, and only 4% of them being women of color (Ariella, 2022). Moreover, women continue to be paid less earning eighty-two cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts (Dellatto,2023). The statistics also demonstrate that women still face many of same hurdles their predecessors faced 20 plus years ago. Yet, there is a growing number who are not as tolerant or patient for change to happen. Post pandemic, women continued to opt to leave their work positions, a large percentage being women leaders. In a 2022 study, approximately 10.5% of women leaders left their jobs, citing burnout, low compensation, lack of advancement opportunities, and workplace microaggression (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey, 2022). There are also many others who actively seek mentorship programs outside of work either because their workplace does not offer a program or the work program offered did not provide the psychosocial aspects needed to address the barriers noted above.

Woman-to-woman mentorship can be the necessary game changer in which time and energy should be invested.

The history of mentorship has primarily been a game changer for men; focusing on male development and advancement. In fact, academic research and literature, over the last 53 years, has proven mentorship to be critical to career success (Jennings, 1971; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Roche, 1979). In the beginning, mentorship focused on the success of young men entering

adulthood. By the 1980's schools, universities, businesses, organizations, and governments began to adopt mentorship programs (Irby & Boswell, 2016), as white males, 16 years and older, comprised 64% of the U.S. workforce (Fullerton, 1999). These were primarily white male dominated mentorship programs facilitated with career progression in mind, but they also provided "an important element of psychosocial development," (Levinson et al, 1978). As evidenced, men have benefited from mentorship for several decades, while women have yet to capitalize on this form of psychosocial and professional development to career advancement.

Today, various work organizations offer either a formal or informal mentorship program that both men and women can participate, but only a small percentage of women take advantage of the opportunity. A 2013 study by Neal, Boatman, and Miller, discovered that 63% of the women in senior-level positions shared that they had no formal mentoring. According to the study, the respondents noted that "it isn't because they aren't willing to mentor; it's that they are not being asked." (Neal et al., 2013, p. 5).

Mentorship and mentoring should be actively sought out. Women should not wait to be invited to participate; rather they should ask to be mentored or act as a mentor. Should one feel uncomfortable completing a mentoring program at work, or such opportunities are not offered where they work, women need to actively seek a mentoring program outside of their work organizations.

## **Woman-to-Woman Mentorship Model**

Today, women are turning to woman-to-woman mentorship programs to help them achieve professional advancement. This holds especially true for women who do not have access to an in-house mentorship program, or for those who deem their workplace mentorship program unable to provide them with the necessary tools to successfully address workplace barriers. Unlike workplace programs, external woman-to-woman mentorship focuses on providing all women opportunities to develop skills that can help them overcome workplace microaggressions, wage disparity, and exclusion from career development and advancement. Furthermore, woman-to-woman mentorship programs center around career advancement that helps to build self-confidence, sense of empowerment, and their social networks (Groves, 2021). The improved psychosocial aspect of mentorship means women are more resilient to workplace adversities, as well as confident and motivated to pursue their goals and aspirations. They are more inclined to take risks, negotiate salary raises, and defend their self-worth.

To further explore the benefits of woman-to-woman mentorships, two mentees from two nonprofit organizations and a representative from each organization were interviewed. Both nonprofits serve to educate and improve women on both personal and professional levels. The first is the Arizona Foundation for Women, a philanthropic association that serves women in the Phoenix, Arizona area, and the other is the Fresno Hispanic Area Foundation of Fresno, California, which serves small business entrepreneurs within the Central Valley.

The Arizona Foundation for Women's (AFW), mission is "to advance the status of Arizona's women through research, advocacy, and philanthropy" (Vision and Mission, n.d.). According to Tracy DeSoto, AFW board chair, the organization also runs SHELeads, which is the mentoring program portion of the philanthropic nonprofit. SHELeads has been around since 2016 and became a formal woman-to-woman mentoring program offered by AFW in 2020 and trademarked as SHELeads - "Safety, Health, and Economic Empowerment."

Each year, forty mentees are selected and paired with forty mentors vetted by the mentorship program committee. DeSoto states that over the last three years, the program has grown organically as more women in leadership roles and from diverse industries have applied to participate. "What we are finding is that most organizations do not have a strong manager or leadership development program. So, a lot of companies will sponsor a women employee to go through our program given their organization does not provide a very structured approach," DeSoto explains. The SHELeads mentoring program is structured and specifically focuses on both the psychosocial and career advancement elements. DeSoto went on to share how the program's curriculum "teaches coaching, how to have difficult conversations, and performance management." This structured and comprehensive approach to one's professional development is what continues to make this program so successful and sought out.

The Fresno Area Hispanic Foundations(FAHF) also utilize a structured and comprehensive approach. In May 2020, FAHF answered the call of its 2019 Women's Conference post-survey results and developed a cohort-learning-based program focused on targeted professional development and networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs. According to Sandra Vidrio, FAHF mentorship organizer, the initial program was developed to enable participants to have a fair competitive chance and survive during the pandemic as well as expand their clientele reach via social platforms. Participants were taught how to maximize digital marketing tools. Throughout the program women supported and encouraged one another and each other's businesses. Over the course of three years, the *Womanpreneur Program* has grown and women from diverse backgrounds and business sectors have joined.

The 2022 *Womanpreneur Program* had 372 participants divided into five cohorts. The participant demographics included 77% identifying as Hispanic or Latina, 12% African American, 3% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 2% Caucasian, and 3% Other. "Our plans are to continue creating networking opportunities for emerging entrepreneurs," while formalizing what has been up to now an organic mentorship program of mentees and mentors, Vidrio shares. The program centers on education and empowerment, which have been at the heart of their mission since its foundation in 2002 (About Us, n.d.).

Yvette Mora, Fresno Area Hispanic Foundation 2020 *Womanpreneur Program* participant, shared "it was a very life-changing experience that opened so many doors for me." The program allowed Mora to meet others like herself and granted her the opportunity to gain experience from others on how to effectively run an entrepreneurship. "You get into these break-out rooms and talk to all these women and learn their passions and hear how they supported one another. It was exciting to

know that I was not the only one in this world. And on top of that you are learning information on how to start and sustain your business,” she continued. The program helped Mora convert an online activewear business into a physical fitness center for women, and she saw her business grow. Mora shares how the woman-to-woman support and program curriculum empowered her to “move forward, grow and network in an environment where ideas, experiences, and best practices were constantly and openly shared.” Other participants who served as informal mentors cheered her on and encouraged her “to work harder and, ultimately, made her dreams more attainable,” Mora explains. She shared that with each new achievement, she gained confidence. Today, she continues to seek out similar opportunities to continue growing.

After her program experience, Mora recommends the Fresno Area Hispanic Foundation *Womenpreneur Program* to everyone she meets who has a business. She has discovered a sense of self-fulfillment in encouraging and coaching women based upon her experience. Mora stresses to women interested in participating in a mentorship program the importance of “being intentional in showing up and participating, even after the program is done.” She encourages women who go through a mentorship program, whether informal or formal, to participate the following year as a mentor or attend networking opportunities, which can lead to additional connections. “Get involved and commit. Do not stop learning and meeting people,” Mora emphasizes. The program took her out of her comfort zone and helped her to eliminate feelings of self-doubt or being unqualified. Today, she is more confident and feels validated in her personal and professional work. The mentoring experience empowered her to sign a lease to a bigger facility for her women’s fitness center, and she is now researching the possibilities of starting a nonprofit.

Amanda Reddie experienced some of the same mentoring benefits as Mora by participating in the Arizona Women Foundation’s 2021 SHELeads program. Reddie’s involvement in the SHELeads mentoring program afforded her with varied opportunities to network and engage. SHELeads included non-curricular activities that exposed Reddie to women leaders with diverse perspectives and experiences. Reddie shares that “during varied sessions we were able to have meaningful and powerful conversations. We were able to share in a safe space what we encountered in the workplace.”

When asked how she learned about the SHELeads program, she explained that she purposefully sought out and found SHELeads after coming from a “toxic work environment.” Reddie also shares that before participating in SHELeads, she completed a workplace career development program, noting how the program focused only on job skill performance. In the workplace program, her mentor was also her direct manager, as opposed to the broader experience she gained through SHELeads.

Reddie attributes participating in SHELeads in having helped her learn “how to negotiate her value” at work. The gained experiences contributed to landing a new job and, subsequently, in the same year, earning a promotion and salary increase. For Reddie, the program’s *GrowthMindset* curriculum was a “game changer.” She shares how the *GrowthMindset* program/content “helped her mature not just as an individual contributor but as a leader as well.” Today, Reddie is a mentor at SHELeads. Her words of wisdom to women who are thinking about participating in a mentorship

program are “always put yourself in a situation that will expand your knowledge. Be a life-long learner and let go of the voice inside you that says you do not need this.”

## Conclusion

These women invested in themselves and are now investing their time and sharing knowledge and experiences with other women. Woman-to-woman mentorship is an opportunity for all women, at all work levels, to grow, develop, and become equipped to address workplace adversity or barriers to advancement.

As mentorship programs have proven to be beneficial for men, they are even more so for women. Woman-to-Woman mentorship can be educational and empowering for women on multiple levels. A well-developed program will not only provide elements that focus on career success, but also consist of trainings that help women tackle workplace barriers that continue to exist. Moreover, it creates transformative experiences that have long-lasting personal and professional benefits. Woman-to-woman mentoring can be the game changer that moves American society closer to equity in the workplace, but only if more women invest time and energy in themselves, and ultimately, in other women. Women need to be intentional about their futures first as a mentee and then as a mentor. Through commitment to continuous growth, more women will advance beyond middle management and a greater percentage will acquire a C-Suite position, which can mean greater equity and inclusion across various work sectors.

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## About the Author

Rita Stanziale, MAEd, is the Central Valley Campus and Academic Director for University of Phoenix. She has spent over 18 years in higher education holding diverse roles within academic affairs. Her experience includes academic management, leadership, and faculty development and coaching. Rita's interests in academic topics such as mentorship, ethics and the ethical use of social media in instruction and practice have led her to co-present at national and international conferences. Most recent presentations include *Women to Women Mentorship: A Tipping Point for Counselor Education*, Hawaii International Conference on Education, January 2022; *Ethics and Social Media in Rehabilitation Counseling Programs*, National Council on Rehabilitation Education Spring Conference, April 2019; and *Safety in Cyberspace: Social Media Ethics for New Millennials*, National Association of Multicultural Concerns Annual Conference, July 2018. She is currently a committee member for the 2023 UPCEA's West Regional Salon.