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## Promoting women

Mentoring is a helpful tool not only for helping women to climb the career ladder but also to make men more aware of the specific problems women face • by *Heike Mänz & Gábor Rossmann*

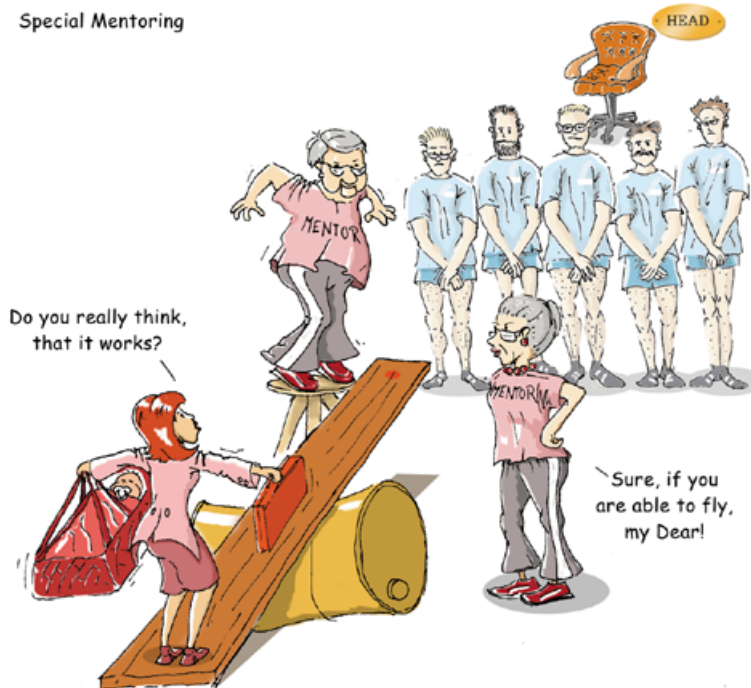
‘Our chief want in life is someone who will make us do what we can.’—Ralph Waldo Emerson

All human beings are supposedly equal. But by looking at the gender distribution in high-level management positions in industry, academia and public services, one cannot escape the fact that men seem to be more equal than women. This is not a satisfactory situation, particularly in an economy that depends on well-trained and educated professionals, who are increasingly in short supply. Numerous strategies are being employed to close the gender gap, either through legislation or through raising awareness and training. Here, we would like to describe our company’s experiences with introducing mentoring programmes that aim to increase the number of women in leading positions.

This strategy actually works both ways by providing better training for women while

The European Technology Assessment Network report clearly illustrates the situation of women in academia. ‘The status quo [of women in science] is wasteful and inequitable. The abuse of the “old boys’ network” in some of our scientific institutions is an anachronism. The emphasis on gender in hiring and promoting has no place in modern institutions. It is not only bad for science but it denies many women the benefits of a scientific career that are enjoyed by men, such as the satisfaction of curiosity, setting one’s own priorities, some status, and a certain degree of autonomy.’ (ETAN report, 2000).

The main reason for this unsatisfactory situation is the ‘glass ceiling’, symbolising all invisible structural and cultural barriers that prevent a woman from climbing the career ladder. But



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acquainting their male superiors with the specific problems faced by the opposite sex.

women are equally capable of meeting all the requirements a leading position demands, a fact that is supported by numerous studies. In the real world, however, the accumulation of small discriminations and specific problems that men do not experience on their career path serve to block a woman's progression up the career ladder. This is not limited to academia but also happens in both the private sector and public services.

And the problems that women face are numerous. As a minority in a predominantly male environment, they often feel 'exposed' to provocative comments, particularly if they engage in programmes to support women. Remarks such as 'quota women' or 'You don't have to work because you are profiting from affirmative action' are the norm for many women. Interestingly, many men are shocked when they learn about these experiences.

Women are often appreciated by their superiors as being reliable, positive and more willing to take over additional tasks. Indeed, they often feel that this is to their disadvantage when they are discouraged or even prevented from moving to higher positions because their superiors fear losing a valuable worker.

Also, many superiors assume their female employees will leave or at least reduce their hours when they start a family and are therefore less inclined to sup-

## Men also profit from mentoring as they learn about the specific problems that women experience

port their further education and qualification. 'As a mother I have to prove that I haven't given away my brain after the birth of my daughter. I cannot talk about my children, because I would then be regarded as fixated on my family. I cannot talk about problems with childcare because it would raise the impression that I am not able to manage my private life,' a

30-year old banker with two children described her experience.

Various strategies, legislation and other measures have been implemented to create a more even gender distribution in high-level management. Affirmative action and creating positions exclusively for women have already increased female appointments in leading positions, but they should be supported by other measures to heighten male awareness of the unequal opportunities for women. 'The tight interconnectivity between structural and cultural factors makes it necessary to pay more attention to the various internal groups within an organisation that actively participate in gendering. In addition to the top-level management and those responsible for personnel, predominantly male middle-level managers play an important role in the selection and promotion processes that lead to decisions about access to or exclusion from certain leading positions.' (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, 1997).

Mentoring is one strategy to help women break through the glass ceiling while simultaneously involving men in the process. An experienced manager personally accompanies and advises a female employee above and beyond the normal 'superior-employee relationship'. The mentor supports the woman in making herself more visible within a company or organisation and, by sharing their experiences, in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for high-level positions (Haasen, 2001). Mentoring is a very helpful tool: not only women profit but also men as they learn through personal contact about the specific problems and barriers that women experience. Furthermore, the company or the organisation makes better use of its women employees and thus increases productivity.

We have been conducting mentoring programmes in private industries and the public sector since 1998. However, there is no reason why mentoring should not also be productive in the academic sector, since the requirements of a leading position in a high-tech company are similar to those of a professor or a director of a research institute.

The ultimate aim of a mentoring programme is to increase the number of women in leading positions, but there are several intermediate achievements that

## We have noted that, even after the official end of the programme, mentee and mentor often continue to work closely together

will more immediately improve her situation. First of all, men—as mentors as well as superiors—get an idea 'of what it means to be a woman'. Women, in parallel, learn more about and gain access to informal networks that often are important for their career development. Last, but not least, mentors become aware of the individual strengths and skills of the



Fig. 1. Organisation of a typical mentoring programme.

women they support, which can, in turn, increase the woman's standing in the company or organisation.

Of course, this is not all as easy as it sounds. To establish an intense relationship between mentor and mentee, our role as personal advisors is to qualify and

pursuing her career path and is exposed to a company's internal structures, communication and how decisions are made at the top management level. Possibly more importantly, women also gain access to internal networks that are helpful, and even necessary, for climbing the

company, may gain a better understanding of their own partners. Indeed, many of them regard this as a valuable personal benefit.

Originally, these programmes were used as an instrument to improve the gender distribution. But it became clear that they not only help to promote women but have additional benefits for the company or organisation. In targeting managers who are interested in not only supporting individual mentees but also the specific situation of women, they remove some of barriers on the female career path and improve the communication between women and men. These managers see a need for more women in leading positions and thus regard the mentoring programmes as a useful tool to promote this. As there is an increasing shortage of skilled personnel for leading positions, more and more managers are having difficulties in finding qualified recruits. Tapping into the largely unused pool of educated women in lower and middle positions is one of the strategies to overcome this shortage and is one that provides rapid and effective results. In addition, the working environment will ultimately improve. There are gender-specific differences between men and women: for example, how they communicate, approach problems or work in a team. Male mentors realise these differences and understand their implications, which contributes to a more productive working environment that makes full use of the strengths of both sexes.

A better understanding of women's problems in trying to manage both their careers and their private lives will also, we hope, change the attitude towards part-time employees. For instance, the performance of a department is often

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## Women gain access to internal networks that are necessary for climbing the rungs of the career ladder

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train both for such a programme and to supervise the process. In addition, the advisor's role is also to solve personal conflicts that may arise between the participants, which a young mentee once compared to 'marriage guidance'. A typical mentoring programme begins with selecting the pairs and then preparing both mentor and mentee for the programme (Figure 1). The mentees—usually women in their mid- to late 20s, often with an academic degree and with no current leadership role—either apply for the mentoring programme or are selected from their department. Mentors either volunteer or are selected by the mentees from a list of proposed superiors.

The mentors accompany the women throughout a self-selected project. The mentor meets his mentee regularly to discuss problems and strategies, and gives advice on the project as well as on her career development. During that time, the mentors are also supported in their advisory role. Later, this process is intensified, for instance through involving the mentees and their superiors in 'gender-workshops' to discuss experiences of the mentoring process and gender-related problems. At the end of one year, the mentees present themselves and their project to representatives of the top management and the personnel department. But, even after the official end of the mentoring programme, we have noted that mentee and mentor often continue to work closely together.

Of course, it is the woman who benefits most from this process. By presenting herself and her project at the final seminar, she increases her visibility within the company or organisation. In fact, many women from our programmes were subsequently promoted as a direct result of department heads or personnel managers becoming aware of their qualifications. But through her mentor, a mentee also receives valuable advice and strategies for

rungs of the career ladder. Women appreciate their individual strengths and how to use them effectively when applying for a promotion or a higher position. And last, but not least, this knowledge and the advice from a superior helps to increase a woman's self-confidence about her abilities and her aspirations.

Male mentors also benefit from the intense contact during a mentoring programme. Above all, they see at first hand the problems in overcoming the

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## As there is an increasing shortage of skilled personnel, more and more managers have difficulties in finding qualified recruits

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numerous barriers or subtle discriminations women face while climbing the career ladder. As they become more aware of these problems, they realise it is not the inherent characteristics of women that prevent them from achieving higher positions, but rather structural and cultural factors. This eventually improves their attitude towards female colleagues as well as the general working environment in their department.

Managers can also directly profit from this close contact with their mentees. In

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## We believe that working with both sexes will eventually show more pronounced and longer-lasting results than simply imposing quotas or guidelines

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our experience, mentors often recommend the women for positions where their knowledge and qualifications would be beneficial. Or they entice them away from their current position into their own group if they find that the woman's qualifications would be a positive contribution to their own department. Finally, male mentors, by appreciating the problems that women encounter in their

measured by the sheer number of people employed and, in this regard, part-time employees are often equated to full-time workers. By understanding why some women prefer to work part-time, managers will eventually measure the department's performance by its budget and output rather than its size.

Furthermore, if managers in top and middle positions support strategies to

find, educate and eventually promote women into leading positions, they improve the public image of a company as an equal-opportunity employer. The problem of unequal gender distribution is not new and has been widely criticised. Thus many companies and organisations now promote gender equality as part of their public relations strategy.

Mentoring programmes serve women first and foremost and they have already been shown to have a positive effect on their careers (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, 1999). But our experience reveals that men also profit. It is hoped that a long-term strategy of mentoring—although rather costly—would show positive long-term effects for working women. Clearly, this has to be investigated further, particularly regarding the payment of women, their positions and their long-term career prospects.

We believe that working with both sexes, will eventually show more

pronounced and longer-lasting results than simply imposing quotas or guidelines. The latter approach is less productive, as it will alienate men and does not contribute to a better understanding about the specific problems that women face while breaking through the glass ceiling. Given our experience in the public and private sectors, we do not see a reason why similar mentoring programmes should not work equally well in the academic realm.

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