Mentoring for change

A focus on mentors and their role in advancing gender equality

Mentoring programmes that aim to foster women's careers and gender equality in academia and research have to acknowledge existing possibilities for women to develop their potential but must also take into account persisting gender inequalities. They have to empower the individual while at the same time generating transformative potential on the institutional level: a process in which mentors play a central role.

With the increasing attention brought to the issue of mentoring, supervision culture, and staff development in academia, it is important that the gender issue does not disappear.

The international workshop 'Mentor Training and Coaching' organised by eument-net set out to provide a space to discuss and exchange on these questions. The current publication presents the main contributions to the workshop.

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Rethinking mentoring: Pursuing an organisational gender change agenda

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Women only programmes, including women only mentoring programmes, remain a popular gender equity strategy in use within organisations today.[1] Yet they are not without controversy and criticism. Of particular concern, from a gender equity practitioner's perspective, is the criticism that women only (WO) programmes focus on 'fixing the women' to better fit the gendered status quo without addressing the need for organisational cultures and practices to be transformed (Meyerson and Kolb 2000).

As a practitioner delivering WO programmes I was challenged by this criticism. The question for me became, how could WO programmes, with their mandate to assist and develop women, more directly engage with challenging and changing the gendered status quo? I began to think of WO programmes as having a dual mandate: to develop the women and work for organisational change. I coined the term 'the bifocal approach' to describe this, playfully drawing on the idea of bifocal spectacles, which enable an almost simultaneous focus on distant (the organisation) and near (the women) vision.

Women only mentoring programmes, as I will outline, are ideally placed to pursue a bifocal approach because of their capacity to work with not just the women, but also a much broader and often more senior group of organisational members: the mentors. I will argue that

including mentors in the developmental work of mentoring opens up opportunities for pursuing the organisational gender change agenda. This article brings into sharp focus the role and approach of mentors and the mentoring relationship in order to explore the link between mentoring and organisational change.

Beginning with a broad overview of mentoring programmes, I then describe in more detail the history and development of the mentoring component of the Leadership Development for Women (LDW) programme at the University of Western Australia (UWA), and how it has been shaped over time to more directly address the need for organisational change. I introduce the idea of a mentoring continuum, as a framework for distinguishing between different approaches to mentoring and their potential contribution to the organisational gender change mandate. I then draw on research which investigated the approach taken by experienced mentors within the LDW programme at UWA. I conclude by considering the implications of this research for mentoring programmes that wish to move beyond 'fix the women' to directly engage with the need for organisational change.

Mentoring programmes

Are WO programmes already grappling with the criticism of them from gender scholars that I highlighted in my opening paragraph? Some practitioners of WO programmes have also taken a critical stance towards an overly pragmatic and decontextualised conception of programmes (Gray 1994), questioning their value in bringing about change for women (Bhavnani 1997) and concluding that they contribute little to the statistical profile of women at more senior levels (Brown 2000). Investigation within the Australian higher education sector suggests that the criticism of WO programmes as focusing on the women without addressing the need for institutional change continues to be well founded. In 2008 I reviewed a total of eighty-eight documents, both the published and 'grey'[2] literature, covering the fifteen-year history of WO programmes within Australian higher education. Simultaneously my colleague Lucienne Tessens (2008) undertook a survey of

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1   In this article I focus on the application of my research to practice. For a more theoretically grounded and detailed account of the research see de Vries 2010.

2   Refers to unpublished materials such a conference papers and institutional reports and evaluations.

current practice within the sector, at a time when thirty-one out of thirty-six universities had one or more WO targeted programmes. We found that both historically and in current practice the large majority of programmes focused on the women, and the positive outcomes for individual women, without reference to the gendered organisational cultures of their institutions. Seventy-four per cent of universities adopted a 'fix the women' framework (Tessens 2008) as did 57 per cent of the literature reviewed. The remaining literature, which grappled with moving beyond 'fix the women', was dominated by the publications of just four universities.

Criticism has not dulled the popularity of WO programmes within Australian universities, where mentoring programmes form the largest subset of such programmes. Anita Devos explored the popularity of mentoring programmes for Australian academic women, and argued that 'these programs are supported because they speak to institutional concerns with improving performance in a performance culture, while being seen to deal with the problem of gender inequity' (2008: p. 195). This highly instrumental approach to mentoring may have very little to do with improving gender equity. As practitioners, Devos challenges us to consider whether WO mentoring programmes have been co-opted for institutional purposes, at the expense of their broader gender equity goal. While individual women may be assisted to be more successful within the gendered status quo, the overall situation for women may remain unchallenged and unchanged. Despite our good intentions, the gender equity intent may easily be lost. I suggest, based on my observations, that Devos's critique may be equally applicable in the European context.

The mentoring programme at UWA

Applying a 'bifocal approach' to WO mentoring programmes is designed to address the constraints of a sole focus on the women. But how can the bifocal approach be applied to the design and practice of a mentoring programme, and does it work? The mentoring component of LDW had always pursued the dual mandate. It was unusual in several important respects.

Mentoring, often a stand-alone programme at other universities,[3] was an integral part of the broader LDW programme when established in 1994. Each year thirty women, both academic and professional staff, participate in a workshop-based leadership developmental programme over a period of nine months. As part of this programme each participant was matched with a more senior male or female mentor. The inclusion of male mentors, commonplace now but somewhat unusual for WO programmes of the time (Quinlan 1999; University of Western Australia 1995), was instigated by the then Vice-Chancellor (VC) Fay Gale.[4] Gale was determined to ensure that the 'too few senior women' were not further overloaded and to 'involve the senior males in the process so that they would own and support' the programme (Gale 1998: p. 294). Mentors, and in particular senior male mentors, were viewed as potential collaborators, who might, and in Gale's view did, influence gender equity matters more broadly (Gale 1999). This intent, to 'convert' the men, became a defining influence in the way LDW developed and evolved.

The engagement of Gale and other senior executive members as mentors cemented the importance of mentoring, resulting in broad support and commitment at the most senior levels of the organisation. Many, most notably the then Deputy VC Alan Robson, mentored on numerous occasions. In the first review of LDW a participant noted, 'men acting as mentors will be exposed to gender equity issues and some male mentors have made positive statements about the programme at public forums' (Stanton 1996: p. 18). Male mentors in fact spoke up in support of LDW funding at Budget Committee and were instrumental in ensuring long-term funding for the programme.

This emphasis on the mentors, and their engagement and learning, most specifically about gender equity issues, is at odds with the majority of mentoring programmes. Professor Alan Robson, VC and still mentoring LDW women, has reinforced this focus by publicly reflecting on his own experience as a mentor: 'All my mentees over the years

3   For example Australian National University, Curtin University of Technology, Murdoch University, James Cook University, and the University of South Australia (Stanton 1996: Appendix 1).

4   Fay Gale was the second female Vice-Chancellor appointed in Australia and an outstanding champion of gender equity (Eveline 2004).

have shared the same problem. They all have difficulty getting heard in meetings. I began to think about meetings and what made it so difficult for women to make their contribution.' This prompted the Vice-Chancellor to reflect on his own style of chairing meetings and he also initiated training for committee chairs that focused on building more inclusive meeting cultures.

Importantly, the VC's example illustrates how gender issues have a basis in organisational practices – such as the way meetings are conducted. It is also worthwhile noting that the VC's understanding of these issues resulted from repeat mentoring and the observation of patterns over time. By observing this difficulty, shared by a diverse group of senior female mentees, the VC's attention was drawn towards systemic gendering practices. This understanding translated into action, whereby intervening to improve organisational practices builds more gender equitable workplaces.

Mentors are key to the organisational change process. As senior institutional members they are well placed to act on any increased understanding of gender equity issues that may occur as a result of their mentoring relationships, in order to bring about organisational change. This model of change is premised on the understanding, drawing on the work of Weick (1984) and others (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000) that individuals, using a 'small wins' approach, can bring about positive change in organisational cultures.

Over time, in order to strengthen the bifocal approach, the LDW programme focused more explicitly on the mentors and sought to maximise opportunities to educate mentors regarding gender issues. Rather than seeking to spread the mentoring load, repeat mentoring was encouraged, even for very senior mentors. Key institutional players were deliberately included as mentors on the programme. Presentations by the women as a group were introduced to further develop mentors' awareness of gender issues.

This explicit focus on the mentor and their development is the main point of difference between the bifocal approach and most WO mentoring programmes. More commonly there is an almost exclusive focus on the outcomes for the mentee. The benefits of mentoring for the mentor are often highlighted during the mentor recruitment process.

However, these benefits are often considered an incidental by-product of mentoring programmes rather than a desirable outcome that can be designed into programmes and included in their evaluation. The bifocal approach, however, wishes to engage both mentor and mentee in the organisational change agenda. The role of mentor is seen as a vehicle for developing mentors' gender insight. Repeat mentoring is seen as strengthening the learning process, allowing mentors to see common patterns or issues emerging, thus building a capacity to see gender equity as a systemic organisational issue, rather than seeing the individual women as problematic.

In the research reported here I set out to examine if the bifocal approach was working as intended. In order to examine this I focused on mentors, the mentoring relationship, the development of systemic gender insight and the capacity to act. The mentors' approach to their mentoring role and the nature of the relationship they develop with their mentees will have important ramifications for their capacity to learn from their mentees. My focus on mentors is not intended to relegate the experience or outcomes for the mentee to second place, but is designed to maintain a focus on the more difficult and neglected organisational change mandate of WO programmes.

A mentoring continuum

The mentoring continuum is designed to clarify the role of the mentor and the purpose of the mentoring relationship. All mentoring is not the same and the mentoring literature provides some useful ways of distinguishing between mentoring approaches. In particular I came to the literature with an interest in exploring what type of mentoring approach would best support establishing a two-way relationship, where both mentor and mentee are intended beneficiaries of the mentoring partnership. From this literature I have developed the idea of a mentoring continuum, with instrumental mentoring on the left side and developmental mentoring on the right.
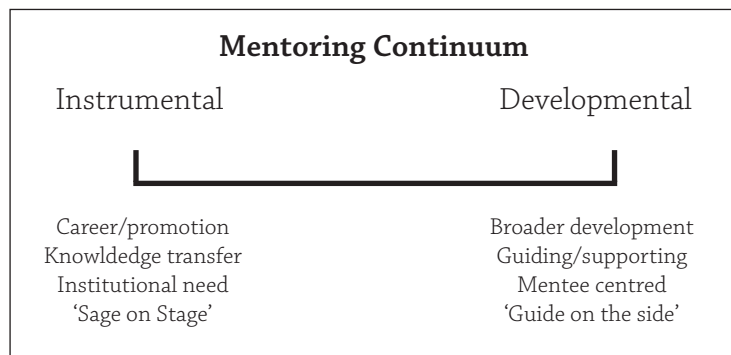
Mentoring Continuum

Instrumental	Developmental

Career/promotion	Broader development
Knowleddge transfer	Guiding/supporting
Institutional need	Mentee centred
'Sage on Stage'	'Guide on the side'

Figure 1: The mentoring continuum

Mentoring at the instrumental end of the continuum is characterised by a senior colleague mentoring a junior colleague with the intent of assisting the career of the junior colleague in their current role and context. The mentor uses their knowledge and experience to teach and/or advise the mentee how to succeed. In the case of WO mentoring, where the organisation wishes to progress women through the ranks to address the shortfall of senior women, there can be a strong focus on promotion. Based on unequal power relationships, an instrumental mentor relationship is one-way and lacks reflection or learning on the part of the mentor. Mentors may demonstrate a lack of capacity or desire to empathise, listen, or offer other types of psychosocial support needed to make mentoring a safe place to learn and take risks.

Instrumental mentoring, while apparently focusing on the women, can also be seen as a way of assisting women to navigate and thrive within existing organisational parameters, thus meeting organisational needs without disrupting the gendered status quo. From the perspective of the goals of the bifocal approach, instrumental mentoring becomes a way of 'fixing the women'. This organisational imperative often remains hidden from view and for this reason I refer to instrumental mentoring as mentoring for 'organisational fit'.

Instrumental mentoring is being increasingly criticised in the mentoring literature: for making institutional needs central (Colwell 1998); emphasising a one-way process of knowledge transfer (Zachary 2000); exclusively focusing on mentees' career outcomes (Greenhaus

and Singh 2007); using male models of success (McKeen and Bujaki 2007); ignoring the learning process (Lankau and Scandura 2007); and emphasising one-way relationships (McKeen and Bujaki 2007). The dangers of this instrumental approach include dependency, control, and greater power distance (Gay and Stephenson 1998); sponsorship and patronage (Jarvis and Macinnes 2009); social control and conformity (Colwell 1998); and socialisation into the majority culture (Chao 2007).

Mentoring relationships towards the developmental end of the continuum would be characterised by a more open-ended journeying approach facilitated by the mentor who works hard to provide a safe, supportive yet challenging learning environment, marked by critical reflection on both the part of the mentor and the mentee. This mentoring exhibits mutuality and collaborative partnership working on a broader range of issues identified by the mentee. Both partners focus on the learning and engage in active monitoring of the learning process to ensure goals are being met. The mentor refrains from giving advice and knowing the answers, instead seeing themself as a guide.

In contrast to the instrumental approach, developmental mentoring makes mentee needs central to the relationship (Colwell 1998) with an emphasis on exploring, guiding, supporting, risk taking, and independence (Gay and Stephenson 1998). With less power distance the relationship becomes more reciprocal, thus perhaps counterintuitively linking developmental mentee-centred mentoring with a relationship that is more conducive to mentor learning and reciprocal development (Fletcher and Ragins 2007). If mentors are to develop greater insight as a result of their mentoring relationships this presupposes a two-way relationship, more characteristic of developmental than instrumental mentoring.

Mentoring approaches adopted at UWA
What approach did experienced mentors at UWA bring to their mentoring role and was the VC's experience indicative of other mentors' experiences? Mentors for this research were chosen from the pool of those who had been LDW mentors on at least two occasions. While I am primarily reporting on my interviews with UWA mentors, four male and four female professors, this is part of a larger study. I have also drawn on my own involvement as participant observer and an

interview with Alan Robson in his role as a 'champion' of the LDW programme. Pseudonyms are used for mentors, but not for the VC, Alan Robson.

There were two distinctive features in the interviews with UWA mentors, both male and female. Firstly, mentors painted a very positive picture of the progress that had been made towards gender equity at UWA. In fact several mentors suggested that UWA was seen as a level playing field for men and women:

> *I have seen no sign that women who are working hard don't do as well, and the opportunities are there for women as much as the men. (Beverley)*

and

> *I generally don't think the university is an anti-female organisation in any way... I don't think there is necessarily any discrimination against women. (Christine)*

Both men and women used the number and presence of senior women as evidence of progress, and indeed there has been substantial progress since Fay Gale's arrival in 1990 when she could count the senior women on her fingers. However, their perception of a level playing field and numbers of senior women were at odds with the data. Men make up 85 per cent of professors, the position coincidentally occupied by all the interviewed mentors. With 15 per cent female professors UWA is ranked below the national average of 19.8 per cent (QUT Equity Section 2008).

Secondly there was very little variation in the approaches taken by these professors, with seven out of eight favouring a predominantly instrumental approach. The belief in a 'gender fair' UWA complements an instrumental mentoring approach, as it places the onus for change on the individual, not the institution. Clive and Raelene epitomise instrumental mentoring with their problem-solving approach. Clive described his role as a mentor as:

> *Sharing experience and endeavouring at least to translate my own experience into candidate solutions to my mentees' problems. So, my standpoint is what is it this person wants to achieve where there is an obstacle? Then I would be saying, given what I know from my background, what would be the way this person should go about that? That would be how I would explain it.*

Raelene took a similar approach:

> *My role as a mentor is really to open eyes, to provide ways of getting around obstacles to move ahead in your career I think ... What I usually try and do ... is identify an issue that I might be able to help with ... around networks... a particular career issue... how to deal with being overloaded with teaching or doing too much admin, or whatever the issue might be ... And usually to try and suggest approaches that are likely to keep everything rational and data driven in order to try and solve the problem.*

Much of Clive's and Raelene's problem solving and advice giving centred around maintaining some semblance of work/life balance while at the same time being a successful academic.

Christine was the exception among UWA mentors in describing a much more open-ended approach to mentoring:

> *... and they could talk about anything ... To listen I think and to be available and to take on whatever and go with them wherever they wanted to go. It is hard to put your finger on it really. I think sometimes they would come with quite specific questions ... but in some ways it was more valuable probably to just explore things together – it's not coming to get an answer. I think the things you bring are the flexibility and trying not to solve the problems.*

Christine's approach to her mentoring role is directly at odds with those of Clive and Raelene. She deliberately avoided advice giving and solving problems. For Christine, mentoring was a mutual exploration, a journey where she accompanied the mentee 'wherever they wanted to go'. Christine's approach is aligned with the developmental end of the continuum.

There was little mention in the interviews of what mentors had learnt from mentees despite the organisational expectation, often cited by Alan Robson, of mentoring as a two-way learning opportunity. Strong championing of gender equity by Alan and others has created a sense of complacency among the mentors that the work has been done, and that UWA is a good place for women. This combined with the highly individual and competitive framing of successful academe throws the spotlight on individual success strategies. The mentors, having achieved success, are more than happy to share their strategies. The prevalence

of the instrumental approach among male and female mentors validates Devos's (2008: p. 195) reading of mentoring programmes for women in higher education as oriented towards 'improving performance in a performative culture', thus emphasising organisational goals of 'fit', rather than equity goals per se.

Extending the mentoring continuum

The lack of mentors bringing a developmental approach to mentoring, accompanied by a failure to develop greater gender insight as a result of the mentoring experience is disappointing. In contrast to this, the VC's experience creates a sense of possibility for mentoring, not just for development but for organisational change. However, it was not until I interviewed mentors in another organisation that I was able to put flesh and bones on a different approach to mentoring that incorporated the organisational change agenda. Trevor became my template of a mentor engaged in organisational change.

Trevor's approach was marked by a thoughtful questioning of the status quo within his organisation, combined with a capacity to speak up and challenge assumptions and practices when he considered it was important to do so. As an insider working for organisational cultural change, without being disenfranchised or disaffected, Trevor fits Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully's (1995) definition of a 'Tempered Radical'. '"Tempered Radicals" are individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization' (1995: p. 586).

Trevor, in his role as mentor, developed a much greater understanding of the situation for women in the organisation. Similarly to the VC, he observed consistent patterns and commonalities, particularly in the way that women were denied access to and overlooked for opportunities that were important to their development and career success. Not only did he begin to actively challenge these stereotypes, assumptions, and practices but he also consciously role modelled for his mentees, the behaviours necessary to challenge the status quo. Together, mentor and mentee sharpened their awareness of gender issues and their capacity to challenge the gendered status quo.

Trevor's approach to mentoring brings both the women's development and the institutional gender change process sharply in focus. He incorporated aspects of instrumental and developmental mentoring, with a strong focus on mentee development. But what set Trevor apart was his development of gender insight and capacity to act as a tempered radical. I see Trevor's mentoring approach as positioned further to the right of developmental mentoring on the continuum. Mentoring for organisational change or 'transformative mentoring' positions the mentor as a partner for change.
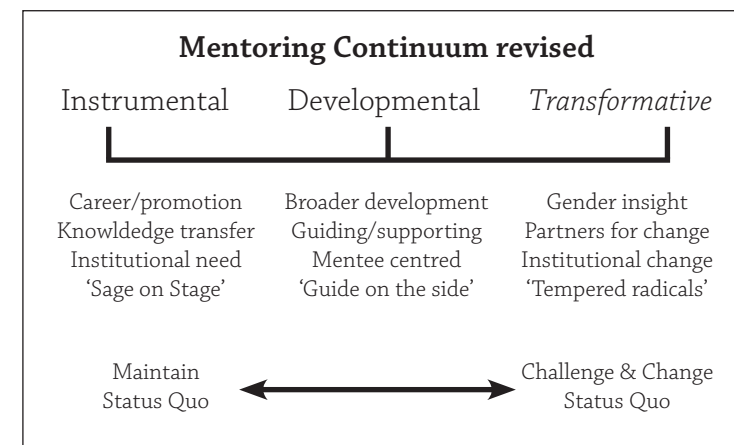

Figure 2: The mentoring continuum revised

This critique of mentoring using the bifocal perspective does not mean that instrumental and/or developmental mentoring are seen as unsuccessful from the point of view of mentees or mentors. Mentees and mentors may use quite separate and different criteria to evaluate the success of the mentoring relationship. At UWA high levels of satisfaction regarding the mentoring experience (70%) and its usefulness to participants' development as leaders (over 70%) were reported (de Vries 2005: p. 92). Mentors interviewed for this study indicated they gained substantial satisfaction from being a mentor, and their willingness to mentor repeatedly supported this. However, satisfaction on the part of mentors or mentees does not mean that the mentoring relationship had the potential to contribute to organisational gender change.

The mentoring continuum is also not intended to imply that instrumental mentoring be entirely abandoned. Instrumental mentoring has a place. We have all experienced times when we want someone to teach us how to play the organisational 'game'. Equally, the prevalence of instrumental mentoring is not surprising, given it is strongly grounded in the historical roots of informal mentoring. However, what is overlooked is that instrumental mentoring focuses on improving the 'organisational fit' of mentees within the gendered status quo. This is well illustrated with the example of Clive, tackling mentees' problems to enable them to be successful academics. The institution is not required to change. This perpetuates the ways in which women are disadvantaged by the requirement to fit male norms of success. Instrumental mentoring may appear to focus on assisting women, but what is more clearly in focus is the need of the institution.

Transformative mentoring is far removed from the instrumental mentoring that most people think of when they become involved in mentoring programmes. In order to pursue a bifocal agenda through a mentoring programme a radical shift in programme aims and outcomes accompanied by a greater emphasis on the role of mentor and the nature of the mentoring relationship are required.

Conclusion

'Good intention is not enough to facilitate effective learning in a mentoring relationship'. This quote in the Preface of Lois Zachary's The mentor's guide (2000) provides salutary advice. Two-way developmental mentoring relationships, seen in this article as a precursor to transformative mentoring, do not just happen, and it cannot be assumed that mentors have the right skill set to enable developmental mentoring to occur. It is clear that the majority of the mentors interviewed subscribe to what I call a 'benevolent colleague' approach to mentoring, where they as more successful senior organisational members impart primarily career advice and support to younger colleagues. This research has highlighted a substantial mismatch between the LDW programme's bifocal goals, the understanding mentors have regarding their role, and the mentoring that is actually taking place.

Mentoring programmes and mentors seem to veer towards the instrumental end of the continuum. It is this tendency that needs

to be addressed in mentoring programmes that wish to engage in transformative change. Building a two-way developmental model of mentoring and providing the opportunity for mentors to develop the appropriate skills is the first step. Reclaiming mentoring towards a two-way developmental (relational) mentoring relationship (Fletcher and Ragins 2007) is in line with the latest developments in the mentoring literature, and there are excellent resources available to support such an endeavour (Zachary 2000).

Neither does the development of gender insight just routinely happen, although both Alan Robson and Trevor provide examples of how this can occur. A developmental approach will only get us so far towards achieving bifocal goals. Focusing on the two-way nature of mentoring and introducing an explicit expectation that mentors learn about what it is like for junior women in their organisation may be possible. Combining the two goals – the development of the mentee and the education of the mentor – explicitly reasserts the gender equity agenda for mentor and mentee. It is the development of this 'gender lens' for mentor and mentee that is the more difficult and more ground-breaking work.

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