

Working together

Karen B. Kahn and **John E. Mitchell** discuss how best to use the male mentor-female mentee relationship to form effective bonds.

While the numbers of experienced female lawyers are increasing, the vast majority of law firms' senior lawyers are still men. Experienced men frequently establish the direction of the firm, disseminate important work assignments and benefit from large numbers of valuable relationships. Female lawyers who want to drive their careers forward are wise to select an established man in their firm as one of their mentors.

There are many male lawyers who are motivated to mentor women. They have a wide range of reasons for wanting to take on this role, from expanding the firm's talent capabilities to enjoying working with a variety of junior lawyers. They are alert to the necessity of developing outstanding lawyers and for involving less-experienced lawyers throughout their practices.

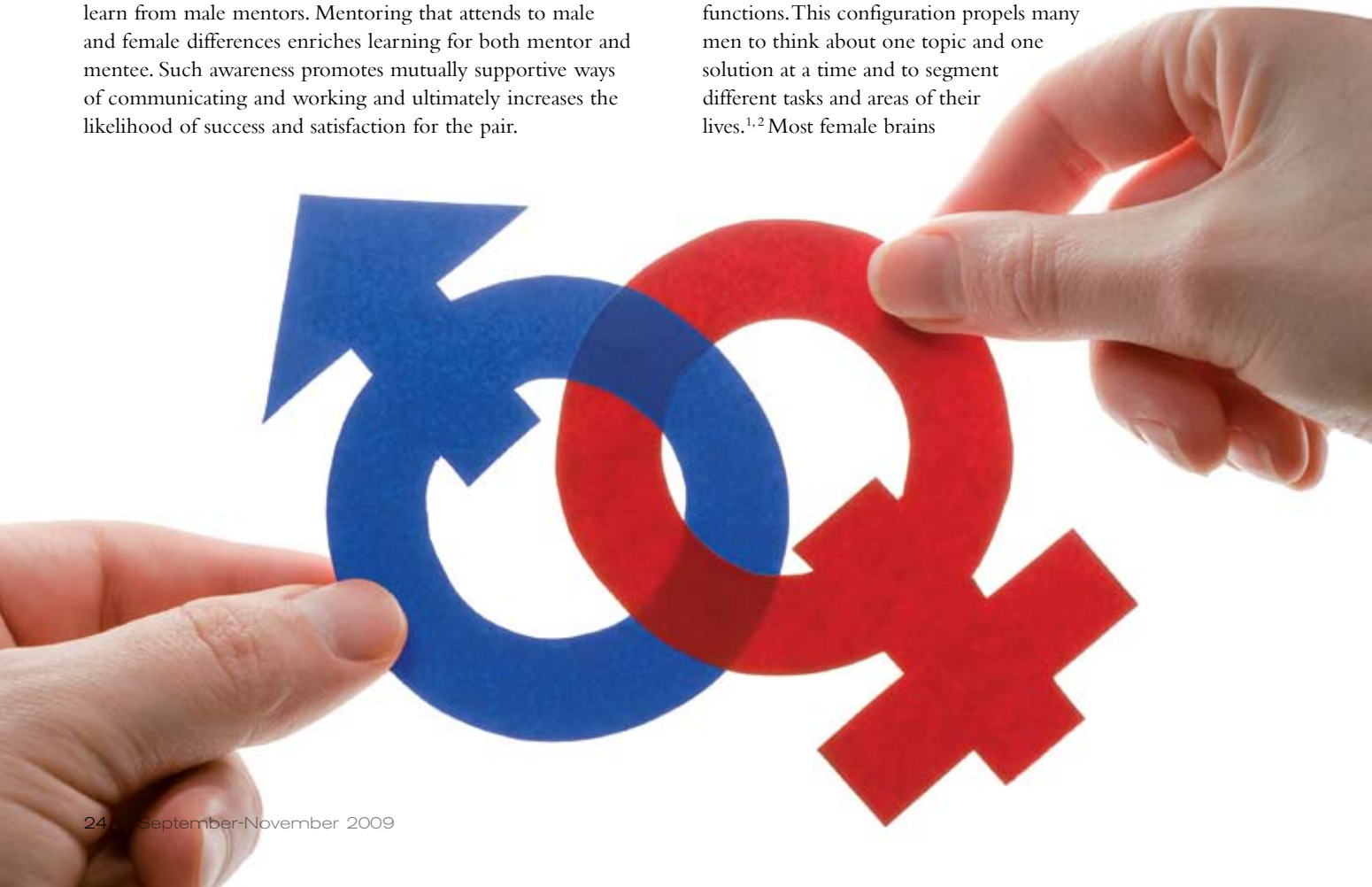
This article focuses on how male lawyers can support the development of female lawyers and how female mentees can learn from male mentors. Mentoring that attends to male and female differences enriches learning for both mentor and mentee. Such awareness promotes mutually supportive ways of communicating and working and ultimately increases the likelihood of success and satisfaction for the pair.

Men and women are wired differently

Research conducted since the late 1970s has increasingly illuminated the biological and psychological differences between men and women. Medical technology providing images of specific sections of the brain continues to expand the depth and intricacy of knowledge in this area. It is now well documented that while both genders possess equal capacity for excellence, the innate intellectual, emotional, sensory and biological 'hard wiring' that most men and women contain is different. The research highlights outlined below have specific application to the male mentor-female mentee relationship:

Brain structure

Most male brains are compartmentalised structures that use specific areas of the brain to perform discrete functions. This configuration propels many men to think about one topic and one solution at a time and to segment different tasks and areas of their lives.^{1,2} Most female brains



are interconnected structures with pathways that integrate various sections of the brain. This configuration enables many women to be able to multitask and spontaneously generate multiple solutions to specific problems.^{3,4}

Chemical make-up

Many men's brain chemistries, marked by the existence of high levels of testosterone and the peptide hormone vasopressin, drive them toward competitive natures, preferences for individual work and tendencies to respond to problems with action.^{5,6} Many women's chemical make-ups, marked by the existence of high levels of oxytocin, estrogen, progesterone and serotonin, propel them to work interdependently, seek out relationships and talk through various approaches to situations.^{7,8}

Flow of information

Most male brains tend to process information in a linear and fact-seeking manner. Input flows through spatial-mechanical areas that drive action and processing information through the use of charts and physical means.^{9,10} The flow of information through most female brains tends to lie in the verbal centres. This enables easy connection between words and concepts that contain memories, feelings and senses.^{11,12}

In order to develop effective male mentor-female mentee relationships, it is critical to understand that both men and women are capable of high degrees of success and that the way each goes about making success happen tends to be different. The more the mentoring pair utilises the knowledge of gender differences in their interactions, the greater will be the potential for success of their mentoring relationship.

Knowledge in motion

We combined research about gender differences with conversations with female leaders and men who have mentored women to create practical tips for creating effective and fulfilling mentoring experiences. Male mentors and female mentees can productively impact this important relationship through intentional, knowledge-based action.

Tips for the male mentor:

Begin with a frank discussion about your mentee's long- and short-term goals

Men and women tend to approach their careers (and tasks in general) differently. Men often think strategically about what will make them successful and then focus on what needs to be done to reach specific goals. Women tend to view their careers as one of many important activities in their lives and create strategies to handle all of their pressing demands. Talking to a women mentee about how she defines long-term success in specific areas of her life and the routes she can take to achieve her goals moves her

forward purposefully and highlights ways that the mentoring relationship can help her achieve her ideal career.

Get to know your female mentee

Women tend toward a 'connected' style of learning where they relate what they learn to their personal experiences. Men tend toward a 'separate' style that focuses predominantly on facts and analysis. Therefore, integrate personal conversation and context into the mentoring relationship. Discussing topics such as the people who are important to your mentee, her values, ideal career, how she would like to blend personal principles with her professional pursuits and areas of strength and discomfort foster the connective environment in which many women best learn.

Discover and support her way

Activities that foster your success may not be comfortable for your female mentee. You may ask friends for business, develop your network on the golf course and challenge opinions of your colleagues to find the most innovative solutions for clients. These activities may not feel natural for your mentee. Talk with her about activities that are consistent with her preferences and lifestyle to create a strategy for success. Asking questions such as how she communicates, how she offers to help others, where she socialises and what activities she most enjoys will assist you to create a career-development plan together. Concurrently, support her in experimenting with behaviours outside of her comfort zone. This may encourage her to discover and incorporate the use of techniques, approaches and tools that she may not find initially attractive.

Find out what she needs

When your mentee presents you with a problem, ask specifically what she needs from you. Many men's action orientation drives them to immediately solve problems, while women's typically relational and verbal style drives them to want to talk about problems and then figure out solutions as needed. Clarify the purpose and desired outcome of a conversation to enable you to be 'in sync' with your mentee and raise the likelihood that a discussion is satisfying and productive.

Be positive, encouraging and affirming

Positive, encouraging comments are strong motivators for many women, particularly when they perceive themselves to be taking a risk. Express confidence in your female mentee and provide frequent affirmation to foster her self-confidence.

Ask, don't assume

Wanting to be respectful, supportive and protective of her way may propel you to make assumptions about your female mentee's desires. For example, if your mentee typically works from home on Tuesdays, you may not invite her to a client event

on a Tuesday night because you respect what you think are her boundaries. Similarly, if you are involved in a deal where she would be the only female on the team, you may not ask her to be involved as you don't want her to be uncomfortable. In all situations don't assume that you know her preference. This empowers your female mentee to make choices and positions mentoring as an inclusive relationship.

Tips for the female mentee:

Plan, prepare and focus during mentoring meetings

Treat time with your mentor as a formal meeting. Plan an agenda and give it to him ahead of time. Prepare for meetings by reflecting on prior conversations, particularly on how his suggestions contributed to your activities. During the meeting, stay on topic. While you may have a tendency to bring up issues as they come to you, his thinking style is likely to be more segmented.

Manage tendencies to criticise yourself

Many women have the innate capacity to note others' non-verbal behaviours. They often interpret some of this data as signs that they are not doing well or that they may not be liked. This is a dangerous assumption and can contribute to a lack of confidence and inability to connect effectively with your mentor. Rather than assuming that you know how your mentor feels about your efforts, ask him for feedback. Additionally, challenge self-doubting inclinations so that fear that you are not 'good enough' does not inhibit your abilities. Remind yourself that making mistakes is an essential part of learning. These shifts make your mentoring relationship a safe platform to acquire information and skills needed to progress.

Use direct, focused and clear communication

Research indicates that women generally use more words than men.^{13, 14} This results in complex, lengthy speech patterns. With

fewer interconnected neuropsychological pathways especially ones that connect language and affect, men tend to focus on one concept at a time and emphasise facts. In order to optimise the mentoring relationship, converse in a clear and organised fashion and manage tendencies to ramble or embellish. If you desire to vent frustration or share excitement about an invigorating day, ask your mentor if he is willing to listen.

Ask for what you need

Women tend to wait for the person with more power to initiate contact and offer assistance. In order to make your ideal career a reality, it is essential that you assertively ask your mentor for help. Also ask for support, a second opinion, to accompany him to client meetings, seminars and events, and for help obtaining important learning experiences.

Consider all suggestions even when the style doesn't match yours

Exposure to a male mentor gives you a valuable opportunity to add to your repertoire of behaviours and approaches. Trying it his way enables you to develop multiple ways of engaging others.

Initiate connection with your mentor

Let your innate drive to connect guide you to initiate informal time with your mentor. Stop by his office to say 'hi'. Ask questions about his work, family and hobbies. Know what is important to your mentor and ways that you can help further his goals. This adds a component of mutuality and leads to strong relationships.

Tips for both male mentors and female mentees:

Acknowledge differences

Gender driven differences can challenge the mentoring bond. Acknowledge and discuss differences to foster trust, individual learning and blend different ideas into concepts that could not be developed by either individual on his or her own. When differences are combined and leveraged, the potential of the relationship can be realised.

Set expectations.

Relationships begin with a degree of ambiguity. This is particularly true for individuals who possess many differences: gender, firm roles, level of professional experience and so on. It is therefore essential that the mentoring relationship begin with a discussion of issues such as what each person wants to accomplish from the relationship, what structure works best for both, his mentoring style, her learning style and how to weave these together. It is important to bear in mind that no relationship can provide everything. Mentees need not have only one mentor. Find others (male or female) to provide input in areas that may not be your mentor's strengths. Mentors should help your





mentee find additional resources for growth and support. Setting expectations provides a clear agenda for the relationship and creates an overarching strategy for success.

Discuss ways to give feedback

In order for the relationship to stay effective, it is important to frequently discuss how the relationship is working. These conversations can touch on areas that may be sensitive to either or both parties. At the outset of the relationship, talk about how to approach these conversations so that each person is comfortable. Discuss topics that you may cover such as how the pairing is progressing toward stated goals and ways that each individual has contributed to the relationship. It is also critical that both share the words, tone and context that help them to openly receive and benefit from feedback. Learning how a person prefers hearing about areas that could use improvement helps future exchanges.

Assume that mistakes will be made

A male mentor once told us, 'I need to be in a mistake forgiving environment. These days I feel like I am walking on eggshells'. It is critical that a male mentor-female mentee pairing agree to point out behaviours that cause discomfort in a blame-free manner. This creates a safe and productive venue for men and women to teach each other how to work powerfully together.

Replace but with and

Awareness of the impact of 'but' and 'and' on a message helps each individual communicate a clear message. The word 'but' often connotes a problem. For example, the sentence, 'I want to do more business development *but* I would have to resign from the committee', communicates that a choice may need to be made between the first and second part of the phrase. When 'and' replaces 'but', the stage is set for solutions. In the new sentence, 'I want to do business development *and* be on the committee,' the speaker and listener are propelled to find a solution that includes both elements of the sentence. In addition, 'and' validates differences, neither party is right or wrong, merely different. The mentoring pair no longer discuss what is better but instead explores how to incorporate the best of both perspectives into a new possibility.

In summary

The relationship between male mentors and female mentees is a critical catalyst for the development of talent in law firms. To optimise the effectiveness of this relationship, it is important to possess a framework that guides you to think about differences. In one model, the 'ladder' or vertical model, traits and characteristics are considered to be better than or less than each other. This model is evaluative and typically creates a scenario where individuals feel minimised. A second model is a 'bridge' or horizontal model. Here, differences are thought without

judgment. Individuals are empowered to utilise their unique ways to successfully attain their goals.

Knowing how to bridge differences so that multiple approaches, beliefs, styles and capabilities are all considered as potentially viable ways of becoming a successful lawyer enables the co-gendered pair to foster a strong connection, leverage their strengths and combine their areas of diversity, dynamically and productively.

As parties implement knowledge-based actions to make their co-gendered mentoring relationships effective, mentoring becomes a mechanism that fosters growth and fulfillment for individuals and adds ingredients to a law firm environment that further enables both men and women to thrive. [WOMENLEGAL](#)

References

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