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# Mentorship Experiences of Women Leaders in Adventist Higher Education Institutions

**JRI**

# MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN LEADERS IN ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Nadine A. Joseph-Collins

**Abstrac**t

There has been an increase in women selected to serve as university presidents at Adventist Higher Education institutions worldwide within the past few years. Notwithstanding that increase, the overall representation of women in that position is still proportionately low. To date, about 22 women have served since we first began operating higher education institutions in 1874. At present, about nine women are serving as presidents of AHEIs; this is largest number serving at any one time since 1874.  Having so few women, in these top-level positions does not provide opportunities for women to mentor other women. This paper examined the mentorship experiences of seven women who served or are currently serving as presidents of AHEIs prior to their appointments as presidents. General findings reveal that the mentorship experiences played a critical role in the career advancement of these women leaders, although in the majority of the cases, men mentored these women. It is therefore highly recommended that strategic and deliberate mentorship opportunities be available for women-to-women, in an effort to ensure that more women leaders emerge to serve at AHEIs.

## Introduction and Background

Mentorship or mentoring refers to relationships in which an empowered person provides support and guidance to a less experienced person (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Santamaria, 2003). These relationships can be either formal or informal (Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000; Kasprisin, Boyle Single, Single, & Muller, 2003; Packard, 2003). Formal mentorship exists when there is an actual mutually agreed-upon relationship where both parties benefit (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). According to Wong and Premkumar (2007), these formal mentorship relationships are systematic since organizations match mentors and mentees together.

Informal mentorship on the other hand according to Wong and Premkumar (2007) is "a type of relationship that is established spontaneously; largely psychosocial that helps enhance the mentee's self esteem and confidence by providing emotional support and discovery of common interests" (p. 17). In simplifying the term and practice of informal mentorship, Zachary (2009) suggests that "informal mentoring relationships are usually described as unstructured, casual, and natural" (p. 64). Basically, the informal mentorship happens when there is no agreed upon relationship or goal-setting, but a more experienced person still offers guidance and the like for a protégé, and both parties are beneficiaries (Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000). Many authors admit that there is much value to these informal mentorship relationships. For example, Ragins and

Cotton (1999) found that protégées in informal mentorship relationships were more content with their mentors when compared to those in formal relationships.

There also appears to be some distinct functions to the mentoring relationships. Kram (1983, 1985) states that there are two in the relationship between the mentees or protégés and the mentors. These are career-related or psychosocial functions. Career-related functions generally refers to the guidance that the mentor offers in helping the mentee or protégée develop or advance in their careers (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Kram, 1983, 1985; Noe, 1988a; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Underhill, 2006). Levinson (1978) for example have also found it to be a significant catalyst for men in their mid-careers. Kram (1983, 1985, 1988) submits that mentors influenced lateral moves and promotions, and provides opportunities for exposure and visibility; the tools needed to maneuver within the organizational culture. Other authors even discovered that both mentors and protégés placed greater significance on the career functions aspect of the mentorship relations than on psychosocial functions (Tillman, 2001).

Psychosocial-related functions of the mentor-mentee relationship generally refer to the mentor acting as a friend, counselor, confidant and listener to the mentee or protégé (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Kram, 1983, 1985, 1988; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Some authors argue that the psychological function of the relationships also assist the mentees in their personal development. For example, Wong and Premkumar (1997) suggest, "…mentored individuals enjoy higher self- confidence, self-efficacy, and self-assurance" (p. 5). Interestingly, in a one-year study conducted by Seibert (1999), the researcher found that mentees/protégés got more psychosocial support than career-related support.

Overall, Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy (2001) made distinctions between mentorship structures such as peer mentoring and supervisory mentoring and links their success to the two functions of Kram (1983), career and psychosocial. Consequently, Ensher et.al (2007) argue that peer mentoring is better in developing a psychosocial function approach, while supervisory mentoring would be better at advancing the career function.  There are several research articles examining whether there are differences in the mentoring experiences of males and females and even the willingness of genders to mentor each other (Allen & Eby, 2003; Allen, Poteet, Russell & Dobbins, 1997; Noe, 1998a).

### Gender and Mentorship

There are views that women are less inclined or interested in mentoring others. Ragins and Cotton (1993) report finding differences in the willingness of male and female to mentor others; citing that women found greater barriers to mentoring others than men did. Later, other studies found that women did not have less interest or intentions to mentor than men did (see Noe, 1988a). Other studies found no differences in the willingness of men and women to mentor others (Allen, Poteet, Russell and Dobbins, 1997; Ragins, 1989).

As it relates to women mentoring women, Kram (1998) contends that women were reluctant to mentor other women because of perceived barriers such as time constraints, token status and a lack of self-confidence. According to Kram (1998), this is linked to the absence or low rate of more female mentors mentoring other women. Some authors even argue that women do not have enough guidance, encouragement and modeling/demonstrations in their academic careers (Bronstein, Rothblum, & Solomon, 1993), thereby hindering their progress or rise to leadership, and consequently, their mentoring of younger women to do the same. Overall, Astin and Leland (1991) found that men have been conscious of mentoring women who they deem as having leadership abilities.

Notably, a significant finding of a few studies on gender and mentorship indicate that persons who served as mentors were themselves mentored, and these people were more likely or willing to mentor others (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1993; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). According to Kram (1985), the willingness of these people can be attributed to them being first-hand recipients of mentorship.

In general, the willingness or opportunities for mentoring may be problematic since few women are in top leadership; fewer women are reported as mentors and consequently may not be in the leadership positions to mentor other women. Some authors have stated, "factors that hindered women's career development was their lack of exposure to role models and mentors (Bower, 1993; T. M. Brown, 2005, as cited in Joseph, 2014, p. 33). In addition, Ragins and Scandura (1994) posit that the differences in the willingness of gender groups to mentor others may simply be functions of rank, position and resources. As such, women's mentorship selections and experiences in the workplace may differ.

There are also contending opinions about the experiences of mentorship relationships across genders. Noe (1998b) in examining formal mentorship relationships found that mentors reported being more effectively utilized by mentees or protégées across genders than in same-gender relationships. Suggesting that persons were possibly more comfortable being mentored by someone of a different sex, or that mentors themselves had greater mentorship experiences with persons of the opposite sex.

Allen and Eby (2003) found no differences in the satisfaction levels between same-gender and cross-gender mentorship relationships. Regardless of the type of mentorship, formal or informal, the mentorship functions performed and achieved- career or psychosocial, or even the willingness of gendered groups to mentor and the experiences persons have with being mentored, same-sex or cross-sex, many authors are of the view that there are significant benefits to mentorship for both the mentor and mentee.

## Benefits of Mentorship in the Workplace

There appears to be some major benefits for companies that promote or have established mentorship programs in the work place and for mentors and mentees who participate in these programs. For example, the literature suggest some benefits to the mentor such as having pride in the accomplishments of the mentee; being able to experience renewed enthusiasm, and solidarity, which has an overall positive outcome in the organization (Williams, 2000). Other authors have also share some of the views of Williams (2000), but add other benefits such as having a rewarding experience by passing knowledge and skills to others thereby leaving a legacy; (Kram, 1985; Levinson, 1978; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). In addition, having fresh and insightful energy; improvement in job performance because of new perspectives shared by mentee or protégé; being recognized by others and the organization; having the loyalty and support of the mentee or protégé were also noted as benefits of mentoring (Kram, 1985; Levinson, 1978; Ragins & Scandura, 1999).

Particularly, Kram (1983, 1985, 1988) contend that the mentors can also assist the mentees in learning about the organization; specifically as it relates to mentees developing and taking up management and leadership roles. These organizational aspects Williams (2000) submits are the politics of the organization, norms, standards, values, ideologies and, history of the organization. Overall, Williams (2000) argues that mentoring creates enthusiasm, camaraderie, and professionalism, and influences positively the entire culture of the organization, promoting organizational values, norms, and standards.

Volunteerism seems to be another aspect or arm of mentorship that is being explored. For

example, recent studies are concluding that mentorship, being very closely linked to volunteerism has significant psychological and physiological benefits such as reducing depression, improved physical health, lower mortality rates and assisting persons in managing stress better (Brown, Nesse, Vinder & Smith, 2003; Konrath, Fuhrel-Forbis, Lou, & Brown, 2012; Okun & Brown, 2011; Okun, Yeung & Brown, 2013). Consequently, it appears that establishing mentorship relationships among any group of people, especially women within an organization can have significant positive impact for the general growth and sustainability of the organization.

In a seminal study conducted on women leaders who served as presidents of Adventist Higher Education Institutions (AHEIs), Joseph (2014) found that women leaders generally reported having male mentors or no mentors at all. Importantly, the Seventh-day Adventist church currently runs the second largest educational system in the world after the Catholic Church (Byrd, 2009; Daily, 2000), and open its doors since 1874 (Greenleaf, 2005, Joseph, 2014). Notably, since 1874, approximately only 22 women have been appointed and inaugurated as presidents of AHEIs worldwide, even though a woman, Ellen White was forefront in establishing the educational system (Knight, 1983, 2001). This article therefore examines the mentorship experiences of seven women leaders who served or are currently serving as presidents of AHEIs.

## Method

Data about the mentorship experiences of the female college and university presidents at AHEIs present and past were collected as part of the seminal study conducted to examine the lived experiences of women who served as presidents of AHEIs. At the time of the study, about 17 women had served or were serving as presidents. Data is therefore specific to the seven participants of that study and one other woman who served as president but was not part of the study. Purposive sampling techniques, specifically snowballing was used since the population was so small.

The research question from which the data were derived "What personal and professional relationships and experiences influenced the development of the women who have served as presidents at AHEIs?" had a specific associated sub-question, "Who were your mentors, if any, during your academic and professional journey?" This question was guided by Clinton's Leadership Emergence Theory (1989), which explores the development of Christian leaders such as the process, pattern, sequencing of events, and leaders' response to God in their leadership journey.

## Findings and Discussion

Mentorship seems to be an increasingly important aspect of organizational development and appears to have benefits for persons within these organizations since people who mentor tend to advance in their careers (Nemanick, 2000). The literature review posits that there are different types of mentorship models such as formal and informal; different functions of mentors such as career and psychological and gender-relate in the willingness of women to mentor others.

### Informal Mentorship

The literature tends to favor informal mentorship over formal mentorship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Chao, Walz & Gardner, 1992). There may be varied reasons, but Ragins and Scandura (1999) contend that if there is a heavy focus on negotiating anticipated outcomes, persons may choose not too mentors others. This is possibly due to the perceived unnecessary pressure or commitment to the mentoring relationship. Notably, none of the women in this study

reported having formal mentorship relationships. Women leaders were actually able to articulate the nature of their informal relationships with their mentors.

> I will say informal, in that we did not sign any paperwork or say this was actually a mentor-mentee relationship. It was more we would have those lunches together and have those conversations. He would send me off to conferences. I would come back and present to the campus on the topics or work on different projects.
> So she was an indirect or an informal mentor, She helped me quite a bit. Even though she did not convince me to get into the field of education, I am convinced that what she said to me really helped me in my future.

One-woman leader shares how her informal mentorship relationship worked.

> The president was sort of like an informal mentor or somebody. I saw the way he functioned as a president. He would have his agenda—this long, legal-sized pad—and he would write everything. If someone called, he immediately addressed that call. He never was behind in anything. He was always on top of everything…
> He was a very caring person. He was very balanced, and so I think he modeled leadership. I think that helped. It was indirect because I do not think that was something that he was telling me, or shadowing, watching what I do. I just saw the good things he did.
> The women in this study were obvious beneficiaries to informal mentorship relationships.

As such, having more mentorship relationships, whether formal or informal may lend well in developing or uncovering more women leaders in AHEIs. A major benefit to possibly establishing informal mentorship programs emerges from the work of Chao, Walz and Gardner (1992) who found that mentees or protégées in informal mentorship settings scored significantly higher on career functions than those in formal mentoring relationships.

Notably, Zachary (2009) submits, "today's organizations need to pay attention to informal as well as formal mentoring taking place among employees. Raising the bar on practice for informal mentoring enriches all the mentoring that goes on with the organization" (p. 64). The data of the seven women reveal that two distinctively had male mentors, three had no mentorship experiences, formal or informal, one had distinct female mentors and one had both male and female mentors.

## Male Mentors

Of the seven female presidents, two mentioned being distinctly mentored by men and eventually advancing significantly in their careers and eventual appointments to serve as presidents of AHEIs. One of these woman leaders believed that her mentors might have recognized great leadership qualities in her, possibly leading them to choosing to mentor her.

> I have had great opportunities. I would say most of my mentors have been male… I think they identified me as someone who had these qualities… the right stuff, which is maybe an intangible.

This participant's feelings and experiences closely mirrors the findings of Astin and Leland (1991), that male mentors were generally deliberate in mentoring women who aspired for leadership, provided significant training and relevant leadership opportunities for these women, and believed that these women had what it took to "make it".

Notably, there are sometimes unique differences beyond gender in the mentorship relationships. Blake-Beard (1991) for example posits that mentor effectiveness transcends differences in gender, academic disciplines, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or disability status. One-woman leader experience is truly reflective of this.

He was the president of an organization and we were just so different in every way: age, race, cultural background, experiences and even continents. There were just so many differences, but yet, he had the capacity to see the possibilities in me and opened the doors for me to achieve whatever I could in an environment which otherwise could have been quite difficult within the organization environment at that time. He would always open up and give me a challenge. He would sometimes ask, "What do you think about this? " He gave me opportunities and I would take some of them and run with them. He just seemed to enjoy seeing me excel.

### Female Mentors

Though women-to-women mentorship is rising, the gross underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions (Acker, 1989; Shakeshaft, 1989; Cook, 2012) is disconcerting since it can hinder more women from mentoring other women, and slow the eventuality of women rising to top leadership positions (Bronstein et al., 1993; Byrne, as cited in Ehrich, 1998; Dessler, 2008; Marshall, 1985; Ragins, 1989). Of the seven women leaders in this paper, only one reported being distinctly mentored by another woman leader.

In the same year that I was hired, our principal resigned and Mrs. X who was the registrar became the principal. Afterwards, I was appointed to the position.  Because I did not have any experience working in the registrar's office, she worked very closely with me and taught me the intricacies of my job as registrar and as an English teacher.

Overall, other studies have also found that some women leaders reported not having female mentors "I must tell you that, in general, I have had no female mentor. I wasn't fortunate enough" (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 52).  Another issue in mentorship for women is not having any mentors at all.

### No Mentors

Tyson (2002) strongly contends that in order for women to rise in leadership and careers, they need to network, have access to support systems and develop mentoring relationships. It is notable that three of the seven women reported not having male or female, informal nor formal mentorship experiences.  Despite not having mentors, they were able to advance to serve in a top leadership position.

When I was in the doctoral program, I did not have a mentor. In fact, I never had a mentor and it is a big regret for me.  I suffer from that until now.

I never had a mentor in secondary school or college.  I never had a mentor in the workplace either.

Again, one-woman leader in the Astin and Leland (1991) study expressed not having the support of a mentor. This finding echoes the reports of the two women leaders in this study. Notwithstanding the accomplishments of all of these women leaders, Brown, Van Ummersen and Sturnick (2001) argue that for women to advance in academic leadership, they must be mentored and mentor others. As such, these women may represent the exceptions rather than the rule. Analysis of the data of the seven women leaders indicate that it is within the organization the career and psychological functions of the mentorship relationship take effect.

### Career Functions

There seem to be significant benefits to the career-related aspect of the mentorship relationship; specifically, being a catalyst for career advancement. Brown (2005) for example posits, "mentoring can help prepare aspiring female college presidents to replace those college presidents who are approaching retirement" (p. 660). Some of the women leaders had significant experiences relating to their careers.

I worked with him {my mentor], and we got a million dollar grant from the X Foundation. At that time, he said to me, "You know, I will need some help in my office. Would you like to work with me as the assistant provost?" At that time, there were no assistant provosts. The job did not exist. I had gone with him to the conference, and on the plane on the way back is when he was asking me all this. I said, "Sure, I would like to do that." He came back, created that job for me, and I got it. That is when I realized okay, I am not going to be a faculty member anymore.  Now I am going to be an administrator. Now I am just three steps away from the presidency pretty much, right.  I am assistant provost, associate provost, provost, and then president. At that moment, my trajectory changed. That is when I realized okay, I am probably going to be a college president one day.  Let me start getting my head ready for that.

### Psychological Functions

The psychological function of the mentorship relationship seems to be as equally important to the mentee. Women leaders reported having significantly benefited from having a good rapport with their mentors.

He was the first person of his race to serve as president in the organization.  Because of that, he faced quite a bit of pushback. It was a difficult moment for the organization to adjust, and I came in new the same time as him as a director. I watched him, and I saw how he was able to react to some of the real hostility and criticism that he sometimes got. I asked him how he did that, and he told me that it was something like a switch in his head I think was the way he put it, but that when someone attacked him, he would instinctively shift it to, "I wonder what is happening for this individual, and how can I help them?"

That really helped me learn how to deal with negativism or critical individuals and realize that, yeah, you have to ask yourself if there is any validity in what someone says. If there is, you need to take it on, but beyond that, it often has nothing to do with you. That helps you relax about it and actually work with someone who is feeling negative or hostile towards you.

Another woman leader shares about her experiences with her female mentor

We shared many common things. We loved almost the same books, the same movies, and the same food. I was the only single teacher and in a way she was single, too, so we spent our spare time together. She taught me how to cook, to sew, to spend money. She was very generous in giving me counsel in almost all aspects of life.

### Career and Psychological Functions

It appears that mentors do not generally distinguish the mentorship functions to either psychological or career functions, even though by examining the data, we were able to distinguish these roles. In most instances however, it appears that mentors performed these dual roles simultaneously and one function influenced the other. The experience of one participant highlighted:

…Many of my graduate teachers were my mentors. I really cannot say it was one person. I guess throughout my professional career, I encountered several people along the way who would encourage me to continue my studies. They would encourage me to continue towards the doctoral degree. According to them, once I get a doctoral degree, more doors would open for me.  We worked very closely together, so they knew that I probably had the skills and the capacity.

Even though women felt that their mentors were open and supportive as it related to their psychosocial needs, all of them felt more strongly that their mentors had been critical to toward their career development and eventual appointments to their positions as presidents, because of the experiences they garnered.

Overall, the mentorship experiences of the women leaders were mainly informal. Notably, while mentors heavily influenced career development of the women leaders, reflecting the career functions (Kram, 1983) mentioned in literature, mentors may not have necessarily separated the functions of career from that of psychological. In addition, while other studies found women to be less willing to mentor others (Allen & Eby, 2003; Allen, Poteet, Russell & Dobbins, 1997; Noe, 1998a), the women leaders in this study were not readily exposed to having women mentors because few women were in leadership roles that would give them the platform to be mentors. Consequently, women reported being generally mentored by men, and a few mentioned having women mentors singly or as part of their mentorship "group" of persons who influenced their leadership development into becoming president of a higher education institution.

## Conclusion

Even though informal mentorship relationships tend to produce great results, I believe it would be beneficial for women leaders in the Adventist education system to be more systematic or deliberate in mentoring young women since that relationship can lend well to creating new women leaders. Kram (1998) contends that in the absence of mentors sponsoring mentees, many persons are overlooked for promotions even though they may possess the requisite potential and abilities.

Finally, Brown (2005) submits, "mentoring is an invaluable resource for the recruitment and preparation of women for the college presidency" (p. 659). Consequently, in order for more women leaders to serve as presidents of AHEIs, deliberate efforts need to be made in establishing or promoting the idea of making mentorship a significant part of the organizational structure. Allen (2003) recommends that mentoring be part of the overall organizational citizenship behavior. Such deliberate efforts can only have positive effects on the growth of women leaders to serve as presidents of AHEIs, possibly affect the rise of women in other leadership areas, and create an organization that plans for leadership successfully.

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