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December, 2023

MENToring Matters for Women

More Women in Financial Services Need Mentors

Women Remain Underrepresented in the C-Suite in Financial Services

Most individuals – whether female or male – begin their careers in entry level positions; however, research shows their career paths can begin to diverge early on. Calling it a bigger obstacle than the glass ceiling, McKinsey and Leanin.Org identified what they call the broken rung in 2019. The broken rung phenomenon occurs as women in entry level positions are promoted to managerial levels at lower rates than men. A 2021 update of the study revealed that for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 86 women are promoted. As the effects of the broken rung proliferate across organizational layers, there are fewer women in senior leadership roles. Additionally, the updated report revealed that men are promoted at a 30% more rapid rate, while women in entry-level roles typically spend five or more years in the same role. Even though women accounted for approximately half of the workforce in Financial Services their numbers decrease at every step up the corporate ladder. Data published by Statista in August showed that in 2021, roughly 21% of the C-suite roles in the financial services sector in the United States were held by women. This disproportionate number of female executives means that there are fewer women in positions to serve as role models or mentors. In 2019, RiverFront launched our ENGAGE initiative to improve the experience of women in financial services. Understanding its importance, we have included mentoring as one of the core tenets of our group's mission. Not only is it good for individuals, we also believe the benefits extend to our firm's culture.

Mentoring is a Win-Win-Win

Mentorship is widely considered beneficial both to individuals as well as corporate cultures.

- From the perspective of the mentee, mentoring relationships can provide a safe space to ask questions, an opportunity to gain experience from more experienced colleagues, and greater ability to accelerate both personal and professional development. Often, employees who have mentors report being more satisfied in their current job than those without. Importantly, the majority of those who have been mentored say that they will go on to become mentors themselves.
- Employees who take on the role of mentor also find significant benefits, according to a study by the Harvard Business Review. In the study, not only did people who served as mentors report lower levels of anxiety, they also described their job as more meaningful than those who did not mentor others.
- The benefits of mentoring often roll upwards as companies with mentoring programs typically experience lower levels of turnover and higher degrees of employee satisfaction. Further, it should be no surprise that almost all US Fortune 500 companies have mentoring programs.

Plan for Success

Given that every individual is unique, and every company has a different corporate size and structure, there is no one-size-fits all when it comes to mentoring. However, there are key elements that successful mentoring initiatives share. Some of them include:

- Have a clear objective. Whether the program is for knowledge sharing or retention, having specific goals will make it easier to measure success and course correct if necessary.
- Make sure the mentors possess the skills necessary to be effective. Plenty of seasoned professionals want to provide support and encouragement to younger associates, but many of them may have never actually had the benefit of working with a mentor themselves. In fact, over 60% of women have never had a formal mentor.
- The strength of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee will determine the effectiveness of the pairing. Consider the goals for each mentor/mentee relationship, and make sure the mentor has the requisite experience level to provide good insight.
- Be inclusive as possible to make sure everyone who wants to participate has the opportunity.
- The initiative must have support from the highest levels of management to ensure that it becomes ingrained as part of the culture of the firm.

Men Can Help Bridge the Mentoring Gap

Women in entry level positions may experience frustration when they try to find someone who looks like them in senior management ranks. At RiverFront, women account for 40% of our associates; however, when we began our own mentoring program, we still needed more mentors from the senior ranks of the firm than we had women to serve in those roles. To help bridge that gap, several men from our senior ranks stepped up to help. In their book *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women*, authors Brad Johnson, PhD., and David Smith, PhD. address the unequal nature of the mentoring landscape. They call it a numbers game. With more men than women in senior level positions, the result can be an imbalance of influence and power. The authors believe the issue is compounded as male leaders may subconsciously seek out mentees who remind them of themselves. The phrase “birds of a feather flock together” reiterates the premise that it is human nature to form connections with others who remind us of ourselves. This can be problematic when it comes to professional mentoring relationships. While a mentoring imbalance may still exist, Dr. Smith highlighted that men who do mentor women often gain greater knowledge about their own organization, particularly if they mentor an associate outside of their own business unit. In 2019, a survey of four hundred men by *Fairygodboss* revealed that 87.5 percent of them wanted to help women advance their careers but most were not sure how to help. One of the suggestions for men, when serving as mentors, was to acknowledge that their experiences and tracks to advancement may not look the same as their female colleagues. Another idea was to create “mentoring circles” – small groups of both men and women to mentor each other under the leadership of a more senior colleague.

Strengthen the Corporate Ladder by Eliminating the Broken Rung

Often, when individuals or companies undertake a new cultural initiative there is a high level of enthusiasm and support. Over time, however, that momentum can fade as the reality of day-to-day schedules and deadlines takes precedent. Hectic times mean calendars are crammed, making it easy for “soft” initiatives such as mentoring programs to be relegated to the bottom of the priority list. In order to keep mentoring initiatives on track, it may be more meaningful for organizations to foster a culture of mentoring rather than simply instituting a mentoring program. Drs. Johnson and Smith suggest the following as just a few of the ways to stay on track:

- Routinely assess the mentoring culture to find out how employees feel about the culture.
- Reinforce and reward mentoring behaviors with public shout-outs and awards to celebrate associates for their involvement.
- Ensure clarity, transparency, and accountability with regular evaluations and metrics designed specifically to track your program.

At RiverFront we know the “soft stuff is the hard stuff”, and we understand the importance of the “soft strategies” which focus on changes in management style, work culture, and people.

About ENGAGE

RiverFront founded Engage in 2019 with the goal of changing and improving the experience for women in financial services. The mission of Engage is to engage women in our Industry through mentorship, education, and support.

[View our full library of Engage articles here.](#)

Sources:

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¹⁰[Normalizing career breaks™ ...for everyone, everywhere. - iRelaunch](#)

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