

HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

# Creating a Culture of Mentorship

A new survey sheds light on the importance of mentoring—what works, what doesn't, why it matters, and how companies could support it better.



# Creating a culture of mentorship

## Report at a glance

**Executive summary**

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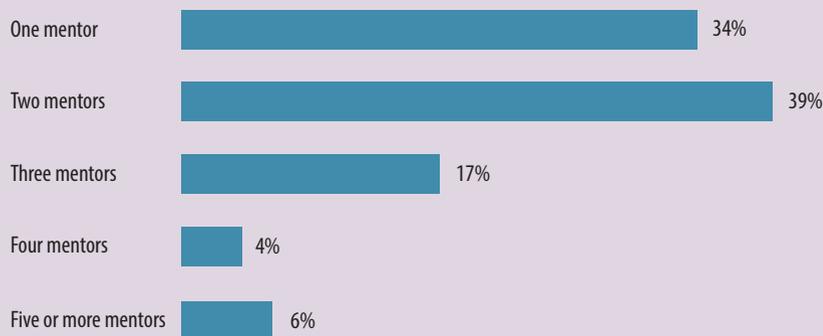
**The when, who, how, and why of mentoring**

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Heidrick & Struggles surveyed more than 1,000 professionals in North America to learn how and why mentoring relationships develop and operate, as well as how they benefit mentees. The findings highlight:

**Career impact of mentoring**  
**Length of relationship**  
**Method of introduction**  
**Reasons for seeking a mentor**  
**Type of advice received**

**Question:** During your working career, how many mentors have you had who offered guidance and advice?  
n = 1,032



**64%**  
of respondents say their primary mentoring relationship lasted five years or less

The majority of respondents said their primary mentoring relationship was very or extremely important to their career.

Just **27%** of respondents said their current organization offers a formal mentoring program.

52%

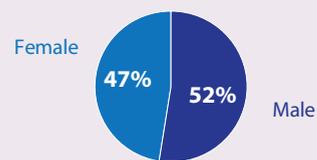
of respondents in the energy industry said their primary mentor was in **senior management**, compared with 11–40% of respondents in other industries.

Closing the gender gap

Men usually have male mentors, and women usually have female mentors.

More men than women said their primary mentor was a high-level executive.

Survey respondents' gender



Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Mentoring across diverse lines

Minority respondents are more likely than the overall respondent pool to say they have participated in a formal mentoring program and that they still have an active relationship with their primary mentor.

Minority mentees also have a stronger tendency to choose a mentor due to similar backgrounds or for networking opportunities.

Survey respondents' race/ethnicity



## Executive summary

Few executives would deny the powerful role that mentorship plays in providing opportunities for personal and professional development. Indeed, most have experienced these benefits firsthand. Yet when it comes to understanding how mentoring operates—let alone how it could be harnessed to support, develop, and retain talented people—most of those same executives have little grounding in data or experience beyond their own.

To help address this disparity, Heidrick & Struggles recently surveyed more than 1,000 professionals in North America about their experience with mentoring, supplementing the online survey with additional, in-depth interviews of 20 senior executives with particular experience in mentoring. (See sidebar, “About the research.”) We found that mentorship is generally a positive and impactful experience—particularly for women and self-described ethnic and racial minorities.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, our interviews highlighted the importance of a personal bond and chemistry in forming an effective mentoring relationship characterized by trust and openness—sentiments that can be challenging to promote in formal mentoring programs.

### Among the findings:

- More than three in four respondents report that their most impactful mentoring relationship was either “very important” or “extremely important” to their career development. Women and minorities were the most likely to say that the relationship was extremely important.
- Minority respondents were more likely than the overall respondent pool to form their primary mentoring relationship when they were in a middle-management position (as opposed to entry-level or upper management).
- Regarding the importance of input from their mentor, women placed more value than men on advice about professional strengths and development opportunities.
- More than half of those respondents who participated in formal mentoring programs at work were satisfied with the experience, and minorities were the most likely to say the programs were valuable. Yet just 27% of respondents said their organization offers such programs.

Taken together, the findings outline the challenges companies face when it comes to harnessing mentoring in service of improving diversity outcomes, gender parity, and the fostering of talent. For example, the executives we interviewed were unanimous in their skepticism about the efficacy of formal mentorship programs, arguing that personal chemistry cannot be forced

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, “minorities” refers to the 17% of survey respondents who said that, in their current organization, the majority of individuals are a different race and/or ethnicity as the respondent.

through such matchmaking. Meanwhile, survey respondents maintain that such programs are important and effective tools.

Regardless of the format, a growing body of evidence suggests companies that offer mentoring effectively have a competitive edge in the fight for talent. One survey found that 68% of people with a mentor said they intend to stay with their organization for more than five years; just 32% of people without a mentor said the same.<sup>2</sup>

Based on our survey and interview findings, the right mix of mentoring approaches—both formal structure and informal, organic connections—is a balancing act. Clearly, not enough companies have implemented formal programs, but given the personal nature of mentoring relationships, the clearest call to action is to build a culture of mentorship as an ecosystem to support formal structures. A company culture that embraces and promotes mentorship will provide an advantageous backdrop for a formal mentoring program. Companies that do this right will be well positioned to unlock the potential of mentorship in attracting, developing, and retaining their workforce.

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<sup>2</sup> Deloitte, *The 2016 Deloitte Millennial Survey: Winning over the Next Generation of Leaders*, 2016, deloitte.com.

## The best advice I ever got from my mentor was ...

*There's always going to be an opportunity to do what you want later, so pick your battles. I was hotheaded and wanted to take on more than I could handle in my early career. My mentor taught me to take a slower yet more complete approach, and my work improved drastically.*

*Make the most of your strengths and delegate the rest. I think this was very helpful since I am a do-it-all-myself kind of individual, and it really helped to hear someone tell me the importance of giving tasks to others who can handle it.*

*Find a values-driven company that inspires you. It's much easier to be successful when you are inspired and love your career. It's equally important to find a high-integrity company where you can be your whole self. If you're passionate and the company's culture matches your values, you'll be successful.*

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Heidrick & Struggles conducted a global survey to learn more about the importance and relevance of mentorship; for this report, we isolated the responses of the 1,032 respondents from North America who have had a mentor. We define mentor as “an individual who takes an active interest over a sustained period of time in the development of your career and/or offers guidance about career goals,” regardless of whether this person is part of a formal mentorship program. The gender split among respondents was roughly equal (47% women vs. 52% men),<sup>1</sup> and 17% self-reported as a racial or ethnic minority in their current organization. Respondents hailed from across the age spectrum and from a variety of industries, including technology, media, and communications; healthcare; financial services; business services; and energy. One-third work in an organization with more than 1,000 employees.

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout this report, figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

## MENTORSHIP IN THE ENERGY INDUSTRY

The energy sector is struggling to attract millennials. Research from the World Economic Forum suggests the culprit is not age so much as gender; in a survey of 371 leading global employers, just 19% of the energy industry is composed of female employees—and it’s worse at the top, where just 11% of senior executives and zero CEOs are women.<sup>1</sup> This reality is reflected in a gender gap among millennials who demonstrate interest in a career in energy: another survey found that while 39% of men aged 16–35 believe a career in oil and gas is unappealing, 60% of women in that age bracket feel the same.<sup>2</sup>

Our survey found that—perhaps in recognition of this disparity—companies in the energy industry are among the most likely to have a formal mentoring program. Unsurprisingly, 78% of energy respondents said their mentor identified as male. Twenty-six percent of energy respondents formed their primary mentorship relationship while they were in middle

management, and energy respondents are more likely than those in other industries to have mentors from senior management (as opposed to middle, first-level, or non-managers). Energy respondents also reported meeting much less frequently with their mentors than respondents in other industries; just 64% said they met once a month or more, while 75–90% of respondents from other industries reported meeting with their mentor at least once a month. Such findings support the view, echoed strongly by the executives we interviewed, that it is a mistake to view formal mentoring programs as a silver bullet and that—on their own—such efforts rarely promote the kinds of strong personal bonds found in more informal, organic mentoring relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, *The Industry Gender Gap: Women and Work in the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, January 2016, [weforum.org](http://weforum.org).

<sup>2</sup> Ernst & Young, *How Do We Regenerate This Generation's View of Oil and Gas?*, 2017, [ey.com](http://ey.com).

## The when, who, how, and why of mentoring

Our survey found that most professionals have had more than one mentor and that most of these relationships are not a career-long commitment. Just 34% of respondents reported having had only one mentor so far in their career, while 39% said they have had two, and the

### TAKEAWAY

**The majority of respondents said their primary mentoring relationship was very or extremely important to their career.**

**Mentees need to have a clear understanding of what mentoring can do for them—and how mentorship is different from sponsorship.**

**Effective listening skills and a high degree of emotional intelligence are important assets for mentors—particularly in situations when they are mentoring individuals of a different gender or ethnicity than themselves.**

rest said they've had three or more. (For the remainder of the questions, we asked survey respondents to have in mind the person who has been most helpful in their career advancement to date—their “primary mentor.”) The majority (64%) of respondents said their primary mentoring relationship lasted five years or less; just 8% said the relationship lasted 15 years or longer.

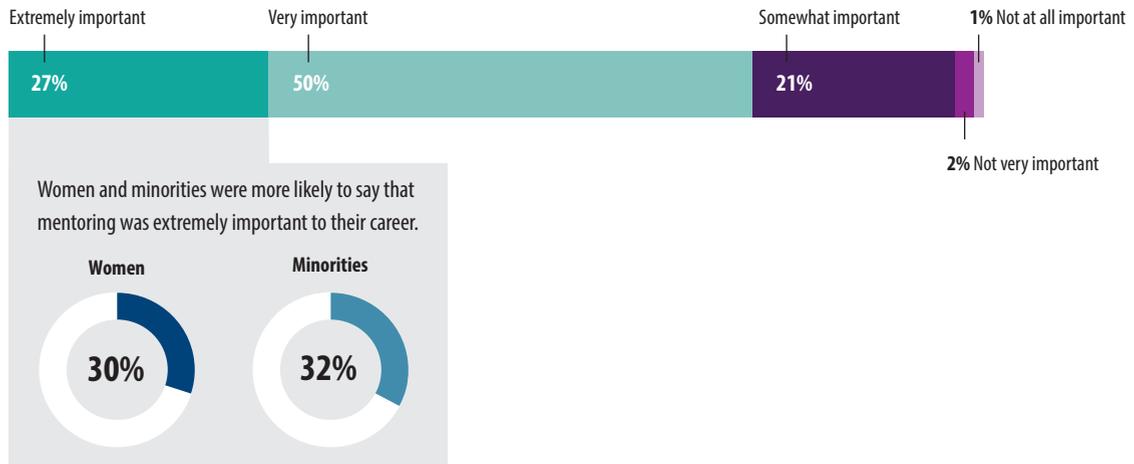
Regardless of length, the majority of respondents said the relationship was “very important” or “extremely important” to their career (see Figure 1). Women and minorities were more likely to report the biggest impact on their career; 30% of women said the mentoring relationship was extremely important, compared with 23% of men, and 32% of minorities found

it extremely important, compared with 27% of the overall sample. Clearly, underrepresented groups are more likely to benefit from mentorship in the quest to get ahead—directly supporting the need for executives to bolster their company's mentorship efforts.

Where do mentors come from? Sixty percent of respondents said they formed their primary mentor relationship with a supervisor who continued to provide career advice and support over the course of further roles (see Figure 2). Only 9% of respondents indicated they found their mentor through a formal mentoring program—which could speak to their limited existence. This finding was consistent across company sizes; employees in organizations with more than 1,000 employees were about as likely to say they found their mentor through a formal mentoring program as those in organizations with 100 employees or fewer. Indeed, only 27% of respondents said their current organization offers such a program; of those respondents, 65% have participated in the program. Minority mentees were more likely than the overall sample to say they participated in the program (74%), and they were also more likely to say they found a mentor on their own (25% vs. 18%)—suggesting their organizations could benefit from establishing tools and forums to help them rather than leaving them adrift. Men and women, meanwhile, were generally similar in how they found their mentors.

**FIGURE 1: The majority of respondents feel their primary mentor relationship has been crucial to their career development.**

**Question:** How important do you think having a mentoring relationship with this person is/was to your career?  
n = 1,032



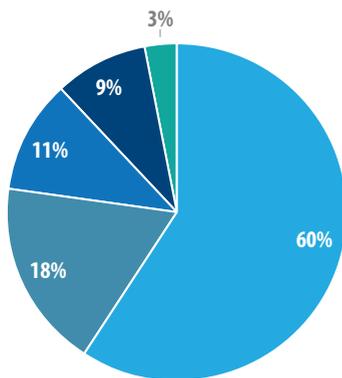
Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.  
Source: Heidrick & Struggles

**FIGURE 2: Most mentors are mentees' direct supervisor—though minorities are more likely to find their mentor on their own.**

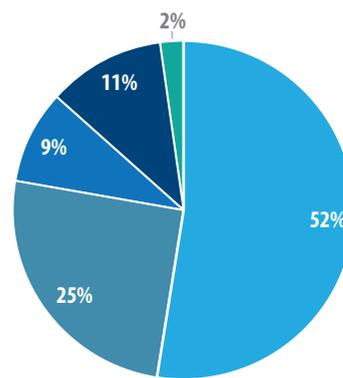
**Question:** How did you form your mentoring relationship?

Supervisor Found mentor on own Mentor found me Formal program Other

**All respondents**  
n = 1,032



**Minority respondents**  
n = 176



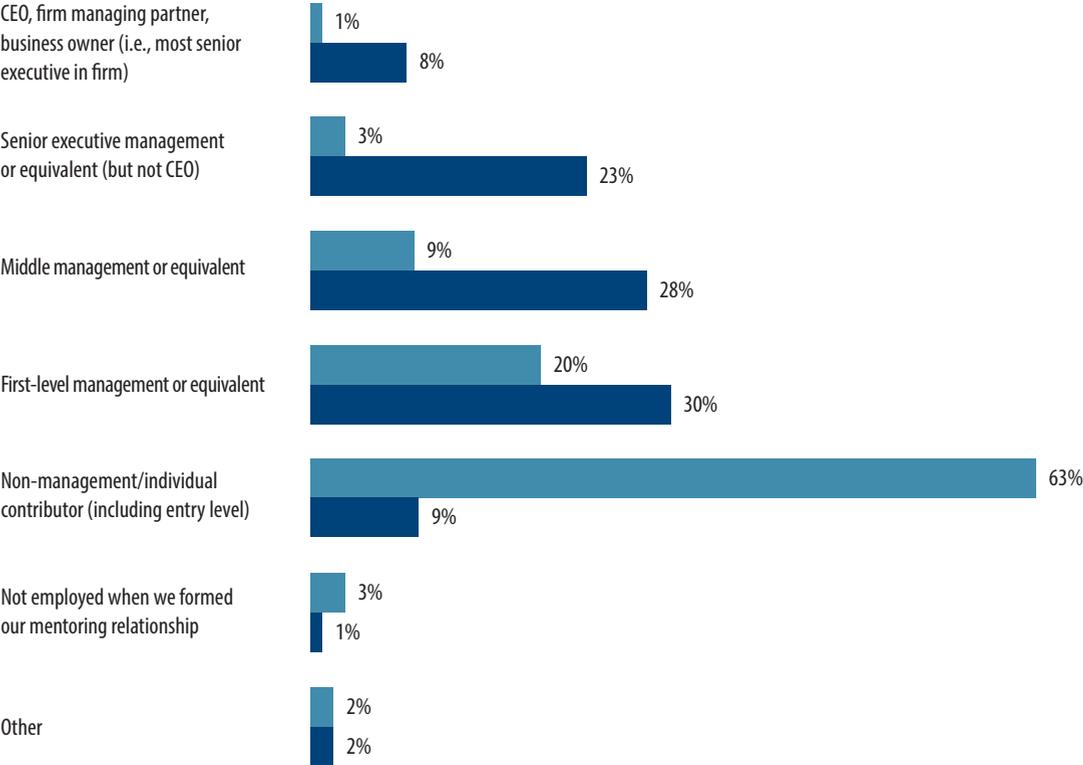
Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.  
Source: Heidrick & Struggles

Sixty-eight percent of respondents were not in management when they formed their primary mentoring relationship, while 88% said their mentor was in a management position (see Figure 3). Interestingly, minority respondents were more likely to say they formed their primary mentoring relationship when they were in middle management (15% vs. 9% of the overall sample) and that they are currently in middle management (29% vs. 19%). We can't determine the reason from the survey results, but these findings suggest that most companies could be engaging this very important segment of their workforce at an earlier stage through mentoring—and, indeed, that some minorities may need more support at the middle-management level. The latter implication is backed up by other research, including a recent survey by LeanIn.org and McKinsey, which found, among other things, that people of color represent 33% of the entry-level workforce but 27% of managers, and then increasingly smaller proportions as they move up the ladder, to just 15% of the C-suite.<sup>3</sup> Women of color have a particularly hard climb, as they currently make up just 3% of the C-suite.

<sup>3</sup> LeanIn.org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2017*, 2017, womenintheworkplace.com.

**FIGURE 3: Mentors tend to be managers, and mentees have roles across the spectrum.**

■ **Question 1:** What was your job level at the time you first formed your mentoring relationship?  
 ■ **Question 2:** What was this mentor's job level at the time you first formed your mentoring relationship?  
 n = 1,032



Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.  
 Source: Heidrick & Struggles

## MENTORING ALL AGES

There were clear correlations between age and reasons for seeking a mentor as well as seniority of that mentor. Respondents under the age of 40 were more likely than those over 40 to say they engaged a mentor for networking opportunities or because of similar backgrounds. Younger employees were also more likely to say their primary mentor was a coworker, while older employees were more likely to say their primary mentor was a higher-level manager or a friend or colleague outside their firm.

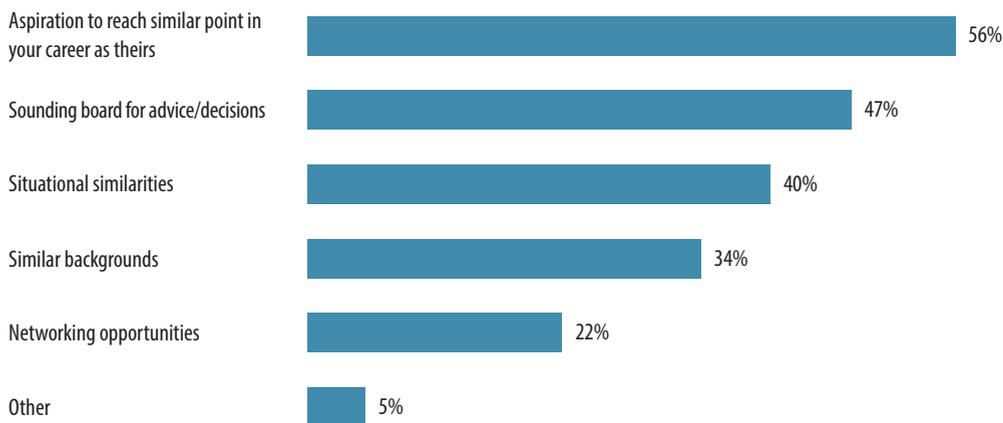
When we asked respondents what led them to engage in their primary mentoring relationship, 56% said it was because they aspired to reach a similar point as their mentor in their own career; this rationale was consistent across genders and ethnicities. Another 47% of the overall sample said they were seeking a sounding board for advice and decisions, 40% cited situational similarities, and 34% said it was because they shared a similar background with their mentor (see Figure 4). Men were more likely

than women to say they engaged their mentor due to similar backgrounds (37% vs. 31%)—which likely points to the fact that men, particularly nonminority men, have an easier time finding people who share their background.

Finally, we asked respondents what type of advice or support their mentors provided: 72% said their mentors gave them feedback on their professional strengths and development opportunities, 61% said they shared ideas about how to further their professional development, and 60% said they gave advice on different career paths (see Figure 5). When we asked what kind of advice was most important, the three answers were the same—strengths, professional development, and career paths.

**FIGURE 4: The reasons for seeking a mentor are varied.**

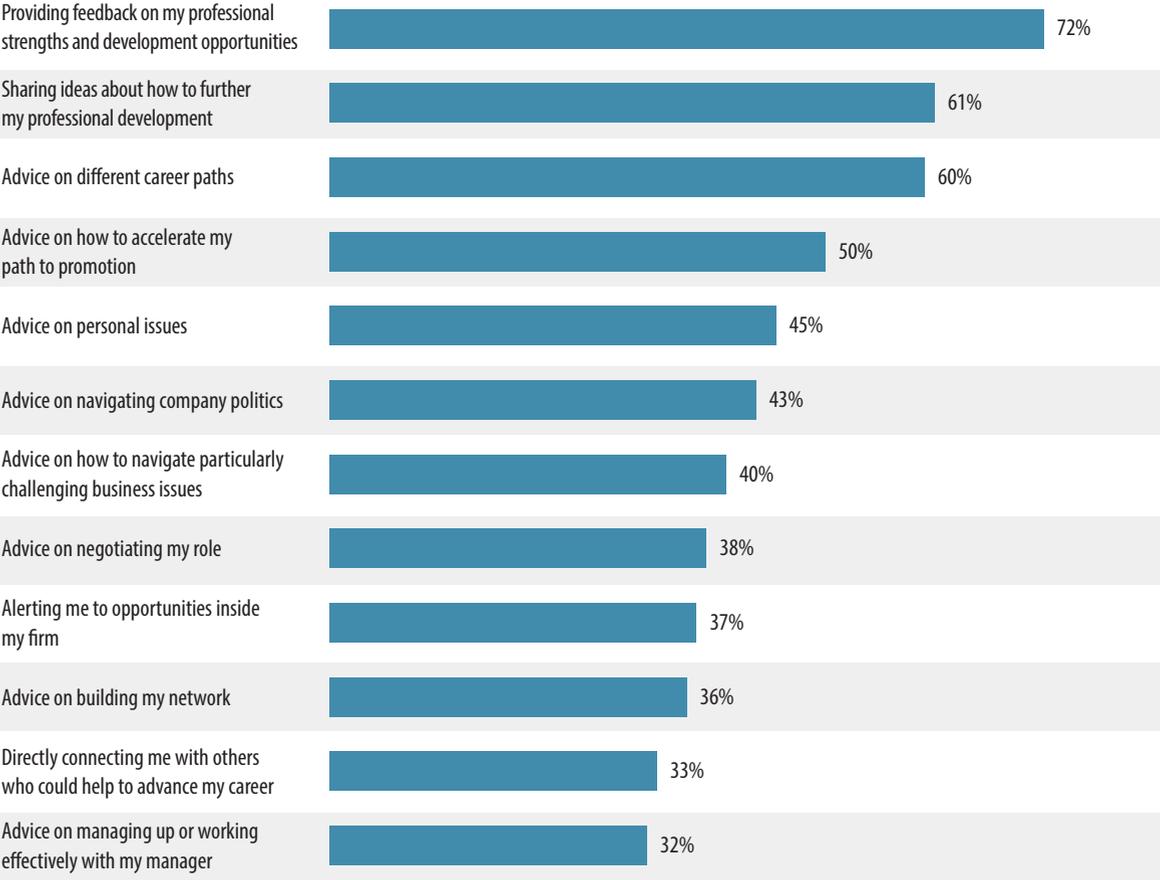
**Question:** What led you to engage in the mentoring relationship with your mentor? (Select all that apply)  
n = 1,032



Source: Heidrick & Struggles

**FIGURE 5: Most mentees seek advice on development and career paths.**

**Question:** What kind of advice or support has your mentor offered you over the course of your mentoring relationship? (Select all that apply)  
 n = 1,032; top 12 responses shown



Source: Heidrick & Struggles

Interestingly, 10 of the top 12 responses reflected that mentees were seeking advice of some kind. The other two (“Alerting me to opportunities inside my firm” and “Directly connecting me with others who could help to advance my career”) may be more appropriately deemed sponsorship, which is when a senior colleague advocates for someone’s career advancement directly. These two terms are often used interchangeably, but they should not be confused with one another. A mentor might provide advice and be a sounding board, and a sponsor will take actions on a mentee’s behalf to promote his or her career. Networking, which one in five respondents said was a reason they engaged in their primary mentoring relationship, could also be deemed a search for sponsorship rather than mentorship.

Although both roles are important, it is not necessary for a mentor to act as a sponsor, and indeed it can be counterproductive to the building of a lasting relationship. A consistent theme

in our qualitative interviews with senior leaders was a frustration with mentees who reach out seeking mentorship when what they want is sponsorship. One executive said that mentees will sometimes seek him out to get to know him—but often these people are looking for a leg up in their career rather than counsel. Across the board, the senior leaders we spoke with were open to being mentors and sponsors—but they don't want to confuse the roles or be both for the same person.

A few priorities differed based on gender; specifically, women placed more importance than men on feedback on professional strengths and development opportunities (53% vs. 44%)—perhaps in recognition of women's historic disadvantage in the workplace.

## Closing the gender gap

Our survey revealed that men and women tend to gravitate toward mentors who share their gender identity. While 61% of all respondents' mentors were men and 39% were women—a finding that likely points once again to the lack of gender parity in senior management across industries—84% of male respondents reported that their primary mentor was a man, and 64% of female respondents said it was a woman (see Figure 6). This divergence seems to be evening out as new generations enter the workforce; 86% of respondents over age 60 and

### TAKEAWAY

**Men tend to have male mentors, and women have female mentors—but this is changing as a new generation enters the workforce.**

**More men than women said their primary mentoring relationship was with a high-level executive.**

65% of respondents aged 51–60 had male mentors, while just 54% of respondents aged 21–25 had male mentors. This finding is quite hopeful, as the likely explanation is that there are more women in a position to be a mentor today than in previous years, though the reality is that women's advance toward gender parity has been slow—and in some realms, it has slipped.<sup>4</sup>

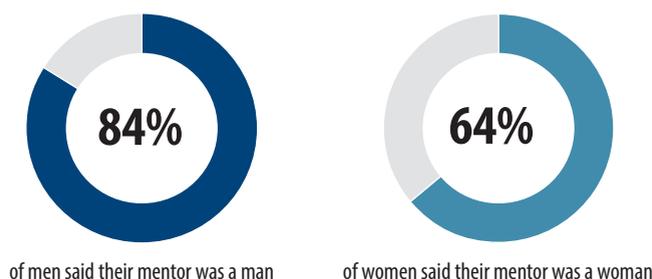
Other research on gender in the workplace supports the assertion that women still have a long path to gender parity. The recent report by LeanIn.org and McKinsey found that employees who receive career advice from managers and senior leaders are more likely to say they've been promoted in the past two years—but women are less likely to receive this advice.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, employees who regularly interact with senior leaders are more likely to aspire to be top executives—but, again, women are less likely to have these interactions. These correlations suggest that companies wanting to improve gender parity across their organization, especially in middle and senior management, might consider using mentoring

<sup>4</sup> For more, see Heidrick & Struggles, "Board Monitor 2017: Is diversity at an impasse?," June 19, 2017, [heidrick.com](http://heidrick.com).

<sup>5</sup> LeanIn.org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2017*, 2017, [womenintheworkplace.com](http://womenintheworkplace.com).

**FIGURE 6: Most respondents said their primary mentor was the same gender as themselves.**

**Question:** What gender does your mentor identify with?  
n = 1,032



Source: Heidrick & Struggles

as an attraction and retention tool—particularly given our finding that women actually place more value than men on professional feedback and development opportunities in their mentorship relationships.

## Mentoring across diverse lines

One clear finding of the survey is that mentorship is one of the most important things we can offer to help develop and retain minority employees. Minority respondents were more likely than the overall respondent pool to say they had participated in a formal mentoring program (74% vs. 65%) and somewhat more likely to say they found their best mentoring relationship extremely important to their career (32% vs. 27%). (See Figure 7.) Minority respondents are also more likely to still have an active relationship with their primary mentor (62% vs. 53%).

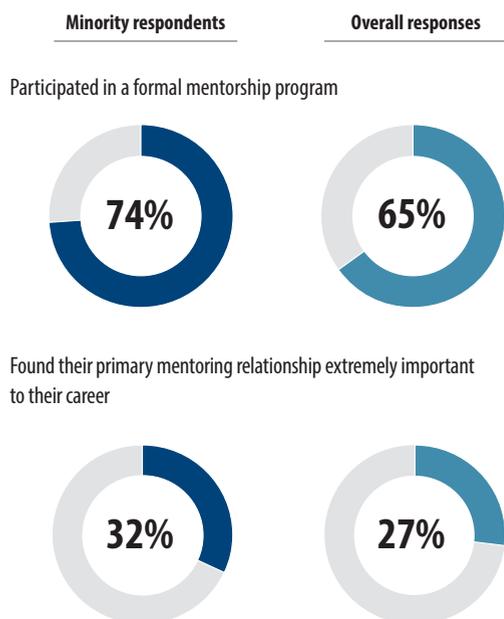
### TAKEAWAY

A male African-American executive noted, “There are definite differences inherent to diversity mentoring. It takes a set of experiences for a white male to mentor an African-American male or, even more difficult, an African-American woman. I was lucky in that I found a lot of people willing to provide advice, but there were not a lot of senior African-Americans in a position to provide mentorship and input. Listen carefully to your mentee’s perspectives and issues; do not dismiss them, and do not assume you know what the issues are. Be truly sensitive and try to put yourself in that person’s situation.”

We also saw clear differentiators in why minority respondents seek mentorship. Minority mentees were more likely than the overall sample to say they engaged a mentor due to similar backgrounds (45% vs. 34% of the overall sample) and somewhat more likely to say they engaged for networking opportunities (27% vs. 22%)—both of which make sense given that mentees may look to their more experienced cohort for advice on how to navigate an ethnically unbalanced workplace. However, as discussed earlier, mentees may want to be wary of leaning too hard on mentors for networking

**FIGURE 7: Mentoring is key to attracting and retaining ethnic minority talent.**

n = 1,032



Source: Heidrick & Struggles

purposes, as it could cross the line between mentorship and sponsorship. On the flip side, minorities were less likely to say they were seeking a sounding board (38% vs. 47% of the overall sample). This finding may correlate to the fact that minority respondents are more likely to be in middle management, where they may be more focused on upward movement, whereas at more senior levels the need for a sounding board becomes the bigger priority.

## Conclusion

Clearly, organizations have far more to gain than lose by instituting formal mentoring programs, especially for high-potential talent, women, and minorities. At the same time, organizations must embrace the challenge of increasing the effectiveness of these programs and not be lulled into a false sense of security about what the programs are—and aren't—

likely to deliver. Senior executives can begin by asking hard questions about what actions they are taking to foster a culture of mentoring where strong, collegial, and trust-based relationships are the rule and not the exception. Where necessary, companies should support the development of interpersonal skills (including coaching and listening) to foster more effective mentoring.

Next, companies should do more to educate employees in the ways that sponsorship differs from mentorship and communicate more clearly about how the company approaches each. By encouraging debate and discussion around these topics, companies can begin setting more explicit expectations regarding their use—and thereby minimize the chances that misunderstandings or mixed signals will unintentionally undermine the broader goal of creating an ecosystem where open, trust-based relationships flourish.

Finally, organizations should take our findings as a cue to actively seek out opportunities for female and ethnically diverse talent to gain early exposure to senior management, through which so many key interactions take place. Examples might include special projects, open forums that allow colleagues to meet outside of their immediate groups, regular luncheons on a variety of topics, or campus recruitment efforts. Companies that tie mentoring programs to

the development of high-potential employees, and make mentoring part of talent reviews and succession planning, will position their employees to live and breathe a culture of mentoring and benefit personally and professionally. Along the way, companies that instill these cultures will create an enduring, competitive edge when it comes to attracting, developing, and retaining top talent. ■

### **The most helpful action my mentor took on my behalf to help in my career was to . . .**

*Arrange some additional training opportunities for me at the corporate office that I would not have had access to at my branch location.*

*Help me find more important work within my company once I finished my regular assignments. I tend to finish things efficiently and quickly, so he helped me find extra work that needed to be done. This got the attention of some of the higher-ups, who assigned me work that they found personally important. This allowed me to become better known to upper management and to possibly advance my promotion chances in the near future.*

*Introduce me to his network and often volunteer me for networking events and opportunities when he knew I was uncomfortable taking risks. My mentor would effectively put my name out there for me when I was too hesitant to do it myself. I feel that this action was the most important because he opened career opportunities and paths that I never would have gotten otherwise because of my lack of self-confidence and constant self-doubt.*

*Support me when I went to look for a job outside of our employer. He not only respected that decision but embraced it, feeling that even though loyalty to an employer is important, loyalty to yourself and what's best for you shouldn't be forgotten. He wrote a glowing letter of recommendation for me, which I know helped me get the job.*

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## HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

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