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A Mantra for Women Leaders

Women are inherently endowed with powers of reasoning and they make excellent mentors

Although the concept of mentoring started in the West only in the 1980s, the growing popularity is a response to compelling needs. Mentoring is now widely recognized in the West for its impact in leveraging personal and organizational development and as a highly effective way to quickly ramp up an employee's performance. It has just started emerging in India.

The challenge before organizations today is profitable, sustainable, inclusive growth with a dire need for care for the environment. The challenge before executives today is containing attrition, recruiting the right talent and retaining high performers. In the process, executive after executive works longer hours whilst helplessly witnessing a deteriorating work-life balance.

Escalating corporate profits provide mounting performance bonuses, but little opportunities for executives to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Every one is stretched, and this tells

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on nerves and on family harmony. The acceleration of productivity in businesses brings along with it challenges in managing and enhancing relationships. Today, executives expect emotional intelligence from supervisors and colleagues, but find its supply scarce.

Organizations implement mentoring at all levels of a company structure, from graduate recruits to top management.

However, as with any programme or initiative, success is dependent ultimately on a high degree of senior level buy-in and commitment. Without such support, programmes risk death through lack of co-ordination and focus.

Women in mentoring

Deepak had met Nick socially at my place once and they had hit it off. Being in the same work sphere helped the meeting of the minds; the fact that Deepak was more into formal mentoring and Nick into informal mentoring did not matter. Deepak knew the potential that existed for sharing of ideas between them, and being a people-person himself, knew the value that a professional yet informal exchange with Nick would yield. He went over the points he had wanted to clarify that morning for his meeting with Nick, points that any experienced mentor like himself would come across from time to time, points that help reinforce ideas, affirm practices and develop convictions.

Nick had mentioned to Deepak in their first meeting of how informal mentoring works for him. Deepak, who had interacted with women in his formal mentoring sessions, opened by enquiring about Nick's experiences during his informal mentoring meets. Indeed, he was reinforcing his own ideas on what it is that mentors have. Deepak wrote feverishly as Nick recounted...

"Given that women are sensitive yet practical, emotional yet strong, logical, intuitive, empathetic and are inherently endowed with powers of reasoning, they make excellent mentors. They are quick to spot undercurrents in organizations, and their ability to effectively detect nuances often helps bring in a timely delicate touch to defuse fragile

situations. The West has numerous examples of successful women mentors. The same will apply in India as the mentoring space opens up. It would also be easy for women in India to move in to occupy this specialized niche, considering that many of them lead their companies or head the people domain in highly successful careers. The increasing number of women entrepreneurs and women executives breaking glass ceilings in an otherwise male-dominated bastion augurs well

empathy, building trust, love for people, a genuine interest in their well-being and development.

There are some individuals who are additionally gifted in the art of encouraging and inspiring others and providing them positive, corrective feedback in a manner that is received in the right spirit. With these basics, it is possible for mentors to evolve and aspiring mentors with potential can imbibe and hone mentoring skills.

"A formal mentoring programme will work well if the company-chosen mentor appreciates the woman's perspective and recognizes her worth in a male-dominated organization."

Women as mentees

Women make good mentees too, but more often when they get to choose their own mentor as outlined by Nick.

for an increasing number to choose mentoring as an area of core competence."

Mentors have to possess a real interest in others and specifically in their development and learning. This is crucial, as it is this that drives their ability to put the issues and concerns of their mentees ahead of the other things that the rest of us find more important. Surely, the mentors' role is essentially to accelerate the rate at which a person learns. Hence, mentors fundamentally provide individual leaders the objective feedback needed to nourish their growth and help them excel. It is possible to develop mentor competence, but only for those who possess interpersonal skills - either potential or existing.

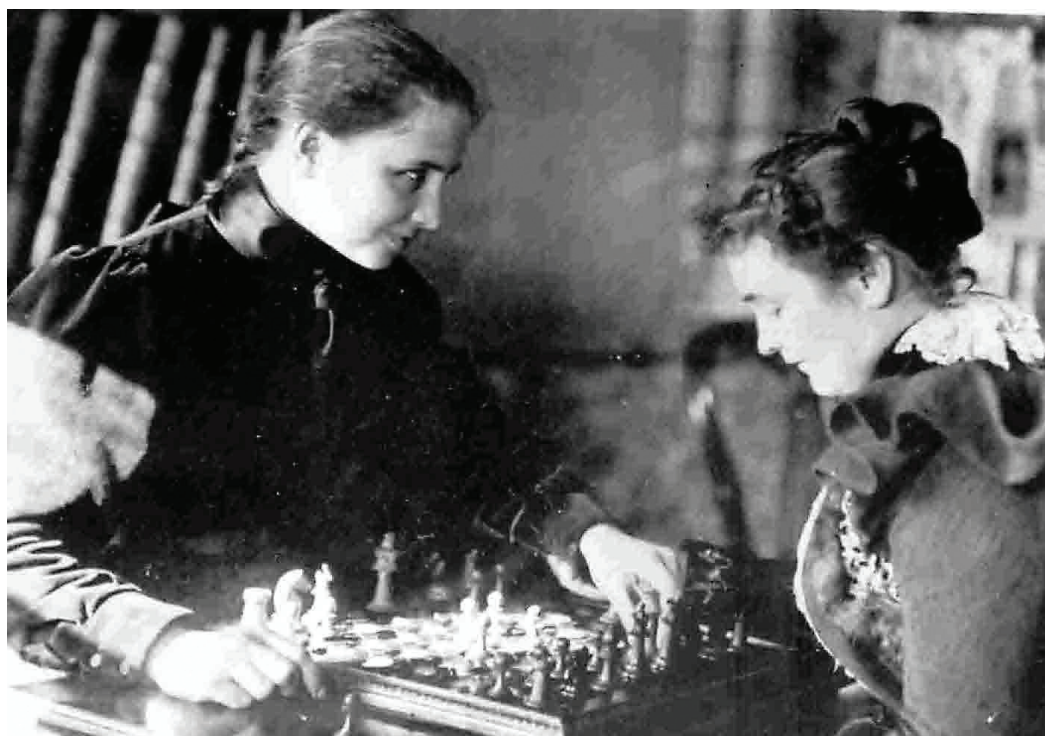
The paradox is that those most keen to become mentors do not have the innate people skills, and that equally, many intuitive, 'natural' mentors do not

recognize their own abilities. Mentors also have to accept that in all likelihood, they will have to put a lot more in than they get back.

Effective mentoring requires a lot more than common sense and enthusiasm. And like in leadership, the individual needs to have the basic ingredients of active listening,

A formal "triangular" mentoring programme will of course work well if the company-chosen mentor is himself sensitive to appreciate the woman's perspective and recognize her worth as an achiever in a male-dominated organization.

Those who have appreciated the learnings from Chakre India! will readily recall the journey of the women's hockey team in becoming world champions. It is worth recapitulating



Annie Sullivan with her teacher and mentor Helen Keller

their key success factors that Deepak outlined when he was explaining the nuances to a keen, ever-learning Nick –

1. The importance of humility, the absence of arrogance, avoidance of narrow parochialism and that no employee is bigger than the organization he/she serves.



Women have that constructive touch

2. That there is only one leader in an entity and his/her direction must be followed with respect and without demur.
3. That self-discipline and teamwork wins matches on the field and orders in business. Trying to play solo, not sharing information at work or not seeking timely support only helps competition win.
4. Team spirit is born out of respect for team mates, appreciation of their skills, reveling in their success and sharing in their joys and sorrows.
5. For sustained success, never underestimate competition, but analyze their strengths and weaknesses.
6. Celebrate team success big time.

The leanings from the film become more important and relevant for women, now that the glory of Indian Men's Hockey has evaporated from the international scene. It is perhaps an opportunity for women to show the way.

As in sport, companies too can reclaim their glory or market position if leaders were to let the spotlight shine on the team members instead of hogging the limelight themselves.

After all, we know that Gandhi became a Mahatma by serving, not by seeking.

This article is inspired by readings from HBR, The Mentoring Group and The Coaching & Mentoring Network. The author is former MD Wartsila India, Past Chairman CII(WR), Past President Bombay Chamber and Founder Chairman of The Listening Post.

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"Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily this is not difficult."

Charlotte Whitton