

Woman to woman, we need female mentors

By [Natasha Bruwer](#), issued by [Catchwords](#)

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Isn't it funny, even mildly frustrating, how the word mentor starts with men?

That's why I'm stepping up this Women's Month to push for more female mentors – femtors? – for women in business.



Natasha Bruwer

The apparent shortage of high-flying female mentors is no doubt due to the male-heavy legacy at the top of the business world, coupled with the history of violence and structural prejudice that has defined the lives of generations of South African women.

When I started my career in the property sector 18 years ago, I was acutely aware of the discrepancy: it felt like being in the East India Gentlemen's Club in London, where you were only allowed access to certain spaces during certain times of the day and totally excluded from the 'smoking room'.

The men knew what they were doing, or seemed to.

And this is one of the most important lessons I have learned during my career: the mistake we women often make is assuming that, before taking on a role, we need to be able to deliver on everything in the job description. Meanwhile, despite the confidence and competence men portray, they will have experience in just half the requirements, yet still

they'll say they can do it.

This is their superpower – taking on the job with a learner mindset.

Meanwhile women, often excluded from leadership roles in the home, church or community, may suffer from feelings of inadequacy.

The knock effect of feeling inadequate and excluded from taking a leadership role in these settings or the community one is raised is the inability to self-promote or position oneself in an organisation for career growth. Thus, we need to continue the shift in the way in which the woman perceives herself in society and the limitations she believes this places on her development.

Career growth is partly a result of output and performance but, in addition, it is very much about showing initiative to take on further responsibility and being given an opportunity to stretch oneself.

This is where it is important for women who feel disempowered to have someone in their corner to vocalise their successes and promote their attributes and abilities. This is the value sponsorship can bring to help women, who have a natural propensity to feel underserving of recognition, to excel in their careers.

This is why women need female mentors, so that they can learn from those like them who've been there first. Female mentors don't have to be on top of the heap either – choosing a seasoned high-flyer may even heighten feelings of inadequacy – but simply need to be a few steps ahead and willing to help those behind.

The truth is, women are vital in companies; there is real value in gender diversity at work, countering any singular or linear way of thinking, fostering growth. Women as role models are vital too.

Yes, male mentorship has benefits. Over the years, I have been fortunate to have had strong, respectful male mentors who have intentionally transferred skills and supported my career development in the most authentic way.

However, societal norms will always filter into the workplace, including gender roles. While there's huge value in this melting pot of values and cultures, it's important to ensure a traditional mindset does not become a barrier, that women who take on stereotypical gender roles at home – or have no choice in the matter – are supported.

Female networks are uniquely reinforcing: women should look beyond their immediate department or entire corporation for mentors and allies, joining industry bodies, building valuable connections, meeting socially.

Female mentors can be vital both practically and psychologically, offering support in everything from office politics, career development and work-life balance to reproductive health, including pregnancy and menopause.

While formal mentorship programmes can be limited by capacity and training, succession planning also provides an opportunity for formal mentorship. However, mentorship can also happen unintentionally, through a culture of collaboration and inclusion – such as in open-plan workspaces and by creating opportunities for informal interactions. Of course, these opportunities should be nurtured, but my advice is to be intentional about mentorship and make it a priority with one's own skills development as a leader. Because as much as it is a learning for the person being mentored, there is much to be gained from the knowledge and skills of young people joining the workforce.

Happily, at Cushman & Wakefield | BROLL there is a strong culture of female leadership, underpinned by progressive men committed to empowering women.

I have been part of executive teams with many highly qualified and impressive women, and these women have become the cornerstone for my growth not only professionally but personally too. We are working mothers who lean on each other for support, easing each other's guilt – oh, the guilt! – and sharing our experiences.

You might call it mentorship, yes, but it's also sisterhood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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