

Mentoring Matters

Dawn Davidson Drantch '88 helps young women devise action plans.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

When I first started practicing law, there was a woman partner at the firm, and I ended up working exclusively with her. She was my teacher. She had my career in mind. She was teaching me for the long term. A few years later, she was appointed to a judgeship and left the firm. I learned a whole other side of how to be a lawyer from another partner. Having good mentors at the beginning of my career made a tremendous difference.

It used to bother me when people said there's such a difference between how men and women are treated in the workplace. But I have to say that the more I mentor, the more I really do realize that there is a difference. Not everywhere. But I think, in general.

There's research that's shown that young women tend to be judged by what they've done, and men tend to be judged on their potential. I think that makes a big difference. Upper management looks at a young man and may think, "This kid has guts," and might look at a young woman and think, "What has she done?"

My first involvement with formal mentoring was with a college student. I had the same mentee for two years. We'd meet for coffee or breakfast. I brought her to networking events, and showed her what life might be like after she graduated. I acted as a nonjudgmental

ear. I'd ask her questions, but she was making her own decisions. It was a lot of listening.

At the Moxxie Foundation, I run a formal group-mentoring program. For two years, we meet every three weeks with our mentees, and we have a curriculum. We talk to them about writing a bio. Working on their elevator speech. Getting along with different personalities. Work/life integration. How to give successful presentations. How to negotiate with a new boss. In the second year, each session is devoted to one woman. She gets to talk about her future goals, and the whole group helps her come up with an action plan. They love it. They love having the focus on them, and having help with what to do next and how to get to where they want to be.

Intergenerational mentoring is incredibly valuable. I think there are things you only learn as you grow in the workforce. To have somebody who can shine a light on things you've never faced before is huge. Often mentors are in management, and to have someone who can shed light on how management works is very helpful.

There are challenges to intergenerational mentorship. For example, most mentors didn't have electronic communication when we were growing up. It was all face-to-face, by phone, or by letter. Young women have a different approach to privacy. Mentors have to understand that. But then young women have to understand that there are certain things you might not want to put out there.

Part of the training that we do for the mentors is to say, these women are not your daughters, and you can't give them the advice that you'd give your daughter. There are certain things that we just have to accept as mentors. Not necessarily as businesspeople, but as mentors.

What I do is mostly for women, but I wouldn't hesitate to sponsor a young man. Why not? It's just the right thing to do. A better workplace helps everybody. ☺

Dawn Davidson Drantch '88

Home: Wantagh, Long Island, New York

Occupation: Attorney and in-house counsel, Alcott HR; member, board of directors of the Moxxie Mentoring Foundation; 2010 Moxxie Mentor of the Year.

On finding support at Rochester: "I don't know that I really had mentors at Rochester, but I had a lot of support. I lost my father when I was a sophomore. It was devastating to me. I'm an only child. The way the University rallied around me is something I've never forgotten. The professors, the deans, my RA, my friends on the hall. I was far from home, and my mother was home alone, and there was always the question, should I go home? Everyone made it feel like, 'We're your community.' That made it easier to go on, and to stay."

