

# **YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR ADVOCATES AND LEADERSHIP**



**A Mentoring Tool for Advocates in the  
Anti-Violence Against Women Movement**

## **WOMEN OF COLOR NETWORK (WOCN)**

A project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and  
Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence

6400 Flank Drive ■ Suite 1300 ■ Harrisburg, PA 17112  
Phone: 800-537-2238 ■ TTY: 800-553-2508 ■ Fax: 717-545-9456

<http://womenofcolornetwork.org/>

### **DEVELOPED BY**

The WOCN Young Women of Color Advocates and Leadership Initiative

Editor: Angela Sutton, JD, WOCN Project Specialist

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## INTRODUCTION

This tool was created to be a sound guide for young women of color (YWOC) advocates in the anti-violence against women (VAW) movement who are interested in building a mentor relationship. Young women of color, in particular, are less likely to have access to mentors or mentoring relationships, despite the important role mentoring may play in workplace success and professional growth. Although this tool is intended to encourage mentoring of YWOC advocates, it also has applicable uses for anyone trying to establish effective mentorship.

In a small national survey of young women of color advocates conducted by WOCN (2009), 82% of the respondents considered the lack of women of color role models/leaders as one of the biggest challenges they encounter in their program. The lack of leadership development opportunities also ranked high among respondents (82%) who took the survey. This reflects a predominate theme among YWOC advocates that the pipeline into leadership roles in the anti-VAW movement is insufficient for women of color. Additionally, many YWOC advocates perceive mentoring to be instrumental in leadership development and who ascends to leadership positions within the organization. However, when there is a lack of women of color in leadership roles, YWOC find it more difficult to be exposed to women of color who can mentor them and whom they share similar values, interests, and perspectives with.

In general, women of color still face a number of barriers in the workplace including unequal pay, slow promotion, and lack of visibility.<sup>1</sup> Women of color often feel pressure to defy racial stereotypes, are less likely to be given high visibility assignments, under-represented in leadership roles, excluded from influential networks, and are less often provided professional development opportunities in comparison to their white counterparts. It is not uncommon in the anti-VAW movement for women of color to be the first and/or only woman of color at their organization, which can lead to feelings of isolation, exclusion, and invisibility among their peers. Mentorship not only nurtures YWOC advocates and helps build career-related skills, it also helps YWOC advocates learn the ropes, unwritten rules, and organizational politics from more experienced mentors who can help them with job issues, overcome barriers, and navigate the work environment. Young women of color who are mentored can then go on to serve as mentor and role models for other young women of color in the anti-VAW movement.

The leadership of YWOC is critical to the sustainability and successful advancement of the anti-VAW movement. As more YWOC join the anti-VAW movement, mentorship has become imperative to increasing YWOC's leadership capacity within their organizations and in this movement. Yet, many YWOC find it difficult to establish a mentoring relationship. This is largely due to a lack of women of color in leadership roles that YWOC can look to as mentors, or they are unsure how to enter into and build a mentor relationship.

In 2007, a national survey of more than 5,000 people who either work in or are interested in working in the nonprofit sector revealed a significant number of highly educated, committed and skilled next generation leaders who aspire to be an executive director someday.<sup>2</sup> The report also noted that a higher percentage of respondents who definitely aspire to become executive directors are people of color. However, the lack of mentorship and support from incumbent executives was one of the major challenges for many next generation leaders.

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1 Network of Executive Women. "Women of Color: The Challenge and Opportunity Ahead." (2006). Available at: [http://workforceexcellence.com/uploads/newreport2\\_woc0407.pdf](http://workforceexcellence.com/uploads/newreport2_woc0407.pdf)

2 *Ready to Lead?: Next Generation Leaders Speak Out*. CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, The Annie Casey Foundation, The Meyer Foundation and Idealist.org. Available at [http://www.meyerfoundation.org/downloads/ready\\_to\\_lead/ReadytoLead2008.pdf](http://www.meyerfoundation.org/downloads/ready_to_lead/ReadytoLead2008.pdf)

To help encourage and support cross-generational mentorship, the Women of Color Network (WOCN) has developed ***A Mentoring Tool for Young Women of Color Advocates***. The aim of this tool is to be a resource for YWOC advocates in their 20s and 30s who are interested in building positive mentoring relationships. For YWOC, mentor relationships can be an enriching experience that elevates their knowledge and understanding of how to adjust and successfully navigate in their programs and the anti-VAW movement.

A mentee should be able to regard their mentor as a candid but caring advisor, as well as a wise and trusted advocate. Normally, in a mentor relationship the mentee is expected to rely on their mentor for guidance and advice, but an increasing number of YWOC advocates are identifying mutual mentoring as characterizing meaningful and effective mentorship. This mentoring occurs when the mentee and mentor are able to draw upon each other's unique strengths, knowledge and experience. As a result, the mentor and mentee can both grow professionally and personally.

This tool discusses the importance of mentoring and the benefits mentoring offers to mentees, mentors, and organizations. In addition, it presents different types of mentoring approaches and outlines steps individuals can pursue to building a mentoring relationship. The user can also modify the tool's suggestions and guidelines to fit the individual's needs, resources and organizational structure.

## BACKGROUND

Founded in 1997, The Women of Color Network (WOCN) is a national grassroots initiative for the elimination of violence against women and families in communities of color. The mission of WOCN is to provide and enhance the leadership capacity and resources that promote activities of Women of Color advocates and activists. WOCN has been able to reach out to advocates and activists of color by offering technical assistance, trainings, and a number of projects, including the WOCN Mentor Project and ***WOCN Resource Guide***.

In 2008, WOCN was moved by a need among women of color advocates to dedicate its project efforts to support and advance YWOC in leadership at all levels in the anti-VAW movement. Although WOCN had established a national mentor project, they realized some YWOC might encounter possible limitations, such as:

- YWOC who are interested in exploring and developing different models of mentoring outside of the WOCN Mentor Project
- YWOC who are considering a potential mentor but that candidate is not a WOCN Mentor
- YWOC who are already involved in a mentor relationship but want a resource tool to help guide or redefine their relationship
- YWOC who would like to mentor others but are not WOCN Mentors

*"I had to look elsewhere for informal mentoring from my peers outside of my agency. Overall, I learned by trial and error."*

– YWOC Advocate, Age 32  
WOCN Young Women of Color Advocates  
and Leadership Survey (2009).

In response, the first **Call To Action for Young Women of Color Advocates and Leadership** was held in June 2008. The call was intended to unify and create a safe space for YWOC to identify issues related to fostering inclusion and empowerment for YWOC in the anti-VAW movement. A **Young Women of Color Advocates and Leadership Initiative** was formed and is comprised of YWOC advocates and activists from various domestic violence and sexual assault state coalitions, national organizations, and community-based programs. There have been seven subsequent teleconferences with YWOC advocates representing states across the U.S. including District of Columbia, New York, Tennessee, Ohio, Oregon, California, Texas, North Carolina, Maryland, and Hawaii.

**Initiative members affirmed that the continuity and sustainability of the anti-VAW movement largely depended on diverse leaders who can bring new approaches, strategies, and vision to our work.** Because the movement's issues impact the advocacy for and by underrepresented women, it is important that YWOC have opportunities for meaningful participation and be involved in critical decision-making. This underscored how leadership development, support and inclusiveness of YWOC, could no longer be an afterthought in our movement's discourse.

Mentoring of YWOC was also regarded as instrumental in helping to equip a new generation of leaders with the requisite knowledge and skills to assume leadership positions. Through mentoring, seasoned advocates were able to pass important lessons of history, culture and experience on to the next generation of leaders. Members cited mentoring as having a positive impact on YWOC's opportunities and key to their advancement and leadership participation. Despite the advantages mentoring offered, many YWOC are not mentored.

Several reasons were raised to explain why there is a lack of YWOC being mentored, including:

- YWOC have less access to mentors or women of color who held positions of power in their organization
- Hesitance to initiate a relationship or not wanting to be met with rejection
- Less access to or lack of formal mentoring programs
- Lack of support from their organization to encourage or promote mentoring

It was agreed that the Initiative would focus on mentoring and leadership development of YWOC. Its principal aims are:

- To identify and promote mentoring opportunities that will empower and educate YWOC to increase their participation in leadership roles
- To advance a national strategy that will foster the development of mentoring for YWOC

Specifically, the Initiative charged itself with developing a mentoring tool for YWOC that they could use to establish effective mentoring relationships. The mentoring guide is intended to promote:

- Integration of YWOC into organizations and the anti-VAW movement
- Mentoring opportunities for YWOC to help them overcome barriers in the workplace, including discrimination and marginalization related to race/ethnicity and/or age
- Provide mentoring opportunities for YWOC who are less likely than their majority counterparts to have access to mentors or a mentor program
- Identify mentoring models or approaches that reflect YWOC needs and redefine traditional ways of mentoring
- Mentoring of YWOC for participation in leadership roles so they can ultimately mentor the next generation of YWOC advocates

## WHAT IS MENTORING?

Mentoring is defined as a relationship of trust between a more experienced person – the mentor – and a less experienced person – the mentee. A mentor should be an experienced professional who offers support, guidance, and assistance to a mentee, through an ongoing and reciprocal relationship.

Mentoring relationships can be *formal* or *informal*. Formal mentoring usually involves programs that are often organized or established by organizations and have a structured support system. Normally, mentors and mentees participate in training(s) or an orientation session. In addition, mentoring relationships are usually arranged between individuals and there can be a specified length of duration.

Typically, in an informal mentoring relationship, the relationship develops naturally through mutual identification. There may also be an absence of a spoken/stated agreement or unspecified objectives.

There are also different approaches and models of mentoring. A mentee and mentor may decide to engage in a particular approach that will best suit their expectations, needs, and resources. These approaches include:

### SITUATIONAL MENTORING

This type of relationship is often short-lived and serves a specific purpose (e.g., mentee needs guidance on a specific task or project they were assigned).

### MUTUAL MENTORING

This style is based on the mentee and mentor entering into a mentorship with a shared understanding that their relationship is non-hierarchical and collaborative. Each person is expected to both give and receive knowledge and experience.

### REVERSE MENTORING

This involves relationships where the mentor is younger than their mentee.

### DISTANCE MENTORING

In this type of relationship, the mentee and mentor engage primarily by telephone and email.

### SINGLE-LEADER MENTORING GROUP

In single-leader mentoring, one person serves as mentor to a group of people. This approach works well in organizations where the number of mentors is limited.

### PEER-MENTORING GROUP

In this approach, group members provide support and guidance to each other. Like single-leader mentoring, this a good option in organizations where the number of mentors is limited.

Although definitions of mentoring may vary, the goals are similar. Mentors play an influential part in the mentee's development and can serve in roles of a teacher, advocate, coach, learner, and advisor. In contrast, a mentoring relationship is *not* a duty, a form of therapy, an unequal power relationship, or used for ulterior motives.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING

Mentoring can have a beneficial impact to the mentor, mentee, organization, and the community. Mentoring offers mentees an opportunity to build new relationships, as well as acquire valuable insight and assistance from an experienced individual. It also provides mentors with opportunities to guide and participate in the mentee's professional development. Additionally, the organization has an opportunity to share and foster the skills and synergy created by the mentoring relationship.

*"I have been mentored by many strong, courageous, and amazing women of color who helped me believe in myself, helped me stand on the courage of my convictions and advocate for fair treatment within this movement."*

– YWOC Advocate, Age 33  
WOCN Young Women of Color Advocates  
and Leadership Survey (2009).

### **BENEFITS TO THE MENTOR:**

- Enhances the leadership and communication skills of mentors
- Opportunities to share/pass on knowledge and expertise to mentee
- Gains intrinsic satisfaction from contributing to the growth and development of an emerging leader
- Public recognition of mentor for their effective people development

### **BENEFITS TO THE MENTEE:**

- Helps decrease isolation
- Provides knowledge and understanding of organizational power, politics, history, and culture
- Greater clarity about career path and goals
- Enhances the development of skills, knowledge, and self-awareness to participate in leadership roles
- Provides networking opportunities
- Increases exposure to new learning opportunities and perspectives

### **BENEFITS TO THE ORGANIZATION:**

- Contributes to improved work performance and productivity, as a result of increased self-confidence, skills, and knowledge
- Reduces staff isolation and promotes quicker assimilation into organization
- Encourages the development of partnerships or allies that may be useful to the organization in the future
- Promotes leadership development and leadership capacity within organization
- Helps build diversity and a culture of inclusion
- Promotes morale and positive organizational climate, and in turn may increase job satisfaction and staff retention
- Prepares mentees to fill key roles as part of your organization's succession plan

## KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL ONE-TO-ONE MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Mentors and mentees should possess certain characteristics that are essential to meaningful mentoring relationships. Mentors should be a positive role model and willing to commit the time required for the relationship. **When selecting a potential mentor, a mentee should look for someone with whom they share similar interests, values, and goals.**

It is important that mentors understand how to navigate the organization and know what qualities will help advance the mentee professionally. However, a mentee should avoid choosing a mentor who is their boss or has direct authority over them. This can allow for more open, objective, and honest communication between the mentee and mentor.

Mentors should also:

- Actively listen
- Exercise discretion; mentor and mentee should be confident in the knowledge that information shared between them will not be shared with others without each other's permission
- Be knowledgeable of different communication styles
- Have patience, empathy and a non-judgmental perspective
- Provide constructive feedback and be honest
- Demonstrate expertise in the areas the mentee requires assistance

### ROLE OF THE MENTOR

- Encourages, inspires, and motivates the mentee in the fulfillment of **their** goals and objectives
- Provides helpful critiques regarding mentee's current abilities and skills, as well as recommendations to improve them
- Exposes and assists mentee in building a network of professional and social contacts
- Helps mentee problem-solve and engage in strategic thinking
- Supports mentee to try new ideas
- Provides guidance and support in relation to mentee's needs
- Views mentoring as an opportunity to each and learn from mentee

### ROLE OF THE MENTEE

- Be proactive and committed to mentoring relationship
- Be open to feedback and new ideas
- Be candid about one's abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and needs
- Be willing to act upon feedback and avail oneself to opportunities
- Be ambitious and demonstrate potential for growth



## FINDING A MENTOR

One of the most important aspects of mentoring is identifying an individual with whom you can build a mentoring relationship. You should carefully consider what role the mentor will play and how they can help you, whether it's professionally or personally. Are you looking for someone to help you network? Someone who can provide you guidance on a long-term project or give you advice on career advancement? Or are you interested in a mentor who can be a sounding board and offer you advice?

Depending on what type of help you need, your goals and the characteristics your ideal mentor should have, the next step is creating a list of possible mentors. The list should be comprised of individuals who match your needs and people you know (professionally and personally). These people can include your friends, family members, a manager or director at your workplace, and leaders in groups to which you belong.

*“My sister and close friend have been my mentors throughout my years in the movement. They listened to me, and helped me elaborate on my ideas. They inspired me to continue this work because they not only talked about being leaders but they WERE leaders, it wasn't only rhetoric. . .”*

– YWOC Advocate, Age 30  
WOCN Young Women of Color Advocates  
and Leadership Survey (2009).

Once you have identified a prospective mentor, you can then decide how to approach them. The level of comfort and relationship you have with that person will most likely influence how you contact them. You may decide to approach them simply via telephone or email. Meeting over a meal or for coffee is another good way to reach out to the person of interest.

When asking someone to be your mentor, make sure to explain why you chose that person to ask and how you would like that person to help you. Have a positive attitude and, if they are unable to mentor you, ask them if they can help you find another mentor. And lastly, don't forget to thank them.

## STEPS TO BUILDING A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

A productive and successful mentoring relationship relies on mutual respect, honesty, flexibility, and dedication. Typically, mentoring relationships occur in four phases: **preparation, initiation, implementation & cultivation, and closure.**

### STEP 1: PREPARATION

In preparation for your initial meeting with your mentor, you should think about:

- Your career goals
- Time commitment
- Strengths and weaknesses
- What work challenges you are encountering
- What you hope to get from the relationship
- What you have to offer to the relationship
- Questions for your mentor
- Available resources

### STEP 2: INITIATION

This is when the mentor and mentee meet, share information about each other and establish an agreement about the mentoring relationship. This involves discussing/addressing the following:

- Each person's expectations and responsibilities
- Meeting days, times, and locations
- Time commitment
- Discussing the duration of the relationship
- Confidentiality
- A workplan and benchmarks for meeting goals
- How challenges in the relationship will be addressed or resolved
- What will be discussed during meetings or what activities the relationship will engage in
- How each of you will provide feedback or assessment of the relationship and objectives

### STEP 3: IMPLEMENTATION & CULTIVATION

In this phase, the mentee has an opportunity to learn and develop from the insight and experiences of the mentor. The mentee sees their mentor as a trusted confidante and should keep them updated of issues, achievements, or challenges. Also, the mentee has gained more self-confidence and developed their personal work and leadership style. Moreover, the mentor and mentee should make sure to do periodic assessments of their self and relationship, progress on goals, and refine any goals or expectations.

### STEP 4: CLOSURE

During this last phase, the mentoring relationship comes to an end. This can be due to various reasons such as all the goals have been met or there is a mutual agreement that the relationship is no longer productive. Irrespective of the reasons, you should clearly explain to your mentor why you want the relationship to end and share with them any useful feedback.

## ADDRESSING PROBLEMS EFFECTIVELY

The mentee and mentor may encounter challenges during the mentorship. Common problems that may occur include:

- The mentee and mentor are not a good match. This can cause uneasiness and foster a poor rapport between the parties, as well as undermine trust and open communication in the relationship.
- One or both parties have unrealistic expectations of the other or differ about how goals should be achieved.
- One party perceives the other as less committed to the relationship (e.g., the mentor or mentee is inaccessible or cancels meetings often)

To avoid problems, from the onset of the relationship the mentee and mentor should be clear and honest about their goals, expectations, and abilities. The mentee or mentor should promptly address any obstacles that arise by identifying the problem and working together to resolve them. If the problem(s) persist, then both parties should end the relationship, amicably.

## WHEN ENDING THE RELATIONSHIP IS THE NEXT STEP

Mentoring relationships offer people an opportunity to welcome and share new ways of thinking, perspectives, and ideas. But there may be a time when differences in personalities, communication styles, expectations, and values can create challenges in a mentoring relationship. When this occurs, the mentee and mentor should try to keep an open-mind and be willing to learn, ask questions to get clarity, and be flexible (whether it's to change, schedules, etc.). Communication, trust and respect should be guiding principles for a healthy mentoring relationship. When those don't exist, are broken, or if the mentee and mentor have attempted to resolve the problems (unsuccessfully), they both should carefully consider ending the relationship through honest, candid, and respectfully interaction.

### AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT A TO SAY TO A MENTOR:

"I appreciate the time you have given this relationship and I feel like I have learned a lot from your expertise. Unfortunately, I don't think we are a good match for each other because... I feel it would be best if we end our mentoring relationship. I still value your leadership and experience and I hope that we will have the opportunity to work together in the future in another capacity."

## EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF YOUR MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

Evaluating the progress of your mentoring relationship is a useful element of mentoring. It helps ensure that the mentorship is as productive as possible, gauge the satisfaction of the mentee and mentor, and encourage space for constructive feedback and recommendations.

During the initiation of the mentorship, the mentee and mentor should determine how they will evaluate each other periodically. The following are some questions that each party can pose to evaluate the mentorship:

- What aspects of the relationship are working well (and what is not)?
- Have we developed a good rapport?
- Did the relationship meet my expectations?
- How can the relationship improve?
- What has been most useful to me?
- What has been the least useful to me?
- Was the use of our time and meetings constructive?
- Did we meet regularly and at our appointed days and times?
- Was the frequency of our meetings adequate?
- What I plan to do or have done as a result of my mentorship.
- I would like more help in\_\_\_\_\_.

## HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT INFORMAL MENTORING

If your workplace for does not have a formal mentoring program, it can still be instrumental in supporting mentoring among staff by:

- Using the intranet for locating willing mentors
- Providing resources and reading materials, including handbooks or guidelines on successful mentoring practice
- Creating a toolkit for mentoring tips for both mentors and mentees
- Hosting lunchtime sessions, showing of videos, etc.
- Fostering a workplace culture that has visible role models of good mentoring
- Emailing staff monthly “snippets” on good mentoring practices or behaviors

## CONCLUSION

Mentoring is a great opportunity that provides individuals with professional growth, support and guidance, valuable advice, and networking. Studies have shown that mentoring can have a positive impact on both the mentor and mentee that can last even after the mentoring relationship has expired. For YWOC in the anti-VAW movement, mentoring helps build relationships with diverse people of all ages, expertise, and backgrounds who can help prepare them for various leadership roles. There are a number of models of mentoring that are useful and that you can explore depending on your goals, the help you need, and your mentor. Good luck!

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