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Cover story: The power of mentoring

Having a mentor is about the most important thing you can do to advance your career. And that's especially true for women business owners, executives and managers who have to deal with an ever-present "glass ceiling." There are ways to break through, however, and mentoring is a big part of it.



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Early in her career as a banker, [Gail Fritzing](#) landed a coveted position in the financial services division of J.P. Morgan in New York City.

"As it turned out," recalls this longtime human resources executive, "I was not in the right job."

She credits her first boss and professional mentor for steering her as a rising career woman toward the bank's corporate training and recruitment department.

"It was a very difficult revelation that I wasn't happy" in banking, said Fritzing, who now runs the all-volunteer mentorship program at the Women's Bean Project.

That position appealed to her in part because her own mentor at J.P. Morgan "provided a lot of guidance and direction... He could have bounced me out on my ear, but he didn't. He talked to me about other opportunities and helped me move through the bank to another area where I was really happy."

Mid- and senior-level businesswomen report that being a woman without professional guidance from a mentor is like using sandpaper to rub away at the glass ceiling — not a very effective approach.

The benefits to those who seek out mentors are vast. And the benefit comes full circle when advancing and senior-level businesswomen become mentors themselves, helping to help

mold the next generation of professionals while growing their own *skills, expertise and professional networks*.

That there even are senior-level businesswomen available to guide younger workers reflects a notable workforce shift.

Our mothers may have worked, but they almost always worked for men. But in recent years, more women than ever are leaders in business.

The percentage of female managers rose from about 11 percent in 1940 to 38 percent in 2009, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Between 1995 and 2013, the percentage of Fortune 500 board seats held by women rose from 9.6 percent to 16.9 percent, according to the working women's nonprofit Catalyst. It also says that the share of executive-officer posts held by women at Fortune 500 companies edged up from 13.5 percent in 2009 to 14.6 percent last year.

In Colorado, however, only about 7 percent of corporate board seats are held by women, according to the Women's Leadership Foundation.

Those women who have successfully bridged the gender gap often relied on mentors along the way.

The mentorship boost

[Megan Shellman](#), president of the nonprofit association Colorado Business Women, attributes an informal mentorship with boosting her entrepreneurship and confidence as a leader.

"I entered the organization during a time of flux... and leadership attrition," Shellman recalls of her early involvement with CBW.

Shellman is grateful for the guidance she received from [Kathy Kelly](#), former president of Boulder Business and Professional Women.

"(Kelly) was there to listen, help problem-solve and come up with solutions," said Shellman, whose own business is Simple Synergy Consulting. "I probably wouldn't be president of the state organization right now" without that mentorship.

[Gail Fritzing](#) is a longtime human resources executive who now dedicates her work life to overseeing the all-volunteer mentorship program at the Women's Bean Project.

The women who work at the Bean Project, most of whom are struggling to overcome poverty, addiction or incarceration, use mentors to talk about their jobs, write resumes and polish interview skills.

For Fritzing, the key to being a great mentor is simply making the commitment.

"I get more out of it than the women do," said Fritzing, who has mentored about a dozen women over the last few years. "I revel in their successes, and I'm heartbroken when they fall."

Finding the right fit

[Donna Evans](#), president of the **Colorado Women's Chamber of Commerce**, has promoted mentorship throughout her career.

"I work with female leaders in almost every industry," Evans said. "Every single one of them had a mentor in (her) life."

How did Evans find her first mentor?

She was fortunate right out of college to have an optimistic, encouraging boss whose support and resources enabled the younger professional to make a significant, money-saving impact on their company.

"As you're trying to navigate (the business world), sometimes it's very difficult without having someone who can either open a door or serve as a champion or pull you aside" for a dose of constructive criticism, Evans said.

Some businesses foster mentorship programs. Barring that option, Evans suggests that career-minded women seek out structured mentorships such as those facilitated by the Women's Leadership Foundation's Board Bound Program.

It pairs sitting corporate board members with women who aspire to a similar role.

One thing Evans discourages: Blindly asking a stranger to be a mentor.

"Whether it's in your company or outside your company," she said, "build a relationship before you ask for that mentoring commitment."

Mentorship: A two-way street

Roughly 130 students participated five years ago when the Leeds School of Business at the **University of Colorado Boulder** first launched its Professional Mentorship Program. Now, the program includes more than 1,200 students.

"The students who participated in it were having such a great experience, and the mentors were as well," [Katie Connor](#), executive director of career development at Leeds, said of the program's popularity.

The No. 1 piece of advice Connor gives students: Be prepared.

"As one mentor said (to a student), if you're going to meet with me, you need to come ready to dance," Connor recalls. "This is definitely one of those things where you're going to get out of it what you put into it."

Heather Terezio is a Boulder software executive who has maintained a *small group* of trusted advisors throughout her career.

"These are people whom I respect and admire and aspired to be like," said Terezio, whose business is Tectonic Group and who also serves as president of an international peer-to-peer networking and mentorship outfit called the **Entrepreneur's Organization**.

"I've made a point of keeping them close to me, and of invited them out to lunch and coffee on a fairly regular basis. I want to know what they're up to and tell them what I'm doing for feedback," Terezio said.

The value of mentorship in Terezio's career was a driving force behind Tectonic Academy, a program within her company that identifies at-risk youth and then teaches them how to code.

The program has the double benefit of training prospective employees while opening up the technology field to young people.

"We write great code and do great work," Terezio said. "But now we're also changing the lives of kids who may not have otherwise gotten a chance."

Elana Ashanti Jefferson is an award-winning writing, editing and communications professional.