

# Developing Women Leaders Through Grassroots Mentorship

Learn how 15 women used a holistic mentorship approach based on relationships and style to develop women leaders in their company.

**ON** a warm February day in 2009, 15 women converged on a conference room in Southern California. They represented various functions within the Qualcomm Inc. organization, from engineering to human resources, research and development to legal. Several are established leaders; others are on the fast track through the rank and file. They took their seats around a U-shaped conference table and set about brainstorming a means by which women can be better supported and developed within the organization.

These women met not out of obligation; nobody told them they had to attend. The meeting stemmed from a shared purpose: to pass on the lessons they've learned, to capture what works and what doesn't, and to help future women leaders progress within the organization and find success in a traditionally male-dominated industry.

A singular question spanned the otherwise bare whiteboard: How do we accelerate the

development of Qualcomm's exemplar women leaders and inspire them to more fully enroll and engage in this organization?

Each of the 15 women was asked to provide a brief career history and share her thoughts about what she felt contributed to her success. After seven women took their turns, a theme began to take shape: Relationships are the consistent difference-maker — not training, not conferences. Open, honest and trusting relationships are essential for success, and helped these seven women open doors to critical opportunities and push through challenges. No surprise — the remaining eight women shared similar experiences.

By the end of the meeting, the women had committed themselves, during the following 12 months, to develop and sponsor initiatives that support women leaders. Their first initiative was a women's mentorship pilot program.

By Shannon Sullivan, Axiom Consulting Partners



The remainder of this article describes the journey the 15 women took to implement a women’s mentorship pilot at Qualcomm, a world leader in next-generation mobile technologies. The unique approach and supporting tools that follow can be tailored to almost any employee group, regardless of gender or organizational level.

### Pilot Objectives, Participants and Topics

The women’s mentorship pilot was designed to meet the following objectives:

- Help participants identify and achieve career development and personal growth goals that support Qualcomm’s business objectives.
- Support building a bench of women leaders who have the knowledge, skills and abilities required to succeed in the complex global company.
- Equip participants with the tools necessary to perform to their highest capability.
- Create opportunities for women to meet and partner with others of different job titles, descriptions and cultural backgrounds.
- Create a culture that sees mentorship as an effective way of developing individuals.

To ensure adequate attention and support for all participants, the pilot was limited to approximately 40 women representing various engineering, business and functional roles within the organization. Mentors were selected from Qualcomm’s director through senior vice president ranks, while mentees represented up-and-coming women leaders.

One-on-one mentorship formed the foundation of the pilot and was supplemented by monthly collaborative learning events. Event topics were driven by mentee requests and included, among other things,

a two-part course on presentation skills delivered by an outside speaker and a panel discussion with senior women leaders in the organization. The panel provided a rare opportunity for mentees to hear firsthand how successful women positioned themselves for success, took risks and achieved pivotal career moments, and learned from career missteps.

### Speed Dating Meets Mentorship

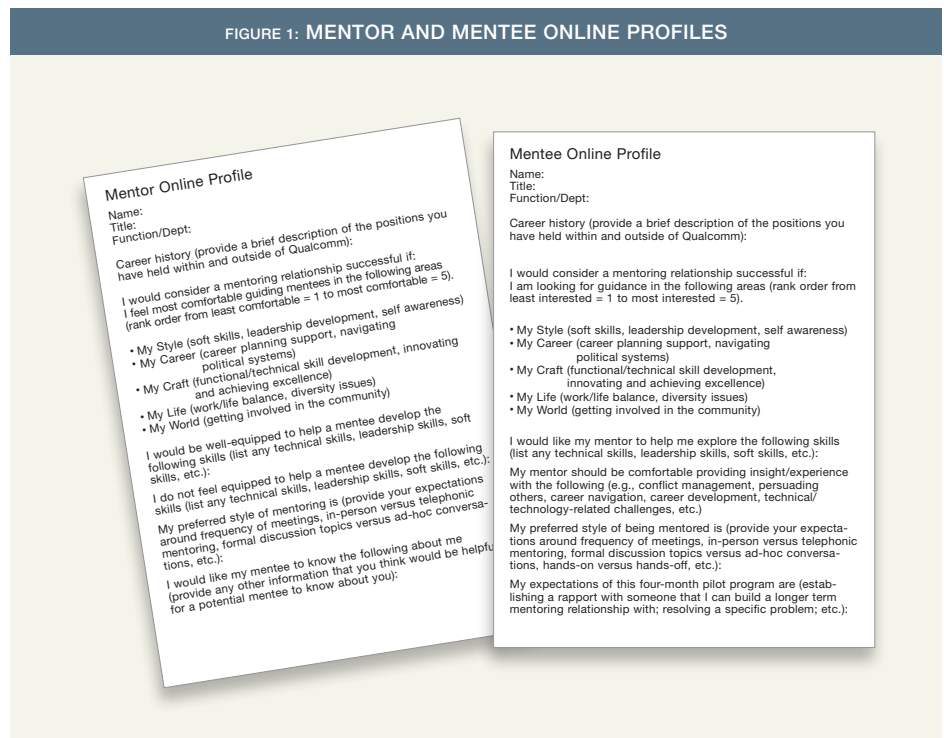
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relationship aspect of mentoring. The importance of establishing a personal connection is minimized and, instead, mentors and mentees are paired solely based on a résumé comparison, answers to a questionnaire or assumption of who might fit well together.

For Qualcomm’s pilot, the 15 women adopted a two-pronged approach to the pairing process. First, mentors and mentees completed online profiles covering their career history and expectations for the mentoring relationship (see Figure 1). They reviewed one another’s profiles to narrow down

FIGURE 1: MENTOR AND MENTEE ONLINE PROFILES



with whom they would like to speak. Second, mentors and mentees attended a casual meet-and-greet event.

At the event, mentors and mentees were free to approach anyone of interest. At the end, each woman submitted her top choices. The results? Roughly 80 percent picked one another based on a personal connection at the event. As one mentee explained: “Some styles and personalities just don’t click. You can’t learn that through a questionnaire alone; it really takes meeting someone, and you instantly know.”

### The Five Mys

For mentoring, the 15 women wanted a holistic mentorship approach that could account for the various dimensions of women’s development and personal growth. The Five Mys framework, as seen in Figure 2, was developed with this holistic intent. Four of the Five Mys — My Style, My Career, My Craft and My Life — represent areas that a mentee can work on to develop her professional self. The fifth — My World — focuses on how a mentee shows up and impacts the world around her. This involves supporting

efforts to promote opportunities for women in science, engineering and mathematics through volunteering and community involvement.

The framework helped the mentor-mentee pairs structure and focus their conversations around key development areas and understand the interconnectivity of various elements. They were able to see, for instance, how choices or trade-offs in one My area were required to reap benefits in another, or how improvement in one would open doors in another. A more narrowly scoped mentorship approach may have missed these invaluable insights. As one mentee commented: “My mentor helped me see that an aspect of My Style, which had always served me well in the past, was not working in this culture. This blind spot was clearly impacting my ability to gain recognition for achievements in My Craft.”

As evidenced in the mentee’s words, an unintended yet positive side effect of the Five Mys framework was that it created a common language of reference to tie participants to this unique experience.

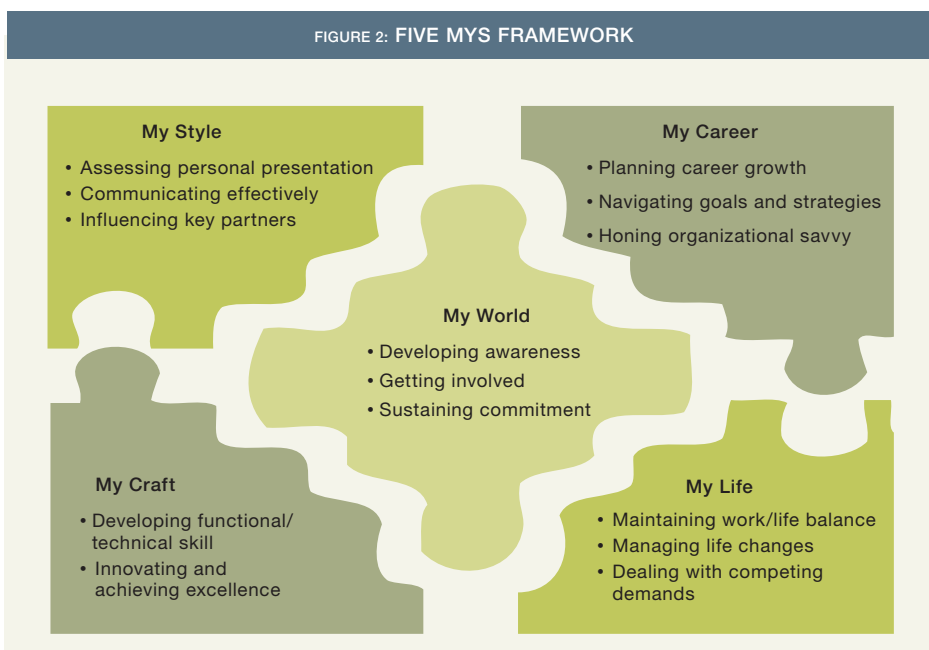
### The Payoff

The 15 women carefully tracked the pilot’s success with a pre- and post-pilot survey, three rounds of 30-minute check-in phone calls, and a focus group to collect quantitative and qualitative data on the quality of the mentoring relationships, mentor/mentee capabilities and pilot program design. These checkpoints also allowed for real-time course corrections around the pairings or pilot design as issues arose.

Four months after the first mentor-mentee meeting, the pilot officially ended, and the final results were in: The women’s mentorship pilot exceeded participants’ expectations, and great strides were made toward meeting the established objectives.

According to feedback, mentors were well-regarded for their abilities to enhance mentees’ self-awareness, to support real-time problem solving and to serve as thought partners. Furthermore, in their one-on-one sessions, mentors and mentees uncovered better ways of doing things within and across functions. And, as hoped, participants built valuable networks inside and outside of the pilot (see Figure 3 on page 56).

FIGURE 2: FIVE MYS FRAMEWORK



### Key Learnings

Several learnings emerged throughout the course of the pilot, three of which are of particular note for any mentorship initiative, women-focused or otherwise:

- 1. Selection:** Selecting the right mentors for the program is critical. In addition to establishing selection criteria, prospective mentors should be provided an opportunity to speak with successful mentors who can provide a realistic perspective on the skills, attributes and time commitment required to foster a productive mentoring relationship. Remember, being a good mentor requires more than good intentions.

# Being a mentor is not about having all of the answers, though mentors often feel undue pressure to do so.


- 2. Foundation:** Don't assume that because you've selected the *right* mentors and mentees, they will automatically know what to do. Before the first meeting, hold orientation sessions for them. Use this time to set context for the initiative, discuss boundaries for the relationships and start to build necessary skills. This could include role-plays of difficult situations, demonstrations of how to use the mentorship tools (e.g., the Five Mys framework) and discussions about mentorship experiences from experienced mentors and mentees. Setting an appropriate foundation up front will ward off potential pitfalls and help ensure productive mentoring relationships.
- 3. Support:** Being a mentor is not about having all of the answers, though mentors often feel undue

pressure to do so. Create opportunities for mentors to get to know one another on a personal level so they can build trust and rely on each other throughout the program. Providing them with opportunities to network with one another, share tips and problem solve can go a long way in building their confidence and skills.

### Conclusion

The relationships and networks formed during the brief four months of the pilot are expected to continue well into the future. In fact, nearly all of the mentor-mentee relationships exist today, formally or informally.

Jane Mack-Baker, Qualcomm's vice president of employee relations, and one of the original 15 women, sums up the experience: "It's amazing to see how

a relatively small grassroots initiative can impact so many. These women have seen the benefits of mentorship and are sharing their experiences and the tools with others. I am very proud to have been part of this." 

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon Sullivan is a principal with Axiom Consulting Partners in Los Angeles. Sullivan, along with Debra Jacobs and John Anderson, also from Axiom, partnered with Qualcomm to design and implement the women's mentoring initiative. Sullivan can be reached at [ssullivan@axiomcp.com](mailto:ssullivan@axiomcp.com).

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- Career Development — A Key Component of Your Talent Management Strategy, Benefits Topic Brief
- Foster a Culture of Engagement — Ten Principles Every Manager Should Know, Work-Life Topic Brief.

FIGURE 3: POST-PILOT PROGRAM SURVEY

Survey statement	% Agree — Mentors	% Agree — Mentees
Mentoring provides an opportunity to expand my professional network	83%	90%
Mentoring provides an opportunity to build business acumen	67%	91%
Mentoring provides an opportunity to enhance self-awareness	100%	100%
Mentoring provides an opportunity for problem-solving	100%	82%
Mentoring provides an opportunity to better navigate through Qualcomm	66%	82%
Mentoring provides an opportunity to develop my skills/competencies	100%	90%
Mentoring benefits mentees	100%	100%
Mentoring benefits mentors	79%	64%