Science & Society

Peer power

A women’s peer-mentoring program at the workplace: example from the academia

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For most scientists in academia, a tenure-track position is both a major achievement and a long-awaited challenge to gain independence and pursue their own research projects. But this independence comes with drawbacks. Although principle investigators (PIs) can rely on many years of experience and training of how to perform research, many find it an onerous task to lead a research group, as their training focused mostly on their scientific education and too often not on the other skills required: recruiting excellent students, allocating resources, management skills, becoming a mentor, and navigating institutional politics. Many universities and research institutions therefore offer mentoring programs whereby successful senior faculty members, who are willing to allocate time, resources, and expertise, pair up with a young PI to help and advise them. These programs, which often hinge on a good personal and professional fit between mentor and mentee [1], are very helpful to improve productivity, career advancement, and career satisfaction [2].

While establishing an independent research group is challenging for anyone, female PIs face additional challenges...”

...Each academic mentoring program has its unique rules about how to recruit mentors and to pair them with junior faculty, the duration of the program, meeting schedules, training of mentors, access to resources and soft-skills workshops, and how to evaluate the success of the program. The majority of these mentoring programs is centered around the junior–senior, one-on-one relationship [6]. Here, we describe an alternative to this classical mentoring model—a Junior Women Peer-Mentoring Group—our experience and recommendations for implementing such a program at other universities and academic centers.

Junior Women Peer-Mentoring Group

In 2016, we started an all-women, new-PIs workshop bi-annually at Ben-Gurion University. This initiative was led by Galia S. Moran and inspired by an all-women’s group she had co-established at Harvard Medical School [7]. The vision was to form a Junior Women Peer-Mentoring Group (JWPMG) program at the university to address the specific needs of young female faculty members, and provide them with concrete advice for coping with the challenges of academic life and running a research group.

During each of seven sessions, the facilitators—Galia S. Moran and Uri Alon—used the peer-coaching approach to address and resolve an issue or a problem per requests from the group; for example, how to say no, time management, work–life balance, networking, and assertive self-presentation. Our peer coaching has three phases: During phase 1, one participant—the mentee—describes a challenge she is currently struggling with. The other members of the group can only ask questions to clarify the situation, but should give no advice. In phase 2, the mentee becomes an observer while the mentors and the other members of the group can only ask questions to clarify the situation, but should give no advice. In phase 3, the mentee becomes an observer while the mentors and the other members of the group can ask questions to clarify the situation, but should give no advice. In phase 4, the mentee becomes an observer while the mentors and the other members of the group can ask questions to clarify the situation, but should give no advice. In phase 5, the mentee becomes an observer while the mentors and the other members of the group can ask questions to clarify the situation, but should give no advice. In phase 6, the mentee becomes an observer while the mentors and the other members of the group can ask questions to clarify the situation, but should give no advice. In phase 7, the mentee becomes an observer while the mentors and the other members of the group can ask questions to clarify the situation, but should give no advice.

Each mentoring session is accompanied by a workshop bi-annually at Ben-Gurion University, which are centered around the junior–senior, one-on-one relationship [6]. Here, we describe an alternative to this classical mentoring model—a Junior Women Peer-Mentoring Group—our experience and recommendations for implementing such a program at other universities and academic centers.
peer-reviewed journals, spend more time on research, and have greater career satisfaction...

During these sessions, we dedicate time to create a positive atmosphere so that participants trust each other and form a group that is interested and dedicated to meeting periodically. An important principle is to stick to this positive atmosphere and clearly set the goal of each meeting, and the timeframe. We also make sure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

*What is special about Junior women peer-mentoring group?*

The JWPMG approach is different from traditional mentoring programs in various aspects. The mentoring is performed by a group of individuals, and not by a single person, which allows for multiple solutions to emerge; the mentors and the mentee are at the same level in terms of academic rank, so there is no paternalism in the interactions; and each person in the group plays both roles—mentor and mentee, forming a sense of reciprocity. Moreover, while other programs also use a group format [8], they include senior PIs, who either lead the group or are part of it, thus maintaining the traditional hierarchical model.

Indeed, playing the roles of both mentor and mentee removes the often-present imbalance between senior and junior colleagues; there is no one person who holds all the answers. The mentor chooses an action plan, not because the person offering advice is her senior, but because it is the one that can help her to solve the problem. This process enhances the sense of ownership over the chosen strategy.

The all-women, similar-academic-rank JWPMG group with faculty members from different departments provides a safe environment. Participants can bring up burning issues without fear of repercussions, and the mentors can discuss these in a relatively neutral manner, as they are not personally involved. These issues often include gender-specific challenges at the workplace, which can be discussed without concerns of experiencing a judgmental look.

There is another advantage to junior faculty members advising their colleagues: Since their specific challenges are often the same no matter in which discipline they work, and are unique to their academic stage—establishing a research group, recruiting students, preparing courses, establishing one’s name recognition—the peers can easily relate to these dilemmas, and offer solutions from their own recent experience. This has the additional benefit of efficiency: Regardless of the role played during the discussion, any member can benefit from advice given by the group. The group approach offers a diverse set of experience, opinions, and suggestions, from which the mentee or any other group member can then choose what she wants to apply to resolve her dilemma.

*What did we take away from the program?*

Our experience with these JWPMG groups shows that it is beneficial for the participants by embracing and discussing different approaches to leadership, by coming up with solutions to problems that women face more frequently, and by creating a sense of camaraderie. Differences in leadership styles increase diversity and help to make research more creative. When we start a new research project leading us into the “unknown”, different voices give different answers to the questions. It is a common cliché that a woman that “makes it to the top” has to act “like a man”. Hearing from other women in the group that they succeed as a research group leader, while maintaining what is a considered a stereotypically female leadership approach, such as using emotional intelligence when dealing with colleagues and students, encouraged us to embrace the diversity of approaches and management styles.

During the JWPMG meetings, we also learned practical advice for how to say “no”, how to deal with being asked to perform administrative duties too often owing to gender stereotypes, and how to manage the overwhelming multiplicity of roles: personal and professional.

“...playing the roles of both mentor and mentee removes the often-present imbalance between senior and junior colleagues; there is no one person who holds all the answers.”

Finally, the group meetings also created a sense of camaraderie among the participants. One can easily feel isolated as a faculty member, especially as member of a minority group [3,9]. In this program, during which we shared personal dilemmas, and exposed our concerns in intensive meetings, we bonded with colleagues across campus. Now, when we face a challenge, we can quickly assemble a group to discuss it, and suggest options. The diversity of personalities in the group meant that each person could find someone to relate to, and at the same time, receive multiple viewpoints and responses to their question.

*What needs to happen for this to be replicated?*

In order to make the Junior women peer-mentoring group work at other places, universities or research centers need to initiate such programs top-down, since the externally determined structure is an important factor to ensure compliance. The regular meetings, set by the university administration, helped participants make time in their busy schedules to attend—the meetings were three hours each, including lunch. This facilitated the formation of a support network [10], which we could then maintain following the initial 7-week workshop. We also suggest charging a small fee for participation, as a way to ensure attendance and commitment.

Confidentiality is key to maintaining trust, and to benefiting from such a program. Participants need to know that what they say in the room stays in the room. In order to ensure that participants are free to express their concerns and opinions,
including about colleagues and seniors, it is advised that no more than one researcher from each department is in a group.

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It should be noted that peer-mentoring, as opposed to one-on-one mentoring programs, does create specific challenges: Coordinating among group members’ schedules can be difficult, the meetings are less intimate, and there is a price paid for diversity; not all topics are relevant to all participants, and not everyone may have advice for how to address a given problem.

Although our experience is based on an academic setting, we believe that JWPMG can be applied in other organizations, including medical institutions or industry. Indeed, we think it has potential to bring about change and help women succeed in academia or other workplaces. While one-on-one mentoring has a significant personal value to the faculty members who participate, it alone is not enough to instigate a cultural change. Group mentoring, however, by its sheer numbers, is more likely to make a more pronounced impact on the local institutional culture than classical mentoring programs.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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