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# The power of gender-sensitive mentoring

Mentoring is a powerful tool to enhance job satisfaction and work-life balance. This guide aims to help mentors adopt a gender-sensitive approach to support women and people who identify as women in teaching-focused roles

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She has finished her PhD. She has given a handful of papers at conferences, where she has taken every opportunity to network with colleagues in her area. She has published a few articles, or even the monograph of her thesis. Still, research-active positions are few and elusive, and always seem to go to someone more experienced, better prepared, or simply lucky enough not to have to worry about making ends meet. So, she ends up accepting a teaching-focused job

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Like other academics in teaching-focused roles, she finds herself having to negotiate her professional identity in an environment where student-facing work is often seen as subsidiary, especially in a research-intensive university.

The challenge is made worse by the traditional association between women and service work: there will probably be one or two managers who will assume her career aspirations are teaching and caring for her students. In this landscape, opportunities for professional development and progression will be few and limited in scope. Heavy teaching loads make research look like an unaffordable luxury, and there might be moments when she wonders what this job has to do with her professional aspirations. This is where the role of the mentor comes in.

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Offering understanding, support and encouragement, mentors can play a key role in helping staff find satisfaction in academic work, even in teaching-focused roles. Gender-sensitive mentors are aware of the need to overcome the low expectations placed on women by traditional views of their professional ambitions.

If you act as a mentor for a woman, or a colleague who identifies as a woman, in a teaching-focused role, this guide based on [a paper by Laura Gail Lunsford](#) will help you identify ways in which you can support your mentee. Although most of the advice can be applied to any mentoring relationship, regardless of gender, background or professional stage, there is a strong focus on the challenges faced by women who aspire to develop their professional profiles and have to deal with stereotypes about their fitness for senior roles. The headings for every section refer to potential development areas. These are followed by suggestions for how you, as a mentor, can meet the needs of your colleague.

### **Finding her place in the department**

This recommendation is particularly relevant to newly appointed teachers. Talk to your mentee about the culture and the social and professional dynamics of the place. Explain what her status will be according to her rank, and what will be initially expected from her.

### **Defying expectations**

Emphasise that it is fine not to conform to what other people think of her: they don't know her as well as she does herself!

### **Not being afraid to be assertive**

Chances are that some people will react negatively to an assertive woman. Support your mentee in preparing for this backlash and help her see it as part of being a competent, strong-minded woman at work. Prevent her setting herself up for low expectations through false humility.

### **Keeping the personal from the professional**

Help your mentee realise that she doesn't need to take everything personally. People will want to challenge her for reasons beyond her control: unhappiness, frustration or simply envy. None of this can be avoided, but the good news is that it's only work.

### **Finding her inner calling**

Help your mentee identify the areas of development that can deliver not only professional recognition, but also personal satisfaction. Encourage her to follow her own agenda of professional growth, rather than gratify someone else's. Foster a sense of purpose in what she does, minimising dependence on external rewards.

### **Sharing her good work**

Identify outlets for your mentee to disseminate the outcomes of her research and scholarship activities and encourage her to seize these opportunities. It will enhance her professional profile and her confidence, and it will let others know that they can learn from her – and with her.

### **Owning her successes**

Support her in taking credit for her own work. Encourage her to claim ownership of her achievements, rather than let others take over.

Help your mentee focus on her achievements, not on her failures. Assert her value as a professional and as a person. Tell her that the way other people see her or treat her doesn't change who she is.

### Looking after herself

Watch that she doesn't lose her health over work-related issues. Help her identify healthy stress outlets to keep her mind off work outside working hours.

### Keeping positive

Every setback is an opportunity to learn about something or someone. Help your mentee focus on the future and how she can apply what she has learned, rather than dwell on projects that didn't go as planned.

Besides supporting professional development, mentoring provides a space to nurture a bond that straddles the personal and the professional. Nobody can understand the mentee as well as someone who has been through exactly the same experiences. Through this unique mutual understanding, mentors promote belonging and well-being, putting a human touch on the frantic day-to-day of academics.

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