

# Women in Leadership: Finding and Leveraging Allies and Mentors



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In 2018, women should be more empowered than ever in the workplace. The idea of a woman finding career success at all levels of business is the norm, years beyond when it was considered a novelty.

Yet, in 2018, businesswomen are still struggling. **An analysis by CNNMoney** found that only 5 percent of the S&P 500 have women CEOs. The same analysis states that just 16.5 percent of the top executives at these companies are women. The obstacles of fewer opportunities, slower advancement, lower wages, and even the overused “glass ceiling” metaphor that unfortunately still applies, remain entrenched. Progress is slow, but it is happening—the #metoo movement is one of many examples of inroads being made and women refusing to accept the status quo.

Women in business, including women in leadership, should not be expected to single-handedly change the culture and values of their workplace—a near impossible feat. Moreover, they shouldn’t need to mimic men’s behavior to get fair consideration for career advancement. A more effective strategy to increase their influence and capitalize on the opportunities they deserve is to find allies and mentors within the organization.

accomplish something and your ally has a motive in helping you; there's a principle of mutual self-interest at work. The relationship is strategic; its purpose is to leverage power. You don't need to have a lot in common with an ally—you don't even necessarily need to enjoy one another's company—but you do need to trust one another.”

Here is a deeper look at how **women in leadership** can benefit from making allies and working with (and serving as) mentors:

## Benefits of Allies and Mentors

Allies and mentors are more than people you can relate to and get guidance from—they can be your strongest advocates, staunchest supporters, and truest partners. The benefits to having a mentor are obvious: increased opportunities, overcoming obstacles in the path toward leadership and success, career advancement, education and skill-building, greater visibility ... the list goes on.

Less apparent are the benefits alliances and mentorships have *for* the allies and mentors. In ***The Female Vision***, Helgesen and Johnson describe a real-life example in which a female executive vice president leveraged her alliance with her boss to present a talent plan and seek guidance. The boss, in turn, “. . . interpreted her efforts as strengthening *him* by extending his own connections inside the company.” In this case, the EVP leveraged her relationship to benefit herself, her boss, and the entire company. When you understand the power behind leveraging relationships instead of just existing within them, allies and mentors become an even greater asset to your career.

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## Challenges of a Different Kind

The challenges women face in the workplace and in leadership are not new: the gender pay gap, slower advancement, longstanding stereotypes, and a general imbalance between how men and women are treated. These problems are frustrating, and though inroads have been made, the progress often seems agonizingly slow.

way of securing allies and mentors in the workplace. Some of these include:

- **Expecting others to spontaneously notice and reward your contributions:** Women should take responsibility for ensuring that their achievements are recognized.
- **Building rather than leveraging relationships:** Women are great at establishing connections, but struggle to turn them into something more productive.
- **Failing to enlist allies from day one:** Women feel as if they must be fully prepared before making connections, which puts them behind the curve.
- **Putting your job before your career:** Women often focus too much on getting through the day-to-day and fail to see the long view.

Helgeson and Goldsmith detail other challenges—described as “habits”—that all have one thing in common: They are limiting behaviors women can overcome on their own. However, allies and mentors can be great resources in the process of overcoming these internalized hurdles; the key to finding them is being proactive.

## Finding Allies

The workplace dynamic can make a woman’s quest for allies and mentors tricky. Some strategies for making this task less daunting include:

- **Look for allies everywhere in the organization:** Your immediate coworkers are often striving for the same goals you are, and though some competition may come into play, working together can be mutually beneficial. Looking upward for allies and, especially, mentors is crucial because those managers and executives regularly interact with other upper-level people and won’t hesitate to sing your praises when the opportunity arises.
- **Seek men as allies:** Despite the often-imbalanced workplace dynamic between men and women, the men in your office can be great allies and should not be overlooked. Male allies often step up to the plate for the women they are allied with or are mentoring, making their advocacy more impactful when those women aren’t in the room. Equalizing gender imbalances will require dedicated focus and action, but being proactive in making allies of all genders can help. (And to the men reading this post, make an effort to be proactive in forming these alliances, too.)

will be mutually beneficial and lead to other alliance opportunities.

- **Take advantage of mentorship programs:** Many organizations offer mentorship opportunities and other chances for employees to connect across departments and beyond everyday cubicle banter. Although some programs are just lip service, many are legitimate avenues to build a network of relationships and boost your career. Also, look into mentorship programs outside of your workplace; sometimes, a relationship with someone unconnected to your workplace can provide a fresh perspective, and good mentors will tout you to other organizations if you are looking to make a move.

## Leveraging Trust

Kathryn Heath, Jill Flynn, Mary Davis Holt, and Diana Faison—the leadership experts behind *The Influence Effect: A New Path to Power for Women Leaders*—frame alliances this way: “Cultivating professional relationships that are based on mutual trust accrues benefits that can never be discounted. All of us need professional allies in order to achieve success, but the supporters we surround ourselves with in our scaffolding should be those whom we trust enough to stand up for us in the best and worst of times. These particular allies mean more to us not only because they are steadfast but also because we’ve invested so much time and effort in earning their trust and support. Simply knowing they are there makes us (and our scaffolding) far stronger.”

Ultimately, women who want to advance their careers and move into leadership roles must realize the relationships they form and nurture are their best assets in achieving their career goals. Alliances and mentorships are only as effective as the influence you leverage from them.

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