

In workplace empowerment, mentorship matters - one woman's story shows us why

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Much is made of the importance of female mentors in the workplace - and with good reason. At every stage of their education and professional development, girls, graduates and young women should be able to look up to and be supported by leaders who understand their circumstances and challenges. Female mentorship helps to build social capital, nurture ambition, and break down barriers to advancement.



But male mentors also have a role to play. In fact, given their often established and usually unquestioned positions of authority, the responsibility they carry is arguably greater.

They're often able to influence workplace culture with relative ease, and so stand to facilitate gender-inclusive ways of thinking and working. By mentoring and supporting young women - and encouraging others to do the same through gender-aware workplace training and education - they stand to make long-term gains in terms of female empowerment.

In her working life, Phemelo Segoe, the brand and marketing manager at Optimi Workplace, South Africa's leading skills development, education and training provider, has experienced this first-hand.

Segoe has worked in education since the very beginning of her career. After completing her brand building and management degree at Vega, she started her first job at an organisation that made school bags for children in rural communities out of recycled plastic and fitted them with solar panels. The solar panels would charge while the children walked to and from school, so that they could be used for light at night.

The role taught her a lot about the intersection between education and corporate sponsorship: why sponsorship programmes that operate in this space fail, and what needs to be in place to ensure they succeed. She carried these lessons into her next position at Tuta-Me, which later became part of the Optimi Group.

"When I joined Tuta-Me, it was still a start-up trying to connect learners to tutors. It hadn't yet evolved to the comprehensive bursary model that exists today, where corporates sponsor tutoring sessions for the learners and students who form part of their bursary programmes. At the time, the team comprised me and four others - all men."

This experience would have a huge impact on Segoe.

“As a young black woman working primarily with men, I was constantly struck by how confident they were. If one of my colleagues thought of something, we did it - we put it to the test. It showed me how differently men operate in the workplace compared to women. Men, I’ve found, are encouraged to try, even if they fail. Women, however, are expected to be smart and cautious. We’re told not to stick our heads out too much, especially if what we’re attempting might not work.”



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Segoe’s colleagues were serial entrepreneurs who had learnt the value of learning from mistakes, exploring alternative options, and pushing boundaries. As a member of this team, she was encouraged to do the same - to fail forward, to put herself and her ideas to the test, to raise her hand.

“It’s a missed opportunity to think that young girls should only be partnered with female mentors,” she explains. “Young women have a lot to learn from male leaders. I learnt a lot from what my colleagues said, but especially from how they behaved. They taught me that the fear I battled was in my head, and that I was often my greatest stumbling block.”

Of course, not everyone has this experience, and Segoe is aware that her anecdotal evidence doesn’t make it a workplace standard. Women don’t always find the psychological safety they need to take calculated risks, be bold, and succeed in their careers.

But this is where the responsibility of male leaders comes in. They have an opportunity to create environments where young women feel safe and supported, and are equipped with the skills they need to become leaders themselves. “This doesn’t rest on the shoulders of women who have already become leaders - at least not exclusively - but also on men who are still building up the gender diversity all businesses need to succeed,” Segoe adds.

In this context, workplace education is everything. It informs teams about the benefits of having gender diverse work in terms of productivity, collaboration, fairness and the bottom line, and helps to put effective mentorship programmes in place. “Companies need to dismantle their own restrictive ideas about the role of women in the workplace, and whose responsibility it is to mentor them,” says Segoe. “Workplace training can help here.”

It starts with planting the seed: gender parity in the workplace is everyone’s responsibility, men included. From there, if properly executed, sustainable change and long-term success is possible.

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