

Mentoring – The Secret of Every Successful Business Leader

“If you are aspiring to lead, find a mentor and learn from them. Mentors may be men or women.”

My first industry conference, a million years ago (or was it only 15), both astounded and astonished me as there were only seven women in the room (and I was one of them). Count ‘em, seven out of an entire ballroom full of attendees. The male crowd was intimidating for a newly appointed female executive in the furniture industry. Not wanting to disappoint my mentors—an important industry couple who had pushed for my employer to send me—I was determined to represent our tiny contingency to the best of my abilities. I made eye contact (sort of) and stuck my hand out (sometimes) and soaked up the speakers’ messages (completely).

Over the next several years, the number of women at industry conferences gradually increased. With time, I was pleased to look around and see a growing number of women. Progress, I thought. That is, until I realized in an entire three-day conference held last month, only one speaker was female.

What gives? Where are the smart, successful females who can contribute to an industry that defines women as the primary consumer of its products? Where is she in your company? Make a list of the men and women who work for you. At the Walt Disney Co., 75 percent to 80 percent of people in leadership roles have been homegrown. Now consider your list. Do the vast majority of these men and women have a mentor, and are they promotable? Disney says they hire the attitude, knowing they can train the skills. Does this hold true for your company?

My first promotion was a job that

required excellent typing skills, which, at my pace of around 20 words per minute, was lacking. My mentor/leader—now a well-known industry CEO—thought I could master that skill. It was my enthusiastic and professional attitude that got his attention. He thought I would contribute and represent his office well. My final role, with his guidance, was vice president of marketing. This leader employed his perceptions about people to make good



business decisions and then mentored his employees through training and the guidance they needed to create success for the entire organization. A respected CEO today, he was recently recognized by WithIt at their annual WOW awards for mentoring.

Are you a mentor? It’s really pretty natural. Teach. Set an example. Be the person that others want to emulate. Maintain integrity. Always respect. Give credit. Inspire to the next level of performance. Be available, motivate and listen. Offer growth and development opportunities. Your smart proteges will grate-

fully attend every class or conference, read every book or bit of research and relish every time you introduce them to other leaders. Remember your mentors and how effective they were.

If you are aspiring to lead, find mentors and learn from them. Mentors may be men or women. They are probably older than you and, yes, some can even be younger than you. After all some parents cite their children as mentors. Attributes, values and qualities count no matter the mentor’s age.

To this day, I work hard, remember my mentors and hope that I have made them proud. Several of them periodically check in on me. Ron and Linda Jones, the power couple I first met when Lexington Furniture was owned by Masco, remain two people to whom I will be forever indebted. They provided opportunities for growth for women in the Masco-owned companies. Our group of “Linda’s Girls,” a title we gave ourselves, grabbed with gusto every chance for inclusion in meetings, training sessions, or conferences. Today, many of us own our own businesses or have climbed the ranks in large corporations.

WithIt provides a multitude of opportunities to mentor and be mentored. We welcome both men and women. Yes, contrary to some beliefs, we encourage men to join WithIt. Men sit on our board of directors and our board of governors. Ask them—they’ll be happy to tell you why they support and mentor WithIt and why you should as well. **HFB**

Learn, Grow, Lead, Encourage. Find out how at www.withit.org.