

A PIECE OF MY MIND

Julie Story Byerley, MD, MPH

Department of Pediatrics, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Mentoring in the Era of #MeToo

In the wake of the inspiring but incredibly upsetting #MeToo movement,¹ I find myself concerned not only for the women who have already experienced sexual harassment, and certainly there are many, but also for those yet to come. Some will unfortunately experience the same pain, fear, humiliation, and stigma of sexual harassment as the stories being brought to light by the brave women who have been reporting their experiences today. In addition, I worry about the potential for gender-based neglect, an unintended backlash in response to this bright light.

I worry about the women who will miss out on the mentorship of well-intentioned men who fear being accused of mistreatment. And I worry about the women who will be passed over because it's simply "easier" for men to supervise men during this challenging time. And I worry that progress toward gender equity with leadership opportunities for women will regress.

I have never had a female supervisor and, aside from many wonderful peer mentors, never had a close female mentor. I have, however, had the good fortune of generous men who have sponsored, inspired, and trained me along the way throughout my academic

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career. With full recognition that many women in similar positions cannot say the same, I can confidently report that I have never been sexually harassed by a mentor.

My mentors have done what good mentors are supposed to do. They have respected my work: they have taught and learned with me, they have constructively criticized and enhanced my ideas, and they have provided feedback for me to learn and grow. We have genuinely disagreed at times, but we have always focused on our work and its mission.

Male mentors have not only helped advance my career, they have become good friends. I know their families and they know mine, we have visited in each other's homes, and we have traveled together to meetings. We have laughed together, a lot in fact, about things inside and outside of the professional environment.

Recently, I have reflected on what specific behaviors my mentors have demonstrated that have always made me feel safe. First, in my presence, they demonstrate exemplary professional behavior during and outside of the work day, never compromised by alcohol consumption or flirtatious interactions. Second, they

always behave comfortably but as if others are watching, demonstrating integrity. Third, though they have warm personalities, they refrain from physical touch except in larger social settings where they may give hugs in greeting. They never mention anything about my appearance or the appearance of others, and they avoid generalizing comments about gender. They text me important or urgent things, and sometimes just very funny things, but never anything I wouldn't share with my husband or their wives. I know I am "in the club" because of their warmth and friendship as well as the content of our conversations, but I do not perceive their "club" as a stereotypical "boys' club" where I am not welcome.

Most importantly, my male mentors have chosen to speak up to support women while other men have chosen to sit quietly or, worse, offend. In particular, one of my mentors has actively sponsored women into leadership roles. He has nominated, hired, and promoted women in each position he has held, speaking up along the way to describe how important diversity is to institutional success. When I have expressed hesitation or fear to him about my qualifications for a potential post, he has shifted the frame, helping me to recognize that my view is necessary to improve the quality of the work we all do.

Empowered male mentors see this big picture, and they are also prepared to respond when they observe sexist behavior. Recently an older male colleague, a mentor of sorts, and I ran into each other unexpectedly in a social setting. We greeted each other with a hug, as Southerners are known to do, and an observer I didn't know quipped to him, "Are you just hanging out with the pretty girls?" He quickly responded, introducing me by name and position, and confidently stated, "She is on our senior leadership team and an important colleague." This thoughtful response did not embarrass the woman who had made the comment, but at the same time sent an affirming message to me that he recognized that comment might have been demeaning. When male leaders respond actively to sexist situations progress is made. When this type of concrete support is consistently demonstrated to mentees, the trust of the mentoring relationship flourishes and the mentee moves toward her full potential.

In this time of tension, men with power must name the issue of sexual harassment and make it clear that harassing behavior is never acceptable, and also invite the mentee to call out behavior that causes discomfort in any way. Men who openly address the issue of mistreatment of women in a confident and respectful manner empower women and advance our organizations to be more inclusive and productive work environments.

Corresponding

Author: Julie Story Byerley, MD, MPH, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, 4068 Bondurant Hall, CB #7000, Chapel Hill, NC 27514 (Julie_byerley@med.unc.edu).

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It is especially important that men spark this conversation in groups with power and authority. The message of leaders must be that sexual harassment will not be tolerated and diversity is a core value. To create an inclusive community, optimize talent, and advance the organization toward success, mentorship, and collaboration across gender lines is essential. Professional behavior is key to establishing a safe environment for effective mentoring.

Those who have experienced sexual harassment must be fully and actively supported. Harassment must be brought to light and eliminated. Concurrently, championing diversity and inclusion has never been more important. A diverse community of leaders can create a more supportive, respectful culture. To that end, building mentoring relationships across lines that sometimes divide us must be encouraged.

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1. #MeToo movement [website]. <https://metoomvmt.org>. Accessed February 15, 2018.