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Advancing Women in Coaching: Shifting from Mentorship to Sponsorship

Over and over again, mentorship emerged as an overriding concern during “The 2015 Conversation on Women and Sport” that took place in Quebec City in June.

In this article, authors Gretchen Kerr and Jenessa Banwell dissect existing mentorship programs and conclude that, while laudable in intent and [often] in outcome, they have not solved the perennial troubling dilemma of declining numbers of women coaches in Canada and, indeed, elsewhere. While mentorship is arguably an adequate development not to be discarded, an additional approach is needed if women are to advance to the highest levels of coaching. They argue persuasively for sponsorship which, by definition, goes beyond traditional mentorship and ensures “a more influential and specific professional relationship.”

The *Journal* acknowledges that this article derives from a joint project between the Coaching Association of Canada and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity funded by the Status of Women Canada. We thank the partners for permitting the publication of this important and timely article. May the discussion continue. — Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor

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Advancing Women in Coaching: Shifting from Mentorship to Sponsorship

By Gretchen Kerr and Jenessa Banwell

Why are there so few women coaches? This question has been raised consistently in Canada and internationally over the last 50 years; however, despite a growing body of research on the topic, the percentage of female coaches remains low and, in the views of some, is declining.

Through the leadership of the Government of Canada, Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), and by Canadian sport community leaders such as the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) and the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC), opportunities for mentorship have been developed and implemented specifically to provide career support for aspiring high-potential women coaches.

For instance, existing at the university level since 2004 is the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) Female Apprentice Coach Program. This program serves to, “... identify and support female graduating student-athletes who demonstrate the desire and skills for coaching by providing them opportunities to share in the coaching experience in CCAA National Championship sports.” Since its inception, this program has supported more than 150 women coach apprentices and over 60% of these women have continued to coach. Similarly, in the early 2000s, the CAC developed and implemented the National Team Apprenticeship Program (NTAP) and the Canada Games Apprenticeship Program (CGAP). Both programs were designed to provide opportunities for Canadian women coaches to work alongside an identified mentor coach and prepare and participate in national- and international-level sport competitions such as the Canada Games and Olympic Games. A review of the NTAP reveals that since its establishment, more than 50 women have travelled and coached with their national teams at major international events.

The mentorship of women for career development has been highlighted and highly researched in non-sport domains. Fields such as business, healthcare, including medicine, nursing, and pharmacy, and (higher) education have utilized mentorship, with varying degrees of success, to develop and support high-potential women. The use of mentorship in non-sport domains can and will be drawn upon to highlight the potential application and impact of mentorship in addressing the lack of women in coaching in Canada.

Mentorship

Mentorship can be defined as: “A relationship in which a person with useful experience, knowledge, skills, and/or wisdom offers advice, information, guidance, support, or opportunity to another for that individual’s professional development.” The content of many mentoring programs includes two different functions of mentoring: the provision of career-related support and psychosocial support. Career-related support includes providing opportunities for a protégé’s professional growth and is made possible because of a mentor’s senior status, experience, and organizational influence that serve to help the protégé “learn the ropes” of an organization. Psychosocial support aims to enhance a protégé’s sense of competence, self-image, and self-esteem through mentors’ role modeling, counselling, and friendship-like behaviours.

Successful mentorship programs for women in medicine, for example, have been linked to supporting female protégé career choices, research productivity, and overall well-being and job satisfaction. In faculty development research, the use of mentorship has led to increased feelings of support and preparation for future promotion and/or tenure. In the corporate world, women hold only 3 percent of top management positions in the world’s top organizations. Mentorship, as a result, has been used to break through the “glass ceiling” and help women advance within the corporate hierarchy.

Despite efforts to support and advance high potential women up the corporate ladder with mentorship programs, it has been argued that if “... women are being mentored so thoroughly, why aren’t they moving into higher [leadership] positions?” Also, mentoring is essential for development, but not sufficient for advancing women to the senior-most levels. Instead, research has pointed to “... a more influential and specific professional relationship: sponsorship.”

The case for sponsorship

Research has shown that although women are being mentored, they’re not being promoted. For example, Catalyst’s 2008 study of over 4,000 high potentials showed that more women than men have mentors, yet women are less likely to advance in their careers, in part, because they are not actively sponsored in the way men are. Sponsorship has been suggested as the missing piece to the promotion of women and a strategy that appears to be working in the corporate world.

While a mentor may also be a sponsor, a sponsor goes beyond the traditional roles of a mentor. Sponsorship is defined as: “The public support by a powerful, influential person for the advancement and promotion of an individual within whom he or she sees untapped or unappreciated leadership talent or potential.”

For example, a 2011 study by Catalyst conducted one-hour interviews with 93 executives and high performers at six top global organizations. According to the executives, sponsorship was key in preparing protégés for the complexities of new roles/assignments; meeting unique executive challenges; determining where, when, and how to make strategic contributions; mitigating perceived risk; and important for advancing high-performing employees. From the perspective of the high performers, sponsorship helped her/him recognize the value-add of sponsors’ offerings to her/his career; develop skills that support advancement; and gain visibility in the organization. For the women high performers specifically, sponsorship was perceived as a means of overcoming barriers they still face in reaching the highest organizational levels in meaningful numbers.

As an example of a Canadian female-focused sponsorship initiative, *Women on Board* connects talented up-and-coming women with prominent board chairs and CEO’s from major Canadian companies. The goal is to expand the number of women who are prepared to take on director roles at major public and private entities. To date, 98 women have been a part of *Women on Board* and over 40% of program alumnae have

been appointed to corporate boards across Canada and the United States.

Sponsorship is described as being focused on advancement and predicated on power and is believed to level the playing field for women. Table 1 illustrates the difference between the role of mentors and sponsors.

Table 1. The Differences between Mentors and Sponsors

Mentors	Sponsors
✓ Can sit at any level in a hierarchy	✓ Must be senior level managers/leaders with influence
✓ Provides emotional support, feedback on how to improve, and other advice	✓ Gives protégés exposure to other executives who might help their careers
✓ Serves as role models	✓ Makes sure their protégé is considered for promising opportunities and/or challenging assignments
✓ Helps protégés learn to navigate corporate politics	✓ Protects their protégé from negative publicity or damaging contact with senior executives
✓ Strives to increase protégés' sense of competence and self-worth	✓ Fights to get their protégé promoted
✓ Focuses on protégés' personal and professional development	

(Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010)

Moving mentorship/sponsorship forward for women in coaching

Improving the representation of women coaches within the coaching ranks requires not only the support and development of women as they pursue a career in coaching (mentorship), but the active advancement of them through the system as well (sponsorship).

Given that male coaches over-represent women coaches at nearly every level of sport – by a ratio of approximately three to one – and are more concentrated in higher coaching positions, cross-gender sponsoring opportunities and the provision of multiple sponsors for each female coach is essential. Specifically, it is important to facilitate opportunities for women coaches to partner with male sponsor coaches who are in positions of power and influence so that they are positioned appropriately to advocate and fight for the advancement of women coaches. Further, while it is traditional to pair a high performer with a sponsor internal to her/his organization, recruiting an external sponsor may be necessary as well due to the lack of appropriate sponsors available at a coach's current sport organization.

The deliberate appointment of formal sponsors for female coaches is also important. In a 2008 Catalyst study, women who had found sponsors through formal programs had received more promotions than women who had found sponsors on their own. This is also important because women report barriers in gaining access to mentors and/or sponsors and not knowing how to proactively pursue sponsoring relationships. Therefore, thoughtful, formal, and deliberate coach-sponsor pairings are critical to supporting the career advancement of women coaches.

The stage of a female coach's development is also of high importance for sponsorship to have optimal positive influence on her career path. As many female coaches are former athletes, and given what we know about retired university athletes not being interested in pursuing a career in coaching unless an opportunity is presented to them, we recommend that sponsorship opportunities should target young, novice, high potential female coaches. In this way, sponsorship could provide an opportunity for young female coaches to pursue the profession of coaching before they are lost to alternative career aspirations.

For sponsorship to benefit women in coaching, high potential female coaches could receive support in managing common barriers women face throughout their coaching career, career-development support such as sport-specific tactical and technical knowledge, psychosocial support, and most importantly, advancement in their coaching career.

Conclusion

The lack of women coaches across Canada and internationally, and the inability to retain what few women coaches we have in the system, has been an ongoing concern for many years. In order to change the current landscape for women coaches, women need active support by someone appropriately placed in a sport organization who has significant influence on decision-making processes or structures and who is advocating for, protecting, and fighting for their career advancement. Only then will we begin to realize a new future for women in coaching.

References available upon request

About the Authors

Jenessa Banwell, M.Sc. is a PhD student in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto studying in the area of women in coaching. Drawing upon her extensive experiences as a competitive athlete and coach, Jenessa is interested in studying the effects of mentorship/sponsorship programs for female coaches.

Gretchen Kerr, PhD, is a professor and the Acting Dean of the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. She has an extensive publication record with respect to the safeguarding of young people in sport as well as the study of promoting women in coaching.