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EXPLORING THE VALUE OF MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN THE BAY OF PLENTY, NEW ZEALAND

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INTRODUCTION

Women remain proportionally underrepresented in leadership roles worldwide, despite increasing recognition that gender diversity in leadership is associated with diversity of thought, broader perspectives, and improved organisational outcomes (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Research by Deloitte Centre for Financial Services (Rogish et al., 2021) on women in finance reported a multiplier effect in senior leadership, where adding one woman to an executive C-suite position was associated with three additional women joining senior management roles.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, women's participation in the labour market has long contributed to economic growth. However, women continue to experience the labour market differently from men, often in ways that create economic disadvantage (Ministry for Women, 2023a). Although New Zealand compares favourably with many countries in relation to women's representation in leadership and governance, inequities remain and further progress is still required (Ministry for Women, 2023b). Deloitte (2022b) reported that women held 31.9 percent of board seats in New Zealand, compared with 19.7 percent globally. Deloitte New Zealand Chief Executive Mike Horne noted in a press release that while New Zealand was among the top 10 countries globally for the percentage of board seats held by women, there remained "a major opportunity to harness talent by closing a still material gap" (Deloitte, 2022b).

International data show that progress remains slow. In August 2025, only 33 of the Global 500 companies (worldwide corporations ranked by revenue) had female CEOs, representing 6.6 percent of the list. This was an increase from 28 women the previous year, but remained below the proportion of women leading Fortune 500 (top-ranking U.S.) companies, which was 55 companies or 11 percent of the list (Hinchliffe, 2025). This slow progression continues despite research and industry reporting linking women's representation in leadership and governance with stronger organisational and financial outcomes (Deloitte, 2022a; Insala, 2018b; Turner-Moffatt, 2019). A Deloitte report (2022a) projected that, at the current rate of change, gender parity on boards is unlikely to be reached before 2045.

These patterns highlight the need for strategies that support women's development, retention, and advancement into leadership roles. Mentoring has been recognised globally, and in New

Zealand, as a valuable form of learning in, and through, work (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Kuntz & Livingston, 2020; Logan & Crump, 2007). For women in leadership, mentoring can support career development, professional confidence, access to networks, reflective practice, and navigation of complex organisational environments. As part of my master's thesis, I conducted research that explored the mentoring experiences, and the characteristics valued by women in leadership positions in the Bay of Plenty business environment. Specifically, it examined the types of mentoring relationships women experienced, the features they found valuable, the barriers they encountered, and the ways mentoring supported their personal and professional development.

Mentoring is commonly understood as either a formal or informal relationship grounded in trust, mutual learning, and professional development. Informal mentoring relationships often develop naturally over time through existing professional connections and may evolve as the mentee's needs change. Formal mentoring relationships are usually more structured, with defined objectives, roles and responsibilities, matching processes, and timelines. Both forms of mentoring can provide value, but their effectiveness depends on the quality of the relationship and the extent to which the mentoring experience responds to the needs of the mentee.

Despite the recognised value of mentoring, gaps remain in the understanding of women's mentoring experiences in the New Zealand business context. Previous literature has identified limited research on the complexities of mentoring relationships for women. There is an absence of ethnographic studies examining how New Zealand businesses establish and support mentoring (Holland, 2009; Kuntz & Livingston, 2020). Kuntz and Livingston (2020) also found that only a limited number of women leaders had experienced mentoring, despite mentoring being recognised as a strategy that may support women's advancement into leadership. Understanding what women value in mentoring relationships is therefore important for developing high-quality mentoring experiences and ensuring that the potential benefits of mentoring are realised (Machida-Kosuga, 2021). This article discusses the research findings to develop this understanding and make recommendations for organisations and mentoring programmes.

METHOD

This phenomenological qualitative research design (Carter, 2018) was a discovery-oriented process that was open to whatever might be revealed by the voices of the participants. This life story method was used to encourage women to reflect on their career and to voice their perceptions and experiences. To identify their lived mentorship experiences in the workplace, and to learn what mentoring experiences were of value, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five women in leadership roles in the Bay of Plenty. A woman 'in a leadership position' was defined as being in a role that had financial responsibility and direct people reports. All participants held senior positions within their organisations and were drawn from diverse industries, including the finance, hospitality, horticulture, and corporate sectors. The Bay of Plenty region was chosen because the researcher was able to access participants if they chose to meet face to face. There were 14 questions used to guide the discussions, with each interview lasting approximately 30–40 minutes. The participants were recruited with a snowball sampling, where the first participant (recruited through professional connections) was asked to recommend other participants from their professional network (Patton, 1990). It was recognised by the researcher that participants might recommend friends and associates with similar views to their own, potentially creating a biased sample, but due to the nature of the semi-structured interview methodology, each participant had the freedom to express their own views and life experiences. The data gathered

was thematically analysed to identify patterns, themes, and experiences, with a focus on learning about the participants' experiences from their perspective, without prejudice or judgement, ensuring the participants were culturally safe, and that all participants consented to their stories being documented. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Toi Ohomai Research Committee (approval number TRC PG2024.020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that mentoring was experienced and valued by participants as a meaningful form of learning in careers. Participants described mentoring as a relational process that supported the building of confidence, created a space for reflection, and provided career development and leadership growth. The value of mentoring was shaped less by whether it was formal or informal, and more by the quality of the relationship, particularly the level of trust, respect, and flexibility and the ability to engage in honest dialogue. As a result of the questions used to guide the discussions, four key themes emerged: a preference for informal mentoring experiences; the value of the mentoring relationship; mentoring is a valued strategy for professional and personal development, and barriers to gaining a mentoring experience.

This study's findings on what the participants valued in mentorship matched the descriptions in the literature, for instance that the mentor "brings wisdom and constructive ideas to a younger, inexperienced member" (Logan & Crump, 2007, p. 47). "Mentors are individuals who have advanced knowledge and skills and who assist and provide protégés with psychosocial support for their career development," Machida-Kosuga found (2021, p. 181). Machida-Kosuga adds that, "regardless of the formality, mentoring provides a significant developmental experience that provides support to developing leaders" (2021, p. 181). A definition of mentoring by Allen and Eby (2010) describes the experience as being an emotionally deep relationship, the authors also stating that "distinct interpersonal exchanges and idiosyncratic interaction patterns define and shape the relationship" (p. 10). This was also found in this study: participants valued trust in their mentoring relationships, and this provided a platform for challenging conversations to take place that were open and honest, also supporting the development of the participants' reflective practice. These highly trusting relationships also provided practical emotional support for growth moments to occur.

Preference for informal mentoring experiences

All participants overwhelmingly preferred informal mentoring relationships to formal arrangements throughout their careers. The participants preferred to naturally connect with someone on an *ad hoc* basis and preferred to seek out their own mentors. These relationships were driven by personal and professional aspirations, rather than following an organisational strategy. Participants sought out mentors they perceived could help them navigate specific challenges and with whom they believed they could build relationships through a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and flexibility. For example, Participant 5 related that they preferred a "very informal" relationship, adding, "I hear of lots of people who have this mentorship where every week or every second week they go and catch up … and it feels quite rigid to me."

These informal relationships evolved naturally over time, through consistent interactions and 'open door' accessibility. The mentoring experience was found to facilitate knowledge transfer and allowed mentees to be challenged in a safe environment. Participant 1 noted that working

closely with senior leaders on various projects fostered the deep trust required for meaningful, high-level conversations: "Informal relationships generally develop over time through shared experiences … the trust developed over time."

In contrast, formal programmes were often perceived as rigid or mismatched to individual needs. Participant 5 described the challenge of the mentorship when it was forced: "You've either got chemistry where you click … or you don't. If it's forced, I'm not quite sure how to navigate." While formal mentorship was less popular and there was limited engagement, this style still provided value. One participant used a formal arrangement to alleviate stress and share grievances. Although the formal relationship was recognised as more structured and needing clear guidelines, both informal and formal mentoring were seen as having the same value; they were just different processes.

This study found that participants gained confidence from the mentoring experience, they learned from their mentors, and they were often guided in their career path and in the actions they took. Mekahli (2021) agrees that mentors are role models for mentees and increase their confidence, teach, and help them find their own path and pursue their career independently.

Value identified in the mentoring relationship

The study identified that mentoring has a powerful role in everyday work, where women in leadership positions are learning to navigate the shifting expectations, power dynamics, and ethical tensions inherent in leadership. The mentoring relationship created an environment in which participants learned to make sense of disruption, whether in male-dominated environments, through moments of self-doubt, or through organisations. The relationships that were most valued were when dialogue enabled vulnerability, courageous conversations, and reflective practice, in a safe, confidential environment that allowed women leaders to explore their potential. Participant 3 explains how mentoring strengthened self-belief and supported them overcoming self-doubt: "I really didn't back myself … and he [the mentor] literally was like, don't be ridiculous, of course you can."

When mentors used their positional power to advocate, open doors, provide connections, and provide psychological safety, mentees learned new skills and new ways of seeing themselves and their roles, often reframing their purpose to strengthen their leadership identity. Within these relationships, hidden roles emerged: the mentor as a cultural interpreter, an emotional anchor, a connector of networks, and a promoter of confidence. "She would always fight tooth and nail for me," Participant 2 said of her mentor. "She was definitely my biggest advocate in terms of employment and development."

The mentee, meanwhile, also had an active role in shaping and directing the relationship, creating goals, and interpreting feedback in real time. The relationships that were most valued allowed honest conversations that made space for shared storytelling and mutual learning. These discussions often went beyond technical advice and into personal experiences. Participants drew meaning from these experiences, learning what 'felt right' and what aligned with their values, and learning how to navigate ethical questions of fairness and belonging. These mentorship experiences were able to support the development of participants' own leadership styles throughout their career.

Trust emerged from all participants as the foundation of an effective mentoring relationship, and an important characteristic that needed to be strong in order for deeper learning to occur. As expressed by Participant 1, "The trust developed over time, sharing experiences, and then eventually getting to a point where you share some things on a deeper level, and that's then

reciprocated." Participant 3 expressed the value of developing trust through storytelling: "Learn off people as you go, as you open up, you start to share your story about where you're from and what you've come up against and start to be vulnerable and open up." Due to the formation of trust, mentorship relationships turned into lasting, long-term friendships.

A study by McGregor and Tweed (2002), also found that New Zealand women valued the ability to have a sounding board, someone to boost confidence and motivation, and a source of business contacts. It was also mentioned by the participants in my research that support to maintain a work-life balance, and health and well-being guidance, were of value. This links to a study into the impact of mentoring on women's work-life balance by Bahrami et al. (2022) which found that the benefits from mentoring can support this balance, along with a growth in confidence, career progression, and self-management.

It was widely agreed by the five participants that they valued being challenged (presented with different viewpoints) and learning from the mentor's differing life and business experiences, and expertise in their specific industry. Eissner and Gannon (2018) also discuss the way mentoring provides for those from different backgrounds to share their experiences and skills in a meaningful way. Brown and Ross (2010) found that the positive aspect of the mentoring relationship is that it is with "a person who could provide alternative ways of looking at problems" (p. 41). It was also found that "truth and honesty, [and] openness" (Brown & Ross, 2010, p. 46), along with support in working through challenging life moments, created meaningful friendships.

Mentoring recognised as valuable for professional and personal development

Participants consistently reported gaining a wide range of transferable skills through mentoring, including enhanced self-awareness, improved decision making, and a deeper understanding of their own value within organisational contexts. These relationships challenged their thinking and encouraged reflection. Mentoring enabled them to use all the 'good bits' that they learned and experienced to develop and strengthen their own leadership style and approach. Mentoring also played a critical role in personal development and encouraging work-life balance and emotional well-being. Women discussed how they applied learning from their mentorship not only at work but in their personal lives, highlighting the depth and impact of these relationships. Participants often became mentors themselves, creating a reinforcing cycle of support and capability development within their organisations and professional communities. This comment by Participant 3 highlights the value placed on the learning within the mentoring context: "To be challenged with respect is a real gift … the gift is once you've heard that [challenge], then it's up to you to change."

The participants in this study often found it difficult to find mentors. However, Machida-Kosuga (2021) found that the quality of the mentorship was more critical than just having mentors available, and that when high levels of satisfaction were achieved in the mentorship relationship there were more positive outcomes. The participants in this study also shared the value of having a quality mentoring relationship, with high levels of trust, and that they experienced positive outcomes from such relationships in terms of career development and personal growth.

Barriers to the mentoring experience

Participants identified several barriers that limited their access to meaningful mentoring experiences. Such barriers included a lack of support to find a mentor and less availability of female mentors (which was a preference), time pressures, gender imbalances, and insufficient general support

for mentoring within their organisation. Difficulty finding suitable mentors (especially women in leadership positions) was experienced by Participant 5, who said that they had been "lucky" to have had inspirational women to look up to in their careers, but recognised that there was a lack of women leaders to access. Participant 3 also noted the lack of access to women mentors: "There's not enough women in leadership for me to go to … there are no women around to talk to about this sort of stuff." Although the participants displayed a preference for a female mentor, all of them had worked with a male mentor.

Machida-Kosuga (2021) acknowledges that "there are advantages of having a male mentor in male-dominated industries, as they have access to social and resource capital" (p. 182). What was important was that the mentors were supportive, that they respected and trusted mentees, and that the mentor recognised the mentee's value. Another study by Logan and Crump (2007) reported that women did not consider the majority of mentors being male to be a problem and shared that the most important factor was having a mentor they could respect, who could give appropriate advice, and who had appropriate attitudes and approaches. However, in Logan and Crump's (2007) study there were not many women in leadership positions in the participants' industries, so it was difficult to find and seek out inspirational women leaders as mentors. As with my research, these women wanted female mentors but were unable to find them (Logan and Crump, 2007).

In addition, all the participants in my research had busy workloads, full home lives, and other responsibilities which meant that finding time to engage in mentoring was difficult. In organisations where the leaders were encouraged to engage in mentoring, the workloads were otherwise prohibitive.

Some participants talked about uncomfortable experiences in male-dominated business environments and actively sought advice from experienced women to overcome issues with the workplace gender imbalance. These informal, self-initiated mentoring interactions provided reassurance and strategies for coping with challenging dynamics.

The participants also reported that, although mentorship was acknowledged and promoted as a career progression tool by industry bodies, there was limited support to find or retain a mentor. They expressed that getting a mentor by yourself could be challenging, especially at the beginning of a career when women were still developing their self-confidence. There were workplace cultures that did not encourage mentorship during work hours, where limited time was given to professional development, and where technical training was often given priority over broader professional growth. Participants also experienced practical and financial barriers to participating in mentoring: "You're encouraged to go and find a mentor [but] that's a really hard thing to do because you think, who's gonna want to do that? [And] you kinda just back away from it" (Participant 1).

Many of the participants had never sought out formal mentoring because they felt uncertain and lacked understanding of the process. There was a perceived professional and personal risk that they would not be matched with the right person. In addition, not knowing how to get out of the relationship if it failed to work out was an issue. This perceived lack of control and inability to participate in the process was a barrier to accessing formal mentorship.

Attributes that enable effective mentoring relationships

Participants in this research displayed common personal characteristics. They were all driven to improve, were open to new learning experiences, and sought out mentors to support their professional goals. Read et al. (2020) found that women leaders must chart their own path which included being willing to seek out mentors and be committed to the mentoring process. The findings of my research are also supported by Logan and Crump (2007), who state that the mentee "should drive the mentoring process" (p. 49), and that taking ownership of the process may not suit all mentees, especially new graduates and those in male-dominated sectors.

Ghaffari (2014) discusses how the value of mentorship is in the development of skills (listening and ability to learn) rather than trying to develop a perfect one-on-one relationship. In the modern business environment, people who want growth must seek out learning; it is up to the seeker to identify what they believe to be of value, what learning that they want, and how they choose to gain wisdom (Ghaffari, 2014). The participants in this research also looked for mentors whom they respected and trusted, and for relationships that would help them gain the wisdom or knowledge they wanted and then made this new knowledge their own. Participants also looked for access to social networks and specialist knowledge, indicating that this was a valuable element of mentorship. Reis and Grady (2020) also state that sharing of knowledge and power is valued as part of mentoring, as well as the opportunity to access resources and social capital.

It was found in this study that the participants valued the mentor challenging them. Ghaffari (2014) also discusses that often the mentor does not teach the protégée directly but, rather, pushes the protégée (mentee) into a learning experience for a growth to occur. If the mentee develops from the process, they grow to possess better judgment (Ghaffari, 2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that mentoring is a valuable strategy for supporting women in leadership roles; however, the benefits are most likely to be realised when mentoring is accessible, relationship-based, and responsive to an individual's needs. Participants consistently described mentoring as a source of confidence, reflection, career guidance, professional networks, and personal growth. The following recommendations arise from the experiences shared by the women in this study.

Recognise the importance of informal mentoring relationships

A key finding of this study was the strong preference for informal mentoring relationships. Participants valued relationships that developed naturally through shared experiences, mutual respect, and trust rather than through prescribed organisational arrangements. Organisations should therefore create environments that encourage professional connections, networking, collaboration, and relationship-building, recognising that these interactions can provide the foundation for effective mentoring relationships.

Prioritise trust and psychological safety

Trust emerged as the foundation of meaningful mentoring relationships. Participants valued relationships where they felt safe to be vulnerable, discuss challenges openly, receive honest feedback, and engage in reflective conversations. Organisations and mentoring programmes

should recognise that relationship quality is more important than mentoring structure alone. Time and support should be provided for trust to develop between mentors and mentees.

Support access to mentoring throughout women's careers

Participants valued mentoring at different stages of their careers, not only when entering the workforce or leadership roles. Several participants indicated they would have benefited from greater support in accessing mentors, particularly in the earlier stages of their careers when confidence and professional networks were still developing. Organisations, industry groups, and professional networks should therefore promote mentoring opportunities throughout career progression.

Strengthen opportunities for women to connect with experienced women leaders

Although participants generally reported positive experiences with both male and female mentors, some women expressed a desire for greater access to female leaders, particularly when navigating gender-related workplace challenges. Participants also noted the limited number of women leaders available in some industries. Industry associations and professional networks could support women by increasing opportunities to connect with experienced women leaders who are willing to share experiences, offer guidance, and act as role models.

AI statement

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) was used solely to refine grammar and improve readability. These tools were employed to enhance clarity while maintaining the intended meaning and context. The authors independently reviewed and checked the final work for accuracy and authenticity.

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