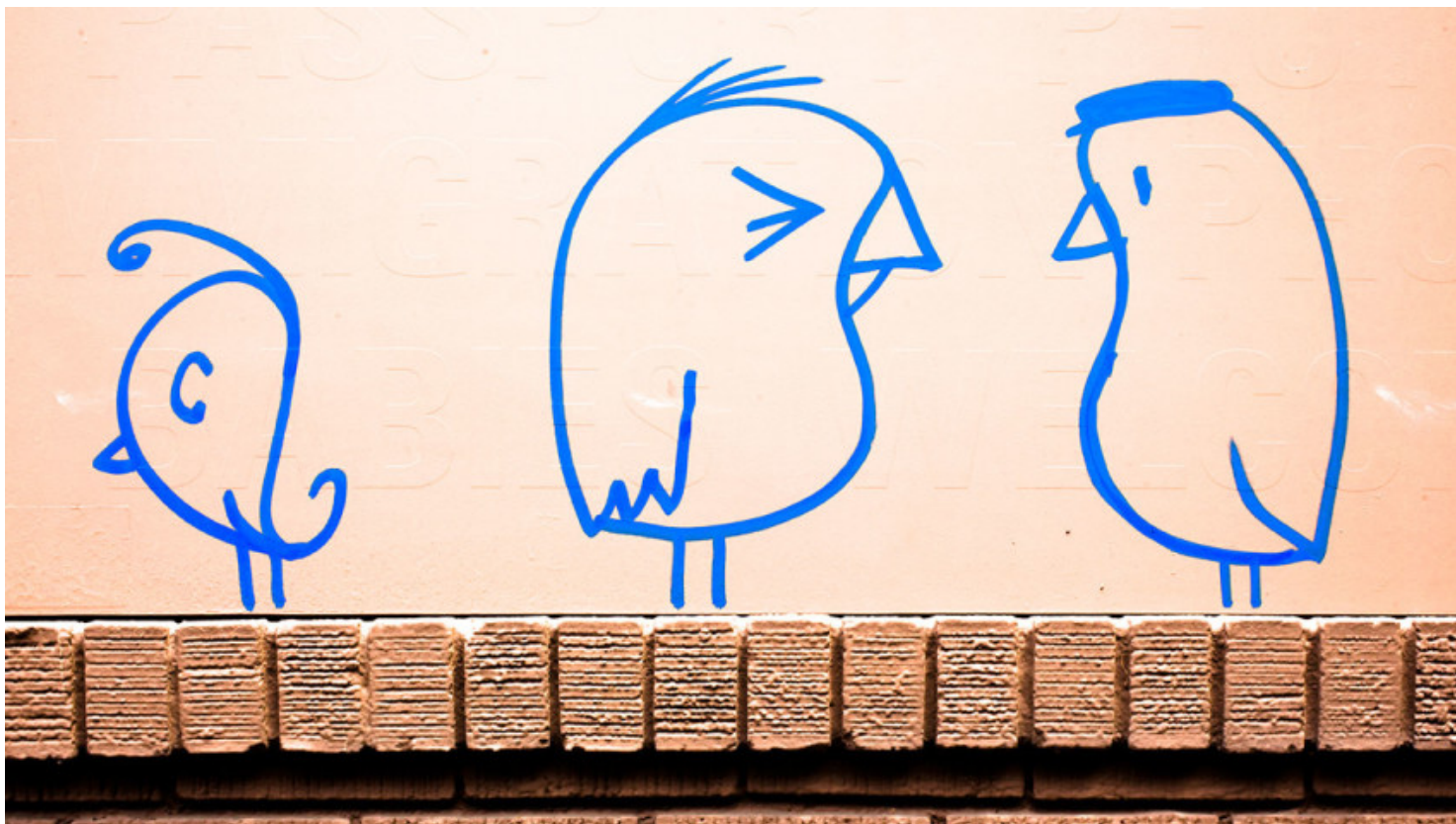


# How Women (and Men) Can Find Role Models When None Are Obvious

by Wendy Murphy

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A new report by the Rockefeller Foundation illustrates some of the challenges for women in leadership, including a lack of mentors and role models. In fact, 65% of Americans say it's important for women starting their careers to have women in leadership as role models. With only 20 women Fortune 500 CEOs, we have a glaring numbers problem.

I teach students of all ages about mentoring and how critical it is for their careers. Because careers today are so complex, we need multiple mentors – a personal board of directors or what academics call a *developmental network*. These relationships provide career and emotional support and role modeling to help you advance, learn, and grow. However the consistent question I get from women is: “Where do I find role models?”

The answer is *everywhere*. Instead of searching for the perfect role model, look for someone who is skilled in an area you need to develop. Here are some quick tips:

**Hone your observation skills.** You want to get promoted, but there are no women role models for you at the top. Can you imitate the men? Not exactly, as women are sometimes punished for the same behavior men are rewarded for. But you can identify what is working for the leaders you admire. Become an organizational anthropologist and hone your observation skills. What do good leaders do? When do they speak up? How do they conduct themselves with clients, coworkers, and other leaders? What skills do you need to polish to successfully perform those roles? Consider peers and step-ahead mentors (colleagues one or two steps ahead of you in their careers) who are both more available and approachable as resources, beyond just senior executives.

**Focus on specific behaviors to emulate.** Focus on specific tasks or behaviors that you could realistically emulate. For example, I admire my Babson College colleague Allan Cohen, a masterful teacher, but I cannot teach using the Socratic method in the same way he does; it just isn't effective for me in the classroom. What I did learn from observing him is how to phrase good questions, build on prior participants' insights, and move around the room engaging the whole audience. I taught a class at Babson with Bala Iyer, who always pushed students to summarize key takeaways from the session, I adopted this practice, too. By identifying key behaviors and practices, you also become more systematic in the approaches you can experiment with to determine if they work for you.

**Experiment.** Try out those behaviors you've observed and see how they feel. Part of leadership development is experimenting as you learn new skills and practice new ways to lead. Role models can serve as positive (or negative) exemplars of behaviors for you to

assess and potentially add to your repertoire. Experimenting may feel uncomfortable at first, but as Amy Cuddy's research has led her to so aptly put it, "Fake it till you are it."

**Get feedback.** Get feedback on your effectiveness as you practice new skills. Feedback is essential for ensuring that your performance of new skills or behaviors is aligned with your own expectations as well as those of your colleagues in the workplace. While seeking feedback can be stressful, you can make it easier by asking trusted colleagues focused questions on a regular basis (rather than just at performance-appraisal time) and making yourself available to encourage them to do the same.

**Go outside your workplace.** While you should certainly look within the workplace, it is not the only place you should be learning and connecting with role models. External role models can help you imagine new possibilities for your career, inspire you to experiment, and even provide insights into what works for them and why. Find virtual role models by following people whose work you admire on social media. Engage them in conversation and you just might convert them into virtual mentors.

**Continuously learn.** Once you incorporate some new skills and behaviors, you will be ready to learn others. Continuous learning is an essential quality of good leadership. Take charge of learning from potential role models around you through this process of focused observation, experimentation, and feedback.

You may never find that one perfect role model, but if you follow this advice, you just might find the ones you need.



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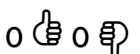
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**CAROL MITCHELL** 20 days ago

This is excellent advice. I have thought peer mentoring / coaching to be quite effective for a long time; and in fact, perhaps more effective than "traditional" mentoring. When developing behavioral skills, we don't need to rely on someone who is at a higher level in the organization. Really, the best role for a higher level mentor is to be an advocate and sponsor, promoting visibility and connections with executive leaders. I think the slow steady work of developing effective behavioral skills is best done with people who are at about the same organizational levels, and who have nailed the particular competency you want to develop.

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