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7. AVOIDING MID-CAREER STALLING

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring mid-career women is about social and organisational learning as much as individual learning. Participating in a mentoring program is becoming a staple of career growth and career planning for both men and women. Mentoring is a generative practice in which those who have experienced mentoring as either a mentor or mentee showing a greater willingness to continue with mentoring practice as part of their working life (Ragins, & Cotton, 1993). Critically though, each career stage requires something different and specific from the mentoring relationship and interactions. This chapter specifically focusses on the mid-career stage in higher education as it especially relates to women seeking to aspire to promotion and perhaps leadership. For many professions, the mid-career is a problematic stage in the working life, in which the professional is often juggling competing professional and personal demands. The likelihood of burnout is heightened (Spickard Jr, Gabbe, & Christensen, 2002) and the likelihood of career stalling is also an outcome. For women in higher education, the mid stages of their career represent the highest level they will achieve. While for some women this may be a choice, research shows that the marked drop of female academics from the mid-career levels into the higher levels indicates that perhaps it is not only women choosing to remain at the mid-level that is the issue, rather a set of specific obstacles that hamper women's progress towards higher levels of academic leadership. Therefore, quality mentoring for mid-career academic women needs to be targeted and focus specifically on the issues that resonate with this socio-demographic group. The mentoring contained in this chapter takes on this challenge by focusing on two key issues that are specific to the interests of mid-career female academics, that of remaining loyal to their organization and increasing their networks to leverage and promote their skills and capacity ready for the next career move.

MID-CAREER QUESTIONS

For many women in the middle of their careers, questions about leaving their current position to seek new possibilities are always part of their career planning. I have heard it many times that getting a promotion is easier when you apply for a higher position outside your organisation than applying for an internal promotion. I have also heard that you should be prepared to be knocked back at least once before

landing a promotion. These kinds of rumours and organizational tips form the basis of much discussion and anxiety for mid-career women seeking promotion. Mentoring programs have been established by universities especially focussing on women and their needs. However, the nature of the mentoring relationships is still problematic with research showing that agreement about the mentoring outcomes between mentors and the mentees are an issue (Raabe & Beehr, 2003). For example, from Rabbe and Beehr's study of mentoring relationships, the recommendation is that mentoring is better served through a line manager or direct supervisor. The implication is that managers directly connected to the mentee can give practical and useful advice pertaining to the current work and the types of practices that will lead to success and better outcomes and performances. Of course, as Rabbe and Beehr suggest, disagreement about what is in the better interests of the mentee can become an obstacle to the mentoring process. However, there is merit to receiving practical and useful advice that can be used on the job. For mid-career women, completing competing demands and more complexity in their work can be a source of great anxiety influencing personal and working lives. Spickard Jr, Gabbe, and Christensen, (2002) investigated burnout among mid-career professionals in medicine. Burnout is described as a dislocation between the actual work that is done and the expectations about what should be done. There is much overlap for academics. They also have more complex demands around teaching, research and administration. They are often in positions to take on more responsibility in their work in order to keep on their tenure track or to be in line for promotion. For many women, this is also the time for greater pressures from their familial commitments. Therefore, direct advice, rather than longer terms strategizing about career plans may be the type of focused and targeted mentoring that is needed.

In this chapter, I will critically discuss two practices that are especially relevant to mid-career academics. The discussion draws on my research of seventy four mid-career academics and their experiences that shape their career expectations and performance. Citing their interviews and survey responses, the chapter will draw on their reflections as further insights into the thinking of mid-career female academics. Reflecting on the experiences of this group of women, I will highlight loyalty and networking as two critical career concepts that are especially pertinent for mid-career women to consider.

Loyalty to the organisation tests many women because many have experienced some successes in their academic careers but also realise that when they look at the number of women in higher levels of management, the number of women is relatively fewer. Baltodano et al., (2011) reminds us that the number of women presidents has remained stagnant at 23% for the last ten years. So, the question arises, do they take their chances and stick to what they know or do they seek out new opportunities elsewhere?

Networking also challenges women because as they are juggling the competing demands of an academic life, networking is viewed as critical to career progress however, yet it is often not prioritized in the daily practices of women. The aim of

this chapter is to shed light on how loyalty and networking operate within the mid-career space and to view this insiders' information as the kind of mentoring, based on practices that occurs between those working within the mid-career space.

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

What is Loyalty?

Much of the research about organisational loyalty comes from the employer's viewpoint (Nadin, & Williams, 2011). Employers seek to retain and reward talented employees by ensuring that the employees' psychological contract, in other words, their commitment to their workplace remains strong. A strong commitment underpins the way that employees will meet their obligations as employers want to ensure that their employees take responsibility for their work and more so, perform their work in a reliable way (Baylin, 1993). Literature also suggests that organizational interests are served by retaining committed and engaged employees in order to optimize organisational survival and wellbeing. Loyalty stabilizes the workforce and it becomes a way for employers to keep talented employees to stick with them.

Rousseau (1990) defined loyalty as a measure of identification and involvement in the organization. The definition encompasses both individual and group interactions that influence to what extent a worker identifies with the organisation and secondly, how involved the worker is in extensive practices that make up the organisation. Loyalty has an emotional connection in which a like-mindedness links worker to the organisation and it has a practical element based on how practices create a sense of involvement in the organisational purposes. When analysed deeper, identification and involvement draw on notions of commitment, ethics and obligations. From the point of view of the organisation, promotion carries an expectation of consolidation of loyalty, especially at the more senior levels where the expectation is that the academic will take on more organisational and positional responsibilities that reinforce the structure of the organisation. For example, chairing committees and taking leadership in programs is a way in which the academic supports the rules and regulations of the university. These are a few examples, suffice to say, seeking promotion requires a re-commitment to the organisation, an adherence to organisational values and ethics, as well as a prioritising of work to meet organisational objectives.

For women in the mid-levels of an academic career, this type of recommitment can be daunting. One of the unwritten benefits of mid-career academia is the freedom to voice dissent and to offer a critical voice to university policies. It is a chance to focus on the work, engage with the ideas that fuelled your passion and to develop graduate students who share your thinking. The politics of academia are secondary, as is the focus on career strategy and planning. As one mid-career female academic noted;

I do feel loyalty to my PhD students. I do feel commitment to them that I want to see them complete their projects. If I take on something new, I would feel

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bad about leaving and abandoning them.

While going for promotion does not mean abandoning students, it may mean having less time for students and research work because of the expectation to become more involved in the running of the organisation by taking on more administrative positions of responsibility. Commitment to the organisation means making it continue to function and focussing commitment reserved for students and your work towards meeting organisational objectives. Perhaps this is easier when you do change the organisation, as your work ties and identification with the organisation are lessened while new forms of involvement and identification are built. When asked how her loyalty shifted with her new job in a new university a mid-career academic stated;

I think [I was more loyal] in my more recent job but not in this current one. I would have said that my loyalty was very high, very high and that was sort of characteristic of other people who were there too. So really strong commitment to what we were doing and why and therefore respect for each other because we are all on the same page, however then I've moved so obviously my loyalty wasn't as good as I thought it was.

In this case, the academic was able to pursue her career goals without prioritising her loyalty to the work and the people around her. To some degree, this kind of organisational movement underpins another question about loyalty, that is, what are you being loyal to?

Research on organizational loyalty categorizes loyalty in three ways, namely, affective, continuance and normative commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Loyalty can be affective, meaning that the employee has strong positive feelings and attitudes towards their organisation. For many women, this type of loyalty dominates their feelings about their workplace. They remain attached to the organisation, which is where some may have been students, or where they completed their PhD, or where they landed their first academic position. Their positive feelings are wrapped up with their workplace. It's not unusual for those with a high level of affective loyalty to defend their university and their workplace. As one female academic reflected,

I felt very loyal, and you know I was told by mentors that I should have left where I was working as soon as I finished my PhD and, "it's better for your career", but I had a sense of we're a small research centre, we're very collegial, there was a sense of, it was a very nice place to work in...

This kind of loyalty is fine, but it can also have its limitations in terms of career progression and personal and professional growth. The experiences of many women who have shown loyalty is that this is not always reciprocated.

...but in the end there was no loyalty and I felt really quite bitter in the end. I put a lot of time into that institution professionally across all the areas I'd been on; I'd been on board, I've been on ethics committees, I've been student rep, I've been a representative on a whole.. I've done a lot of sort of university

promotions activities putting back; there was no loyalty to me after 12 years that I felt a worthwhile employee of that university.

The message about the value of affective loyalty is that the same kind of loyalty cannot be relied upon to be reciprocated from the university. The dissonance between university career support and how mid-level women viewed that support was a topic of research (Vongalis-Macrow, 2012) which indicated that when 74 mid-level female academics were asked to respond to the level of support they received from their university, only 23 % of the participants describe the organisation as supportive. Over half of the participants, 54%, disagree that the organisation was supportive. Therefore, this suggests that one of the career building tasks is to review the nature of female affective work loyalty and the importance of remaining loyal to the work and university. A key career question involves reflective conversations about whether loyalty dependencies are as important as or more important than your career.

Other forms of loyalty include continuance loyalty (Meyer and Allen, 1991). This is the most likely reason for women to stay loyal to their organisation because it signals that within each woman a tentative decision has been made in which she has weighed up the costs and benefits of moving organisations. Continuance is more likely to be influenced by other factors such as workplace flexibility, childcare facilities, proximity to home and school runs. For many women the opportunities for a new position is weighed up against these familial responsibilities. The decision to stay is more or less a concession that moving does not guarantee more benefits nor does it mean that other workplaces are very different. Elsewhere (Vongalis-Macrow, 2012), I have argued that continuance loyalty is an example of substantial rationality (Barbalet, 1996) in decision making. Substantive rationality indicates that that mid-career female academic has a broad understanding of social and political issues around women in leadership that are evident across the field of higher education rather than limited to particular institutions. Extensive scholarship on the persistent lack of women in leadership in higher education continues to illustrate that despite progressive change, women in higher education leadership remain a rarity. Higher education remains largely male dominated and a male perpetuated construction (Blackmore, 2006, Haake 2009).

It is within this patriarchal context that many mid-career women experience their first realisation that the grass is not always greener in another university because the broader structures of power and gender are prevalent throughout the system. But that does not mean continuing loyalty; rather the onus is on each woman to seek opportunities that build their capacity and confidence. For example, many universities have leadership programs for women. While these may vary in quality, they are a concession that women need greater skills and knowledge in leadership. Higher education leaders are required to manage the diverse requirements of a range of stakeholders, develop world standard teaching and learning practices, develop world standard research and 'conduct their activities in a more business-like manner'

(Davies, Hides and Casey 2001, p. 1025). Management and leadership skills and knowledge are critical for the mid-career female academic if the aim is to progress her career to the next level. Breaking organisational ties and loyalty should be a consideration in order to explore career options and take calculated risks in pursuing opportunities in other workplaces.

Thirdly, normative commitment draws upon feelings obligation towards the organisation (Meyer and Allen, 1991). For example, many teachers may feel disgruntled by their work and constant changes to education policy but often prioritise the obligation they feel towards their students. Teachers' obligation to the students keeps them attached to their workplace. Common sense understandings tend to promote this response of loyalty and link this to the emotional and caring nature of women. For example, Oxley and Wittkower (2011), suggest that women have little control over their feelings, thus are bound by their gendered based responses in their workplaces. Identifying with their gender bound reactions, they conclude, "we do not have direct control over our feelings and emotions; we do not have the ability to suddenly become loyal ...our loyalty is not subject to choice (Keller, 2007 cited in Oxley & Wittkower, 2011, p. 43).

Oxley & Wittkower (2011) argue that women's actions are governed by an ethic of care. This ethic of care has a biological component arising from the role of women to take care of children, families and be the care givers. They claim that these feelings and actions are transcribed to the workplace. If we ascribe to this analysis, then it would assume that women are predetermined to be loyal and to remain loyal because they feel compelled to show care irrespective of whether that same care is reciprocated. Evidence and experience tells us that this is simply not the case. In many cases, loyalty as a normative expression of obligation and care is as much a product of work practices that have shaped organisational work and expressions of loyalty. As one respondent to questions about loyalty and work stated,

... I would have said that my loyalty was very high, very high and that was sort of characteristic of other people who were there too. So really strong commitment to what we were doing and why and therefore respect for each other because we are all on the same page, however then I've moved so obviously my loyalty wasn't as good as I thought it was.

Often normative loyalty is not only about caring about the organisation, but being excited and interested by the work. Women will stay for interesting work, whether that is teaching, researching or managing. A critical reflection is to think about whether loyalty is a primal expression of care, or whether it is about work.

...in things that I've read about men in the workplace, any workplace, women, like I said earlier, women will wait until they are really expert at something before they ever consider another job and then they think oh but I can't leave this organisation, I haven't finished this, I haven't finished that, where men would say, oh here's another opportunity off I go. I haven't done that yet but

I'll go. So it's much more about your own ability that helps.

Normative loyalty should be about the quality of work and how you are meeting the challenges.

Remaining loyal to the organisation should not be taken *prima facie*. As Duska (1990) notes,

One does not have an obligation of loyalty to a company, even a *prima facie* one, because companies are not the kind of things that are properly objects of loyalty. To make them objects of loyalty gives them a moral status they do not deserve and in raising their status, one lowers the status of the individuals who work for the companies. (p. 156)

For the mid-career academic, understanding your responses to loyalty is an important consideration because, if you do not see opportunity to achieve your goals in your current workplace then remaining loyal to the organization makes little sense.

BUILDING YOUR NETWORKS

The capacity to network has been identified as a critical professional skill that is highly valuable for the capacity building of higher education leaders as well as to the progression of an individual's academic career and (Ledwith & Manfredi, 2000, Madsen, 2012). A research participant reflected on the changing nature of networking and how it has become a constant in her career. She reflects,

So when I first started off as a lecturer, I think I was on level two or something, there were a whole bunch of other female lecturers at that level and I connected with them and I connected with other people that I was started doing research with, some of the males, but there has been a lot of turnover and so my networks have changed and a couple of years ago or last year, I was kind of reflecting that I really don't have any close friends anymore here, things have quite changed but I see that I am making new connections and there is an a female associate professor who belongs to the graduate school who is going to be merged into our department and I have already started working with her and I have started networking with a number of men who I think are reasonable and who I think I can talk to and who will understand and who will probably support me.

Research examining women and networking has successively demonstrated that networking continues to challenge women in academia (Durbin, 2011). The lack of participation in networks has been identified as a career blocker for working women largely because most networking has been traditionally organised around male activities and interests (Ibarra and Andrews, 1993). The lack of networking has been linked to broader issues around women's leadership and how to increase the number of women in senior and leadership positions. Durbin (2011) argues that the lack of

access to networks contributes to women's access to channels of decision making and channels of control over resources. These two influences are closely aligned to power and leadership.

The term network denotes actor relationships based on exchanges of products or services, information, emotions and these are dependent upon the duration, intensity and closeness of the relationship (Seufert, Von Krogh, & Bach, 1999). Fombrun (1982) also alludes to two purposes of networks. The expressive and instrumental networks (informal) through which actors share a commonality, friendship and trust, and the transactional networks (formal) based on the exchange of information, resources and materials. From an organisational point of view, enabling both formal and informal knowledge networks, means that "the faster the rate at which individuals in organizations construct formal and informal networks, the greater the opportunity may be to create, circulate and share knowledge" (Durbin, 2011, p. 91).

Generally women are good at formal networking. This is the type that happens when you join a committee or have some managerial or administrative duties which require you to be part of teams or groups. These formal arrangements provide women with opportunity to develop and practice their leadership and management. However, the types of networks that have been identified as important to the career prospects and aspirations of women are the informal networks. These networks are more difficult to identify because they are more nebulous in terms of identifying membership and the nature of the relationships within the network. Their informality suggests that those in the networks may have some overlap between work and their organisation; however, these informal networks are based on ties wider than the work context. Access to informal networks presents an obstacle for women.

A common obstacle faced by many women is finding mentors and access to informal networks of advice, contacts, and support. Surveys of professional women reveal both perception and reality of exclusion from "boys clubs" or "old boys' networks." The result is that many women remain out of the loop in career development (Rhode, 2003).

The main issue for women and informal network appears to be the kind of information that they are excluded from. This includes strategic and political information that are part of the tacit knowledge of working within the organization. The lack of this political and strategic advice means that the way that women navigate and make career decisions is not as informed as those who have 'insider' knowledge. Durbin suggests women's denied access mitigates better access to decision making and control over resources. Women's exclusion from this essentially closed, informal system where strategic tacit knowledge dominates means that women are potentially denied access to a gateway network that ultimately controls resources (Durbin, 2011).

There are two issues that confront women and the prospect of exclusion from informal networks. Firstly, is access to networks that may involve doing business on the golf course, or after work or over lunch. There may be competing demands on women in terms of time and other duties, therefore fewer women may be able to participate in these extra work activities. Catalyst research (Sabattini, 2011) shows

that lack of access to informal networks—especially those networks that can provide important information—is one of the primary barriers to women’s and women of colour corporate advancement. Thus, many talented women may not have the same access to their organization’s unwritten rules as their colleagues, to the detriment of their career advancement.

The second issue is how women understand the value of these informal networks. For example, a female colleague came to work and from the moment she arrived until the moment she left for the day, she hardly left her desk. She was working hard to finish all that she had to do within the tight frames of a typical working day. It used to annoy her to walk past her two male colleagues who would be in their office talking about their weekend and their passion for yachts. She often wondered where they got the time to sit and chat. My colleague understood the formal networks at work, and the need to be included on committees and power teams and so forth, but she could not decode the value of the informal networking as demonstrated by her male colleagues. What she saw as a waste of time, was something else. Durbin (2011) cites other important work around understanding networks in terms of codifying tacit knowledge. She states, “Those who can successfully extract and codify tacit knowledge enjoy a competitive advantage” (Durbin, 2011 p. 91). In this case, my colleague may have understood that these informal conversations, which appeared to waste time also provided the necessary exchange of values, beliefs and understanding between two colleagues that may help to set up further work and collaborations in the future. It was time well invested.

Durbin suggests that some organisations fail to decode these messages especially for female workers. She means that the creation and sharing of knowledge happens both formally and more tacitly. The sharing process is essentially a relational activity amongst different actors. That casual conversation about yachts could be paving the way for greater relational interactions and exchanges between the two male actors. Further, tacit knowledge may also be transmitted and exchanged. In the meantime, my female colleague is cut off from this exchange as she focuses on her tasks and is not able to take part in the conversation. From an organisational point of view, enabling both formal and informal knowledge networks, means that “the faster the rate at which individuals in organizations construct formal and informal networks, the greater the opportunity may be to create, circulate and share knowledge” (Durbin, 2011, p.91).

What Can Be Done to Improve Networking?

Recent research on women’s networking highlighted two key areas where women’s networking was lacking (Vongalis-Macrow, 2012). The first centres on collaboration, especially with their female colleagues. Asking 74 mid-career women, across three universities in Australia to comment on their networking behaviours showed that women were very caring and sharing with their colleagues. In other words, they demonstrated a great propensity to help their colleagues in the workplace. This helping ranged from career help to daily work helping. Other networking actions included;

praising (26%), engaging conversations (29%), offering support (29%) and learning (22%) and engaging in new ideas (26%). These actions are the social expressions of how the mid-career women academics create meaning and value through their relations. However, when it came to collaboration, that is the kind of team work that produces work outcomes and achieves career goals, they were less willing to help. Collaboration is an underused form of networking especially amongst mid-career women. The reason is specifically linked to the highly competitive nature of higher education, especially around performance and promotion. For many women, aiming for promotion requires a focus on outcomes and results. Framed in a context where there is a noticeable drop of female academics reaching the higher levels of academic leadership, the tendency is for women to go it alone to achieve their goals of leadership. However, collaboration is a form of outcomes based networking. It provides the means to both achieve outcomes and results from common projects, while also showcasing your skills and knowledge when applied to the common project. Rather than viewing networking as a caring and sharing activity, by building collaborative projects, networking enhances practices that enable new skills and relationships to be formed based on a mutual showcasing of talents and abilities.

Secondly, another shortcoming of women networking is the reluctance of women to talk informally about their leadership aspirations. When asking the research group of 74 women, only four per cent admitted to talking with others about their aspirations (Vongalis-Macrow, 2012). Perhaps this has as much to do with the competitive nature of the mid-levels of academia, part of which is a strategic silence about work aspirations. However, these kinds of conversations are also the stuff of informal networking. By letting others know of your aspirations and intentions, then they may be able to offer advice and also support for your goals. The casual conversation about what you need and what you need to achieve alerts those who are able to support to or else put you in contact with someone else who may be useful for progressing your goals.

Forming strong links through informal networking can also benefit women as they go through inevitable obstacles and life challenging moments. One respondent in the research spoke about the need for strong social links. In fact one person was going through a very bad split up at the time and she was given workload relief. I cannot imagine that happening here at all. Only temporarily, but enough so that she could get through the crisis and move forward. And recognition that things in life happen and so that kind of recognition of ebb and flow over a period of time was taken into account for everyone and the assumption was that everyone could come to expect that their turn would come when they needed it.

Networking is viewed as important for career and personal reasons. It continues to challenge women, especially the kind of networking which appears informal. Because of its informality, it may appear that in a time poor, task focussed day, sitting down to have a conversation over lunch or coffee may seem like a waste of time. Yet, these personal interactions can help to increase your influence and increase the range of your interactions. As one respondent commented,

Some of the best advice I got in the last year was to not be so completely embedded in a program or the people that you immediately work with that you need to move outside your own corridor...

The lessons for the importance of informal networks may come from powerful social and cultural changes that have been achieved by women outside of academia. Extensive and radical change has been achieved by women forming alliances around their common bonds and common interests. Purkayastha and Subramaniam (2004) illustrate a number of case studies of social change in African and Asian countries led by women's networks seeking to empower traditionally marginalised poor women. They focus on informal, episodic and unobtrusive networking which nevertheless creates a powerful force for change. These networks strengthen community ties and inherent bonds of women. The networks offer resources to women who may otherwise be marginalised from means to help and sustain themselves. They garner collective interests and gather political will. These are the very requirements necessary for women in the mid-career levels to leverage in order to progress towards their individual and collective goals.

CONCLUSION

Mid-career professionals face critical decisions about their career and work trajectory. Mid-career female academics are a particular sector of this professional group that require targeted and specific mentoring in order to make strategic and informed career decisions. These decisions are constructed within a work context where higher education leaders are required to manage the diverse requirements of a range of stakeholders, develop world standard teaching and learning practices, develop world standard research and "conduct their activities in a more business-like manner" (Davies, Hides, & Casey, p.1025). This context demands highly skilled and highly practiced leadership. It is hoped that the next generation of higher education leaders will come equally from both genders in the mid-career levels. However, history and research tells the story that creating a seamless pipeline into leadership for mid-career female is still a work in progress. Part of the work is to provide extensive mentoring for mid-career women in order that they may learn from the experiences and practices of others.

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