

3 ways leaders of color can support C-suite diversity through mentoring

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The benefits of having a mentor have been widely studied and discussed.

Professionals who have been mentored enjoy higher salaries, more opportunity for promotions, and greater career satisfaction, as a result of their mentor's influence, experience, and protection.



With more mentoring relationships between people of color comes the hope of breaking through what has been called the “concrete ceiling” for minorities aiming to enter the C-suite.

Mentors also provide emotional support, helping their protégés find confidence in their abilities and their identity.

But for minorities in the workplace, finding a mentor at all – let alone a mentor of the same race – can be incredibly difficult. As outlined in the [Harvard Law Review's "The Mentoring Gap,"](#) published in May 2016, there is a gap in access to mentors that “is frequently associated with students’ backgrounds – race, class, and gender.” People of color may find it difficult to access mentors at all, and if they do, they must overcome barriers such as differences in race, gender, job level, profession, etc.

I spoke with [Deborah Hughes](#), president and CEO of [Brookview House in Boston](#), about the importance of connecting minorities with leaders of color. Brookview provides supportive housing for women and children experiencing homelessness, including programs that teach personal and economic independence.

“Having someone who not only knows your field but who can also speak to the specific professional and personal challenges you face as a minority navigating the workplace is enormously beneficial,” says Hughes. “The lack of diversity at upper-management levels makes it especially difficult for people of color to find a mentor who is in their field, looks like them, and is willing to teach them.”

Hughes was instrumental in connecting former Brookview resident [Moriah Wiggins](#), now a bioengineering major at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, to Jeri’Ann Hiller, senior manager and award-winning scientist and medical device innovator at Boston Scientific Corporation.

Hiller now provides regular mentoring to Wiggins, including guidance around Wiggins’ college courses and exams and building her network for benefits now and in the future. Wiggins says she is deeply inspired by Hiller and grateful to have a “go to” person in the field of bioengineering, especially someone who has faced – and continues to face – similar challenges as both a black woman and a mother in a field where the diversity gap is very real.

Hughes offers this additional advice for both leaders of color interested in mentoring and minorities seeking a mentor:

1. Be proactive in finding and creating connections

“Opportunities for mentorship between people of color are more difficult to come by. We have to be proactive in seeking them out and creating them, whether for others or ourselves,” says Hughes. That means reaching out to organizations like Brookview that serve as a bridge between young people and the professional world, and constantly looking for occasions to make connections for others.

2. Don't try to tick all the boxes

“As wonderful as it is to have a ‘perfect match’ – where the mentor and the protégé are both of the same gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background and both are in exactly the same field – that is rarely possible.” Instead, Hughes advocates for ticking as many boxes as possible, and thinking broadly in terms of fields. “We were lucky to connect with Jeri’Ann, who is a bioengineer, but any leader of color within the STEM field could still have been an excellent mentor for Moriah as she completes her studies and prepares to enter the working world.”

3. Remember, mentoring can be done remotely

Every mentoring relationship is different. Even though they reside in the same state, Hiller and Wiggins usually connect via monthly phone calls, as that is most convenient for them both. Don't let distance hinder a mentoring relationship; using today's technology to make the mentoring as efficient and enjoyable as possible for both parties ensures the relationship's strength and longevity.

With more mentoring relationships between people of color comes the hope of breaking through what has been called the “concrete ceiling” for minorities aiming to enter the C-suite. Says Hughes: “We believe in possibilities, not limitations.”

Dana Manciangli is a global career expert, private job-search coach, and master class instructor. She has spent more than 30 years as a Fortune 500 sales and marketing executive, including more than a decade at Microsoft. Manciangli is the author of the book "Cut the Crap, Get a Job!" and a prolific blogger. She sits on the worldwide board of Junior Achievement and has an MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management.

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