# How does WLI use Mentoring to Suport Women's Developmental Leadership?

Elisabeth Jackson

OCTOBER 2025

## Key Points

- Mentors can provide leaders with knowledge and advice that can help them lead and influence developmental change.

- WLI has adapted its approach to mentoring in response to participant feedback and lessons learned through implementing its mentoring program.

- WLI's mentoring offering is flexible and tailored to the specific needs identified by WLI participants.

- Mentoring complements other support provided through the program, including ontological coaching, individual counselling, funding for small projects, and platforms to connect with other alumni for professional and personal support, guidance and advice.

## Mentoring as an approach to supporting women's developmental leadership

Mentoring is an integral part of many leadership development programs in the corporate world, as well as in professions such as teaching, higher education, nursing and medicine. For women leaders in particular, mentoring is often seen as a way of addressing the gender gap in leadership, by providing women with access to advice, opportunities and networks to support their career development.[1]

In the academic literature, mentoring is often understood as having two main functions: professional support and personal support. Mentors use their position to provide mentees with exposure, visibility and access to career opportunities, as well as sharing their knowledge and skills.

They also provide personal support in the form of guidance, advice, counselling, and role modelling.[2] Traditional models of mentoring often involve a formal relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee who work together over a number of months or years. However, there are a range of other mentoring models, including peer mentoring, reverse mentoring and feminist mentoring – which try to break down the traditional hierarchical mentoring relationship – as well as group-based approaches and models which are more short-term or focused on specific personal or professional development needs.[3]

In international development, formal and informal mentoring is part of the 'capacity building' toolbox.[4] In the Pacific, mentoring has been used as part of professional development programs for civil servants, lawyers, medical professionals, journalists and other professions as well as to develop the skills of women parliamentarians.

As a development modality, mentoring is not without its challenges. In particular, transferring corporate mentoring models into a Pacific context – particularly when it involves international experts mentoring those from the Pacific – can reinforce unequal power dynamics.[5] On the other hand, research on approaches to supporting developmental leadership suggest that technical assistance, mentoring and coaching can be used in positive ways to provide leaders with technical knowledge to support the change they want to pursue or advice on how to navigate the process of change.[6] Mentors have also been shown to be important in developing emerging leaders within movements for social change, including in the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa and Indonesia's disability rights movement.[7]

## Mentoring on WLI

In WLI's pilot phase (2018-2022), mentoring was a key part of the 18 month 'Leadership and Mentoring' program. In line with the initial design of the program, mentoring was intended as a way of strengthening relationships between Pacific and Australian women as well as providing participants with access to knowledge, skills and networks. All participants were paired with an influential Australian woman mentor identified by WLI in consultation with participants, with pairs matched based on common professional and/ or other interests. Mentoring took place through both face to face and remote meetings as well through emails. While some pairs met regularly and developed close relationships, others only met once or twice.

In their feedback to the program, WLI participants were positive about the opportunities that mentoring provided to access Australian expertise and experience. Both mentors and WLI participants said that they valued the connections they developed through the mentoring program. Mentors also played an important role in helping to scope and host workplace internships, providing valuable professional development experiences for many participants.[8]

The Independent Strategic Review of the WLI pilot identified several ways to adapt and strengthen the program's mentoring offering, which were then reflected in the design for the second phase. This included the need to be clearer about the purpose of mentoring and provide participants with greater choice about when they engaged a mentor (while in Australia or on their return home) and who the mentors were (an Australian or Pacific expert; woman or man). The Review also suggested that mentoring be framed more consistently around participants' goals and aspirations for developmental change, including supporting participants to identify strategies for navigating the structural barriers to achieving change.[9]

Consultations early in the second phase to inform WLI's mentoring offering reinforced many of these points, including the importance of enabling participants to define the support they wanted from a mentor, allowing time for relationships to develop, and taking power dynamics and cultural differences into account in mentoring relationships. The consultations also identified a desire among alumni for ongoing connections to fellow alumni as 'peer mentors' as a way of accessing emotional and psychosocial support and to foster collective action. [10]

In response to these lessons, the focus of mentoring in the second phase of WLI shifted. Mentoring is now one of a suite of offerings available to participants and alumni of the 18-month Women's Developmental Leadership Program[11]. Mentors can be requested while participants are in Australia and at any stage on their return home. The mentoring relationship is less formal and structured, with the frequency of meetings and the length of time that the mentoring relationship lasts decided by the pair themselves. Mentors can be Australian or Pacific, and of any gender.

This more flexible approach is designed to ensure that mentoring relationships are tailored to the specific needs of participants and are self-directed and goal oriented, in line with adult learning principles.

WLI's experience in the second phase is that participants most often seek a mentor for advice and support on specific technical issues or aspects of their career. In the last few years, participants have used mentors to provide them with advice in areas such as conducting organisational audits, developing urban masterplans, and scoping methods of land reclamation. They have also sought advice on how to establish a consultancy or small business as well as more general advice on career trajectories in their sector or support to fine-tune their ideas for research or further study.

Most participants are open to whether the mentor is in the Pacific or Australia, but often request that the mentor understand the Pacific context. Some participants are specifically interested in understanding Australian practice, with a view to adapting this to their own context on return. Others seek a Pacific mentor to help them transition back into their home context.

## How does WLI make mentoring matches?

WLI's tailored approach to mentoring starts with understanding what the participant wants from the relationship. Participants complete a short expression of interest, outlining their initial ideas on what support they are looking for. WLI's Program Manager then arranges a phone call to talk through this in more detail. This call aims to clarify participants' needs and expectations of mentoring, what kind of mentor they are looking for, and how long they would like to engage with them. At this stage the Program Manager also asks the participant if they have a particular individual / potential mentor in mind that they wish to work with.

The Program Manager then uses this information to search through the program's existing mentor community as well as using LinkedIn and the personal and professional networks of members of the WLI team to identify candidates who may be a good fit. This process often involves some back and forth between the Program Manager and the participant to help narrow down the list of potential mentors.

Once a potential mentor has been identified, WLI's Program Manager will reach out to them to provide information about the participant and see if they are interested in being a mentor. In cases where the participant has identified a potential mentor themselves, an approach will be made by the Program Manager (and in some cases by the participant themselves, with Program Manager support) to that individual. Having WLI's Program Manger make initial contact is useful for several reasons. It provides some organisational 'weight' for the request (rather than having the participant reach out as an individual). It also helps overcome the fear of rejection that can prevent many women – including women from the Pacific – from seeking out a mentor.

If the mentor agrees, the WLI Program Manager will facilitate an introduction via email. This includes some brief 'onboarding' materials and mentoring tools/ resources, including a mentoring journal template and a mentoring agreement template. The mentoring agreement template provides a framework to support the pair to discuss how they will work together and what they want to get out of the relationship. While not compulsory, these resources can be provide a useful starting point for the participant and mentor to articulate and agree the terms of the mentoring relationship.

The Program Manager follows up with the participant and the mentor after 2 months to check how the relationship is going and whether they need any further support from the program. WLI also sends participants and mentors a short survey every 6-12 months for monitoring and evaluation purposes.

## Mentoring as a leadership tool

WLI's mentoring offering complements other tools, resources and support provided through the program. This includes ontological leadership coaching, which provides participants with individual guidance as they work through leadership issues in their workplace or community, and professional counselling. Coaching and counselling are available to both participants and alumni who have returned home at any stage.

Other assistance available includes: access to workplace internship and professional development opportunities; the Leadership Fund, which provides a small amount of funding to enable alumni to put their ideas for developmental leadership into practice; and the Leadership Lab, an intensive program which supports select alumni to navigate their own real-life leadership challenges.

To strengthen the peer support provided through the WLI alumni network, WLI has also increased its focus on in country activities, including establishing Alumni Representatives in many countries, holding refresher training and other events for alumni, and providing an online networking platform, the Leaders Hub. Recent research conducted by the program demonstrates that the WLI alumni network provides a valuable resource for those who have returned home, including technical and career advice as well as social and emotional support.[12]

*October 2025*

# Bibliography

Brennan, Elizabeth. "Women Leading and Influencing Mentoring Strategy." Agdots, 2023.

Buckley, Sarah, Leyna Clarke and Jo Doyle. "Developmental Leadership for Women in the Pacific: Cultivating Networks for Change in Australia Award WLI alumni" Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023.

Cardno. "Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative Activity Completion Report, September 2017 – June 2022." Cardno Emerging Markets (Australia) Pty Ltd, 2022.

Carter, Angela. D., Cynthia Sims, C., and Arelis Moore de Peralta. "Blazing the Trail: A Qualitative Case Study of Mentoring in a Gender Equity Leadership Development Program." Journal of Business Diversity, 20, no. 2 (2020), 35-49. https://doi.org/10.33423/jbd.v20i2.2898

Gannon, Judie M. "Applying the Lens of Social Movements to Coaching and Mentoring." Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal 6, no. 1 (2021): 5-29, http://dx.doi.org/10.22316/poc/06.1.02

Gentry, William A. "Mentoring for Leadership Development." In The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Coaching in Organizations, edited by Douglas Riddle, Emily R. Hoole, and Elizabeth C. D. Gullette. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015.

Grocutt, Alyssa, Duygu Gulseren, Julie G. Weatherhead, and Nick Turner. "Can Mentoring Programmes Develop Leadership?" Human Resource Development International 25, no. 4 (2020): 404–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1850090

Harris, Deborah A. "Women, Work, and Opportunities: From Neoliberal to Feminist Mentoring." Sociology Compass 16, no. 3 (2022), e12966. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12966

Hastings, Lindsay J. and Cindy Kane, "Distinguishing Mentoring, Coaching, and Advising for Leadership Development." New Directions for Student Leadership, no. 158 (2018): 9-22, https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20284

Hayes, Kate. "Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative Independent Strategic Review: Summary Report." Octo Consulting Pty Ltd, 2020.

Howard, Elise, Julian Barbara and Sonia Palmieri. "Mentoring to Support Women's Leadership." Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2020), https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/items/c23314b5-b7ce-4424-aa95-49787b0357c7

Ismail, Zenobia. "Technical Assistance and Capacity Building in International Development." (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2018), https://gsdrc.org/publications/technical-assistance-and-capacity-building-in-international-development/.

Jackson, Elisabeth, Eka Liu, Ishak Salim, Cucu Saidah, Joni Yulianto, Nur Syarif Ramadhan, Yuyun Yuningsih, Robandi, Surya Sahetapy, Sen Sendjaya, and Erin Wilson. "Finding Self, Leading Others: Leadership Journeys of Persons with Disabilities in Indonesia." Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingahm, 2023, https://dlprog.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/DLP_Report-Finding-Self.pdf

Lovai, Betty, Geejay Milli, and Sonia Palmieri. "When I Go Back': Experiences and Expectations of PNG Women Scholarship Graduates on Return Home." Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2022, https://researchprofiles.anu.edu.au/en/publications/when-i-go-back-experiences-and-expectations-of-png-women-scholars.

Lucas, Brian. "Current Thinking on Capacity Development." (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2013), https://gsdrc.org/publications/current-thinking-on-capacity-development/

Martin, Richard. "'Action, Comrades Action': Social Movement Learning and Knowledge Generation in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle During the Decade of Resistance 1980–1990". PhD diss., Lancaster University, 2022. ProQuest (30365813).

Mullen, Carol A. and Cindy C. Klimaitis. "Defining Mentoring: A Literature Review of Issues, Types, and Applications." Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 1483, no. 1 (2021): 19-35, https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14176

Ollis, Tracey. A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education: Learning to Become an Activist. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Roche, Chris and Lisa Denney. How Can Developmental Leadership Be Supported? Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, https://dlprog.org/publications/foundational-papers/how-can-developmental-leadership-be-supported/

Singh, Swati and Siti Vanka. "Mentoring is Essential but not Sufficient: Sponsor Women for Leadership Roles." Development and Learning in Organizations 34, no. 6 (2020): 25-28, https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-05-2019-0100

Stead, Valerie. "Mentoring: A Model for Leadership Development?" International Journal of Training and Development 9, no.3 (2005): 170-184,  https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2419.2005.00232.x

## Endnotes

1 Swati Singh and Siti Vanka, "Mentoring is Essential but not Sufficient: Sponsor Women for Leadership Roles," Development and Learning in Organizations 34, no. 6 (2020): 25-28, https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-05-2019-0100; Carter, Angela. D. Carter, Cynthia Sims and Arelis Moore de Peralta, "Blazing the Trail: A Qualitative Case Study of Mentoring in a Gender Equity Leadership Development Program," Journal of Business Diversity 20, no. 2 (2020), 35-49. https://doi.org/10.33423/jbd.v20i2.2898

2 Valerie Stead, "Mentoring: A Model for Leadership Development?" International Journal of Training and Development 9, no.3 (2005): 170-184, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2419.2005.00232.x William A. Gentry, "Mentoring for Leadership Development," in The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Coaching in Organizations, ed Douglas Riddle, Emily R. Hoole, and Elizabeth C. D. Gullette, (2015. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated), 347-382; Lindsay J. Hastings and Cindy Kane, "Distinguishing Mentoring, Coaching, and Advising for Leadership Development," New Directions for Student Leadership, no. 158 (2018): 9-22, https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20284

3 Carol A. Mullen and Cindy C. Klimaitis, "Defining Mentoring: A Literature Review of Issues, Types, and Applications," Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 1483, no. 1 (2021): 19-35, https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14176; Alyssa Grocutt et al., "Can Mentoring Programmes Develop Leadership?" Human Resource Development International 25, no. 4 (2020): 404–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1850090; Deborah A. Harris, "Women, Work, and Opportunities: From Neoliberal to Feminist Mentoring," Sociology Compass 16, no. 3 (2022), e12966. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12966

4 Brian Lucas, "Current Thinking on Capacity Development: (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2013), https://gsdrc.org/publications/current-thinking-on-capacity-development/; Zenobia Ismail, "Technical Assistance and Capacity Building in International Development" (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2018), https://gsdrc.org/publications/technical-assistance-and-capacity-building-in-international-development/.

5 Elise Howard, Julian Barbara and Sonia Palmieri, "Mentoring to Support Women's Leadership" (Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2020), https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/items/c23314b5-b7ce-4424-aa95-49787b0357c7

6 Chris Roche and Lisa Denney, "How Can Developmental Leadership Be Supported?" (Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, 2019), https://dlprog.org/publications/foundational-papers/how-can-developmental-leadership-be-supported/

7 Tracey Ollis, A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education: Learning to Become an Activist (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Judie M. Gannon, "Applying the Lens of Social Movements to Coaching and Mentoring," Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal 6, no. 1 (2021): 5-29, http://dx.doi.org/10.22316/poc/06.1.02; Richard Martin, "'Action, Comrades Action': Social Movement Learning and Knowledge Generation in the Anti-apartheid Struggle During the Decade of Resistance 1980–1990." (PhD diss., Lancaster University, 2022), ProQuest (30365813); Elisabeth Jackson et al., "Finding Self, Leading Others: Leadership Journeys of Persons with Disabilities in Indonesia" (Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, 2023), https://dlprog.org/publications/research-briefs/finding-self-leading-others-leadership-journeys-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-indonesia/.

8 Kate Hayes, "Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative Independent Strategic Review: Summary Report" (Octo Consulting Pty Ltd, 2020); Cardno, "Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative Activity Completion Report, September 2017 – June 2022," (Cardno Emerging Markets, 2022); Betty Lovai, Geejay Milli, and Sonia Palmieri, "When I Go Back': Experiences and Expectations of PNG Women Scholarship Graduates on Return Home" (Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2022), https://researchprofiles.anu.edu.au/en/publications/when-i-go-back-experiences-and-expectations-of-png-women-scholars.

9 Hayes, "Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative Independent Strategic Review"; Cardno, "Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative Activity Completion Report".

10 Elizabeth Brennan, "Women Leading and Influencing Mentoring Strategy" (Agdots, 2023).

11 Formerly referred to as the Leadership and Mentoring program.

12 Lovai et al., "When I Go Back"; Sarah Buckley, Leyna Clarke and Jo Doyle, "Developmental Leadership for Women in The Pacific: Cultivating Networks for Change in Australia Award WLI Alumni" (Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023).