

Women In Product Podcast Episode 22: Mentoring

Cyronne

It is great to be with you today to talk about mentoring for success on the Women in Product podcast. Before we begin, I just wanted to know, so Bridget, how long have you been involved with Women In Product, and was this your first time having a mentor from Women in Product?

Bridget

Yes, I was so fortunate to be selected for this first program. This is my very first Women in Product mentor experience. I started in Women In Product or kind of learning more about it, I want to say maybe four years ago when I moved up to the Bay and I'm at the company I'm at now. My manager, I think, shared a little bit about that, and we kind of learned about the conference and started going to that more, so that's more of how I started.

Cyronne

Okay. Vanessa, how about you?

Vanessa

Yeah, I think I heard about it through the grapevine and joined around 2019, and kind of followed along with the Canadian chapter, attended a couple events, but yeah, was excited to see a formal mentorship program in it, and also felt like I won the lottery when I got accepted into it. Yeah, that was my first time experiencing mentorship through WIP.

Archana

I've been with Women In Product for a very, very long time, but this whole pilot program, the mentoring pilot program, has allowed me to build deeper connections, and meet a lot of new people, and just enrich my own experience.

Muneera

I think I've been a big fan of Women In Product. I've been involved in various activities. But in terms of a mentorship program, I would say formally, it was my first time. But if you think about mentorship, mentorship is such an ongoing thing in my career. I've always been a mentoring woman all throughout I think I've been in this field. But with Women In Product, I love the program. I love that it became formal. It pushed us to get together and get to know each other, which was amazing. I love the warm up and I got to see some of the mentees, and then I got matched, and it worked really beautifully for me. I love my mentees.

Vastla

Yeah. I have been into Women In Product for the past four to five years, but this was in... In theory this was my first time signing up for a formal mentor for Women In Product. I think I just got lucky to be chosen for the pilot program.

Cyronne

Archana, tell me a little bit about your experience with mentoring. I could tell from some of the



responses from the mentees in the program that this is probably not the first time that you've done mentoring.

Archana

That's true, Cyronne. So I've been in the product industry, like building products, for the last 20 years. And for me, mentoring is more personal than anything else. When I started my journey in product some 20 years back, I was the only woman, let alone the only woman of color, in the room. So, for me, I struggled a lot with the imposter syndrome and just baffling and thinking whether or not I belong here. So, for me, mentoring has been very, very personal. Making sure that all the young, aspiring PMs and women, in general, have the necessary confidence to live up to their full potential.

So even when I was back at Oracle, which is where I started my professional career here in the US, I would mentor a lot of women who would just reach out to me randomly, "Hey, Archana. We'd like to spend some time with you. Get some advice," and so on. So, yes, I've been doing mentoring for quite a bit, and it is definitely a passion for me. And when women in product launched this pilot program, I jumped in and I'm like, "Yes." This is more a formal way to help, but yes, I've been doing mentoring for a bit, and I really enjoy it.

Cyronne

When you think about mentorship overall and the recent program where you just participated and you were a mentee, did the program fall into your ideas of what mentorship really is? Did it meet your expectations for mentorship? Bridget?

Bridget

Yeah, I think it did, because I think ... How I like to think about mentorship is just a really supportive relationship between two people, with one really guiding the other individual and the other individual, in my case, me, feeling safe and free of judgment, kind of being able to bounce things off of someone, and so I feel like this program really aligned in that area because I built a connection with my mentor and she helped me just unblock mental blocks, and not to say that my current manager and people at my current company don't help me with that, because they definitely do, but you know I think it's just helpful to have maybe people outside of that, and so I felt really supported by my mentor.

Cyronne

Vanessa, tell me a little bit about your experience in the mentoring pilot.

Vanessa

Yeah, I think it met my expectation for sure, to Bridget's point, around a comfortable and transparent kind of dynamic where I felt comfortable to bring kind of any issue, problem, or opportunity in my current job or navigating the job process, and having someone to answer the question. I think what was interesting was, first of all, she was in the Bay area and I'm in Canada. Then, she was in kind of a bit of a field or a company that wasn't really of personal interest to me, so originally I was worried that that might negatively impact the experience somehow. She was just too far and not in a direct line, but I really did find it super, super helpful, and I loved having that distance to be honest, and also having that other geographic point of view to compare differences and similarities between this world, the product world in Canada to the US. It ended up being a benefit and really nice to have somebody completely fresh and completely unknown, that I would never otherwise probably come across.



Cyronne

So, if you had to define mentorship overall, and your thoughts about mentorship. Did your program change your ideas of mentoring or did it fulfill your ideas of mentoring?

Muneera

I think it did. It did because I think so many people confuse mentoring with coaching. I'm lucky that I'm actually working in the business of coaching because I work for a platform that is actually matchmaking for coaches. Coaches usually talk to you, mentors talk with you, and your sponsors talk about you. It's a very simple way to phrase it. To put it in words, mentorship is really using your own skillset and experience to actually guide other people to the box. So sometimes, mentees choose you. And a lot of time mentors also choose mentees because it really is driven by mentees where they're trying to go.

But sometimes, it's actually not like that. For me, it's also that I'm really interested. I see a spark in people and usually in women, oh, this person is here and how you can take them from here to the next, and how I can use my own skills and my experience, and I can guide them through it, and whatever they can take. And I always say that take what's helpful and don't take what's not helpful. So, I think the program was very good. I would love to have a few more options of the mentees available, but also we had very few in Women In Product. Still I would say that we just need to advocate for Women In Product can have more people. Active members, actually. I think we have quite a few members, but I don't think that we have much activity, which I think we should all drive towards.

Vastla

I would say to me, mentorship is something that I look at as a very pivotal part for anybody's career. You can think of a mentor in many ways. You can think of them as your sounding board, somebody with whom you exchange ideas.

You have to be very transparent. You have to actually set some goals with you and your mentors like, "Hey, what you are looking out for in the session," because you don't want to be wasting someone's time and you also want to bring some value to the table. Whenever I look for the mentorship, I look, what is the value I would be getting out of that 30 minutes time frame and what he or she would be getting value out of my conversation.

It should be a two way traffic. With every mentor you should be very well prepared. These are some of the key characteristics that I found very helpful in Women In Product, just in general networking with people.

Cyronne

Well, you talked a little already about my next question around mentors, coaches, and sponsors, right? Because they each can serve a different purpose in your career. So if I'm a mentee and I'm looking for help, how do I know which I need? And when?

Muneera

So, mentorship's more like skills, like experience and skills. It's more about very direct experience. So for example, if I have been an engineer, and then I became a product manager, now I'm a product leader in the space. If someone's looking for the same path, what it will take them to get there or any industry I work in that they would actually practice, that's where the mentorship will help you. Where coaching comes, it's really goals. It's really driven by a coachee. I have these certain goals in life, regardless of it's

career goals, it's your personal goals. What coach will do is will help you with your thought process and reinforce to achieve your goals. So, that's where I see a little bit of difference. Sponsors are basically... This is where it's gets very tricky between mentors and the sponsors. Sponsors are basically who are really your responsible.

They believe in you, and they would like to advocate for you. And they talk about you to the people, their sponsors. But I would say mentors do a bit of that too. There is a type of mentorship. There are quite a few types of mentorship. There's one very strict, very driven by the skills. One is actually very social. They're going to connect you with other people to get more mentors and stuff like that. So there are quite a few ways you look at it, but that's how I see the difference between coaching and sponsorship and mentoring.

Archana

So there is a very thin line between mentoring, coaching, sponsorship, allyship, or being an ally to someone. I mean, the line is so thin that sometimes the mentoring session becomes one or the other. And so, mentoring itself can take a form of coaching. You are literally coaching the person to get to their full potential, talking to them, showing them or sharing your experiences and your learning so that they can quickly embody some of those learnings and can start becoming productive and walk towards and build their own career trajectory. But then also, sometimes I feel like when mentors and mentees build a very, very solid relationship, you can vouch for the body of the work of the mentee, especially if in the same organization and they're part of the same organization. I think it can also turn out to be a sponsorship, because sponsorship is when I can recommend the person to come in and fill in a position or get more responsibility. So I think it can quickly turn into a sponsorship, as long as you're able to vouch for the mentee's body of work and you know them for long enough.

Again, I think there's also a trust factor in that. So you rely on this person's capabilities to fill in a role. Literally, I think sponsors push the envelope. And I think I've been fortunate in my own career journey where I've had sponsors who've exposed me to the opportunities that have allowed me to grow. So I think between being the mentor, the coach, the sponsor, there's really a very thin line and being an ally too.

I think more from an ally perspective, when you look like someone or where you can relate to that person's background in terms of, I think, ethnicity, race, or experience, or nationality, and you can learn from their experience because you can so easily relate to those situations. So, sharing those experiences with one another and helping each other grow is definitely another form of mentorship. There's a very thin line between all of those.

And to answer your second question, how do I know which one I really need? I think when people sign up for mentoring and go and decide to have a mentor, they need to have clarity for their own selves as to what they want to achieve in their career. What is their next step? If somebody wants to grow in their own organization, take up a leadership role or a larger responsibility, then they should be really reaching out to people who are already in those roles and can help them and influence or make sure that they have a seat at the table in on certain conversations so that they get exposed to the opportunities. That's a sponsor relationship.

There could be scenarios where I just want to develop maybe better product management skills. And I can look up LinkedIn and find, I don't know, a million other women doing product management for several years and are open to sharing their knowledge and their experiences, so I could reach out to them in terms of coaching and helping me better hone my skills.

So, it really depends upon what the mentee wants, so what the individual wants, and based on their needs. And everybody's journey is unique, and everybody is in different stages of their life aspiring to do different things. So I think it's really a self-realization process, and they have to first realize what they want to do. And then I think, as long as they know how they can get to the next step in their own career or their professional journey, they should be able to map it to either a coaching relationship. Coaching typically can come with the cost, too. There are a lot of professional coaches. So I think some folks can afford. Some folks cannot afford. And I think that's where coaching and mentorship can go hand in hand, where you may not be in a position to hire a coach. But you can get a mentor who is an experienced professional in a certain domain or certain area that you either want to venture in, or you want to grow, and you can reach out to them.

So I think it's different use cases, different matching in terms of what they need. But then I feel, especially today, with LinkedIn and all other networking options that individuals have, there's several ways to approach people for the right kind of support that they need.

Cyronne

So, what in your mind are the ingredients of a great mentoring relationship?

Muneera

I think mentorship is a discipline and I think differentiating between few disciplines that are helping people from where they are to where they want to go on their coaching sponsorship and mentoring, but mentoring is very discipline oriented. It is really using the other person's experience and skills, and how to actually utilize, help other person. Or if I'm a mentee, and I want a mentor, I would really like to use that experience and skill to be able to help me guide where I'm trying to go. I think it should be mature, shared values, I would say. Shared values. That you really believe in this discipline. That will really help because I have seen people using it not in a way. They just totally ignore it. It's such a valuable thing.

All my career, I have found coaches and mentors who helped me grow. I think a lot of credit goes to them and it doesn't have to be directly your manager or someone you directly report to. I have actually learned so much from my own teams who I was leading, actually. And also, my leaders. Not necessarily my direct leaders, of course, my direct just has been really, really amazing in helping me go through all the challenges and really help me. But I always found anyone who I could see a spark, can really help me where I am lacking and I would use them as mentors. But it's a discipline that you have to believe in.

Archana

Yes. I think the two things that make mentorship very successful, and I try to check both boxes when I am mentoring folks. So one is, of course, a match, right? So the mentor and the mentee, like I've said previously, too, that they really have to come to rely on one another. They really have to see eye to eye and gain that confidence. So for me, it's important that I'm able to connect with the mentee. And sometimes I may feel like I may not be able to contribute in a very positive way towards a mentee. So, I'll be honest and say, "This is not something I can help her or him with." But then most of the times, if I know I can help them out, that's a good sign for me, and that's one check mark. And also being able to relate to that person.

The other thing, I feel, which has led for me to successfully mentor for these many years is having a dedicated time allocated for mentoring. Typically, every Friday, in fact, most Fridays of the month, I will block an hour or so. And I let my mentees know about this upfront so that they can let me

know at least a couple weeks in advance when they'd like to meet me. But it's between 10:00 AM and 11:00 AM Pacific on Friday. So having that dedicated slot on my calendar does do things. Sometimes I'm doing homework for the mentee. So I prepare myself before that Friday meeting. And second, I always have dedicated time. So I think that those are the two things that I think are super, super necessary for becoming a good mentor. And the one that being able to relate and connect with your mentee and the other is making sure that you carve time out of your busy schedules.

I think in that way, mentors need to be able to... It's a commitment, I think, in my mind. When you choose to become a part of somebody's success story, it's a commitment and you have to have that. If that's a motivation for you, you'll find a way to make time. Staying committed is super crucial.

Cyronne

One thing that we like to say around mentorship is that the mentee really is the one that drives the relationship. You come to the mentor with your questions, your challenges, your goals for the relationship, so I wonder if for this mentoring pilot, did you set your individual objectives upfront, and what did you want to accomplish?

Vanessa

I think I was originally pretty keen on finding a new opportunity before the end of the year, so that was sort of my original objective. Then as the year wound down to a close and certain actions were made, I actually just completely gave it up and I was like, "You know what? I just want to explore and optimize where I'm at now." Then as soon as that mental shift happened, a job opportunity came out of nowhere and then it was back on again and she was supporting me through that. It was an interesting ride where I had a certain purpose, took some actions, got some advice. There was a lot going on for me personally. We bought and sold a house and were doing renovations and I don't know how I even thought that I could switch jobs during that time period. It was way too much going on, but it was just always helpful to know that there was this very experienced objective third party person that I could always count on, in a very consistent scheduled way. Every week, she made herself available to connect if need be, and then there was a little bit of period of time near the end of the year where we sort of took a bit of a break with the holidays and vacations and things like that, and then came back together strong in the new year.

Cyronne

So life happened during the mentoring pilot, right, but you were able to navigate around it, so that's great. Bridget, how about you?

Bridget

My goals or objectives definitely changed, because originally I wanted to focus on strategy learnings or how other companies work like her own, because I'm moving up in my career in a leadership position, so I just wanted to be really strong and make sure I understood not just what my company was doing, but what other companies were doing, and she was a great resource to share that information, but I did feel like what she shared, I was familiar with or working on. Maybe in the back of my head, I knew, which did help reaffirm, "Okay, I'm on the right path or I am using the tools I need to keep growing," so that was definitely helpful to talk through, but then throughout the process, as we maybe got to know each other more, felt more comfortable, kind of morphed more into just growing and learning together, and then me talking more about overall career goals and me as an individual and what are my values, and then what are my long term next steps. Even talking about prepping to go to new roles, whether you're in the same company or other companies, and not to say that I don't have those conversations with my

manager. She's fantastic and I love having those conversations with her, but having my mentor Manira go through that kind of stuff was also really helpful, and yeah, was great, and so she really helped me through a lot of that stuff.

Cyronne

You touched on something that I think we really saw come out of this pilot in that the match is very key. Right? Mentorship is a relationship at the end of the day, and we know that it takes more than just overnight to build a relationship, so when you said that as the time went or as the time passed, you kind of learned each other more, you learned about how to communicate better, and I think that's important, right? When you have a mentor, so when you think about the match with the mentor, right, what are the things that really ... What are the ingredients that make that a great match? Vanessa?

Vanessa

I think what worked was, I did feel like it was a judgment free zone in that there was a ... I'm always very candid, in general in life, so I definitely came with a full candid presence, and I was a little worried about how that would be received, but Archana was very open kind of to that, and also was pretty transparent on her side as well. I think that was sort of important, the level of commitment, as well. I also found her to be compassionate and empathetic, but also drawing from her sort of journey as well and sharing what she learned or what she's kind of heard from others. Yeah, I'd say we had different personalities or tempos of communication, so on the surface, I don't know if I would be like, "Oh, we're 100% perfect, perfect on paper," but I feel like it was a really positive and really worthwhile and really comfortable relationship, and even though the program is over now ... I didn't reach out to her for a little bit and I'm like, "I need you in my life, I need to keep talking to you," so yeah, so we kind of reestablished that we're going to continue to check in now that it's officially passed.

Cyronne

Bridget, how about you?

Bridget

I think the ability to shift is really important. Goals are really key, but I think there's also a value in patience and kind of growing together. I think that's really important to make a mentorship work, but I also think, not just only going in super strong and, "This is the goal," and only working on that, because I think, not that we maybe did that a little bit in the beginning, but then when it got to be really strong, it was the times that we took a good amount of time to really get to know each other outside of strictly product or work related things. Then I could understand what her values were and her passions, and I learned that she has a super creative side and hopefully will launch her own business with creating cards, and we kind of talked about that and shared resources that way. Then she gave me inspiration or encouragement for when I started a podcast a few months ago. I feel like that really helped us grow closer, not just only talking about product stuff. I think it's important to sprinkle a little bit of that in to get to know more of the person behind the person giving you feedback or asking for feedback.

Cyronne

In your opinion, what ingredients make a great mentorship relationship?

Vastla

I think it's just one key formula. I always use to be authentic, be yourself. Don't fake it. You don't have to fake it to your mentors. Be very, very genuine, be honest, be prepared. Be prepared, you don't want to waste anyone's time. You want to be fully prepared. You want to be focused on what you want out of that session. Like I said, what you want out of the session and what you bring on the table is super important. It is like any other relation that you have in life.

Archana

Mentoring is done at different levels, and they're different purposes for which people reach out. Some are just trying to climb up the ladder, the corporate ladder. A few folks are just honing their skills. A few just want a new perspective. Someone wants a sounding board just to run their ideas by. I feel like mentoring in general, it's like a coaching session where you are talking to people who probably are in the shoes or have the skill set that you personally aspire in and want to embody. So what makes mentoring successful is building that trust and relationship between the mentor and the mentee. And typically, I think in the first two calls or the first two meetings, now I say calls because we've all moved to the virtual world, but in the first two meetings, the mentor and the mentee are able to gauge whether or not this is going to be a long-term relationship.

But I think as long as you're able to build the confidence, and specifically talking about the mentor, that they're able to build the confidence, and they're able to listen in and be that person that they can rely on and feel confident sharing their stories with. I think that's a good starting point for a successful mentorship. And it evolves as we go through. You get to know the person better. There's some mentees that I've worked with for months together. So I know how they're thinking through this, and I can probably use the right terms or make them see through in their way, a certain situation, and open their eyes to a different perspective completely. So, that relationship-building and then also getting to know each other and getting in a comfortable zone where you can respect one another, I think that's a very, very key ingredient to a successful mentorship.

Cyronne

What are the top recommendations you would have for anyone who thinks they need a mentor? How should they know what's the right solution for their situation? How should they prepare themselves and how do they get the most out of the relationship?

Vastla

Mentorship is a very organic process. When you get assigned to a mentor or when you look for a mentor, just keep three key bullets in the mind. Whom you are reaching out? How do you resonate with him or her background? What is that you think that you can learn from him or her?

Not necessarily that every big shot of any organization, you would be able to build that relationship or resonate with. Be cognizant about that and there can be hit on this, that's number one.

Number two is whenever you're requesting anybody's time for that matter, be super prepared, be super prepared, make best use of your time. I always... I got this tip from someone, when you go for mentorship session think that you're going for an interview. Every time, every time, bring your best. Do that.

And third and most important, be authentic, do not fake. They're not your actual interviewers do not fake, be yourself because that's the best way you can learn.



There's a saying, I'll just sum it up, "With teacher, doctor and lawyer, you should always say the truth." Mentor is a guide, is a teacher so tell the truth, be honest.

Cyronne

So, if you had to give advice to anyone that wanted to be a mentor, whether it's a formal program or just an informal mentoring relationship, what advice would you give them to help with be successful mentoring?

Muneera

I think I would say, be present at the moment. We are all very busy. We are all transparent at the time, but really if someone is seeking your advice, they're looking up to you. They're looking up to you and that is something is very deep for me. It's very important for me. If someone is looking up to me to help them guide, I see that I'm privileged, and I'm so lucky to have someone seeking advice from me. So, I think we should respect that and really help. I would say it's very rewarding. It's really rewarding when you see your mentees growing. Your own folks that you're managing, growing, and you see them shining, sometimes you're sitting in the back seat and there is just a light bulb just going in your heart. So, I think respect with time and be present at the moment. I would say that is my only advice.

Archana

So, like I mentioned earlier, this is very personal for me. And I think that's why I feel very committed, and I have a drive, and I am able to block my calendar and make sure I have time for mentoring every week. So, the advice that I can give for mentors is that if this is what you like to do, make sure you make the time for it and stay committed through the process. Because there are mentees who are relying on you, and they're relying on your judgment and your support, so it should be one of your top priorities, for sure. And like I said, most of the times, the intent is there, but people are not able to find the time. So, it's just making sure that you carve out that time for the mentor.

And the one thing about mentorship is that it's a two-way street. I feel like it's not just the mentee gaining out of these conversations or these relationships. There's quite a few times where the mentor, or not quite a few times, but always the mentor's also gaining a lot. They're gaining new stories. Then you're gaining new experiences. They're building new connections. There's a sense of gratification. So, I feel like people who are hesitant from mentoring, they should definitely jump in because I think everybody has something to offer, and everybody's experiences are unique, and there's just so much that they've learned themselves that it can be valuable for somebody just starting off. So, it's definitely a thing that people should pursue. And if they really want to be successful mentors, then they want to make sure that they're able to carve out the time, stay committed, and realize that, in fact, I think it's a easy way for instant gratification and also for your own career growth.

Like I said, when you meet so many different individuals with different backgrounds and different aspirations, you end up learning as well about yourself. And sometimes, like I said, I do the homework myself. So I am also enriching my own knowledge. I read up before my mentoring session, so I'm able to coach the person in the right direction. I think it's absolutely beneficial for both the mentor and the mentee. Make the time and support your mentees.