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Can mentoring contribute to preparing more New Zealand women for private sector governance roles

A Victoria University of Wellington MBA research project

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“Men are still viewed as default leaders and women as atypical leaders”

- (Hannum et al., 2015, p. 66).

Executive summary

New Zealand has a severe shortage of women in leadership at governance levels in the private sector - just 17% of directors at NZX-listed companies are women.

This research project looks at the current situation for women in governance in New Zealand and considers the role of mentoring in developing more women with an interest in and capability for governance roles.

By interviewing 11 accomplished New Zealand women who are already in at least their second board role, I sought to answer the research question of, ‘Can mentoring contribute to preparing more New Zealand women for private sector governance roles?’

The findings are that mentoring is a useful tool for developing professional skills, and all senior women interviewed benefit from a support network including mentors.

However, while aspirant directors would benefit from mentoring, it is not the only solution to improving levels of women in governance.

Initiatives should have the broader focus of getting more women in leadership generally, including at CEO levels and on boards. Aspirant directors should be encouraged and given a clear idea of what governance involves. Board recruitment processes should adopt thorough searches that include gender diversity.

Introduction

The lack of women in senior leadership and governance is no secret in New Zealand. For kiwi companies listed on the stock market, only 17% of directors are female (Lin, 2017). In senior management, it isn't much better. Of the top 50 companies on the NZX, only one has a woman Chief Executive. This is not unique to New Zealand - only 4% of Fortune 500 companies have women CEOs (Merelli, 2017).

Such low statistics surely don't inspire young ambitious New Zealand women to feel optimistic about their chances of achieving governance roles here. Instead, it sends the signal that to be a woman in governance will be a struggle - you will be in the minority and roles might be difficult to find. This could have the troubling, negative long-term impact of dissuading the pipeline of future talent from setting their sights on governance.

Extensive research shows that diversity in business is beneficial in many ways including for business performance, but encouraging inclusion is also the socially and ethically 'right' thing to do (Ryan, 2017; Hunt, Layton & Prince, 2015; Nally, 2015).

There are currently many relatively recent initiatives in place to foster the pipeline of emerging female business leaders. In New Zealand, the Institute of Directors' Future Directors programme gives people aspiring to governance the chance to sit in on a board for year, while the website www.appointbetterboards.co.nz allows those seeking governance roles to advertise their interest in positions and apply for suitable roles. Cultivate Lab is a mentoring programme by women, for women based in Wellington with the specific goal of nurturing the pipeline.

In the public sector, there is a conscious commitment to improving gender diversity on boards. The number of women on state sector boards is now at its highest ever: 45 per cent as at December 2016 (Ministry for Women, n.d., para 1). These positive statistics, however, have not translated to the private sector. Change is occurring at a glacial pace.

This is of interest to me because in my previous career as a business journalist, I often interviewed successful women in business, and wrote about the lack of female leadership at a governance level (Crossley, 2012; Crossley, 2013). In completing my MBA, I am aspiring to make a contribution in my career via governance myself (I was appointed to my first director role on a board in 2016) and see the current low levels of women directors as frustrating. I want to see the New Zealand business environment be inclusive, fair and with plentiful opportunities for all capable people to succeed.

This research project looked at the current situation for women in governance in New Zealand. It considered the role of mentoring in developing more women with an interest in and capability for governance roles. It sought to answer the research question of, 'Can mentoring contribute to preparing more New Zealand women for private sector governance roles?' I was interested to see, by speaking with women to already hold governance positions, how mentoring may or may not have increased their self-efficacy and skill set for directorships and/or directly led to their interest in being on boards.

I chose to focus this project on mentoring related to women. The interviewees were people who self-identify as women. However, this should not be taken to mean that I perceive gender diversity as more or less important than ethnicity or other forms of diversity, or the advancement of women ahead of other genders. Personally, I believe diversity in all forms including measures of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background and physical ability should be represented throughout businesses, including at leadership levels and in governance. The desire to see more diversity in leadership does not suggest the mainly Pākehā, older men who dominate governance can't bring value, experience and even diversity of thought. It's not a rejection of male leaders. Rather, it's a call for fairer leadership that includes a broader range of people representing New Zealand's population. It's a desire for inclusivity instead of exclusivity.

The focus on women in this research project was simply to keep this research tightly focused. It allowed this research to respond to media articles on the topic of women directors, to clearly relate back to previous research in this field and respond to NZX reporting on this particular measure. In New Zealand, local companies listed on the NZX Main Board are required to include in their annual report "quantitative data on the gender breakdown of their directors and officers at the financial year end, together with comparative figures for the prior financial year end" (Gender Diversity Statistics, 2017). I chose to keep diversity in mind when selecting people to interview. Of the eleven women interviewed, six were Pākehā, two Māori, one Pacific and two Asian. All were at least in their second governance role, most had a high public profile and several were on the boards of NZX-listed companies.

“Men overwhelmingly dominate economic decision-making positions, such as those on corporate boards, as business executives, government financial regulators, trade negotiators, and central bankers around the world”

- True (2013)

Why women in governance matters

There is “very little” known about the causes of why there are so few women on boards, according to Adams (2016). “One important reason why we need more research on this topic is that the causes of underrepresentation are likely to affect how important selection is and, as a result, gender gaps in director preferences”. Only ten per cent of New Zealand women directors surveyed in 1997 believed that qualified women were not interested in board service (Pajo, McGregor & Cleland, 1997).

Vachon (2014) found evidence that organisations with women directors outperform competitors in several fields. “Consequently, the decision-makers for the corporation, ultimately the board of directors, should implement a corporate system to provide more opportunity for women and create opportunities for qualified women at the board level”.

Nagarajan (2011) found four main reasons businesses should support having more women on their boards:

- more democratic representation of societies' diversity;
- improving decision-making (“increasing the range of views, values and experiences represented”);
- improved profitability;
- reputation benefits: an improved image for shareholders, employees and consumers.

Adams (2016) writes that there is a much “longer way to go towards breaking the boardroom glass ceiling” than people like to think. Xero managing director Anna Curzon says the numbers of women senior executives in New Zealand are “terrible”. She told business magazine Idealog “we need to build up, support, and encourage people with potential in business to build out that pipeline. Of course, we also need to fight against some of the natural and unconscious biases that occur when recruiters go into the selection process” (Mack, 2017).

NZHerald reported that of companies that filed gender diversity information for the 2016 calendar year, “83 per cent of directors were male and 17 per cent were female - identical to the ratio from the previous year, despite efforts to get more women on boards” (NZHerald, 2017).

There is some evidence that women wish to avoid competition (Niederle, 2014) which could be a factor impacting the lack of women in governance. Adams (2016) suggests that one cause of relative female underrepresentation may be women's unwillingness to take up directorships. "But, it seems unlikely that women who are sufficiently qualified to be directors would shy away from competition in the boardroom". Reading this, I thought mentoring might be able to help ambitious women clarify their goals in order to reach them: it could, perhaps, play a significant role in helping build up the pipeline.

“Women often don’t receive the same support for professional achievement as men do”

- Hall and Sandler, 1983

Why mentoring is a useful development tool

Mentoring is one way of facilitating women’s entry into male-dominated boardrooms, according to Cross-Company Mentoring Program executive coach Peninah Thomson (McShane, Olekalns, & Travaglione, 2013). “Mentors can assist women in interpreting the boardroom culture by helping them to learn the unwritten rules of networking and impression management”. According to Sheryl Sandberg, mentoring and sponsorship are “crucial for career progression” (Sandberg, 2013). There are strict regulations around governance, including with financial reporting and health and safety, that directors need to be familiar with. Directors also need the resilience to manage conflict, experience in business and life to draw from and soft skills to navigate other aspects of governance. Board members are often expected to represent their organisations at events. Research shows that generally, women receive less advice on career advancement and don’t interact with senior leaders as often as men in the workplace (Lean In & McKinsey & Company, 2017, p.7).

Mentoring provides many professional benefits that could help prepare women for governance roles, including:

- “improved opportunity and success in career advancement;
- higher salaries; improved time management and productivity;
- improved satisfaction with profession and work–life balance;
- higher administrative aspirations; and
- improved networking skills” (Quinn, 2012).

Defining mentoring

Mentoring is considered a form of role modelling, where one party influences their protege. Collin (1988) defines mentoring as a “protected relationship in which learning and experimentation can occur, potential skills can be developed, and in which results can be measured in terms of competencies gained” (p. 23).

Garvey and Galloway (2002) suggests that having a mentor is like having “a personal career development officer.” The best-known model of mentoring, according to Stead & Jowett (1994) in business has a central aim of grooming “high-flyers for senior roles”. In this model, senior staff are matched with “selected learners to promote their systematic acquisition of skills”. According to Megginson, Garvey & Stokes (2000), mentoring is complex and involves “a highly variable dynamic of the individuals, the pairs and the organisational context”. At the heart of mentoring, however, is a “learning relationship between two people”.

Sambunjak & Marasic (2009) define mentoring as a dyadic relationship. It usually occurs between a more experienced person as the mentor with a less experienced person as mentee. The more senior half of the relationship is usually eager to share “what they wished they had known when they started out” (Reis, Stage & Summit, 2014). This personal insight is extremely valuable. It is also reassuring to a woman aspiring to governance to hear a senior woman whose achievements she admires speak candidly about her own career journey including stumbles along the way. Mentors may provide a safe space that “encourages mentees to speak openly about their anxieties, concerns, and struggles” (Tillman, 2001).

For healthcare professionals, Sharma & Freeman (2014) found mentoring to be “a time-proven strategy” to help workers reach their career potential. “In providing career guidance, encouragement, scope for research, and opportunities to make professional contacts, mentors make substantial contributions in recruiting promising young people to their area of expertise”. People with mentors say they are more satisfied with their own career development. They also have greater productivity as leaders in professional associations, receive more competitive grants, and - in the case of academics - publish more articles in their field (Crawford & Smith, 2005).

Having a mentor has been proven to improve “job satisfaction, career commitment and organisation-based self-esteem” (Cotton, Miller & Ragins, 2002). Strengthening career commitment and self-esteem in relation to work could certainly help to prepare women to take on more responsibility in senior leadership roles including governance.

Formal and informal mentoring

The difference between formal and informal mentoring programmes is that formal programmes are run by either an organisation that the mentor and mentee work for (large corporates often have in-house mentoring programmes), or a professional development organisation with a mentoring scheme people can apply to participate in. For example, I am Director of Professional Development on the board of communications networking group IABC Wellington. This includes managing mentoring that members can apply to take part in - I pair them with senior members who have relevant experience, which might be working in a similar industry or having key responsibility areas in common (for example, energy industry communications or internal communications). This is a formal but unstructured programme. I have taken part myself earlier in my career and was lucky to be paired with a senior woman I felt a connection with and could speak candidly to. We got along well and continued mentoring beyond the official twelve month duration of the formal mentoring programme: our formal mentoring transitioned to informal. I expect the relationship to continue in that she will be someone I will call when I am seeking feedback on a tough decision or considering accepting a role in future.

Cotton, Ragins & Miller (2000) found the “difference between formal and informal mentoring relationships is that informal mentoring relationships develop spontaneously, whereas formal mentoring relationships develop with organisational assistance or intervention . . . formal relationships are usually of much shorter duration”. Formal mentors may be less intrinsically motivated to be in the relationships therefore less personally invested in their proteges' development than informal mentors. Ultimately, the quality of a mentoring relationship is much more important than its origin (Sambunjak & Marasic, 2009) including whether it was formal or informal. That research relates to mentoring in medicine, but it is indisputably true of human nature that an authentic connection between people is genuine, regardless of how it begins.

Informal mentoring is a casual, naturally-occurring partnership between a senior and more junior person where the senior person takes a special interest in developing the junior person. It occurs organically and continues because both parties find it rewarding. I had two key informal mentors as a young journalist, including a male editor and female sub-editor. Both took an interest in my development by offering extensive feedback on my work, creating opportunities for me to stretch my skills and sharing stories about the earlier days of their careers. It was encouraging and supportive beyond the call of duty, and helped significantly in my skill-building. It also boosted my confidence in my own abilities. Later in my career, I still recall with regularity the words that both of these informal mentors said to me. Through this research, I was interested to explore what other women gained and learned from their mentors.

"I do believe life is tougher for women in business than their male counterparts."

- Joan Withers, 1998

Cross-gender mentoring

US research claims fewer instances of mentoring occur between men and women "because people are worried about perceptions" (O'Neill & Blake-Beard, 2002). Typically, people are more comfortable with mentors who are of the same sex because they hold "similar attitudes, values, and experiences". People, in the US at least, tend to avoid cross-gender mentoring out of fear of real or perceived sexual involvement: people don't want to put themselves at risk of the potential for rumours to circulate. "Since men are seen as more powerful than women, there may be a perception that they have more access to resources and opportunities, therefore more likely to be chosen as mentors." O'Neill & Blake-Beard also write that men do not always want to be mentored by women, no matter how accomplished they are. Men prefer same-sex mentors because they perceive women as "less qualified, able, and powerful".

Because senior women in business are in the minority, they select mentees with extreme care and caution. They see, or think others may see, their mentee as a reflection of themselves. "They may have higher expectations of their mentees. . . . They cannot afford to have a woman protégé fail" (Parker & Kram, 1993). Often, women in business can feel dissatisfied with mentoring other women because they feel they need too much support, according to this research.

Vachon (2014) found that studies show a strong mentor programme helps women to reach senior levels in the workplace. "Men, as well as women, need to competently mentor women. A system designed to promote women to officer and board positions needs to account for the tiaras, queen bees and impostors." This refers to imposter syndrome whereby successful women feel like a fraud, do not think they deserve their success. In referring to queen bees, she speaks about the stereotype of senior women isolated at the top and 'pulling up the ladder behind them', not supporting other women to reach seniority. I originally thought this was a cliché, not to mention contradictory to other research that says women - as a generalisation - bring skills of collaboration to the boardroom. Nagarajan (2011) finds women can bring different experience and decision-making to the boardroom. "Some areas where this difference has been noted include a collaborative approach to leadership, a risk averse approach to investment and different ways of expression."

When we talk about diversity, of course, gender is only one small part of that. All forms of diversity including ethnicity are also important. Research around mentoring for academics 'of colour' in the

United States found mentoring was critical to helping many succeed, according to the work of Turner & Gonzalez (2014). Researching in the education profession, Crutcher (2007) stated that mentors don't have to share a cultural or social background with their mentees for the relationship to be successful. "But they must pay close attention to the implications of the differences". Both parties need to be aware of the implications and/or privilege of their own situation, and try to understand how that influences their view of the world and therefore the advice they give in a mentoring context. Due to the complexity of cross-cultural mentoring, Crutcher (2007) found mentors "need certain attributes or abilities, including selflessness, active listening skills, honesty, a nonjudgmental attitude, persistence, patience, and an appreciation for diversity".

Currently, according to an Ernst & Young report, Māori account for just 2 per cent of board directors (Pelletier, 2016). Mentoring Māori within a Pākehā framework is a challenge that New Zealand organisations may grapple with as they aim to support Māori to senior roles (Hook, Waaka & Raumati, 2007). "Just as the Māori pathway might be less effective when applied to Pākehā, the Pākehā pathway for mentoring may be also be less effective when applied within a Māori framework....Delivery of any programme for the mentoring of Māori should be done according to tikanga Māori."

Where the literature leads me

Overall, the literature shows that mentoring is beneficial to boosting one's career, and that more work needs to be done in terms of supporting and encouraging women to governance positions.

The questions the literatures raises for me are:

- Has mentoring contributed to the success of the few New Zealand women in governance?
- What are the links between mentoring and governance specifically?
- Can fears of cross-gender mentoring be overcome and would this benefit New Zealand women?

Research design

In this exploratory research, I spoke to women who held governance positions and explored whether mentoring increased their self-efficacy and skill set for directorships and/or directly led to their interest in being on boards. I wanted to hear their personal stories and how they perceive the impact of mentoring. This was best done through one on one interviews.

Currently, there is little research on how New Zealand women found their path to governance. There is international research about the benefits of mentoring, and research about mentoring in particular fields such as medicine or academia. There is research about different types of mentoring such as informal or formal mentoring, and cross-gender mentoring. What is missing is research about if mentoring can benefit women towards governance roles.

I interviewed eleven women from a range of ethnicities who had already been appointed to at least two private sector governance roles. The interviews were about half an hour in length. By using interviews to hear people's personal opinions in their own words, this was a qualitative (data collected through words) and participative analysis. It assessed a small sample of individuals and involved looking at their unique, subjective personal opinions.

Methodology

I took an interpretive phenomenological approach, using a small sample to produce qualitative data that was concerned with generating theories. "The research philosophy of 'phenomenology' is centred on gaining an understanding of another person's experience as they live it, as opposed to forming a conclusion which may have been derived from incomplete information" (Rodani, 2015).

Location was important, because the New Zealand context is a key part of this research. I used interviewing - "asking questions and listening to individuals in order to obtain information or opinions" (O'Leary, 2004) - as the method of gathering information.

Patterns emerged that could be analysed from the interviews. I typed transcripts of the interviews then coded them. "These verbatim accounts are generally captured via semi-structured interviews ... analysis then proceeds" (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2008). In analysis, "interpretative work can be judged to 'draw out' or 'disclose' the meaning of the experience" (Larkin, et al, 2008). "As the name suggests, these interviews are neither fully fixed nor fully free, and are perhaps best seen as

flexible” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 164). I allowed for a conversational flow of interview to follow threads that emerged.

As O’Leary (2004, p. 164) says, “interviewers generally start with some defined questioning plan, but pursue a more conversational style of interview that may see questions answered in an order more natural to the flow of conversation. They may also start with a few defined questions but be ready to pursue any interesting tangents that may develop.” In the conversations, I sought to answer the “where”, “when”, “why” and “how” of the impact of mentoring in their career journey to governance roles.

Questions included:

- Have you had mentors in your career?
- Were your mentors male, female, what age, what stage of career, were they of the same profession (etc. - questions to understand the context of each mentoring relationship described).
- Was your mentoring formal or informal?
- If your mentoring was formal, how would you describe the match and the depth of the relationship? Did the relationship continue after the formal period ended?
- If your mentoring was informal, how did the mentoring relationship come about? Describe the relationship - what makes you consider it mentoring?
- When did you become interested in governance? How? Why?
- How did mentoring help to aid or clarify your professional goals?
- What did you learn from your mentor/s about:
 - Impression management
 - Networking
 - Satisfaction with work/life balance
 - Achieving salary growth
 - Improved time management and productivity
 - Improved opportunity and success in advancement
- What else did you learn from your mentor?
- Did your mentor/s share what they wished they had known earlier in their career?
- Did your mentoring relationship provide a safe space for you to talk about anxieties, concerns or struggles?
- Did you feel your mentor/s was invested in your development and progression?
- Have you been a mentor to others?
 - If yes, describe that mentoring relationship - was it formal or informal, how did it start?
 - Describe your level of support for your mentee?

Data analysis

The thematic analysis included “analysis of words, concepts, literary devices, and/or non-verbal cues. Includes content, discourse, narrative, and conversation analysis; semiotics; hermeneutics; and grounded theory techniques” (O’Leary, 2004, p.11). I looked for patterns in the responses particularly relating to issues raised in the literature such as cross-gender mentoring, the benefits of mentoring, formal and informal mentoring.

Research limitations

All research is bound by some limitations. Here, limitations included that relationships could not be formed on a particularly deep level with interview subjects. Because interviews were conducted with people I did not always have an existing relationship with, the connection between us was weak.

Some interviews were conducted by phone so we did not have the advantage of building a rapport through eye contact. The research was also limited by the number of interviews. I was only able to secure people who were willing, able and had availability in the relatively tight timeframe that I could conduct interviews.

Ethical issues

Potential conflicts of interest were my own biases. I am personally interested in governance in future, and am currently in my first governance role. It is something I have a clear goal for. I believe that studying for my MBA has contributed to my sense of self-efficacy in viewing myself as capable of and suitable for governance roles in future. I work with a mentor, in a relationship that was formal and has continued in an informal context. This mentoring did not explicitly encourage me towards governance but did support my goals by working clearly towards planning for my professional future.

Everyone interviewed had “the intellectual capacity and psychological maturity necessary to understand the nature of the research and their involvement in the study” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 53). All interview subjects were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time before the interview was completed.

I have ensured participants confidentiality. It is not necessary to the research that participants are identified. I felt that they would answer more freely and frankly if they knew their responses wouldn't be published with their name. It was important to me that responses were genuine and revealed personal truths that were not otherwise known, so anonymity encouraged openness. As the researcher, I aimed to act ethically and avoid coming to conclusions during the interview process or before all data was coded.

Outcome

The outcome of this research was basic. The sample size was small but I hope for transferability, and for applicability to other New Zealand women. "Rather than make 'claims' about populations, transferability highlights that lessons learned are likely to be applicable in alternative settings or across populations" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 63). While this is a small sample, it will contribute to developing ideas related to mentoring and governance in the New Zealand context. Because I spoke to New Zealand women on boards in this country and took into account some Māori, Asian and Pacific perspectives by interviewing women of those ethnicities, this research is uniquely relevant to the New Zealand context.

Findings

Mentoring / coaching / sponsorship: what's in a name?

The research defines mentoring as a form of role modelling, where one party influences their protege. I was interested to hear how the women interviewed defined mentoring. It can mean different things to different people - a one-off coffee meeting to discuss a particular issue might be mentoring, whereas for others it means a support-based relationship focused on career development over several years. All eleven women interviewed had mentors throughout their career but in different ways including formal, informal, peer mentoring, coaching and sponsorship.

Although research said people avoid cross-gender mentoring out of fear of real or perceived sexual involvement, it was present for all the women interviewed. Each had a mix of men and women mentors. A large portion of the research available to analyse was American, where people are hyper-conscious of liability issues. Influential early mentors for most of the women interviewed were male managers who took an active role in supporting them above and beyond the typical manager-staff relationship through mentoring. "I've had informal mentors come about because of managerial or other relationships in the workplace," one interviewee said. "[My first mentor] could see potential in me but also could see that I needed to work on a couple of things in my leadership, when I was working with him in my first managerial role." Another woman made a similar comment, saying, "My first mentor was one of my first managers. He saw potential in me that I didn't yet see in myself."

Another described mentoring as a long term relationship with a person in which both parties got something from the interactions. The person who is doing the mentoring has to feel some affinity with the person they are assisting, she said. "They have to have their best interests at heart and enjoy the one on one interaction. The person being mentored has to be open to receiving feedback and acting on it because no mentor will keep doing it if what they say is ignored."

Some had difficulty defining mentoring in relation to coaching or sponsorship. "I've always struggled to differentiate mentoring from coaching. I'm quite clear that sponsorship is what men want - men don't want to be mentored or coached, they want to be sponsored. Sponsorship is when someone in a position of power is your advocate for getting on to a board or suggesting you for CEO." The term sponsorship was also used by others. One woman described a manager as sponsoring her for leadership roles: "When I was in senior management I was sponsored by my boss, he was a huge advocate in me becoming CEO." A 2017 study found significant benefits for women's career progression when managers sponsor them (Lean In & McKinsey & Company,

2017, p. 24): “Women are more likely to be promoted when managers advocate for them, give them stretch assignments, and advise them on how to advance.” Other media articles have highlighted the need for women to have sponsors, saying mentors are “necessary but not sufficient” (Berhane, 2015). According to an article in Forbes, women need someone to place their resume on a higher desk, not someone to tell them how to improve their resume. “While mentors help you skill up, sponsors help you move up” (Zimmerman, 2017). New Zealand research has shown aspirant women directors know they have to “come to notice” of influential people before attaining directorships (Pajo, et al, 1997).

Coaching is often viewed as more focused, deliberate planning to achieve goals. One interviewee said a mentor would encourage her to talk something through, question and prod her in a friendly way to arrive at the solution herself. “A coach is more like, ‘get your shit together. This hasn’t happened, how can we get it going again? Let’s write a plan’. The conversation lends itself to planning, whereas a mentor is more about problem solving.”

Another interviewee referred to a coach as a ‘life coach’, who helped her with personal issues. “In my first Chief Executive role, I had someone who was more like a life coach. He was helping me understand and deal with challenges on the more personal side of leadership.”

In coaching, one interviewee learned “how to ask great questions” which she believed made her a better senior executive and a better director. “The quality of questions and being comfortable with questions where the answer is unknown or ambiguous requires thought and consideration, and deep levels of self analysis or reflection. Sometimes it requires a higher level of geopolitical scanning. Those really insightful questions both about myself or the environment, and the value of self reflection, were things I learned from my coaching experience. Those were two incredibly important lessons.”

Rather than sponsor or coach, ‘champion’ was the term another interviewee used. She defined a champion as “a sponsor on speed”, someone who has great trust in the protege to meet challenges. “A sponsor might say ‘here’s an interesting opportunity’ and try putting the person in it. A champion puts you in situations that are almost far beyond your capacity and it’s a sink or swim scenario. Mentoring is a lot gentler, to round out your skills before you leap into opportunities.”

Some view mentoring as deeply personal relationships. One interviewee, who described herself as “a little guarded”, said support was the “number one” biggest thing a mentoring relationship needed to have. “It’s someone who, when something goes wrong, is still beside you. When you don’t know what you’re doing, you can ring them up and say ‘what the hell am I going to do about that’.” She

valued mentors who were a supportive sounding board, who would support her in decision making, even when things were going badly. “Friendship is part of that. I don’t really have this sort of relationship with someone unless they’re a friend. I’ve got to have a personal relationship with them and consider them someone who would visit me in hospital. For me, a mentoring relationship goes to that deep level where there is transparency and vulnerability - you don’t always get with typical mentor-mentee relationships.”

Others see mentoring as more transactional, without the need for a deep personal connection to the person they seek advice from. This was only the case with one of the women interviewed. “I’ve had one on one mentoring but it has been on a more informal basis, I haven’t had one person continually who I have used for years or anyone I’ve had for very long. My relationships are more transactional, I just kind of know that, so that’s possibly why I’ve had mentors for shorter periods of time.”

Only one of the women interviewed claimed to have not had mentors, yet with further questioning she described an early manager who gave her extensive support which could be termed mentoring. She also participated in peer mentoring. “I have been part of women’s groups at senior level and we’ve often talked about things. It’s about collegiality, colleagues getting together talking about issues, having a bit of a laugh and sharing insights into experiences.”

Others also described peer mentoring as rewarding. One Māori woman interviewed belonged to an informal group of young Māori women on boards or in chair roles. They reach out to each other when they have challenges to give support or advice by email or phone. “Once a year we’ll have a girls weekend. We bring issues, have an agenda, spend a day doing group work then just spending time with each other. Those kind of peer mentoring relationships need to have very good solid relationships because there’s stuff you wouldn’t share with just anyone. It’s quite vulnerable.” Several interviewees mentioned the vulnerability involved in mentoring, in line with research describing mentoring as a ‘safe space’.

Another described a circle of girlfriends, women acquaintances, who she would contact if she needed insight or feedback. “Especially when I have decisions I need to make, they provide a safe space to talk about concerns and anxieties.” One interviewee had formalised peer mentoring through a leadership course she took part in early in her career. “We were in peer groups of five. For a year, we helped each other out in terms of peer mentoring with questioning and supporting each other through our journeys as we grew in to young leaders.”

Another interviewee had a one on one peer mentoring relationship with a trusted woman at a similar level of seniority and public profile. They both learned from each other. “One of my mentors is a very wise and capable woman who has over time become a very important part of my support network. She’s more a peer. We both provide each other advice, support and opportunities.”

All these relationships, whether they’re defined as mentoring or coaching, sponsorship or peer mentoring, share mentoring characteristics: they give personalised work-focused support to enable career progression and development.

Formal mentoring and informal mentoring

The literature defines formal mentoring as a mentoring programme run by an organisation.

Typically, mentors and mentees are matched up and the mentoring lasts for a defined period of time. Informal mentoring is a relationship that develops naturally between a senior and more junior person, focused on the younger person's development. Informal mentoring can continue for years. Sometimes if participants form a strong connection, formal mentoring can transition to an ongoing informal mentoring relationship.

Formal mentoring

Several of the women interviewed had been through formal mentoring programmes for governance, most commonly and notably the Institute of Directors' Mentoring for Diversity 12 month programme. Aspirant directors can apply to be matched with chairmen and senior directors from NZX and large company boards as mentors for a 12 month period (Mentoring for Diversity, n.d., para. 2). Learnings included how to strengthen one's resume and understand one's value proposition for governance. An interviewee actively sought out this programme in order to learn from women who are on the boards of NZX-listed to companies, to decide if that was what she wanted from her own career. "I would go with prepared key questions, they would answer and probe."

Even within a structured mentoring programme, the experience is different for each set of participants because of the inherently personal nature of mentoring. Each mentor and mentee brings different experiences, styles and expectations to the exchange. One interviewee did formal mentoring with two "quite different" women mentors. "One was like, 'let me tell you how I've done it and what you need to do' and the other one was much more like, 'these are my choices, here's what it did for me, but you need to make your own choices'. One was mentoring, the other one was just downloading her views and experiences. I learned a lot from both of them but one was more thoughtful, I felt she was listening to me more."

Another interviewee described her experience of formal mentoring as more "probing, providing critique, providing resources or ideas that I may not have had access to or that were from a very different view point. These people were not cheerleaders from a personal perspective, they were there purely to impart wisdom which you may not be able to find yourself or they were from a network you might have difficulty accessing."

Formal mentoring was seen by one interviewee as valuable for focusing on a particular set of skills or becoming a "technically astute and capable" governor. "Those formal mentors, who were very

senior in the governance game, offered me strategic career development advice. They said, 'if I was in your position I would structure my governance career like this, then it will be a 30 year career instead of 5 years'. They provided that strategic thinking."

Another interviewee found formal mentoring useful for specific work challenges. It was also reassuring to learn mentors had overcome similar problems. "There's nothing new under the sun - you're not the first person to have gone through a particular exercise. There is value in sharing experience because often others have an insight that could help you." The advice and supportive guidance from mentors helped "fast-track" her own development. Another interviewee echoed this, saying that being a CEO could be isolating. "You don't have all of the answers all of the time, so you need to look to certain people. It helps to find someone who has been there, done that, performed at a very high level. They can give you advice and direction."

Informal mentoring

All the women interviewed had informal mentors, from many different sources. Sometimes they were managers in the workplace, or other women they approached for assistance with a particular problem.

In one case, informal mentors were friends of the woman's parents, who were overseas when she was starting out her career. They played a "sounding board" role with holistic, whole person support, and the relationship continued in a mentoring capacity longterm due to the personal connection. "They helped with some challenges even later in my career, in my 30s and 40s. Then, it was more about wisdom around our Pacific community. There was a real learning edge for me there around connecting, understanding and relating. This couple, the man in particular, had long been part Auckland's diverse Pacific community. He brought wise counsel on political stuff I experienced, and did so because of the family connection."

Another interviewee described an informal mentoring relationship with her boss, her Chief Executive when she was in a senior leadership role. He organised for her to attend a course at Harvard and provided her first board opportunity by acting as a sponsor in recommending her for a role on a board he held an influential position over. "He was very influential in terms of telling me what I needed to do to develop myself and critiquing opportunities for me and providing opportunities for me. He's still a very close friend now. He gave me additional responsibilities, anything he felt would develop and grow me. We have a special relationship that has probably turned into a father-daughter relationship. He identified in me that I had the talent to do certain things and wanted to develop that, to maximise my potential." While she maintained contact with him and regularly called him for guidance, his influence lessened as her own seniority grew. She

described how early in her career she would have “jumped off a bridge” if he’d told her to, but now she had enough confidence in her own decisions to disagree with his advice sometimes.

One interviewee described informal mentors as friends, colleagues and family (her governance experience included with her iwi). The value she got from these relationships was building confidence and providing feedback. “When I was trying to make hard decisions or coming up against certain challenges, I could ask them, because I know them and they are supportive of my career development. Because of your personal relationship it’s easier to have those conversations. They’re probably more confidence-building, encouraging conversations.”

Another described informal mentors as people she looked up to or respected. “I have gone to them for specific advice, but in a more informal basis along the lines of ‘I’m struggling with this, what are your thoughts on this situation, what would you do’. It’s more tactical, informal and intermittent.” She sought the guidance of a senior, well-known male in the same sector as her for three sessions when trying to make a tough decision at a “pivotal” point in her career. A different woman described a similar style of approaching informal mentors on a case-by-case, needs basis. When she was a Chief Executive, she would seek out support of people she saw as good at something she had a weakness in. “Early on, I really admired someone who was very good at chairing meetings. I wanted to learn how to do that. It was very practical. I said, ‘can I sit in’, he was really flattered by that, so I sat in on some of his meetings to observe. That was really good.”

Encouragement was referenced as important in informal mentoring relationships. An interviewee described informal mentors encouraging her to put herself “out there”, including for governance roles. “At the start of my governance career it was encouraging having someone else more senior who I respect saying ‘you could do this, you would be good at it’. With most of my early governance roles, that was really why I put my hand up, especially for the chair role.”

What women learn in mentoring

In both formal and informal mentoring, valuable personal and professional lessons were learned for growth.

Sometimes women learned “technical, practical skills” such as how to chair a meeting or deal with the media, as leadership roles inevitably involve public speaking. “The mentors and coaches I’ve worked with have all been very good at helping me with my impact in those environments - particularly as an introvert and getting comfortable with the performance elements of the job,” one interviewee said. Her mentors shared advice about what their coping mechanisms are, what approach they take, how they prepare, what works for them and challenges that come with public-facing parts of leadership jobs. “Inevitably you’re open to a higher level of criticism. Working with people who have been in high profile roles ... has been helpful.”

One interviewee who was a lawyer by background found skills imparted from her mentor on the commercial, financial side of business to be useful. Another described a mentor as uncovering “a little fire” in her that needed stoking, helping her to see how governance could be a form of leadership. “[My mentor] contributed to shaping my views of what exceptional leadership is by the way they coached and mentored me. Watching their ability to connect with others at all levels of an organisation was very empowering, enabling. Their leadership and mentoring of me shaped my leadership style.”

In terms of impression management, mentors helped to refine the “value proposition” of one interviewee, reflected herself back at her in a “mirror-like way” and explained how others saw her skill set. “Other people see things in you that you can’t see yourself. I thought I needed to leave behind the idea I was a scientist and public servant [for my governance career] but both my mentors said ‘you’re not afraid of complex technical subjects, you understand how government works’. Those were my strongest attributes. Now, every board I’m on finds me for one of those two reasons.”

Another interviewee had a mentor tell her directly to tone down her extroverted personality in business interactions. “He pointed out that my natural style is so full on, I needed to step back and be a bit calmer. I was very full on, hard charging. [Another mentor] had been in the public sector and helped me with [media] interviews in terms of the way I presented myself.”

One of the women interviewed had a mentor tell her explicitly to be kinder to people when disciplining them as a leader. “How he described it to me was, ‘it’s ok to kill them, you don’t have to

reverse over their corpse' - let things go after someone has been told off, basically. I've softened considerably. In fact a lot of people wouldn't recognise me, as a result of working with him. I was very strong, black and white. He helped me see shades of grey and work on my people side of leadership, which was about how I was presenting and being perceived."

Governance link: mentoring and board appointments

The women interviewed entered governance in various ways, but none of them were intentional. None had set out with a career goal of being on boards. Most were asked to join boards once they had built up skills and experience.

One was asked through her profession (law) to join the board of a community organisation. Another joined the board of YWCA when her boss recommended she do something for the community. “They said, ‘why don’t you chat with this woman’ who was at the time recruiting for a position on the YWCA board. I didn’t know what boards were or what governance was, or my left from right. I had no idea. So I joined the board and got interested in strategy and organisational design, then I guess that’s where my paid career in terms being a CEO reporting to a board came from - that kind of thinking and experience.” Another interviewee described a similar journey where an early mentor explained what governance was by telling her about director roles they held. “I firmly believe in the value of role models. If you don’t have role models or can’t see something in your atmosphere or environment you will never know to aspire to it because you just don’t know it is possible. My mentors were incredibly important in terms of showing me that governance existed.”

One interviewee did not have a strong interest in being a director on boards. “I only do governance where I’ve invested my own money and I chair some of those companies, or where I have a passionate commitment to the cause...overall I think governance is overrated in terms of impact. I only enjoy it if I can cause action to happen that I think improves the situation. I like being the instigator in my own life too much. I’m not interested unless I’m chair anyway.” She said boards ended up looking homogenous with the same few women appearing on multiple boards because once they were seen as safe, adding value and “not feisty, not challenging, not going to upset the apple cart” they would get another appointment. Another interviewee who was shoulder tapped for most of her other board appointments said she suspected she was appointed to one board because she is female, and it was a male dominated board wanting to improve its diversity. “But I’m alright with that - boys have been doing that forever, boys are always giving jobs to boys. I do have the relevant skills.”

Others found career satisfaction and values alignment in governance. “It wasn’t that I wanted to go in to governance,” said one interviewee, whose first board role was on the board of her kids’ school, “It was that I like working in environments of change, starting things out, making things happen... I don’t sit on a board unless I know I can add value to something or create change, that it connects to me in my heart and what I care about. After a year with two corporate directors [as

mentors] I realised I never want to be on the board of Ports of Auckland because I don't care about it." Another interviewee said that she liked contributing in governance in the iwi space, but aimed to be on an NZX-listed board within 5-10 years. "I think everyone who does board work has a bigger calling because you don't make a shitload of money. I see it as community service."

One interviewee who is now a professional director got on to boards by being selected for a charity role that was related to her job. "I was just in front of them at the time, they needed more female directors, they thought I was capable so they gave me the role. I've had a very high media profile and the business community largely know who I am, so I haven't had any trouble at all, I've just been approached a lot. It just sort of built." Another interviewee was approached to be on a board relevant to her career. "I didn't seek it out, I got a call from somebody saying you've been recommended for this board. It's in my nature to be interested in most things so I followed it through, ended up with the appointment."

Among the women interviewed, opinions differed about the role mentoring had to play in getting more women on boards.

"Personally, I don't think that mentoring is anything to do with getting on to boards. The women who are experienced enough to be on boards don't need mentoring, they need the first board door opened for them. They need to network and make it clear they're available," one interviewee said. "Women don't need to be mentored. There are plenty of qualified women. Saying they need mentoring is a way of saying they're not ready - like, we won't give women the vote because they wouldn't know how to use it." Another interviewee said there was no lack of suitable women who could be on boards, but unconscious bias in the recruitment process was a significant barrier.

Another interviewee said that mentoring was useful but not a silver bullet without the hard work and building the necessary skill set for governance. "Mentoring will give an opportunity to get on to a number of boards but not a senior or significant board if you're not up for it. And I have met a lot of would-be directors, women and men, who are not up for it, who would never in 100 years get on a board. That's the tension. A lot of people think because they're a woman and they've joined the Institute of Directors they will get on a board. Getting a mentor will fast track things, but it's not enough."

An interviewee said mentoring was useful for people wanting to get into governance, with the right mentor. "A lot of times it's about their networks. If you're looking for a mentor to get access to the right networks, to be seen, that's one way of doing it. It can also help you to get a reality check and understand what governance is."

Mentee turned mentor: interviewees on mentoring others

The women interviewed, who were all senior in their fields, reported that they were often approached by younger women who wanted to be mentored. While one interviewee did not mentor others in terms of committing her time to forming a relationship and offering support, she would frequently meet with people for one-off sessions where she was willing to impart guidance. “I’ve had a lot of coffees with a lot of people, if someone asked me to and there’s a personal connection. Frequently I’ve said no, if I just don’t know the person and there’s no personal connection. I get approached all the time, it’s quite soul destroying saying no.” Another interviewee only mentored people who demonstrated coachability, because some she had mentored in the past would listen to her advice but not execute it. “If you’re not prepared to take charge, responsibility and accountability to move forward...I’m just wasting my time.”

These extremely successful women, most of whom have often appeared in the media, were wary of what people wanted from them when they were approached to be a mentor. “Women aspiring to be on boards think that if you know of them or think they’re capable, then you’ll put them forward for something. They don’t need mentoring at all, they just want you to do something for them.” Another interviewee said that people who asked her to be a mentor often sought access to her network in the hopes of being recommended for board positions within that network. However, she said that approach was ineffective. “No one will risk their reputational credibility putting someone on a board who is not up for it. You have a lot of reputational capital as an established director and if you suggest someone who is not up to it, you lose a lot of credibility.”

Often women are told networking is important for career progression (Vongalis-Macrow, 2012; Rappaport, 2015; Hyder, 2017), but one interviewee described the challenge of networking with a purpose. A mentor taught her about being deliberate rather than social in networking. “Networking to get on to a board requires things as brutal as saying here’s my hit list of boards, here are people I know who know them and if I want a coffee meeting, here’s how I’m going to do that. I think many women find that somewhat distasteful, marketing yourself or putting yourself out there and being prepared to fail if it doesn’t work. That’s about managing your brand, which you have to do as a director.”

Jumping the gun? Readiness of aspirant directors

Many of the women interviewed raised how serious a responsibility governance is legally and in terms of workload. Others were skeptical of the motivations younger women had for wanting to be on boards and thought aspirant directors were naive. I was interested to hear what these senior women thought about the readiness and skill set of younger women who approached them for mentoring and/or who expressed an aspiration for governance. “I think a lot of women view governance as an escape route. Being a director is an important, big, interesting-sounding job. You get paid, can work part time, go to yoga and look after the kids or whatever and it’s actually nothing like that at all. A lot of women aspire to it...it’s a real trend,” one interviewee said. Another said that it had “become quite trendy, quite cool” to be on boards.

One interviewee described how the aspirant directors she met were impatient to get on to boards, particularly listed boards, without understanding the complexity of those particular operating environments or the skill set needed to do that successfully. “I think generally also there is a bit of a misunderstanding about the time commitment involved in governance. People seem to think that it’s only a once a month, part time kind of gig. The reality is, to do it well you’re doing a couple of hours preparation for every hour of board meeting at least, more in a listed environment or highly regulated environment. We’re starting to get some female aspirant directors - and males as well - who are interested in governance as a career for a portfolio career type approach. They see it as an opportunity to do something at a senior level for reasonable remuneration on a part time basis.”

Another interviewee said many of the women she mentored had a premature interest in governance. “I can’t really explain why because frankly, it is fraught with risk and responsibility. You don’t want to leap in to it.” She said aspirant directors needed to have built up experience so they could add to the strategy of the company with relevant experience and skills. “I get the impression [aspirant directors] want to make change in general, and believe sitting on the board of a company is a way for that to happen.” Another said that a mentee was particularly keen to get in to governance, but not quite ready personally. “I think she’s got the smarts to do it, just lacks a little bit more experience in the world. But she’ll get there.”

A divergence from this was one interviewee who said governance was very rarely the goal for women she mentored. “My experience is women are not usually interested in that. The reasons they’re not, a lot of women aren’t interested in governance because - as relayed to me and from what I understand - it’s a boys club and they’re nervous about being in that environment. It’s not that they’re not capable.”

Barriers and overcoming them

The fact that there are such low levels of women in governance suggests there are barriers in place preventing women from being appointed to these roles. A New Zealand survey of women directors conducted twenty years ago (Pajo, McGregor & Cleland, 1997) found 68.9 per cent of respondents thought we had so few women on boards because companies did not think women were qualified. “Female directors believe companies felt women were not qualified, were not interested in appointing more women to boards and had no real idea where to look for them”. More than half of respondents thought directors feared they could “bring a “women’s issues” agenda to the boardroom” (Pajo et al, 1997).

Today the biggest barrier is, according to one interviewee, that it is not a priority. “The mainly male chairmen don’t care enough. As country we don’t care enough. If we said we’re not going to invest in these companies, we’re going to call it out all the time, they’d do something about it. Most of these companies do have at least one woman on the board because of the pressure, but they’ve done their thing of one. [Equality] on boards hasn’t happened because there is insufficient will to make it happen.” Another interviewee said men did not want to give up their own positions on boards in order to make way for a newer, more diverse generation of directors to come through. “Men certainly don’t want to give up something for women or to make room at board table for women. Now there are no more excuses of, ‘oh, women aren’t qualified’. They are, they’re here, so now what are you going to do about it?”

McGregor (2014) pointed out that ‘soft’ strategies to improve numbers of women in boardrooms “such as rhetorical advocacy and voluntary disclosure of gender” have been ineffective. Just over half the women interviewed were supportive of quotas. “If your boards are full of - sorry - old white women, it’s not good. That’s not diversity.” One interviewee said she was supportive of quotas as a way to get very quick volume and numbers. “I dispute the concept of ‘but there’s not enough good women out there’ - that’s bullshit. There are amazing women out there. For various reasons and probably unconscious bias they are overlooked.” Another interviewee said that in her early days in business she would not have been supportive of quotas, but had changed her mind because she had seen no improvement over the years. “Absolutely I’m in favour of quotas now, because you can find women or any diversity group with the right skill sets if you look hard enough - you just have to look harder.”

A Māori interviewee who was supportive of quotas said boards need to genuinely want someone for their skills and experience, not because they will tick a diversity box. “Do I like the idea of being *the* Māori woman on a board? No. I don’t want to run the risk of being a box that’s ticked. It’s very

obvious when that's happening. It's dehumanising. It's actually just stupid, there's no other word for it. But it happens routinely...I always decline those opportunities."

Another interviewee who was supportive of quotas (but "not diversity for diversity's sake") said she questioned the numbers that say 17% of directors are women on NZX-listed boards. "How many of that 17% is the same woman going around and around? How many of that 17% is just Joan Withers and the five other people you can name? Good for them, but there certainly needs to be other people brought through."

One interviewee who was not supportive of quotas was "not as stressed about it as some people and the media might be" because in her experience, boards with fewer than 50% women were "beside themselves" to improve their gender balance. "It's not that boards are not wanting women or diversity or anything like that. In my experience it's the fact there aren't as many to choose from, because we as a gender just bail out of the workforce. At the first opportunity we get we're out. I'm making mass generalisations here, but that's my experience. The first opportunity you struggle, you're out. A lot of people say they never made it because of unconscious bias so they didn't get promotions...it's not the men holding them back or not giving them opportunities, it's a lack of resilience and confidence."

Another interviewee said that some women on boards don't encourage more women or help others - what Vachon (2014) refers to as the Queen Bee phenomenon. "Why? I don't know. They feel special and want to keep their specialness. Terrible, isn't it?"

Conclusion

In beginning this research, my questions were:

- Has mentoring contributed to the success of the few New Zealand women in governance?
- What are the links between mentoring and governance specifically?
- Can fears of cross-gender mentoring be overcome and would this benefit New Zealand women?

I found women who were naturally driven sought a range of mentors, the way an aspiring athlete may take the initiative to hire a coach and a masseuse and a personal trainer and a dietitian to assist with different areas of their development. These driven women are generally self-aware and deeply committed to personal and professional development.

All the women interviewed had some form of mentoring: personalised work-focused support that enabled career progression and development. This confirms previous research that mentoring is beneficial for career success.

While mentoring contributed to the success of the few New Zealand women in governance, there was not a clear link between mentoring and governance specifically.

The women interviewed were shoulder-tapped or recommended for their first director roles rather than deliberately seeking out those positions. Typically, governance opportunities came to them once they had built up experience and proven themselves at senior leadership.

Cross-gender mentoring was not an issue for the women interviewed, who had both male and female mentors.

The interviews raised for me the importance of the fact that New Zealand doesn't just lack ladies on boards: they are in the minority at all senior leadership levels. Initiatives and discussions about more women in governance should therefore be broadened to include the need for more women in senior leadership generally.

In order to have a diverse pool of skilled, capable people to be directors in future, the pipeline needs to be built up and supported at the mid-senior career level. Many of the women interviewed had a sponsor at the mid-senior career level, indicating sponsorship and access to networks was beneficial for reaching senior leadership.

The women interviewed were skeptical of the motivation and capability of the next generation of aspirant directors. Therefore, women aiming for governance should have a clear idea of what it involves and up-skill for director roles with appropriate training. They should work to reach senior leadership roles in business because that experience is useful for building governance capability and demonstrating one's skills.

Most of the women interviewed were supportive of quotas to get more women on boards. The barriers are complex. Most women interviewed believed those appointing directors were not committed to seeking out more women and other forms of diversity.

Existing directors and CEOs should conduct thorough searches for directors, with a focus on diversity including gender. As the people who make decisions about who is appointed to leadership and governance, they play a critically influential role in supporting upcoming diverse talent. It is the responsibility of those hiring for boards and senior leadership roles to be aware of their privilege and their power to create real change. Shareholders can influence here if they advocate for more diversity in the leadership and governance of companies they invest in.

Future research could investigate where the drive comes from for existing women directors to lead, what women learn in senior leadership roles that prepares them for governance and how to persuade existing directors to seek out and work alongside more diverse people.

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