

# Mentoring Matters

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Understanding difference is of paramount importance in facilitating effective mentoring relationships. Dr. Blake-Beard is currently on a Fulbright Grant to research the impact of cultural context on the dynamics mentoring relationships. For the past six months she has been talking with professional Indian women to explore its impact on their careers. In this interview, she shares what she is learning with us.



**Dr. Stacy Blake-Beard**

Associate Professor of Management, Simmons College School of Management; Faculty Affiliate, Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons College Visiting Research Scholar; Center for Leadership, Innovation and Change, Indian School of Business

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## Interview with Dr. Stacy Blake-Beard

**MM: You have done a tremendous amount of research on mentoring and gender in the US, what differences are you seeing with the women you interviewed in India?**

**SB-B:** I am seeing both similarities and differences. On one hand, the women with whom I have spoken have the same passionate belief that mentoring is an important developmental relationship. They speak about the significance of having help in their careers. I hear this same passion around the topic when I talk with women in the U.S. It is heartening to hear from almost all 40 women whom I have interviewed that mentoring is important and that this relationship is worth the attention it is beginning to receive here in India.

But I also hear so many differences that are based on cultural norms and expectations facing women in the workforce in India. Women talk about the importance of mentoring as a tool to help give them voice and confidence. One woman said to me, "We are socialized to be quiet...to be seen and not heard." I heard some iteration of these words over and over again. Yet at the same time, these women know that in order to advance in the workforce, they have to be both seen *and* heard. Many of them talked about mentoring as a tool to assist with gaining greater presence in organizations and with developing the confidence to raise their voices.

**MM: How do cultural expectations about Indian women's workforce participation influence mentoring relationships?**

**SB-B:** One expectation that they spoke about focused on the decision to stay in the workforce after getting married, and even more critically after having a child. They talked about immense pressure to stay at home once they have children, and the negative perceptions that they had to counter if they chose to stay in the workforce after having children. A second expectation is the acceptance of having close relationships with men who are not family members. Given that most of these women reported their mentoring relationships were predominantly with men, they were keenly aware of the need to manage these perceptions. They articulate a level of societal discomfort with women having close relationships with male colleagues. Both expectations have an impact on women's ability and ease in forming deep substantive relationships with male advocates. The decision about how long to be in the workforce and the boundaries that surround the formation and development of interpersonal interactions across gender could impact mentoring relationships.

**MM: What aspects of Indian culture support mentoring relationships?**

**SB-B:** When I asked women about aspects of Indian culture that support mentoring relationships, they were able to talk about several cultural norms that they believed would support mentoring. Respect for elders and a culture where advice is readily offered by everyone (sometimes whether you want it or not, they laughingly added) are two factors that support mentoring relationships.

**MM: What aspects do not?**

**SB-B:** When I asked about factors that might get in the way, women were able to rattle off several of those as well. The respect for elders could go both ways-as a possible challenge to mentoring relationships, it was noted that it is not expected that you will go against the wishes of elders. Even questioning elders is seen as disrespectful. The expectation that you will not challenge elders, or authority figures in general, could get in the way of developing substantive mentoring relationships. Another cultural challenge to mentoring is the high degree of attention to hierarchy in Indian society. The societal expectation that cross-gender relationships at work should be tightly constrained, means that behaviors necessary to maintain mentoring relationships (close contact, frequent communication, a measure of vulnerability and sharing) may place women outside of accepted norms.

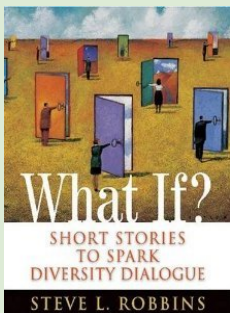
**What We Are Reading**



**[Mentoring as a Bridge to Understanding Cultural Difference](#)**

**by Dr. Stacy Blake-Beard**

*Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives (Anzaldua, 2002, p. 1)*



**[What If? Short Stories to Spark Diversity Dialogue.](#)**

**by Steven L. Robbins**

*Customer Review: Over twenty-five inspiring lively personal stories anthologized in "What If? Short Stories to Spark Diversity Dialogue" deftly illustrate concepts of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, using anecdotes and visions to put key learnings into action in a business structure. Each story is paired with questions, an activity and an assignment to reinforce ideas, making for a fine, light business reading title.*

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