

Network and Support: The benefits of mentorship

Linna Tam-Seto, Ph.D., O.T.Reg.(Ont.)
Research Associate
McMaster University

MST Symposium
September 16, 2021



Research Question



What can a gender-informed, culturally competent mentorship program aimed at supporting women in the Canadian Armed Forces look like?





Experiences with Mentoring

”Growing up as a mentee...”

“I’ve really enjoy it to be honest. I find it really rewarding. I was super fortunate to have a few women early on in my career that did that for me so I’m super keen to pass it on.”

“They were great leaders and good mentors. And some of them, I mean, mentored me right up until their retirement a couple years ago.. Yeah! So um, for me, mentorship is, you know, I was fortunate enough to have met those people at the very start of my career. So as a pay it forward uh, you know, act in some respects, but also as a responsibility.”

“The first time I’d ever personally interacted with a female [*high ranking officer*] in my life, I was kind of like holy shit if she can be a [*high ranking officer*], I can be [one too]. It was this mind-blowing moment. From that moment on that’s what piqued my interest in mentorship. I was around her all the time and got to see her interact with male officers and her other staff and it was just like it changed a lot for me. I was motivated and wanting to help.”

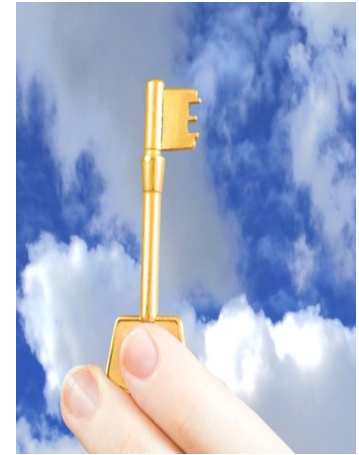
Navigating “the system” as a woman

Psychosocial Development

“I’ll give them my own personal experiences what worked what might not have worked and how things have changed too...So my challenges 25 years ago are not the same challenges that they would have today. I also show them the options that are there now for them...like Military Family Services. Twenty-five years ago, it didn’t exist...So it’s a combination of things. I might provide advice what worked or not worked for me”

Career Development

“I ask them, wanna get promoted? Here’s what you have to do to get promoted. The system is the system. I can’t change that system. I can tell them how the system works and the best way to go forward...So, I can help teach them the rules. What I’m doing is I’m teaching them the system. How best to use the system to do what they want to do with it. Not to exploit it but to make it work.”





Shared Experiences

“I would say the women come to me for different reasons...They know [that] I was a victim of sexual misconduct...sexual assault when I was in military college. They heard, reached out to me on that aspect because they too had encountered a similar situation and wanted guidance and help on that aspect and moving forward in their careers. They thought that I would be a good mentor to them on how to continue on in your career despite some initial challenges like that.”

Necessary for Success

“When we joined, women, we didn't have anyone to be there for us. During my first posting...we were all *[rank type]* there was one female *[rank type]* and there was no one else higher than that. There was no one to to guide us on things like starting families and stuff like that because it hadn't been done. I was actually the first woman in the entire *[unit]* to have a woman officer to have a baby. It was still relatively new that women had been in *[unit]*, so we had no one to reach out to. So, over the years as younger people came in behind me they would reach out to me about ‘How are you balancing with kids?’, ‘How are you doing deployments with kids?’. I was kind of mentoring without calling it mentoring all along.”

Creating a Support Structure



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY NC ND

“Oh, I think [the benefits are] huge in the CAF. I think we all just want to see somebody who looks like us or who's in a similar circumstance or who has had a similar circumstances as us just to validate that we have a place and our thoughts and feelings are important too. Where I think sometimes women can really feel dismissed or when they're the only woman sitting at the table it can be very intimidating.”

Moving Forward with a Support Structure

“I’ve reached out to [my mentees] to tell them about more about the sexual misconduct lawsuit. I emailed saying, ‘If you’re like me, you probably got the email, thought it was good that something was being done but you weren’t planning on joining in yourself. You probably deleted it without even clicking on the link’. I said ‘Here’s some of the information that I’d like you to know because it helped me make my decision and I actually changed my mind and I did fill out the form’...Just a few details that I emailed out to everyone. The response has been pretty positive...I also said, ‘you know, you might not realize that you were victim of sexual harassment because back in the day it was so common and prevalent that that’s just the way people talked and whatever else, but really it is.’”



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

Amplifying Voices

“I think the generation that's coming behind me is not okay with some of the behaviors or some of the negativity in the military culture that was accepted when I first joined. So, I think it's a really exciting time that people who are joining are [coming into] a place where people have more of a voice whether in terms of initiatives such as Op Honour when we're talking about sexual misconduct or hateful conduct. I think we're finally saying these thing out loud and we're giving people a voice to call out unacceptable behavior. I feel when I first joined there were things that happened that crossed all of those spectrums and you just didn't say anything.”



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

A Role for Mentorship

1. Creates a support structure and network of support
2. Safe arena to share and validate experiences
3. Amplifies voices
4. Increases visibility of women



Thank you

Transcription Team: Bibi Imre-Millei, Melika, Anna, Maddy, Elana, Claire, and Kaiya

CPO 1 Robert (Sean) Wilcox

Canadian Forces Training Development Centre,
Canadian Armed Forces

Women and men in the CAF

Thank you for your service!





Linna Tam-Seto, PhD, OTReg(Ont)

Research Associate

Trauma and Recovery Lab

tamsetol@mcmaster.ca

Twitter: [@linnaseto](https://twitter.com/linnaseto)