



## Mentoring and Mentorship that Works for Tradeswomen

There are huge demands on the time of working women. Tradeswomen add the demands of overtime, apprenticeship classes, continuing education for journeymen, union meetings on top of this. Issues of schedule rigidity mean that it is hard for tradeswomen to get away to speak to students during the workday – your team & employer counts on each worker to be there, to accomplish the work – next to impossible to leave during the work day, because places too big a burden on the team.

On the other hand, mentoring is a hugely important way to pass on the unwritten rules of construction culture, success strategies, subtleties of survival, cultural understanding, places where more experienced women can pass on survival skills and tips on how to thrive. A reality check – what is normal from a woman's perspective. Mentoring is a way tradeswomen can learn how to navigate co-worker relationships – how to be friends without inviting romantic impulses, how to ask for help without being considered a wimp or without inviting excessive chivalry that ultimately gets you labeled a bad worker. How to shine as a quality worker, bring your skills and initiative to the attention of the boss, where to get tools, work clothes and safety gear that fits a woman's body. Who's hiring? Mentoring is a valuable peer to peer skills & knowledge transfer mechanism.

Traditionally, family & friends are where construction workers learn these things. Its not really a part of the apprenticeship curriculum. Peer or near-peer co-workers pass on this knowledge to each other. With few women on the job, and sometimes complex relationships between men and women, mentoring or even information sharing does not always happen between women and their male co-workers. The younger generation seems to be able to take male/female friendships for granted, for older workers or for men and women who grew up in more gender-separated lifestyles, still based largely on more traditional models, it seems to be harder.

Women need more experienced women to learn from. With women being 3-6% of trades workforce, 0-15% of each trade, a tradeswoman may not work directly with another woman, there may not be another woman in your trade on the job, the other women on the job might not fit your personality style or be friendly for any number of reasons. Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc. has had to find another venue to bring women together for mentoring exchange besides the job site.

At one point OTI tried to establish a formal mentorship with trained mentors receiving 5 days of training spread over 5 weekday evenings. We carefully matched experienced tradeswomen with a new apprentice. It did not work, while we had significant numbers of women who signed up to be mentors and receive mentoring, they did not show up for all of the trainings and we had a very hard time getting the mentors and their mentee pairs in the same place at the same time – one or the other would not be able to show for one reason or another, and then the mentor or mentee would feel like their showing up was a waste of time. They were too busy to attend training, schedule demands meant that it was very hard to get pairs together. So we tried a very different approach. We designed a number of elements designed to foster the exchange of information, peer to peer or mentor to mentee exchange, experienced worker to new worker exchange.

These elements had the following things in common: who ever showed up would be engaged, either in learning if a new worker, or in passing on knowledge if an experienced worker (sometimes the same worker would be in each role). It was casual, no formal presentation or preparation was required of the experienced worker. They required an organization to take a coordinating role and provide an experienced staff facilitator who could

facilitate connections, dialogue, They required a system of outreach and marketing. They required an organization with extensive connections with tradeswomen to invite.

Here are the four elements we came up with and how they worked to foster mentoring:

- 1) Speed mentoring: bringing experienced tradeswomen to speak to a class of pre-apprenticeship students, in the week before their graduation, when they have had more time to think about their future careers,
- 2) Membership committee: a committee of tradeswomen and some allies, led by staff, who create activities for tradeswomen, to bring tradeswomen together.
- 3) Membership/mentoring gatherings we call “social hour” and other social activities.
- 4) Tradeswomen Leadership Institute – a 1 ½ day event of workshops led by tradeswomen.

All facilitated by staff, but engaging tradeswomen as leaders and deciders. –what is relevant & important to them.

Speed mentoring is after work hours. It brings 6-10 tradeswomen to speak to our class of 20-26 pre-apprenticeship students. OTI creates stations by trade, staffed by an apprentice and a journeywomen from each trade (if only one shows up, that trade is still covered, if both show up their experiences are different and the same enough for a great learning experience). Having the stations means that tradeswomen do not fear speaking to a large group, they can focus on the 4-6 women at their table. It inspires pre-apprentices who might not yet have decided which trades direction they want to go in. They all get a deeper understanding of construction culture and specific trades. At the last part, we do move to a panel format where the tradeswomen can bounce off of each other.

Membership committee 6-8 tradeswomen various trades and experience levels. Come together to plan activities that bring tradeswomen together for peer mentoring, social support and social interaction. Example: tradeswomen trivia night, tool swap, assertiveness are some of the topics. Committee of tradeswomen = authentic, serves needs of tradeswomen, builds leadership, ownership, committee acts as greeters and outreaches to their network of tradeswomen. Hosts at events so that every tradeswomen attending is made welcome and matched with a mentor or mentee.

Mentorship gatherings/social hour/monthly activities: activities and social aspect attract experienced tradeswomen who might not come just for altruistic purpose of mentoring. Activities are interesting to new women, but they also come to learn from the experienced industry women gain from hearing stories and advice from established tradeswomen. Gathering 15-30 each month, creates a sense of norm, community, among tradeswomen, combat isolation feel when only woman on the job or in apprenticeship program. OTI staff connects those that need mentoring with those that can offer it. Mentors are happy to provide advice, but need activities that interest them in order to come. OTI provides food, organizing, invitations.

The Tradeswomen Leadership Institute is an annual event produced by Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc. to facilitate leadership development, advocacy skills, and unity among all women (union, open shop, self-employed and otherwise) working in the building, construction, mechanical and utility trades. Participants of the Tradeswomen Leadership Institute learn how to be more effective leaders in their workplaces, unions, companies and communities while building relationships with and gaining vital support from a community of women who share similar experiences working in the trades. The 2015 Tradeswomen Leadership Institute will take place September 25 & 26.



# Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc.

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## **Here is the message we send out to tradeswomen to invite them to be “speed mentors”:**

Hi

I am wondering if you would be able to participate in our speed mentoring session on the evening of **Tuesday February 24th? We would need you between 5:30-7:30.** If you have never done Speed Mentoring with us before it’s a fun night for everyone. We have chosen **6 trades** to be represented that night. We are attempting to get at least 2 spokes people from each trade to sit at a table together. We will divide our class of **15** students into 6 small groups of about **2-3** students per group. Each group will sit at a table and learn about each trade for about 15 minutes. Every 15 minutes each group will rotate tables until they have listened to all 6 trades.

As a tradeswoman, we will want you to describe what your work day is like, what the application process was like for you, and anything else the students want to know about your trade. We will give you some starter questions to make it easier. We will save the final 30 minutes for a panel discussion where you will be able to give advice to the students as a whole group of tradeswomen.

**If you have any special tools that are specific to your trade it would be great to bring those as well so they can get a feel for the tools you use.**

We will order pizza and soda for everyone so you can have a bite to eat.

Please let me know if you can attend as soon as possible so I can keep looking if you are not available.

On the day of the event I can be reached on the Pathways cell phone which is 503-753-9180. Otherwise please contact me at my extension which is listed below.

Thank you so much!!

## **Here are typical questions we use to get the dialog going:**

### **Speed Mentoring Questions**

1. What is your trade and your position? What does your day look like?
2. What’s your least favorite thing about your job?
3. What’s your most favorite thing about your job?

Additional questions:

1. What advice do you wish someone would have given you when you started out?
2. How is it like to be a woman in your trade?
3. What advice do you have about dealing with communication/other issues on the jobsite?