

Women, Entrepreneurship, and Mentors By Janet F. Williams



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GIA students, jewelry apprentices and professionals learn their craft with an eye toward the future, and some dream of running their own businesses. Women of all ages engage in entrepreneurship, and the jewelry industry—whether wholesale, retail, design, manufacture or support services—can be a rewarding career choice.

Women start businesses for a variety of reasons. They may have a strong desire to lead, be attracted to lucrative financial possibilities, or wish to continue a cherished family line of work. Owning a business is one way a woman can create a position in which she is in control. The prospect for unlimited opportunities provides flexibility, creative advancement, empowerment, and satisfaction derived from enjoying the fruits of her labors.

Making decisions for her company allows for the introduction of personally-created products or curating designer collections she wants brought to market. That part sounds exciting and glamorous, and it is! Besides the artistic expression a maker brings to her work, as an owner she will also be responsible for the nuts and bolts of day-to-day operations: the website, employees, location, legalities, accounting, and customer service, along with other aspects she may find less appealing. Similarly, a manufacturer or supplier with a head for logistics may struggle when it comes time to be more creative.

Treading unfamiliar territory can be daunting. Studies show fear is a major

inhibitor for women deciding upon the entrepreneurial path. These dilemmas can be resolved and shouldn't deter the up-and-coming businesswoman. She is not alone.

Whether in the classroom or at work, a woman is wise to make friendships and connections in her field. Family members, coworkers, managers, and other business owners have experience and knowledge she needs, and they need to know her goals. Not everyone has the resources to hire a business coach and team of experts. Outside of paying someone to do what she cannot or prefers not to do, getting that extra experience and knowledge can be achieved through further training, diligent work habits, and being an attentive observer. Another way is to secure a mentor.

It's not unusual for a successful seasoned professional to want to give back, and being a mentor is a great way to help a less-experienced individual move up in the world. A mentor is someone who takes you under her wing and shows you what you need to do to accomplish your goals. A mentor acts as a guidance counselor giving hands-on help and walking you through the steps to your own success.

How can you find a mentor? Speak up! Let your network know you're interested in learning what it takes to operate a successful business. You can approach a particular family member, your boss, or outside businessperson you feel would be agreeable, someone interested in your career who would take on the mentor role. This is a give-and-take relationship. Therefore, it would be considerate to know ahead of time how you might contribute in order to receive this type of help. If you aren't sure what you need to do or what you have to offer, ask what needs to happen on your end for them to agree to this arrangement. It might be continued hard work, taking on extra responsibilities, moving up to management, or creating a business plan.

Ideally, your mentor will be in a business similar to the one you would like to start and would be able to help you in several needed areas. Fortunately, general business skills can be obtained

through many sources. Consider people in your immediate circle and work outward. Establish contact, state your objective and make your request. If that person is unavailable, ask for a recommendation. Be sure to follow up and send thank-you notes to anyone who made an effort on your behalf.

Not everyone has the needed connections or can find a suitable match. Never fear! There are outside services committed to your success. Here in San Diego we have Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) located around the county. They offer free classes in marketing, import/export, writing a business plan, customer service, and other topics relevant to your business development. SCORE is an organization comprised of talented, often retired businesspeople who are happy to share their expertise—also at no cost. Another great resource is the Small Business Administration (SBA).

While running a business comes naturally for a lucky few, it is a life-long process of hard work, learning and change. Take advantage of the resources available to you and learn from the mistakes of others. Your dreams of a successful business can be furthered in ways you might not have imagined. All you have to do is ask. And that goes for you gentlemen, too.

Janet F. Williams is a writer, editor, and sales trainer. She authored the award-winning book "You Don't Ask, You Don't Get."

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