



*Editor's Note: I recently read LTC Ray Kimball's book, [The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring](#), and while the book in its entirety is a worthy read for self development, I thought LTC Kimball's section on cross-gender mentorship was of critical importance to our Profession. With the SECDEF's recent announcement, there will probably be a few combat arms officers who struggle with the idea of mentoring females. There will also be young women in the Armor and Infantry communities, who find themselves in male dominated branches without older female mentors to lean on. I hope this post helps to shed some light on this topic.*

By Ray Kimball

[SECDEF's decision to open all military career fields to women](#) is a momentous one that will set in motion all manner of policy actions at multiple levels. In addition to the formal mechanisms for integration, we need to think seriously about the informal ones. [Nick Palmisciano has already amply covered the question of standards enforcement](#); I want to come at this issue from a different direction and talk about the importance of [mentoring](#) for women newly entering these career fields.

We know that mentoring is [a vital component of socialization for women entering new career fields](#). We also know that Army officers [strongly prefer informal mentoring mechanisms](#), where mentor and protégé choose one another with a minimum of outside interference, to formal ones. What we don't know is the best way to pursue that informal cross-gender mentoring, or even if it should differ from how mentoring currently functions in those career fields. What I want to suggest in the following paragraphs is drawn from my research with Army officers and professional mentoring; as such, it should be considered a first step towards meeting this challenge instead of the definitive answer.

First, I think it's important to note that even senior folks in these career fields will probably

have little to no experience with cross-gender mentoring as either a protégé or a mentor. Our choices of mentors are overwhelmingly driven by the people we have regular contact with. As one of my research participants put it:

“JOSH\*: Being a combat arms guy, I’ve only very rarely come into [professional] contact with females. As a matter of fact, I was thinking about it: I’ve been in the Army now for 11 years and only 6 months out of that time was I working with someone of the opposite sex. That plays a huge part.”

Cross-gender mentoring in the newly opened career fields will be *terra incognita* for protégés and mentors alike. There will be hesitation; there will be missteps; there will be outright crashes and burns. But it still has to be done.

The other great barrier to cross-gender mentoring in these fields will be the fear of misperception. Mentoring, by definition, is a close relationship bordering on intimacy and it can be extremely difficult for outsiders to differentiate between the two. This isn’t a problem unique to the Armed Services; [plenty of studies](#) have demonstrated how precarious the line between professional and romantic relationships can be. But it is magnified by the close quarters and constant contact that typifies the service environment. Again, I’ll let two of my research participants lay it out:

“JOAN: [When mentoring across genders], you have to be careful: you have to be cognizant, you have to accept facts. ‘Nothing was going on’ is not going to fly. It just isn’t. I enjoy mentoring, I like having protégés, and I enjoy being a protégé. But I am not about to put my career on the line for that.”

“ARLO: Sadly, there’s always a concern of perception...we were taught things like ‘Never be alone with a female for the sake of appearances.’ That’s to avoid being in a situation you can’t explain. It’s always been a concern, because in the Army, we can be stupid at times about things like this.”

So how do we deal with these difficult realities? Below are some starting suggestions for mentors and protégés alike:

Cross-gender mentors should:

- Remember that the foundation of a successful mentoring relationship is **trust**. As the senior member of the relationship, you are responsible for setting the conditions to keep the relationship professional.

- Take steps to minimize the perception of a potential romantic relationship while being candid with your protégé about why you're taking those steps. Those steps may include meeting in public; keeping the door open while talking; and avoiding pet names or nicknames.
- Realize that your protégé has almost none of the context of your career field that you take for granted. You may feel like you're breaking things down Barney-style, but understand that your protégé may not have gotten any of it from their commissioning source.

Cross-gender protégés should:

- Plan to take the first step and initiate outreach to a potential mentor. They may not be cognizant of your need for a mentor; find the person you want to be professionally and engage.
- Understand that this may be the first time your mentor has had a mentoring relationship with someone of the opposite gender. They will make mistakes; they will say stupid things. Work with it.

Make a difference. Mentor.

\*All names in caps are pseudonyms, used in accordance with the human subjects protections of my original research.

*Ray Kimball is an Army officer and the author of [The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring](#), available [in print or Kindle](#). Hit him with questions/comments at [@ArmyMentoring](#) on Twitter. His views are his own, not those of the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or the Tal Shiar.*

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