

DIVERSITY

# Mentor People Who Aren't Like You

by [Richard Farnell](#)

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Leaders tend to coach and mentor their “own,” and here’s the human impulse that drives it: Even those who believe that diversity improves creativity, problem solving, and decision making naturally invest in and advocate for the development of the subordinates who are most like them. They see less experienced versions of themselves in these folks, and so they’re inclined to believe in their potential – they want to nurture it. Of course, this also means that growth and advancement

opportunities go disproportionately to those who belong to the demographic or social group that's already in power. That's what I've often observed in my leadership experience, and research confirms that this happens in organizations.

Telling our protégés that diversity matters won't change a thing. We must demonstrate our commitment to it by deliberately mentoring people who aren't like us. Otherwise, we do what's comfortable, and we risk saying with our actions that we care about cultivating the talents of a homogeneous few. That's the example we end up setting, the culture we end up building.

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We may also overlook specific developmental needs on our teams, despite our best intentions, because it can be tough for people from minority demographic and social groups to speak up and voice their concerns. As an Army officer who has trained many diverse groups of recruits, soldiers, and staffers, I've always cared deeply about helping all kinds of people reach their potential. But it took me years to understand this basic dynamic: Those who look less like me might find it hard to share their concerns with me or ask for help. They might feel uncomfortable raising their hand if they aren't sure I will identify with them. And it's on me, as the leader, to help close that gap.

I'm reminded of one captain I recently mentored. This was a smart, high-performing officer who nonetheless felt invisible to the leaders in his organization. He thought he was being overlooked for opportunities because of his religion. Though I didn't agree with his perception of how others viewed him, I understood why he felt that way – and talking with him made me see some of the complexities of social acceptance and integration. He had approached me for mentoring because I treated people from diverse backgrounds with respect and kindness, but he was still a bit skeptical

about how much I could help him. Through many relaxed, exploratory conversations, I helped him examine his own thinking and behavior, assess the organization's culture, and identify which jobs he could volunteer for to build the credibility and confidence he needed to succeed in that culture.

At first, he held fast to his negative assumptions about how leaders saw him. But after volunteering for some tough assignments – and receiving superior performance evaluations – he confronted his own unconscious biases, and his confidence grew. He realized he wasn't as invisible as he had initially assumed. Leaders in senior roles took notice of his initiative and desire to develop, and now that he was communicating more freely and comfortably with them, they better understood what he had to offer and what his career ambitions were. They, in turn, coached him further on management and leadership skills. This captain went on to receive multiple prestigious assignments and continued to excel not just because of his expanded skill set, but also because several leaders in his organization were investing in him and advocating for him. They might have missed out on his talents and contributions if they hadn't made a focused effort to mentor a promising high potential who didn't fit the dominant social profile. And I would have missed out on an enriching relationship – one that deepened my understanding of the challenges in diverse groups.

That brings me to my last point: Mentoring across social and demographic lines is good for the mentor, as well. It has made me a more empathic, emotionally intelligent leader. I've become better at spotting potential outside the usual mold – and better at understanding the obstacles people face when they aren't part of the dominant group. And that makes it a little easier for the next person to get leaders' attention and support.

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Richard Farnell is an Army officer who has experienced several combat deployments, has led and trained multiple basic-training companies, and is currently a planner for a combat organization. He is also a doctoral candidate in education at Northeastern University.

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

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**Yves Gouvrit** 2 years ago

Interesting, I've been in Management for 6 years at a Big 4 Consulting company in Mexico. Now, this article made me realize that in Mexico and the rest of Latin America countries the dominant group is the white minority and that this might even be harder for majority !

I am French and have lived in France and in the US where the logic of the article applies, but here it is completely reverse, and maybe this explains why Global Corporates Values just don't apply in this countries because things realities are completely different. And yes it is a reality that discrimination exists but the other way around, you will never see a darker skin person at a higher hierarchy level in the private sector than a white person.

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