

## 2009 Workplace and Equal Opportunity Survey of Active-Duty Members: Formation of Informal Mentorship Comment Analysis

### Overview of Study

Open-ended questions were included in the *2009 Workplace and Equal Opportunity Survey of Active-Duty Members (2009 WEOA)*, which was conducted February 2 through April 30, 2009. Completed surveys were received from 26,167 eligible respondents (21,963 Department of Defense [DoD] and 4,204 Coast Guard).<sup>1</sup> The overall weighted response rate for eligible members, corrected for nonresponse and nonlocation, was 32% (31% for DoD and 55% for Coast Guard).

The *2009 WEOA* included questions that asked active duty members to identify whether they had had a formal or informal mentor and, if they identified an effective *informal* mentor, to describe how this relationship started.

Specifically, participants of the survey were asked:

- “*In your opinion, have you had a formal and/or informal mentor who advised you on your military career?*” (Q25)
  - *Yes, I have had at least one mentor*
  - *No, I have not had a mentor*
- “*Was your most effective mentor assigned/provided to you as part of a formal mentorship program?*” (Q28)
  - *Yes*
  - *No*

Once a participant identified that they had a mentor (Yes to Q25) and that this mentor was *not* assigned to them as part of a formal mentorship program (*No* to Q28), the participants were presented with an open-ended question asking them to describe how the relationship with their most effective informal mentor started. These questions provided participants an opportunity to reflect on the experiences with their informal mentor and detail how this relationship developed.

Overall, 71% of Service members indicated that they had either a formal or informal mentor who advised them on their military career. Of those who have had a mentor, most indicated that having a formal (76%) or informal (98%) mentor was helpful in advancing their military career.

<sup>1</sup> The target population for the *2009 Workplace and Equal Opportunity Survey of Active-Duty Members* consisted of active duty members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard, excluding National Guard and Reserve members, who (1) have at least six months of service at the time the questionnaire is first fielded and (2) are below flag rank. To be considered an eligible member, members of the sample had to answer a minimum of 50% of the survey items, including at least one valid response on the critical questions Q45 and Q48, and indicate that they were on active duty when the poll was first fielded.

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While the Services sponsor several formal mentorship programs, the majority of Service members with mentoring experiences<sup>2</sup> indicated that their most effective mentorship was informal (80%).

One of the topics of interest in the 2009 WEOA was the methods by which members acquired informal mentors. Open ended questions were included to gain some insight into how these informal mentorships were initiated. Service members provided 12,326 comments in response to the open-ended questions.

Comments were analyzed qualitatively to identify the major themes and ideas conveyed across the responses. No attempt was made to quantify the number of comments made in reference to a specific theme. Findings may be viewed as a general perspective on informal mentorship, but are not a statistical report on members' mentorship experiences. The order of presentation does not imply that any one theme is more important than any other. For each theme, supporting comments from the comment fields are included. The supporting comments do not include every comment made on a particular theme; rather they exemplify the themes in the words of the active duty military members. Although the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of active duty military members, they do provide insight into specific issues and ideas for future research.

### Summary of Major Themes

Overall, the 2009 WEOA comments on informal mentoring included a number of recurrent themes regarding how effective informal mentorships developed. The insights from the comment analysis are grouped into seven major themes: hierarchical mentorships, peer to peer mentorships, professional networking mentorships, social networking mentorships, pre-existing relationships, gender/racial/ethnic minority affiliation, and comparisons to formal mentorship programs.

*Hierarchical Mentorships.* Hierarchical mentorships are those that form between Service members where the mentor is of a higher rank. Members most commonly reported professional interactions with more senior members of the military, which were conducive to the development of a mentoring relationship. Members who indicated having senior mentors reported that these relationships were initiated in one of four ways: 1) the protégé's supervisor evolved over time into a mentor 2) the protégé was approached by a senior member who wished to offer professional and personal development support or to help the protégé deal with some disciplinary action or a difficult adjustment period or 3) the protégé approached a senior member that the protégé admired or respected.

*Peer to Peer Mentorships.* Many members reported developing effective, informal mentorships with peers and coworkers of equal rank within the workplace. Most commonly, these relationships were more collaborative than hierarchical mentorships and involved an exchange of advice and information on military-related issues.

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<sup>2</sup> Seventy-one percent of members reported having at least one mentor advise them on their military career.

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*Professional Networking Mentorships.* Some members indicated that they acquired their informal mentors through external, work related functions, which were designed to encourage networking between Service members. These professional networking opportunities, often conferences and trainings, were seen as conducive to the development of informal mentorships between senior and non-senior military personnel.

*Social Networking Mentorships.* Members often reported developing mentorships with individuals through social interactions outside of the military setting. These include organized social groups (e.g., religious services), as well as intermittent social activities (e.g., playing sports), attending sporting events, concerts, and having a drink at a local bar.

*Pre-Existing Relationships.* Some members reported informal mentorships evolving from previous personal relationships with family members and childhood or family friends once both individuals were in the military.

*Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Minority Affiliation.* Initiating informal mentorships with mentors or protégés who share one's demographic characteristics was one of the more prominent themes in the comments. Women often reported either actively seeking female mentors or having female senior members seek to provide mentorship for more junior women. Similarly, participants of minority races and ethnicities often reported forming informal mentorships with senior members of similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Members noted that the opportunity to connect to those with similar backgrounds and experiences helps to develop effective informal mentorships.

*Comparisons to Formal Mentorship Programs.* Many members compared initiating informal mentorships with the assignment process that precedes formal mentorships. These individuals spoke strongly in favor of informal mentorships, suggesting that informal mentorships were superior because they allowed members to choose their mentors based on cultural, ethnic, professional and personal preferences. Members feared that formal mentor assignments would result in pairing protégés with mentors who did not adequately represent the protégés' ideals or beliefs. In addition, members spoke of assigned mentors often having little interest in providing *effective* mentorship, and rather made a show of providing mentorship out of obligation to the military or to fulfill staff requirements.

### The Themes in Comments

#### ***Hierarchical Mentorships***

##### ***Mentoring by Supervisors***

The most common method of initiating informal mentorships were based on professional interactions within the military. Members noted that the supervisor/supervisee relationships can naturally evolve into mentoring relationships since they already involve one-on-one interactions where the more senior member provides guidance and feedback.

- *“I have been fortunate so far in my career (from starting out as a junior enlisted) to have had supervisors who cared about my professional & personal development. Everything from my career to family, finances, etc. In addition, these individuals showed me how to have the*

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*professional courage to step up and take advantage of opportunities to excel; that it is ok to fail, learn from my mistakes, and press on. I have never really had a mentor as part of a formal program.”*

– **Air Force E5-E9 White Male**

- *“My most effective mentor was my immediate supervisor. Over the course of working with each other in a small staff environment, the supervisor/subordinate relationship became a mentor/mentee relationship as well.”*

– **Coast Guard O1-O3 White Female**

- *“We worked together and he was my boss. I had to come to him a lot for various situations and asked his opinion on how to handle certain delicate matters. It has brought us closer and now we have a very strong relationship where I feel completely comfortable talking to him about anything: personal or professional.”*

– **Army E5-E9 Hispanic Female**

Other members reported developing effective informal mentorships with senior military members within the workplace, though not always a direct supervisor. Most notably, members commented on relationships with raters, supervisor’s supervisors, or senior members in the same workplace who were not in their direct chain of command.

- *“My mentor works in another section of my shop. She would stop by and check on me while I was being trained when I first arrived to the unit. She would always be willing to listen to my questions and provide advice on whatever task I was assigned to do. All I had to do was ask.”*

– **Army O1-O3 Black Female**

- *“It was more by chance than a deliberate attempt on my part to look for one. A senior officer who was in a staff position in my battalion inadvertently slipped into the role of a mentor as a result of good work relations I had with him. Furthermore, his genuine desire to listen to my development needs led to him suggesting key solutions and advice that greatly boosted my performance and productivity.”*

– **Army O1-O3 Asian Male**

- *“He was my rater when I arrived at this duty location. He took me under his wing and showed me how to be a standout leader amongst my peers and motivated me to excel.”*

– **Air Force E1-E4 White Female**

### **Mentorships Initiated by the Mentor**

In many cases, mentors sought out protégés.

- *“He was my senior enlisted and took the time to ask me about my career intentions. Then on a daily basis he would ask me questions about what my next job assignment would entail, which intrigued me to learn even more about my new rate. He also asked me about my personal life and took a walk with me and really listened to me. Then he gave me options*

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*and talked to me like a friend. (very knowledgeable)”*

–Navy E5-E9 White Male

- *“The person took time out of his day to talk to me. It was not an assigned mentor--he just makes time to talk to junior officers because he knows it is important to provide them with professional development.”*  
– Army O1-O3 2 or More Races Female
- *“My mentor was stationed with me. My mentor just took ahold of me and has helped guide me throughout my career. I think mentors should seek out those whom they would like to help. Maybe we should make it mandatory for senior enlisted and above to find someone to mentor. It is difficult to assign someone to mentor because mentoring typically goes way past just doing work. A mentor is someone you would feel comfortable hanging out with in your liberty time.”*  
– Coast Guard E5-E9 Black Male

Some members developed mentoring relationships with senior military members after a disciplinary action or a particularly difficult adjustment period. These difficult circumstances seemed to provide military members a unique opportunity to acquire guidance and support under the watch of mentors who noticed their difficulties and made themselves available as resources.

- *“I was a young and troubled junior enlisted under little or no supervision from my supervisor. I was always in trouble and hanging with the wrong crowd. Then one day a senior enlisted new to flight talked to me and saw some potential and guided me to become a very technically sound and effective member of the USAF SFS.”*  
– Air Force E5-E9 Hispanic Male
- *“My mentor saw how much I was struggling, trying to manage a family and a career. He knew that without help I would surely fail and hurt not only myself but my family as well. So he decided to be there for me every way that he could, and it helped me stay on my feet.”*  
– Coast Guard E1-E4 Hispanic Male
- *“He was my immediate supervisor. I had just come out of a very tough and taxing situation at my previous unit and based on a disciplinary issue related to lack of supervision was feeling very down on myself. My supervisor/mentor made me feel like I was needed and helped me to see the big picture; his mentorship helped me to recover from my disciplinary issues and to feel like a needed and respected member of the military again.”*  
– Air Force E5-E9 White Male

### ***Mentorships Initiated by the Protégé***

Alternatively, some participants developed these relationships through their own initiative. Typically, comments reflected a desire to learn from someone who had followed a similar career path or who was available for guidance.

- *“I tracked down an individual who was successful in the type of career that I wanted to emulate. This individual took care of the guys below him and was always considered an*

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*expert within his field. He was non-confrontational and he helped to get the job done across a spectrum of activities. It was my responsibility to watch and learn. When I was assigned a mentor by the command, this individual was less concerned with my progress and only checked up on me as a responsibility.”*

– **Coast Guard 04-06 White Male**

- *“I started by just walking into his office and asking advice on a subject. My mentor had an open door policy. After we sat down and had a 1-on-1 counseling session, he took it upon himself to take me under his wing and help guide my career.”*  
– **Air Force E5-E9 Black Female**
- *“He was a squad leader in my platoon; we hit it off and seemed to have similar interests and goals. After getting to know him better I found out he had achieved the same things I wanted to in the military and seemed to be aligned to reach his goals. At first I would just ask general questions about issues within the platoon, but it evolved to him helping me steer my career.”*  
– **Army E1-E4 Hispanic Male**

### **Peer to Peer Mentorships**

While the vast majority of members indicated developing informal mentorships with someone more senior than them, there were some Service members who described having effective peer based informal mentorships.

- *“My mentor is basically a peer that has vast experience with senior officers and strategic issues and is willing to give me advice.”*  
– **Air Force O4-O6 Hispanic Male**
- *“We were co-workers working for the same common goal. With such a variety of experiences, we were able to learn from each other and help others as well. It's still an on-going learning process each day, and we support each other in everything through teamwork.”*  
– **Air Force E5-E9 NHPI, Female**
- *“The person was a fellow co-worker who took it upon themselves to teach me about ways to advance and succeed in the Air Force, as well as some of the workings of Air Force systems, assignments, promotions, etc.”*  
– **Air Force E1-E4 2 or More Races Male**
- *“My most effective mentoring relationship has largely been peer mentoring. It has also mostly been amongst Black officers. We share experiences, offer guidance, and primarily provide encouragement/support/empathy.”*  
– **Air Force O4-O6 Black Female**

### ***Professional Networking Mentorships***

Some members reported developing effective mentorships as a result of professional opportunities which were designed to encourage networking and/or professional interactions. Most commonly, these were conferences, trainings, and other work-related situations outside of their normal work environments.

- *“We interacted spontaneously at an organized conference. It was by chance that we started communicating. On the other hand, the conference had been organized to facilitate this sort of interpersonal communication.”*  
– **Army O4-O6 Asian Male**
- *“We are on a Coast Guard-sponsored athletic team together, and we are in the same officer Community.”*  
– **Coast Guard O1-O3 Asian Female**

### ***Social Networking Mentorships***

Members reported developing effective mentorships from organized social interactions, such as attending regular religious services. These structured and ongoing interactions were reported as being conducive to developing effective mentorships.

- *“We met at a church that we both attended at the time. When I learned that he was senior to me and that we are heading in the same direction, I sought his guidance and wanted to tap into his experiences and learn from him.”*  
– **Marine Corps O1-O3 Black Male**
- *“My mentor relationship was started by attending a spiritual gathering.”*  
– **Marine Corp W1-W5 Black Male**
- *“I met her at church while we were stationed together overseas. We developed a great sisterhood, and we were fortunate enough to get stationed together here.”*  
– **Air Force E5-E9 White Female**

Members also reported developing effective informal mentorships through more intermittent social interactions such as sporting events, concerts, and visits to local bars and other social events.

- *“At the squadron bar, where most fighter pilots do their best learning.”*  
– **Air Force O1-O3 2 or More Races Male**
- *“We used to play chess together, and I used to talk to him about problems that I was having within my division.”*  
– **Navy E5-E9 Black Male**
- *“I met him at a local history event. He is a retired senior enlisted who lives near me and since we have similar interests we hang out quite a lot and he decided to take me under his wing and help me mature and grow as a junior enlisted and help me prepare to become a*

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*senior enlisted.”*

– **Air Force E1-E4 2 or More Races Male**

- *“We attended a sporting event together!”*  
– **Navy E5-E9 Black Male**

### **Pre-Existing Relationships**

Many members commented on informal relationships that developed with relatives who had served, or were actively serving, in the military.

- *“I married him. My husband is a retired NCCS. He has been my most effective mentor who has been my career counselor, mentor, and friend for nearly 30 years.”*  
– **Navy E5-E9 White Female**
- *“My mentor is my brother-in-law. He has been in the Coast Guard for about 10 years. I have always gone to him with challenges or questions about the Coast Guard.”*  
– **Coast Guard E5-E9 White Female**
- *“My aunt was active duty military for six years, so when I have any questions I ask her, and she provides me with direction.”*  
– **Army E1-E4 Hispanic Female**
- *“My father retired out of the Air Force after 20 years and encouraged/mentored me to be where I am today.”*  
– **Air Force E1-E4 Asian Male**

Other members reported mentorships developing from previous relationships with individuals who were also serving, or had served, in the military. Most commonly, relationships developed from childhood, college, or family friends.

- *“Was best friends with his son in high school, and when I decided to join he just took me under his wing.”*  
– **Army O1-O3 White Male**
- *“He was one of my fraternity brothers and took me under his wing.”*  
– **Army O4-O6 Black Male**

### **Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Minority Affiliations**

Comments from the survey indicated some themes unique to minority populations, specifically women and racial/ethnic minorities. Common between them was the desire to initiate a relationship with a mentor who shared their experiences and beliefs.

- *“She was my senior enlisted, and I knew she would listen and help me through the problems I was having, and if it were a male they wouldn’t understand, especially if they were single, without children.”* – **Marine Corps E5-E9 Asian Female**



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- *“In the CG there are not a lot of African American officers, especially in the senior ranks senior officer and above. So you know all of them, and you tend to latch on to the one who knows your field of expertise and shows an interest in you and your career.”*  
– **Coast Guard O4-O6 Black Male**
- *“Sought her out because she was a female senior enlisted, experienced as a senior drill sergeant and in deployments. I knew I would learn a lot from her, and I did.”*  
– **Army E5-E9 2 or More Races Female**
- *“Found someone that I respected, had the same convictions I did, and sought them out. It was important for me to have more than 1 mentor and one that looked like me.”*  
– **Navy O4-O6 Black Female**

Also prevalent were comments indicating senior military members sought out junior members of similar demographic groups based on a desire to share their own experiences and difficulties.

- *“Most senior females take junior females under their wing”*  
– **Coast Guard E1-E4 White Female**
- *“A female senior enlisted in my work environment took all the female Marines aside and spoke to us about different issues.”*  
– **Marine Corps E1-E4 2 or More Races Female**
- *“We met at a conference for minority officers in the organization while in training for my commission. He gave me his card and told me to contact him and let him know how training was going, and where I was stationed at the end of training. I contacted him with this information, and received guidance for starting my career. Since then he has contacted me and my supervisors to check on my progress. I have contacted him with questions, concerns, and updates on how I was doing.”*  
– **Coast Guard O1-O3 Black Female**

There were also a small number of female and minority members who developed informal mentorships as the result of harassment and/or discrimination experiences.

- *“During residency, I was being harassed by one of the staff and went to my mentor for advice on how to deal with it. Over the next 4 years, she continued to look out for me. I would occasionally ask for advice, and she would share some of her career experiences and coach and encourage me.”*  
– **Army O4-O6 White Female**
- *“She sought me out when I was in trouble...she saw very unfair work practices and decided to advise me on how to get out of the situation.”*  
– **Air Force O4-O6 Black Female**
- *“I was assaulted on board, during my first patrol, and one of the officers took me under his wing and offered unending support and reassurance.”*  
– **Coast Guard E1-E4 White Female**

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**Comparisons to Formal Mentorship Programs**

A large number of individuals provided a comparison of formal and informal mentorships that they had experienced. The most common theme within these comparisons was the lack of effective mentoring when someone is assigned to be a mentor rather than allowing the mentor and mentee to establish the relationship on their own based on a common career path and leadership qualities.

- *“The Mentorship Program may have been formally introduced in the last couple of years, but it has been an on-going event throughout the Marine Corps' history. I personally do not have a formal mentor, and I would say that the majority of other Marines are the same way and choose their own mentor based off of what type of person they are and what they would like to be in the Corps. This can either be bad or good, depending on the quality of Marines in the work environment. That is why it is imperative for the senior enlisted and Officers to weed out the 10% and to provide our Marines with the best possible Marines to choose their mentor from. Assigning a particular mentor to a Marine when he/she may not look up to that person has done nothing for the Marine. I have had several mentors throughout the years, and most of them if not all of them have had no idea that I looked up to them and considered them my mentor. I believe this holds true for most of, if not all, of the Marine Corps.”*  
– **Marine Corp E5-E9 White Male**
- *“My most effective mentor was a Marine leader of my choosing. I still remember his name, and although he has retired from the Marine Corps, I continue to email and contact him on a monthly basis to ask questions and seek guidance. I do not agree with the formal 'mentorship' program, only because if leaders are doing their job effectively and are engaged with their juniors, then they will be selected as mentors because they are respected and admired.”*  
– **Marine Corps E5-E9 White Male**
- *“Informal mentoring through my senior enlisted was always the most effective. Formal mentoring with Navy generated paperwork and always came across insincere and more like receiving an evaluation debrief.”*  
– **Navy E5-E9 2 or More Races Male**
- *“He was a senior supervisor stationed overseas with me. We never used to call it mentorship. You just had a senior person you connected with closely and looked to them for advice. Formal mentorship gets bastardized. Senior people are looking to fill that 'billet' to help them promote. This, in turn, drives them to grab golden boys and not the struggling sailor that could really use a hand.”*  
– **Navy E5-E9 White Male**

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