

# The Importance of Role Modeling in Mentoring Women: Lessons from Pat Summitt Legacy

**Authors' contribution:**

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

Manuela Picariello<sup>A-D</sup>, Steven N. Waller<sup>C,D</sup>

*University of Tennessee*

**ABSTRACT**

The role of mentoring for women in sports industry has gathered attention among researchers in the past years (Bower, 2009; Bower, & Hums 2009, 2014; Weaver, & Chelladurai, 1999, 2002). Since few women are in leadership positions (Acosta, & Carpenter, 2014), cross-gender mentoring relationships are more likely to happen (Hopkins et al., 2008). However, according to Kram (1985), cross-gender mentoring relationships are more complex in terms of individual development and quality of the developmental relationship. In particular, role modeling function is limited (Kram, 1985). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the functions of the same gender mentoring relationships looking at coach Pat Summitt, the winningest coach in NCAA Division I basketball history and a woman in leadership position (Becker & Wrisberg, 2008). Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the huge impact of Pat Summitt on sport (Janssen, & Dale, 2002, De Marco, & Mccullick, 1997), a single case study design to analyze her relationships from the staff and players' perspectives was utilized as the method for data collection. This study collected data published on American news sites located using Internet search engines Google News (<http://www.google.com>) for 7 days. The dataset included content published through national and regional online news media, radio, television and entertainment websites and blogs. Texts were qualitatively reviewed with a content analysis and coded (Patton, 2002). This study identified career and psychosocial functions that were important in developing an effective mentoring relationships. In particular, the psychosocial functions of "role modeling" was identified as the most important for the relationship. In fact a female mentor as a role model can be perceived as a woman that has successfully overcome discriminatory barriers to career advancement.

**KEYWORDS**

mentoring, women, role model, summitt

**Introduction**

Despite numbers showing that women now have greater opportunities to participate in sport at worldwide level (Acosta, & Carpenter, 2014; Smith, & Wrynn, 2013), there is still much work to be done in terms of leadership positions within the industry. The leadership representation of women in sports governance structure is certainly not better at the international level (Geeraert, Alm, & Groll, 2014; Henry, & Robinson, 2010; Pfister, & Radtke, 2009; Smith, & Wrynn, 2013). The role of mentoring in sports industry as a tool to facilitate career advancement for women has gathered attention among researchers in the past years (Bower,

2009; Bower, & Hums, 2009, 2014; Weaver, & Chelladurai, 1999, 2002). However, many barriers, such as availability, proximity, networking, stereotyping, sexual connotation, tokenism, still prevent mentoring relationships to blossom in the sport industry (Weaver, & Chelladurai, 1999). Women, in particular, face more challenges in establishing a mentoring relationship in this industry (Weaver, & Chelladurai, 2002). According to Eagly & Carly (2007), if we can understand “the various barriers... and how some women find their way around them, we can work more efficiently to improve the situation” (p. 3). Several studies among different industries suggested mentoring as a professional development opportunity to support women in their careers (Bower, 2012; Bower, & Hums, 2009; Henry, & Robinson, 2010; Hoover, 2006; Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008; McDonald, & Westphal, 2013; Noe, 1988; Schira, 2006; Smith, & Wrynn, 2013; Tolar, 2012; Waller, Wozencroft, Trendafilova, & Hobart, 2015).

### **Purpose of the study**

Women leadership can be developed through effective mentoring relationships. Since few women are in leadership positions (Acosta, & Carpenter, 2014), cross-gender mentoring relationships are more likely to happen (Hopkins et al., 2008). However, according to Kram (1985), cross-gender mentoring relationships are more complex in terms of individual development and quality of the developmental relationship. In particular, research suggested that in those types of relationships the role modeling function is limited (Kram, 1985). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the functions of the same gender mentoring relationships looking at coach Pat Summitt, the winningest coach in NCAA Division I basketball history (Becker, & Wrisberg, 2008), from her players and staff’s perspectives.

### **Theoretical framework**

The concept of mentoring relations is not a new phenomenon and it can be traced back to the Greek mythology, however mentoring relations within the organization had gained attention from researchers and practitioners only in the last 30 years (Scandura, & Pellegrini, 2007). The majority of the early theoretical research on mentoring in the workplace was focused on defining the functions and roles of mentors, and shedding light on the phases of the mentoring relationship. One of the earliest attempts to develop a conceptual model for mentoring was undertaken by researcher Kathy Kram in 1983. In her study, 18 developmental relationships between younger and older managers in a large northeastern public utility in the United States were analyzed through in depth interviews. In the theory originated from her empirical work, Kram (1983) identified two key categories on which mentors help protégés: career development and psychological support.

### **Primary functions of mentoring**

Career mentoring functions may include sponsorship, exposure-and-visibility, coaching, protection and challenging assignments (Kram, 1983). These functions are usually related to aspects of the relationship that can help the protégé “to learn the ropes” (Kram, 1985, p. 22) of the organization and give him or her proper tools for career advancement. Kram (1985) highlights that the type of career functions provided to the protégé depends also on the mentor’s position and influence in the organization. Sponsorship is defined as one of the most frequent career function observed in the mentoring relationship and usually involves promoting the protégé as the best candidate when opportunities for advancement arise in the organization. This function is really important because helps individuals to build a reputation, to be recognized for their competence and performance, which in turn may help them to be taken into account to climb the organizational ladder (Kram, 1985). According to Kram (1985) this function benefits both mentor and protégé: the recipient obtains a promotion and the mentor increases his or her credibility by sponsoring someone who advance and performs well. Exposure-and-visibility is obtained when the mentor decides to give responsibility to the protégé to demonstrate his or her competence and performance. In particular, this function helps the protégé to be ‘visible’ to key figures in the organization and to ‘expose’ him or her to future opportunities (Kram, 1985, p. 27).

Coaching involves training the protégé in adopting “specific strategies for accomplishing work objectives, for achieving recognition, and for achieving career aspirations” (p. 28). This function is important in all career stages because the information and advice gained is essential to career advancement (Kram, 1985). Part of the career functions in mentoring also includes protection. This function is important when visibility is not in the best interest of the protégé, especially in controversial situations to reduce unnecessary risks that can threaten his or her reputation. Moreover, it is important to use it in a balanced way. Kram (1985) affirms that it is more difficult to achieve the appropriate balance use of the function in cross-gender mentoring relationships. Challenging assignments is the last function that pertains the career development area in Kram’s (1985) mentor role theory. It consists of assigning challenging work to the protégé along with technical training and ongoing feedback. The aim is to enable him or her to develop a sense of competency and accomplishment. This function is critical in helping the protégé to be prepared to perform well on difficult task and be equipped with high skills. While other functions explained above are inherent opening avenues for advancement, the last one is more focused on preparing the protégé for greater responsibility and authority (Kram, 1985).

Kram’s (1985) mentor role theory identified also psychosocial mentoring functions (see Table 1). The psychosocial support from the mentor may include role modeling, acceptance-and-confirmation, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1983). These functions are usually related to aspects of the relationship that “enhance an individual’s sense of competence, identity and effectiveness” and affect the protégé on a more personal level (Kram, 1985, p. 32). Role modeling is defined as one of the most frequent psychosocial function observed in the mentoring relationship and usually involves an identification process that is both conscious and unconscious: the mentor may be unaware of being a desirable example that he or she is setting and the protégé may be unaware of the power of the identification process. The conscious part of the modeling process happens around business task when the protégé learns different approaches, attitudes and values from his or her mentor. However, there are cases in which the identification process may be more complex due to gender and racial differences. Learning through observation takes place when the protégé respects and admire the mentor (Kram, 1985). Acceptance-and-confirmation gives both mentor and protégé a sense of support and encouragement. Moreover, this function enables a tolerance for differences and allows self-differentiation in the relationship. The protégé feels free to explore “who he wants to become in the organizational world” without spending “more energy trying to please and win acceptance” from the mentor (Kram, 1985, p. 35). Personal concerns in the mentoring relationship are addressed with counseling. This function provides a forum in which the protégé talks openly about concerns and fears that are detracting him or her to be productive in the workplace. Cousenlig can be beneficial in the relationship at any time in the career. The last function among psychosocial mentoring functions is friendship. When the social interaction between mentor and protégé is perceived as enjoyable both in work and outside work settings, then friendship takes in. Indeed, both individuals are pleased in sharing personal experiences.

Mentoring relations that can provide both career and psychosocial functions are more likely to be supportive and effective. Those aspects of the mentoring relationship are not completely separated and any interaction can combine different elements. In fact, the emphasis placed on fulfilling each of these functions may vary by mentoring relationship. Several factors influence the types and extent of the functions provided in a relationship. Kram stated: “individuals’ important needs will affect what functions are sought out and offered”, “the interpersonal skills...influence how the relationship gets started, how it unfolds over time, and the range of possible functions”, and lastly, “the organizational context shapes the range of functions...the extent to which individuals are encouraged to participate in mentoring activities” (Kram, 1985, p. 40).

### **Mentoring and women in sport**

The role of mentoring in sports industry as a tool to facilitate career advancement for women has gathered attention among researchers in the past years (Bower, 2009; Bower, & Hums 2009, 2014; Weaver, & Chelladurai, 1999, 2002). However, many barriers, such as availability, proximity, networking, stereotyping, sexual connotation, tokenism, still prevent mentoring relationships to blossom in the sport industry (Weaver,

& Chelladurai, 1999). Women, in particular, face more challenges in establishing a mentoring relationship in this industry (Weaver, & Chelladurai, 2002). An effective mentoring relationship includes a mentor that is competent, hard working and act as role model, but also an individual that has a personal and professional interest to develop the protégé's potential and in that sense must be supportive (Bower, 2009; Bower, & Hums, 2014). On the other hand, the protégé is portrayed as a high performer that wants to be mentored. Bower (2009) reported that the opportunities to meet people and show their potential, be coached and be assigned challenging tasks, are what make the difference in an effective mentoring relationship in term of career advancement. Equally important for female protégés were the psychosocial functions, the idea of a nurturing behavior of the mentor through friendship, acceptance and role modeling (Bower, 2009; Bower, & Hums, 2009). Bower (2009) also suggested that informal mentoring guarantees more benefits for female protégés than formal mentoring. The outcome of a mentoring relationship is principally seen as providing women an opportunity to develop professionally, but the lack of female leaders and time commitment are barriers that prevent women from getting more mentoring opportunities (Bower, 2009). For this reason, according to Bower & Hums (2013, p.12), "the more female leaders in the field, the more opportunities exist to create a support system that enhances mentoring relationships and networks that can lead to success".

### **Pat Summitt**

Pat Summitt, former women's basketball coach at the University of Tennessee, is the winningest coach in NCAA Division I basketball history and she represents an exemplar of coaching success (Becker, & Wrisberg, 2008). Since very few women are in leadership positions in the sport industry (Acosta, & Carpenter, 2014) and even fewer are unanimously recognized as influent leaders like Pat Summitt (Janssen, & Dale, 2002; De Marco, & Mccullick, 1997), we decided to design a single case study to analyze her relationships from the staff and players' perspectives.

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were developed:

1. What career functions were most often identified as important?
2. What psychosocial functions were most often identified as important?

### **Significance of the study**

The possible benefits of this study included to contribute to the literature in three ways. First, the protégés' perspectives will provide information on the importance of the mentoring relationship in the career development of women. Second, these informations will provide additional ways to mentor women and the role played by specific functions in the same gender mentoring relationship. Finally, the protégés' perspectives will add to the body of scholarly research in the sport management literature which currently is limited in the area of women being mentored by other women in leadership positions.

### **Method**

Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the huge impact of Pat Summitt on sport (Janssen, & Dale, 2002, De Marco, & Mccullick, 1997), a single case study design was utilized as the method for data collection. A single case study design is a qualitative method, which allows for an in depth and detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study and produces "a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Yin (2014) stated that "the single-case design is eminently justifiable under certain conditions – where the case represents

- a) A critical test of existing theory,
  - b) An extreme or unusual circumstance, or
  - c) A common case,
- or where the cases serves

- d) A revelatory or
- e) Longitudinal purposes”.

Based on the status of coach Pat Summit (Becker, & Wrisberg, 2008), this case study provides unique insights into functions of same gender mentoring relationships. Thus, the qualitative data collection and analysis were used to address the research purpose and questions. In particular, data were systematically gathered and used to analyze the career and psychosocial benefits of having Pat Summitt as the leader of the women’s basketball program at University of Tennessee.

### **Data collection**

This study collected data published on American news sites located using Internet search engines Google News (<http://www.google.com>) for 7 days (June 28 to July 7). These sites included a diverse range of American national and regional newspapers, weekly magazines, non-print news and sport sites and blogs. Online news and blog sites included The Washington Post, USA Today, ESPN, ESPNW, NCAA, WNBA, Daily News, CNN, Knox News and The Tennessean. The dataset was limited to the period 28 June 2016 to 7 July 2016 inclusive using the keywords: ‘Pat Summitt’. This time period limitation was imposed as the media’s interest was concentrated in the first few days following Summitt’s death. All online news items identified by the search were copied into a Microsoft Word document recorded onto a spreadsheet.

### **Data analysis**

The final document containing information from the web sites resulted in 77 online news items. The dataset included content published through national and regional online news media, radio, television and entertainment websites and blogs. We initially read to get a general sense of the message contained in it and to identify the key issues related to mentoring functions. Then, researchers re-read again to begin to code and categorize data describing the mentoring relationship. The adopted approach involves analyzing the mentoring functions expressed by Pat Summitt’s protégés in the context of Krams’s (1983) framework, focusing on career and psychosocial functions. Texts were qualitatively reviewed with a content analysis and coded. Content analysis is defined as a “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). The initial coding was derived from the mentoring literature. After initial data coding of the texts, the following themes emerged in career functions:

- a) Challenging assignments,
- b) Coaching, and
- c) Exposure and visibility.

In psychosocial function, emerged:

- a) Role modeling, and
- b) Counseling.

Texts were then again analyzed for a final review by both researchers.

### **Results**

After Pat Summitt’s death, a total of 77 online news items was found in which players and staff commented on their relationships with the Lady Vols coach during their time at University of Tennessee. The dataset included content published through national and regional online news media, radio, television and entertainment websites and blogs. The content analysis of the texts led to interesting results in regards to mentoring women. Specific career and psychosocial functions mentioned by players and staff may help women advance within leadership positions.

**Research question #1 – career functions**

Players and staff cited most often about being pushed by a very demanding coach that payed attention to every aspect of the game both on the court and off the court. Thus, three themes emerged:

- a) Challenging assignments,
- b) Coaching and
- c) Exposure and visibility.

Former players in particular explained how the coach would push them to be the best players they could be. Summitt's would accept anything but all every time they played. The focus was always on improving and becoming better. Also the ability to enhance player's knowledge as been often cited by former players and staff. Players recalled her as a phenomenal teacher. She taught them the game, how to watch film, to look for things in an opponent, how to look for things in their own teammates, how to run a team, how to command an offense. But also exposure and visibility have been cited as important. This exposure and visibility mentoring function may lead to greater advancement opportunities. Many shared that being part of the Lady Vols program gave them the opportunity to become a coach or a professional basketball player or to get job opportunities in other programs. Protection and sponsorship were mentioned just few times, thus they were not identified as important.

**Research question #2 – psychosocial functions**

From the memories shared by former players and staff about their relationship with coach Pat Summitt two themes emerged – role modeling, and counseling. Players and staff cited most often about Summitt being a role model for many of them. As Summitt demanded that everyone give their all at all times on and off the court, she was also very demanding on herself. This attitude was really powerful to the players and staff's eyes. Most of them seeing their role model put her heart and soul into the program, were motivated to do their best as well. The role modeling function, indeed, for many of them was not only on the field but also in how to live their lives with integrity. The concept of counseling was the second most cited from players and staff to describe their relationships with coach Summitt. Beyond her role as a coach, many players felt that she was always there for them. She cared about them as individuals and not only as players. She cared about their education and made sure that all of them were able to graduate. Summitt spent time to talk one on one with her players during season and with many of them even after they were not playing for the Lady Vols anymore. Players and staff recalled that her office and her house where always open to them. Many players felt genuine concern in their relationships.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to identify the career and psychosocial mentoring functions perceived by Pat Summitt's players and staff throughout her career as the head coach of Lady Vols at University of Tennessee. These functions are usually related to aspects of the relationship that can help the protégé "to learn the ropes" (Kram, 1985, p. 22) of the organization and give her proper tools for career advancement. The players and staff stressed the importance of the career-related function of "challenging assignments" and "coaching" in their relationships with Summitt. These two career functions are important for a few reasons. In Kram's (1985) mentor role theory, this function consists of assigning challenging work to the protégé along with technical training and ongoing feedback. The aim is to enable him or her to develop a sense of competency and accomplishment. This function is critical in helping the protégé to be prepared to perform well on difficult task and be equipped with high skills. As recalled by many of the former players, Summitt's effort was on preparing them to perform well on difficult task so that they could have moved forward as players in their professional careers (Kram, 1985). According to Kram (1985), in this function critical feedback on performance and support from the mentor is fundamental to help the junior person to meet the challenges presented. Consistent with previous research on successful coaches, (Becker, & Wrisberg, 2008) found that

Summitt provided instruction more frequently than any other coaching behavior. The challenging assignment function is important to the success and advancement of players. Indeed, this function significantly impacts the ability of players to advance in their career and be prepared for professional leagues. Many players affirmed that they acquired knowledge, skills, and productive feedback as they were coached by Pat Summitt. Consistent with Kram's (1985) coaching function, Summitt transmitted knowledge, provided strategies needed to succeed, offered feedback, and provided relevant information about the game of basketball to her players and her staff. The focus was on suggesting specific strategies for accomplish work objectives (Kram, 1985) which in this particular case it was about winning games. This function is important in all career stages because the information and advice gained is essential to career advancement (Kram, 1985). But also exposure and visibility have been cited as important. This exposure and visibility mentoring function may lead to greater advancement opportunities. Many shared that being part of the Lady Vols program gave them the opportunity to become a coach or a professional basketball player or to get job opportunities in other programs. The exposure and visibility function provided by coach Summitt and the Lady Vols program helped players in particular to be more recognizable, especially because women's sports lacks coverage (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). Indeed, research has shown that although women participation in sport is currently at an all-time high with very impressive athletic performances, women's sport does not get the same treatment by the sport media commercial complex compared to their male counterparts (Fink, 2015). The importance of coaching, challenging assignments, and exposure and visibility as career functions in mentoring women is consistent with previous research (Bower, 2008; Bower, & Hums, 2014).

The psychosocial functions of "role modeling" was identified as the most important for the relationship while "counseling" was also important. In particular, being a role model is highly related to satisfaction in the mentoring relationship (Bower, 2008). Role modeling as the most cited psychosocial function is consistent with previous research (Bower, 2008; Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1990; Kram, 1985; Ragins, & McFarlin, 1990; Sosik, & Godshalk, 2000). Moreover, this is consistent with previous studies that highlighted this function as a very important one for minority protégés (Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1997). Indeed, according to Kram (1985) the role modeling function is limited in cross gender relationships. Through this function, Summitt set a desirable example and many players identified with it and try to emulate her (Kram, 1985). Learning through observation takes place when the protégé respects and admire the mentor (Kram, 1985). Counseling was the second most frequently mentioned psychosocial function. Personal concerns in the mentoring relationship are addressed with counseling because this function provides a forum in which the protégé talks openly about concerns and fears that are detracting her to be productive in the workplace (Kram, 1985). Summitt offered help to resolve "problems through feedback and active listening" (Kram, 1985, p. 36). This finding is also consistent with study conducted by Bower (2011) in which they examined the mentoring relationship between the head coach and female assistant coach in women's basketball. Overall Pat Summitt's relationship with players and staff showed key elements of an effective mentoring relationship that can help women to advance to leadership positions in sport. Indeed, according to players and staff, she was competent, hard working and most of all acted as a role model (Bower, 2009; Bower, & Hums, 2014).

## Conclusion

The present study added to the body of scholarly research in the sport management literature which currently is limited in the area of women mentoring other women since there are very few women in leadership positions in the sport industry globally (Acosta, & Carpenter, 2014; Smith, & Wrynn, 2013). The findings provided information on the importance of specific functions in same gender mentoring relationship. In particular, this study identified career and psychosocial functions that were important in developing an effective mentoring relationships with a female mentor. For women in particular, a female mentor as a role model can be perceived as a woman that has successfully overcome discriminatory barriers to career advancement.

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**AUTHOR'S ADDRESS:** Manuela Picariello  
1914 Andy Holt Ave  
Knoxville, TN 37996  
E-mail: mpicarie@utk.edu

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