



Senior executives talk mentoring, career development



NAVAIR senior executives Toni Meier, left, and Leslie Taylor mentor approximately 50 employees as part of NAVAIR's Mentoring Program and have said mentoring has benefited their own careers. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — NAVAIR senior executives [Toni Meier](#) and [Leslie Taylor](#) enjoy having multiple employees to mentor and learn from.

“Helping people further their careers or discussing areas such as work-life balance is my favorite part of mentoring,” Taylor, the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division’s executive director, said. “It’s very rewarding to see others accomplish their goals and achieve their potential.”

Between the two of them, Meier and Taylor mentor approximately 50 employees formally as part of NAVAIR’s Mentoring Program and mentor dozens of others informally. Established in 2007, the program offers speed and group mentoring, training, a playbook and an online tool, iMentor, to help match mentors and mentees. Currently, there are 6,077 NAVAIR civilians registered in iMentor.

Naturally, Meier and Taylor have found themselves mentoring many female NAVAIR employees, both formally and informally.



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“Women feel like they can talk to you more, that you walk the walk,” Meier, who also serves as an executive champion of NAVAIR’s Women’s Advisory Group, said. The group, established in 2011, includes a mentoring sub-team to support and promote women’s professional inclusion, development, advancement and networking.

As of March 2016, nine women, including Meier and Taylor, have been selected into the Senior Executive Service at NAVAIR. Both women said they have become mentors in part because of how mentoring shaped their own careers and lives outside of work.

Meier, the director of the Logistics Management Integration Department, started her career in 1973 as a GS-1 shipment clerk at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. She credits mentoring and participating in formal career development programs as being instrumental to her success.

It took her 13 years, she said, to earn her college degree while balancing work travel and demands at home. Her mentors supported her when she wanted to work part time to raise her children.

“You can’t do it all, and you can’t do it all well,” she advised. “Be willing to take time for your family when you need to.” She referenced Sheryl Sandberg’s book, “Lean In,” and its visualization of a career as a jungle gym, not a ladder.

“Becoming a leader is like climbing a jungle gym,” she said. “It’s not a straight shot to the top.”

Taylor has worked at NAVAIR since 1984, at a time when she said mentoring was not often discussed.

“My mentors early on were supervisors who took a particular interest in forming the worker I would become,” she recalled. “One mentor that sticks out to me the most was one of those supervisors who believed in me more than I believed in myself. He was an outstanding leader who put me in for significant growth opportunities for developmental programs and challenged me to excel in all facets of my career.”

Two of her supervisors encouraged her to take higher ranking positions, even when she believed she did not feel ready, which helped shape her current career.

Both Taylor and Meier have advice for mentees.

Meier said mentees should share their goals with their mentors so they can help keep them on track and give them structure.

Listening and being open to candid feedback is what Taylor advises for mentees. She also said employees should choose multiple mentors from different levels and departments and interview them before they formalize the relationship to ensure they are the right fit.



April 6, 2016

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They agreed employees need to improve their teamwork skills and emotional intelligence — the ability to recognize and discriminate between emotions and use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior.

“Learn your technical and soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, so you can make it work as a team and work with people,” Meier said. She also advised employees to move to a different team or project every three to five years to gain a new perspective.

“Your career is your own,” Taylor said. “Every day is a job interview. Because your reputation is hard won and easily lost, strive to be self-aware and continuously learn.”

Find more information about [mentoring and NAVAIR's other career development initiatives](#).