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Supervising and Mentoring First-Gen Professionals

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This primer provides higher education leaders, supervisors, and mentors with evidence-based practices for effectively supporting first-generation ("first-gen") professionals. As more first-gen graduates enter the workforce, academic institutions have an opportunity to cultivate inclusive environments that foster their development, affirm their identities, and enable their advancement.

Understanding First-Gen Professionals

First-generation professionals are often navigating uncharted territory. They enter roles without inherited workplace norms, professional networks, or career roadmaps. Their professional identities are shaped by intergenerational expectations, strong cultural and community ties, and financial responsibility to their family (Griffin, 2020; Nichols & Islas, 2016).

What is a First Generation Professional (FGP)?

For our purposes, we have a starting point definition. A First-Generation Professional is the first in his/her/their primary caregiver to obtain a 4-year college degree and/or obtain a higher-level professional position than what was held by either parent (US Department of Commerce).

Common Challenges Faced by First-Gen Professionals

- First-gen professionals may be unfamiliar with certain meeting etiquette, institutional politics, and leadership pathways. They often confront unwritten rules around communication, self-advocacy, or strategic visibility. Without explicit guidance, they may unintentionally miss opportunities for collaboration, advancement, or recognition.

- Feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt are heightened when first-gen professionals do not see others like themselves in leadership roles (Peteet et al., 2015). The pressure to "prove oneself" can result in perfectionism, overwork, or reluctance to seek help, all factors that contribute to burnout and diminished well-being. Taken together, these pressures converge to create what is known as the "impostor syndrome (Kranzow, 2022)

- First-gen professionals often shift between their home culture and institutional culture, which can lead to emotional exhaustion (Yosso, 2005). They may struggle to reconcile professional expectations with personal or cultural values, particularly around communication styles and assertiveness.

- Many do not benefit from informal mentoring or insider knowledge that often accelerates advancement for others (Griffin, 2020). This absence of mentors or professional sponsors can make it challenging to navigate promotion pathways, understand power dynamics, or

receive critical feedback in a productive and supportive manner.

- Continued financial contributions to their family can influence job choices, limit relocation, or cause stress during salary negotiations. These obligations may also constrain participation in unpaid or underfunded professional development opportunities (e.g., professional conferences, work outings, and research collaborations).

- First-gen professionals may experience isolation when few of their colleagues share similar backgrounds. Lack of representation in leadership can perpetuate the sense of being an outsider and may discourage individuals from pursuing roles where they do not feel they belong.

- First-gen professionals may face assumptions that they are less competent or connected than their peers. These biases can manifest subtly in performance evaluations, work assignments, or exclusion from high-impact projects and leadership pipelines.

- Unlike their continuing-generation peers, first-gen professionals may not have access to networks that offer career mobility or sponsorship. Sponsorship is best understood as the tactical moves a leader makes on behalf of junior talent (Simmons, 2024). Without these connections, first-gen professionals may be passed over for collaborative or upward mobility opportunities.

- Provide clear guidance and education on navigating employee benefits. First-gen professionals may be less familiar with options like health savings accounts (HSAs), retirement plans, paid leave, or other workplace benefits, as they may not have seen these modeled by parents or guardians. Supervisors can help by explaining benefits in plain language, sharing examples of how they can be used, and encouraging staff to take advantage of them to support their financial security and well-being.

Best Practices for Supervising and Mentoring First-Gen Professionals

- Create psychologically safe environments where individuals can bring their whole selves to work without fear of judgment or exclusion. Regularly check in about team culture, norms, and belonging to ensure inclusive participation.

    - **Example**: In weekly team meetings, the supervisor might begin by asking, "What's one personal or professional win this week?"
        - *Over time, team members start sharing stories about family, cultural celebrations, or challenges they're navigating, which helps to create a more inclusive and humanized workplace.*

- Proactively explain workplace expectations, power structures, unwritten rules, and advancement strategies. Offer guidance on navigating cross-functional teams, institutional hierarchies, and organizational politics.

    - **Example:** When a first-gen team member joins a new committee, their supervisor takes 30 minutes to walk them through the decision-making hierarchy, common meeting dynamics, and how leaders tend to communicate influence.
        - *Supervisors might also share insights on who champions promotions and what success typically looks like in that context.*

- Offer feedback that considers the individual's background, goals, and values. Use strength-based language and frame growth areas as part of a shared development plan rather than as personal shortcomings.

    - **Example**: During a performance review, the supervisor might say, "I see how your community-centered approach has really helped our team grow together."
        - *The supervisor might also highlight specific examples and then frame areas for growth as opportunities to gain visibility that aligns with the employee's career aspirations.*

- Establish formal mentorship pairings with individuals from similar or aspirational paths. As a supervisor or mentor, act as a sponsor by advocating for the professional's inclusion in high-profile projects, leadership development, and promotion discussions.

    - **Example**: The supervisor connects a first-gen staffer with a senior leader who was also the first in their family to work in higher education.
        - *The employee and this senior leader then meet monthly, and the mentor also invites the staffer to observe a leadership retreat to demystify executive decision-making.*

- Recommend different professional development opportunities (i.e., conferences, webinars, writing retreats, leadership institutes, and certifications). Help individuals secure funding and administrative support to eliminate barriers to participation.

    - **Example**: Once a supervisor notices a staffer's interest in organization policy, the supervisor recommends an upcoming regional leadership institute and helps draft the funding request.
        - *The supervisor also offers to adjust the staffer's workload during the event so they can attend fully present.*

- Create flexibility around work schedules or travel obligations. Normalize and validate conversations about multigenerational caregiving, various financial commitments, and

community roles. Recognize all these as legitimate professional considerations.

    - **Example**: When a first-gen employee explains they help care for an elderly parent or sick child, the supervisor adjusts meeting times and travel expectations.
        - *The supervisor also explicitly says, "Your family commitments are part of who you are. They're respected here."*

- Publicly and privately acknowledge the unique skills first-gen professionals bring (i.e., adaptability, intercultural communication, problem-solving, and empathy). Integrate these strengths into performance reviews and team planning.

    - **Example**: At a team retreat, the supervisor highlights how a first-gen colleague's lived experience contributed to a more inclusive onboarding guide.
        - *Later, the supervisor also notes this strength in the staffer's evaluation as "critical cultural competence and community insight."*

- Take time to examine your definitions of professionalism, competence, and leadership. Attend training in anti-racism, class equity, and inclusive supervision to better support first-gen growth.

    - **Example**: After reflecting on a workshop in class equity and supervision, a manager realizes they've been prioritizing speaking up as a leadership trait.
        - *The supervisor then begins creating multiple ways for team members to contribute ideas (i.e., writing, voice memos, informal 1:1s) and start revising evaluation rubrics.*

- Support the creation of employee resource groups (ERGs) or professional development communities for first-gen employees. Encourage participation in campuswide or national networks that amplify first-gen voices.

    - **Example**: When a first-gen employee proposes a monthly peer meet-up, the supervisor helps secure department funding for lunch and helps locate a consistent meeting space.
        - *The supervisor also asks leadership to promote the group in internal communications.*

- Collaborate with the first-gen professional to co-create a growth plan that includes short- and long-term goals, mentorship checkpoints, and role-scaling opportunities. Clarify promotion criteria and timelines.

- **Example**: In a one-to-one, the supervisor and employee map out a two-year path that includes increasing project ownership, quarterly check-ins, and attending a national conference.
    - *The supervisor also highlights what it would take to be considered for promotion and commits to reviewing progress together.*

Reflective Questions for Supervisors and Mentors

- Have I asked my first-gen staff or mentee how they define success?
- What assumptions might I be making about what is "obvious" or "expected" in our workplace?
- How do I intentionally affirm their identity and invite their voice?
- In what ways am I actively advocating for their growth and visibility?

Conclusion

Supervising and mentoring first-gen professionals requires intentionality, cultural humility, and a commitment to equity. By naming the hidden rules of the workplace, validating diverse strengths, and creating pathways for authentic leadership, institutions can support the success and retention of first-gen professionals across sectors.

Further Reading

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