

SECTION III

Professional Development:

Stretch Assignments & Allyship



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Introduction

Co-authors Bonita Stewart and Jacqueline Adams strongly suggest that women of color pursue stretch assignments to progress in their careers. In their book, “A Blessing: Women of Color Teaming Up to Lead, Empower and Thrive,” Stewart and Adams introduced the concept of 40 Allies and a Stretch Assignment. In the period after the Civil War, freed slaves were promised 40 acres and a mule. Rarely was that promise kept, but today, inclusive and insightful leaders and managers can revisit the strategy by surrounding “rising star” employees of color with improved feedback, additional allies and opportunities to “stretch” or grow their capabilities.

This section provides definitions of a stretch assignment and 40 allies. It also lays out the experiences of our American female desk workers across four races and four generations as they seek and give advice in the workplace.

40 Allies and Stretch Assignment: Definitions

Stretch assignments can be a tool for tapping workers with exceptional talent, either visible or hidden. They can also be used when there is a misalignment of skills and job requirements or a clash of personalities, or even boredom. Frustrations can break out on all sides. However, in many cases, if a leader or manager is truly observant and/or empathetic, the misalignment can be adjusted, thereby salvaging a talented worker, improving productivity, and reducing the costs of losing an employee in whom an organization has invested. Proper use of a stretch assignment can accrue to an organization’s ROI. Encouraging stretch assignments is far more than a “nice-to-do” perk for an outstanding performer. Increasingly, it is a viable retention mechanism.

For the individual, a stretch assignment can provide an opportunity to differentiate oneself, to achieve what others deem impossible, unexpected, or unlikely to catapult one’s career and to give women employees a chance to believe in themselves while driving meaningful results and impact. A stretch assignment is NOT housekeeping, taking on additional extracurricular chores in the office.

When the authors say 40 allies, they suggest including:

- 10 people on your existing team at work,
- 10 managers from other parts of the business,
- 10 “sisters” or supportive women of color, and
- 10 members of your personal board of directors, i.e., relatives, teachers, clergy, former colleagues, people of any race or gender who have one’s best interests at heart and have provided useful advice in the past.

Large majorities of the female desk workers of all races reported that they have not received stretch assignments in the past 12 months. However, 37% of Black and LatinX Millennial desk workers reported that they have received stretch assignments, the most significant percentages among the non-managers.

- About a quarter of the female desk workers said they initiated the stretch assignments themselves, with Asian women reporting the highest percentage at 28%.

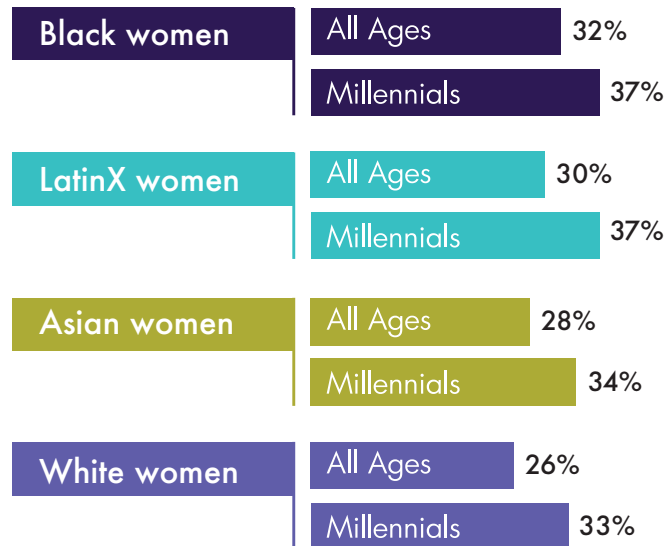
The authors looked closely at the experiences of somewhat more senior Gen X workers.

- Large majorities of the women of all races reported that they were recommended for stretch assignments by their supervisors.
- Of women who have received a stretch assignment, Black women were most likely to report that it increased their professional development.

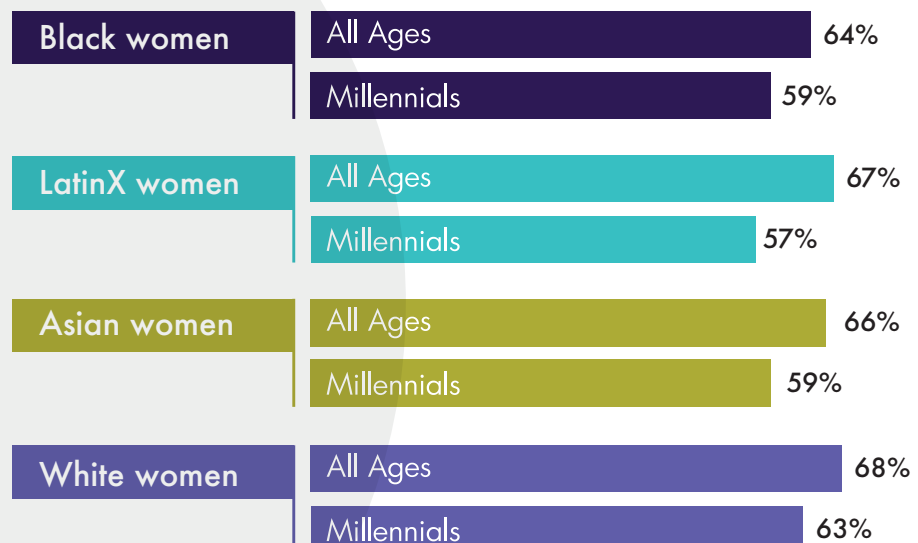


**STRETCH ASSIGNMENTS - WITHIN THE LAST 12 MONTHS,
HAVE YOU VOLUNTEERED OR BEEN RECOMMENDED?**

Yes

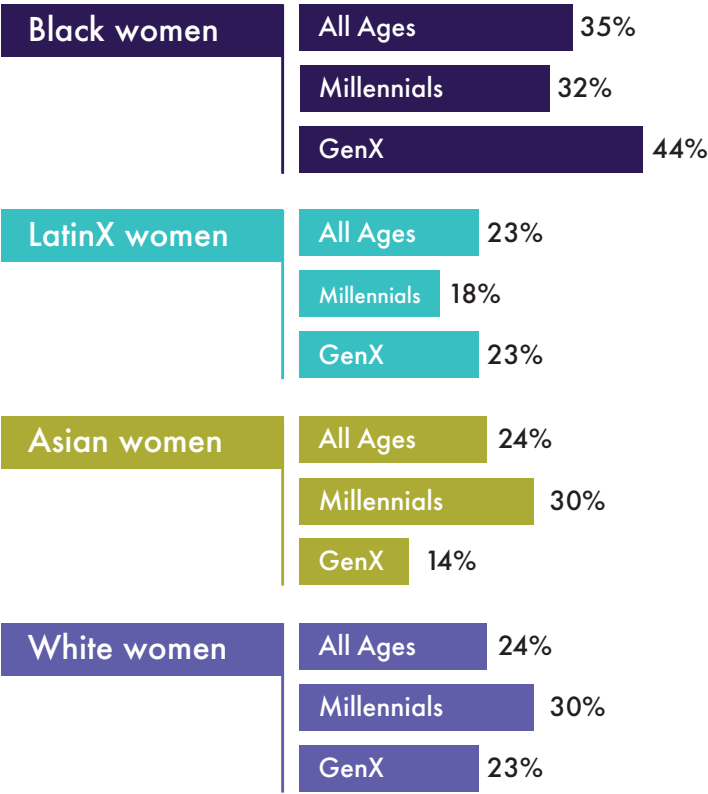


No



STRETCH ASSIGNMENTS - IMPACT ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A great deal



- 44% of Black Gen X women said their stretch assignment enhanced their professional growth a great deal; 61% said greatly or moderately.
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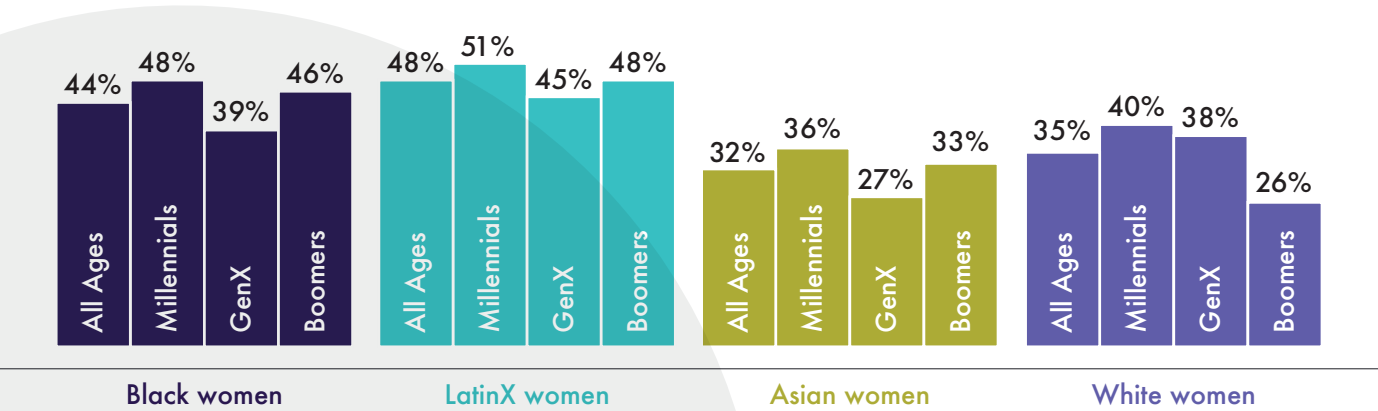
Impact of Feedback and Professional Advice

Feedback is an essential component in the quest for a stretch assignment. Feedback involves having a manager assess a desk worker’s performance honestly and suggest additional or new duties to improve her career trajectory.

- 48% of Black Millennials and 51% of LatinX Millennials reported that the feedback they received at work was very helpful in improving their performance. The same was true of only 36% of Asian and 40% of white Millennials.
- Near majorities of older female workers also said they appreciated the feedback they received: 45% of Gen X LatinX women, 46% of Black and 48% of LatinX Boomers.

FEEDBACK: IMPACT ON IMPROVING WORK PERFORMANCE

Very Helpful



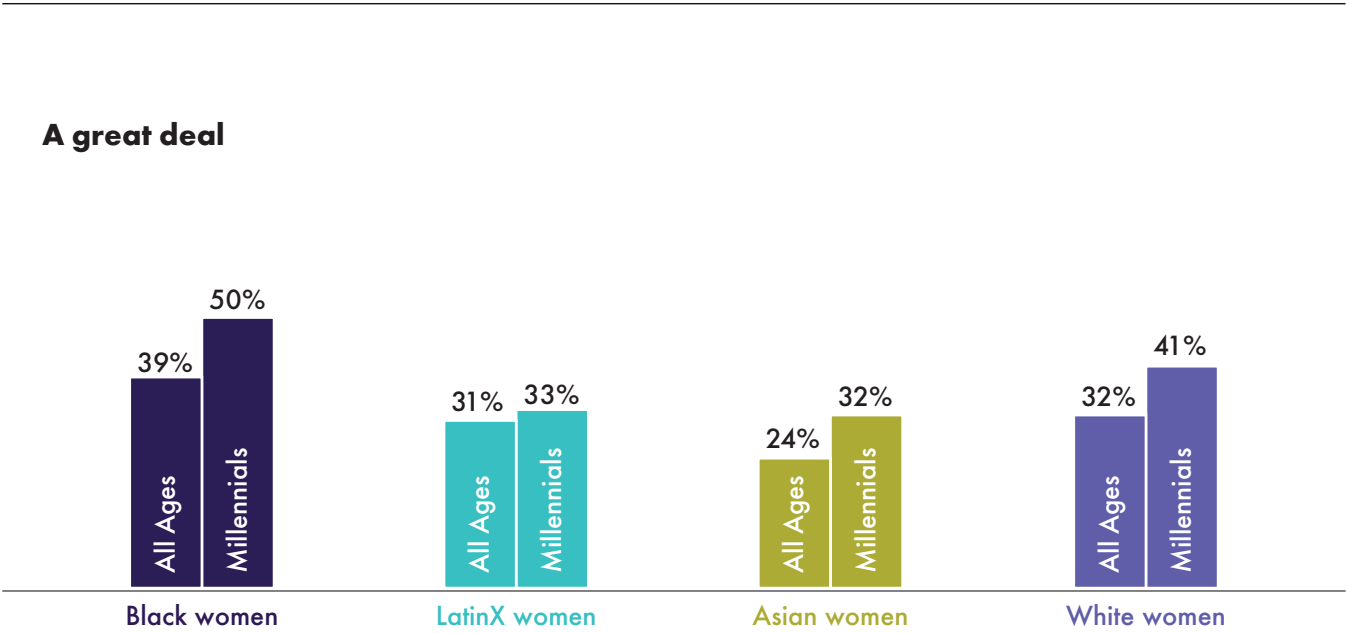
Sources of Career Advice

As the authors found, honest career feedback and advice were important to developing stretch assignments and achieving career growth.

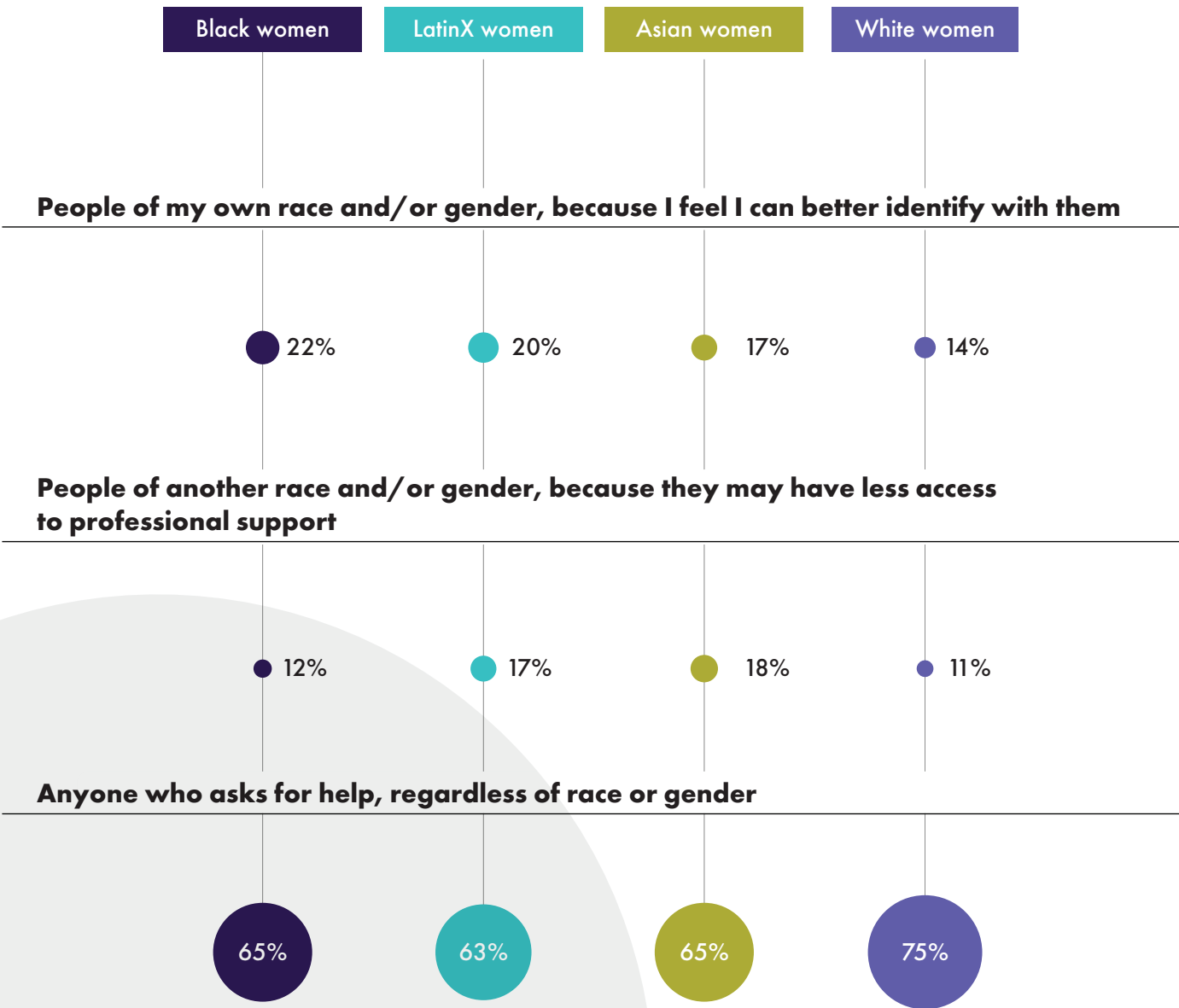
However, only 39% of Black women desk workers overall strongly agreed that they have someone to consult for career advice. The same was true for only 24% of Asian women.

- The percentages improved for Millennial female desk workers across the races. At 50%, Black women reported the largest percentage of having someone to consult for career advice.
- When asked whom the female desk workers go to themselves for career support or advice, 42% of the white women said they seek people of their own race and gender. Smaller numbers of women of the other races said that they seek out people like themselves.
- However, large majorities of all of the female desk workers said they would mentor and support anyone who asks for help, regardless of race or gender.

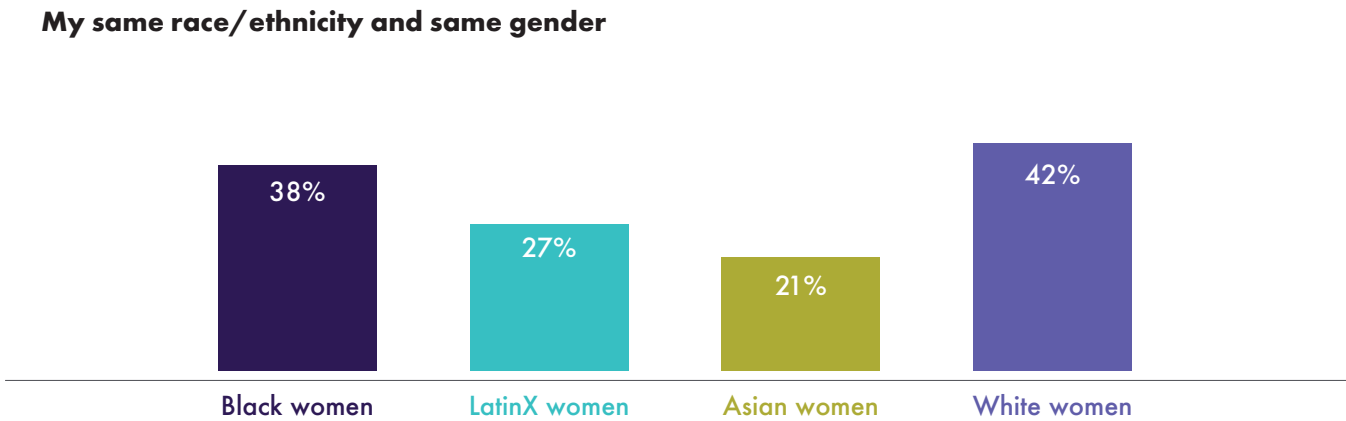
TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE SOMEONE YOU CAN GO TO FOR CAREER ADVICE?



WHOM DO YOU MENTOR: PEOPLE OF MY OWN RACE/GENDER OR ANYONE WHO ASKS?



FROM WHOM DO YOU SEEK CAREER ADVICE: SAME RACE/GENDER?



Word Clouds:
Advice for Women of Color in the Workplace

The authors asked respondents in 2020, as they did in 2019, for the first piece of advice they would give to women of color to achieve success in their careers and work. As these Word Clouds illustrate, all of the respondents stressed, “Work Hard.” The answer is different but consistent with the most popular earlier answer: “Never Give Up!” As in 2019, there were distinct differences by race.

BLACK WOMEN

What is the first piece of advice you'd give to a women of color for success in her career and in her work?



Black women overall said:

- Work hard
- Be yourself
- Believe in yourself
- Never give up
- Seek support
 - Keep your head up
 - Advocate for yourself
 - Do your best
 - Be confident
 - Follow your passion
 - Get an education
 - Don't be discouraged

LATINX WOMEN

What is the first piece of advice you'd give to a women of color for success in her career and in her work?

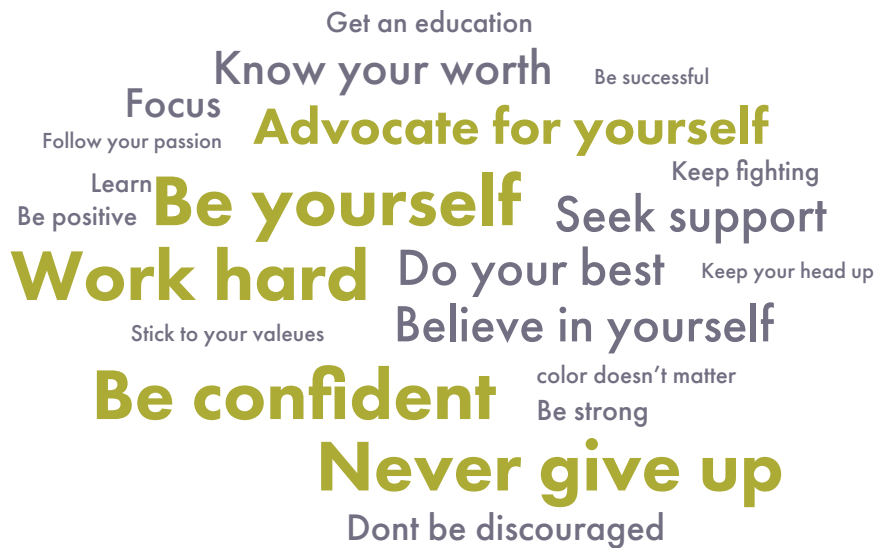


LatinX women overall gave many of the same answers but also stressed:

- Be confident
- Don't be discouraged
- Get an education
- Seek support

ASIAN WOMEN

What is the first piece of advice you'd give to a women of color for success in her career and in her work?



Asian women overall offered the same advice, but they added:

- Keep fighting
- Be strong

WHITE WOMEN

What is the first piece of advice you'd give to a women of color for success in her career and in her work?



White women overall echoed the other races and added:

- Be confident
- Be yourself
- Believe in yourself

Word Clouds:

Best Ways for a Manager or Supervisor to Support a Woman of Color (by generations)

In 2019, the authors called on leaders to conceptualize 40 allies and a stretch assignment. In the 2020 survey, respondents were asked directly to name the best way a manager or supervisor could support them. While the answers were somewhat similar across the different groups by generation, there were clear differences in emphasis.

Gen Z women of color responded much as their elders did. The youngest desk workers had specific expectations that their managers would provide: Encouragement, Constructive criticism, Direct feedback and would Be supportive. They also cited: Reward success and Be fair.

The Millennial women of color responded with: Constructive criticism, Direct feedback, Communicate, Be Available and Growth Opportunities. The women have provided an actionable playbook for managers in these five specific areas. And remember, the U.S. Census has [predicted](#) that these Gen Z and Millennial people of color, currently ages 18-29, will become the majority of Americans in the workforce by 2027.

GEN Z: WOMEN OF COLOR

What's the best way a manager or workplace supervisor could support you?



Gen Z women added:

- Encouragement
- Constructive criticism
- Direct feedback
- Be supportive....and also cited:
 - Reward success
 - Be fair

MILLENNIALS: WOMEN OF COLOR

What's the best way a manager or workplace supervisor could support you?

Check in
Training Be supportive
Constructive criticism
Be fair Collaborate **Communicate**
Direct feedback Encouragement
Be positive
Hands off **Be available** Listen to me
Transparency Reward success
Growth opportunities

Millennial women echoed Gen Z and reinforced:

- Constructive criticism
- Communicate
- Direct feedback
- Be available
- Growth opportunities



GEN X: WOMEN OF COLOR

What's the best way a manager or workplace supervisor could support you?



A word cloud of responses from Gen X women of color. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'Direct feedback' and 'Be supportive' being the most prominent. Other visible words include 'Listen to me', 'Training', 'Transparency', 'Be positive', 'Be available', 'Collaborate', 'Communicate', 'Be fair', 'Encouragement', 'Growth opportunities', 'Hands off', 'Check in', 'Reward success', and 'Constructive criticism'.

Hands off
Reward success Check in
Listen to me Training
Direct feedback Transparency
Be positive
Constructive criticism Be available
Collaborate Be supportive
Communicate Be fair Encouragement
Growth opportunities

Gen X women overall were the most emphatic in their responses:

- Direct feedback
- Listen to me
- Be supportive
- Constructive criticism
- Communicate
- Encouragement
- Growth opportunities
- Training

BOOMERS: WOMEN OF COLOR

What's the best way a manager or workplace supervisor could support you?



A word cloud of responses from Boomer women of color. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'Training', 'Transparency', 'Growth opportunities', 'Communicate', 'Be supportive', 'Encouragement', 'Reward success', 'Check in', 'Direct feedback', 'Be available', 'Hands off', 'Be fair', 'Listen to me', 'Be positive', 'Collaborate', and 'Constructive criticism' being visible.

Training Growth opportunities
Transparency Constructive criticism
Be positive Listen to me
Collaborate Hands off Be fair
Be supportive Communicate
Be available Direct feedback
Reward success Check in
Encouragement

Boomer women advised their managers to:

- Reward success
- Communicate
- Be supportive
- Encouragement
- Training
- Transparency
- Be available
- Direct feedback
- Hands off

Take the #TeamUp Challenges

After analyzing all of their data over two years, the authors have come up with a series of challenges for both managers and individual desk workers. These challenges are intended to help everyone “lead, empower, and thrive” in their workplaces.

Challenge #1

For Managers:

Track “stretch assignments” among women of color. Ensure that intentional “nudges” or formal programs are developed to provide greater opportunity for those with potential.

Goal:

100% of top identified women of color receive stretch assignments within the next year.

Challenge #2

For Women of Color:

Identify and activate your 40 allies: 10 people on your team—10 other managers —10 “sisters” — 10 people on your personal board of directors (family, friends, clergy, etc.).

Goal:

Seek at least one “stretch” assignment in the next 12 months.

Conclusion

Advice is easy to give and sometimes difficult to hear and follow. Constructive feedback, on the other hand, is essential to a person’s professional development. In the authors’ professional experiences, however, managers and even co-workers often have great difficulty providing crucial, constructive feedback, especially to women of color. That’s why the *2020 Women of Color in Business: Cross-Generational Survey*® asked so many questions on the subject of feedback and framed them in the context of stretch assignments and allies.

The Word Clouds in this section illustrate the importance and consistency of the advice that women of all four races offered up: Work Hard, Never Give Up, and happily, increasingly: Be Yourself.

Likewise, the second set of Word Clouds, with suggestions for supervisors and managers, should provide helpful and actionable insights to those designated to provide feedback. Constructive Criticism but also Be Supportive showed up in the answers of all four generations.

The goals of the surveys and #TeamUp Challenges are to increase the number of women of color in the workplace, to help them thrive and to offer easy tools to help their allies achieve these goals.