

6

IT Leadership Style

*Leadership is a combination of strategy and character.
If you must be without one, be without the strategy.*
—Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf

This chapter looks at current thinking about leadership style and behavior in general and how it applies specifically to IT leadership in higher education. We address the following questions:

- ◆ What are the leadership style profiles of higher education's IT leaders?
- ◆ How do the top IT leaders differ from other IT professionals?
- ◆ How does mentoring relate to leadership style?

The Nature of Leadership Style

Researchers have studied leadership style extensively over the past three decades, focusing heavily on what *behaviors* effective leaders exhibit. Their findings indicate that leadership style is something people can learn. In fact, the leadership style used within an organization has been shown to relate profoundly to its performance and, especially, its ability to adapt to changes in the environment. Evidence continues to grow that developing effective leadership behaviors is important and that leadership style does indeed matter.

An important leadership model developed over the past 20 years encompasses two different leadership styles: *transformational* and *transactional*.¹ Transformational

Key Findings

- ◆ Higher education IT leaders have leadership profiles consistent with effective leadership.
- ◆ These effective leadership profiles are generally consistent across institution types and demographics.
- ◆ Senior-most IT leaders or aspirants to the senior-most IT positions display significantly more effective leadership profiles than other IT professionals.
- ◆ Mentoring may help develop effective leadership behaviors.

leadership inspires followers to accomplish things beyond what might be expected, typically by

- ◆ raising followers' consciousness of the value of specified goals;
- ◆ helping followers transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the team, the unit, and the organization; and
- ◆ motivating followers to address higher-level personal needs.

Transformational leadership is frequently associated with increased organizational effectiveness.² Such an approach stresses that leaders must understand and adapt to their followers' motives and needs. These leaders are good role models who empower staff members to achieve higher standards and engender trust in others. They are change agents who articulate a clear, shared vision of the organization and establish meaning

in organizational life. This encompassing approach can describe a wide range of leadership behaviors, from specific attempts to influence followers on a one-to-one basis to broad attempts to influence whole organizations.

In contrast, transactional leadership refers to the most common approach, which focuses on the exchanges that occur between leaders and their followers. Transactional leaders exchange things of value with subordinates to advance their own, as well as their subordinates', agendas. Traditional examples include a manager offering employees a promotion in exchange for performance, or instructors giving students a grade for work completed. Transactional leaders achieve results through positive or negative reinforcements of behaviors and can be very influential because subordinates realize it's in their best interest to do what their leaders ask.

The model also acknowledges nontransactional behaviors, sometimes referred to as *nonleadership* or *laissez-faire* behaviors, typically associated with a hands-off leadership style. Such a leader tends to abdicate responsibilities, delay decisions, and make little effort to help followers satisfy their needs. An example might be the head of a small unit who calls no meetings with employees, has no long-range plan, and makes little contact with others in the organization.

We associate transformational leadership style behaviors with more effective achievement of outcomes, higher performance levels among followers, and the ability to successfully initiate and execute change. An effective leader must also, however, be facile with transactional leadership processes in a typical organization's ongoing activities.

We employed elements from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)³ short-form version to assess ECAR survey respondents' leadership behaviors. This tool determines leadership style by assessing seven different behaviors, including

four transformational (Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration), two transactional (Contingent Reward and Management-by-Exception), and one non-transactional behavior (Laissez-Faire). Table 6-1 details these seven characteristics.⁴

Overall Leadership Profile

Using this leadership model as a guide, we defined the most effective leadership profiles as those that meet each of these three criteria:

- ◆ high transformational scores,
- ◆ moderate transactional scores, and
- ◆ low laissez-faire scores.

It is good news that, as a whole, higher education IT leaders surveyed showed a tendency toward this effective leadership profile (Figure 6-1). Transformational scores were quite high for the pool of respondents: 37.5 percent had high scores, and another 61.2 percent had moderate scores.⁵ This suggests that higher education has strong IT leaders who are good role models and able to intellectually stimulate and motivate their followers. Transactional behaviors were also moderately high for the population, with 14.2 percent of respondents having high scores and another 75.3 percent having moderate scores. Laissez-faire style was very low across the population as a whole. As a group, then, respondents lean toward what we know from the literature to be more effective leadership styles.

We interviewed several transformational IT leaders about their leadership styles and what they considered important in working with staff. Not surprising, several themes emerged that are consistent with transformational leadership style. One finding is that these leaders thrive on challenges. Vince Sheehan, CIO and associate dean for information technology at the Indiana University School of Medicine, said, "In my

Table 6-1. Leadership Style Behaviors in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) Short Form

Leadership Style	Behavior	Description
Transformational	Idealized Influence	The leader acts as and is perceived as a strong role model for followers. The leader is respected and trusted by followers and provides a sense of both mission and vision that others want to follow.
	Inspirational Motivation	The leader communicates high expectations for performance. Through images and emotional appeals, the leader inspires followers to pursue a shared vision over individual self-interests.
	Intellectual Stimulation	The leader stimulates and encourages both creativity and innovation. The leader provides an environment fostering experimentation, empowerment, and new approaches to problem solving.
	Individualized Consideration	The leader actively listens to and cares about the individual needs of followers. The leader acts as a mentor or coach and provides attention and direction to followers individually.
Transactional	Contingent Reward	The leader achieves agreement and performance from followers through negotiated exchange. The leader uses positive reinforcement to encourage followers to achieve outcomes.
	Management-by-Exception	The leader uses corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement to encourage followers to achieve outcomes.
Nontransactional	Laissez-Faire Leadership	The leader minimizes exchange with followers and allows followers to "do their own thing" with minimal intervention, feedback, or support.

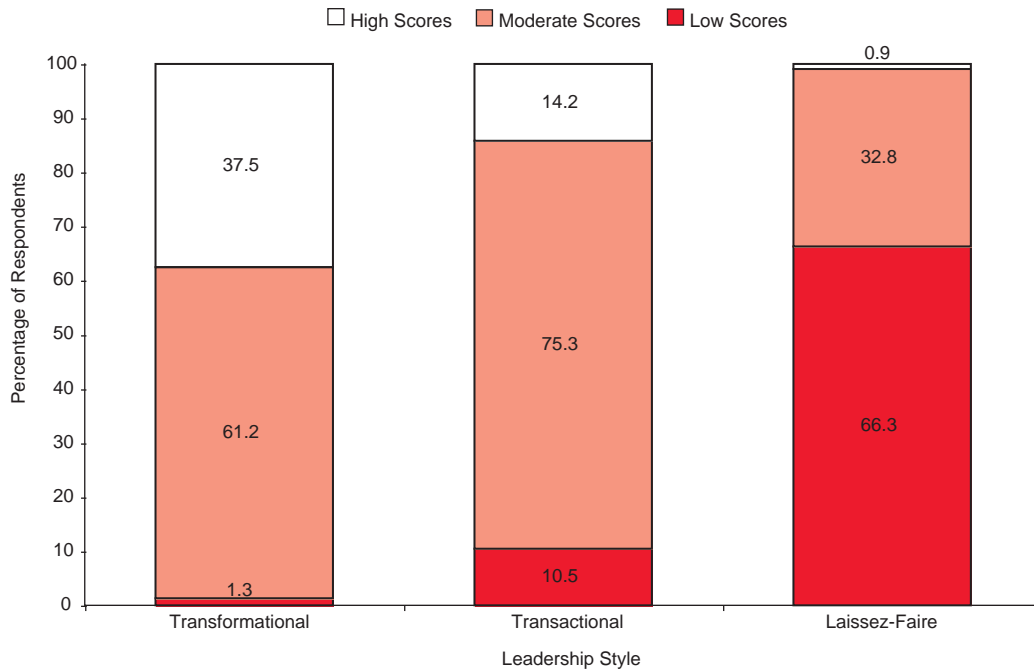


Figure 6-1. Leadership Style Scores

last job, I cleaned up many messes and there was not much challenge left. Frankly, like many people in leadership positions, I need a little juice.”

Likewise, these leaders like to be surrounded by employees who enjoy challenges and want to grow professionally. Many willingly put much time and energy into staff development, identifying and supporting employee-specific goals, and creating high-performing teams. Niels Jensen of Normandale Community College stated, “We give people responsibilities and treat them like professionals. We have overlapping duties to discourage them from working in a silo. We watch people for burnout and stress. We try to challenge people and to move them on to better things.” North Carolina A&T State University’s Rodney Harrigan said, “I like people to have goals. They may change them along the way, but I think it is important to encourage people to find their way and set directions, and then help them understand what it takes to move ahead and what to look for.”

Many interviewees also take seriously their function as a role model. The Ohio State University’s Susan Metros said, “It takes a lot of time and energy, but it is really worthwhile to build a strong staff. I am honest about budgets and I try not to keep secrets from them. I think it makes them more confident in what they are doing.” Lasell College’s Deborah Gelch echoed this theme of openness: “I cultivate a ‘we are all in this together’ attitude. We sit around the table every week to review our projects—even mine. I am quite honest with them about which projects I am having trouble with. I think that example is important.”

Why does higher education have transformational leaders? Competing hypotheses attempt to explain this. The most straightforward explanation is that academic institutions have a mechanism for either recruiting or developing more transformational leaders. Perhaps individuals with more transformational leadership styles are drawn to and prefer the unique higher education environment. See, for example,

the respondent scores for transformational leadership behaviors in Figure 6-2. Note that the Idealized Influence leadership behavior scores are highest. Idealized Influence refers to providing followers with a vision and a sense of mission. Many IT professionals choose to work in an organization whose mission they can believe in, and they take pride in services they help provide. They perceive higher education’s role as more contributory to society than the corporate world’s financial “bottom line.” As expressed by University of Kansas’s Marilu Goodyear, “For me it really is a passion; this is where I want to contribute. I want to educate the students well and make the University of Kansas the best university it can be. I truly believe in public education.” Leaders drawn to this environment may also be more inclined or able to translate this sense of mission to their followers and relate it meaningfully to their IT initiatives.

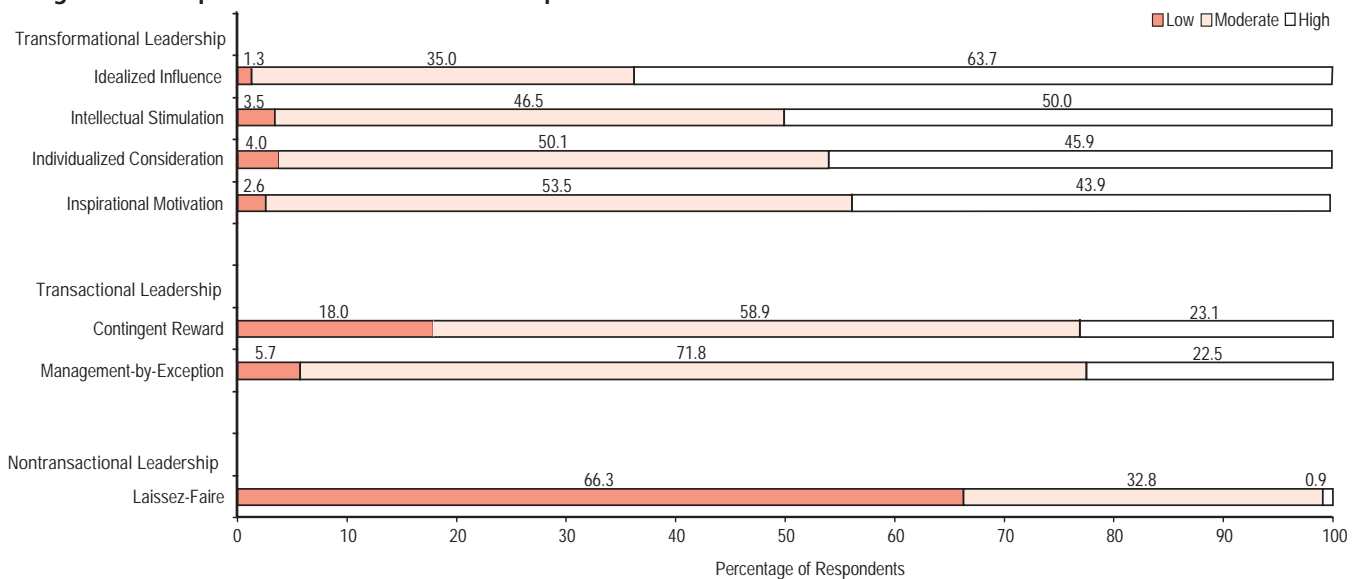
We also noted high Intellectual Stimulation behavior scores for at least 50 percent of the respondents. Academic institutions by their nature are engaged in intellectual stimulation, and, as we found earlier, more than one-third (34.9 percent) of senior-

most IT leaders and 25 percent of other IT professionals surveyed held some type of academic appointment (from tenure to adjunct appointments). Leadership often comes from the academic side of the institution, and leadership candidates come to colleges and universities because they resonate with the academic environment. Again, these leaders may translate the values of creativity, experimentation, and learning into their leadership styles.

Another possible or contributing hypothesis is that the respondents identify so strongly with the higher education mission and educational processes that they overly attribute these characteristics to themselves. IT leaders might actually exhibit these transformational leadership behaviors at lower levels, but the scores are inflated by this environmental “halo” effect.

Do these general behavioral trends play out universally among subgroups of our sample population? Actually, the findings are surprisingly robust across institution types: leadership style didn’t vary significantly across Carnegie class (with the exception of medical school respondents, who scored even higher on Idealized Influence),

Figure 6-2. Respondents’ Scores for Leadership Behaviors



between public and private institutions, or when moving from smaller to larger institutions. The leadership profiles also remained consistent across gender and ethnicity, and scores were similar for IT leaders in central IT units as well as those in administrative and academic units.

Despite this overwhelming similarity of leadership behaviors across institutions, we found significant differences in two areas. The first emerged between the senior-most IT leaders and other IT professionals. A second pattern of differences became apparent when we looked at the role of mentoring.

Leadership Profile of Senior-most IT Leaders

The data show strong leadership profile differences among the senior-most IT leaders and other IT professionals. Further, it confirms distinctions between IT professionals who aspire to the senior-most IT role and those who do not. Figure 6-3 illustrates the findings. More than half (51 percent) of senior-most IT leaders had high transformational leadership scores, compared with roughly 35 percent of all other IT professionals. The finding that people in the top leadership positions have the best leadership skills is not unexpected, and it reinforces our hypothesis that IT lead-

ership in higher education has the potential for high effectiveness.

Leadership Style of Aspirants to the Senior-most IT Position

Another interesting pattern emerges among the other IT professionals when we look at the aspirants to the top IT position. As Figure 6-3 shows, these aspirants show significantly higher transformational leadership behaviors than IT professionals who don't aspire to the top IT job. Among the aspirants, 49 percent have high scores for transformational behaviors, compared with 31 percent of other IT professionals. Indeed, aspirants' transformational leadership scores don't vary significantly from those of senior-most IT leaders, 51 percent of whom scored in the high range.

At a more detailed level, we can look at how these populations differ in the four behaviors constituting transformational leadership style. Table 6-2 compares the percentages of respondent subgroups receiving high scores for these behaviors and shows that aspirants scored significantly higher than other IT professionals in all four areas and mildly lower than the senior-most IT leaders in two of the four areas.

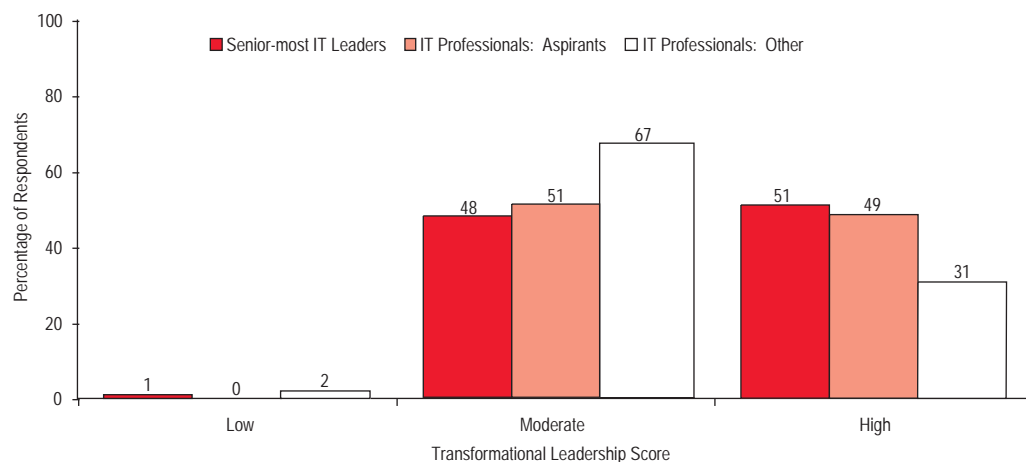


Figure 6-3.
Transformational Leadership Style Scores, by Role

Table 6-2. Percentage of Respondents with High Scores for Transformational Leadership Style Behaviors, by Role

Behavior	Senior-most IT Leaders	IT Professionals: Aspirants	IT Professionals: Other
Idealized Influence	71	72	60
Inspirational Motivation	54	57	38
Individualized Consideration	56	52	42
Intellectual Stimulation	63	59	45

Do Mentors Influence Leadership Style?

One of the most interesting findings to emerge from the data is the importance of mentoring, as shown in Figures 6-4 and 6-5. Respondents with high transformational leadership scores (Figure 6-4) had mentors more often (55 percent) than those with low transformational leadership scores (26 percent). This pattern also holds for transactional leadership scores (Figure 6-5): of the respondents

with high transactional leadership scores, 61 percent had mentors, compared with 35 percent of those with low scores. Thus, for those with high transformational and transactional scores, there is a small difference between those with mentors and those without. However, for those respondents having low scores, there is a large difference between those with mentors and those without. This relationship between mentoring and leadership behavioral scores was highly statistically significant

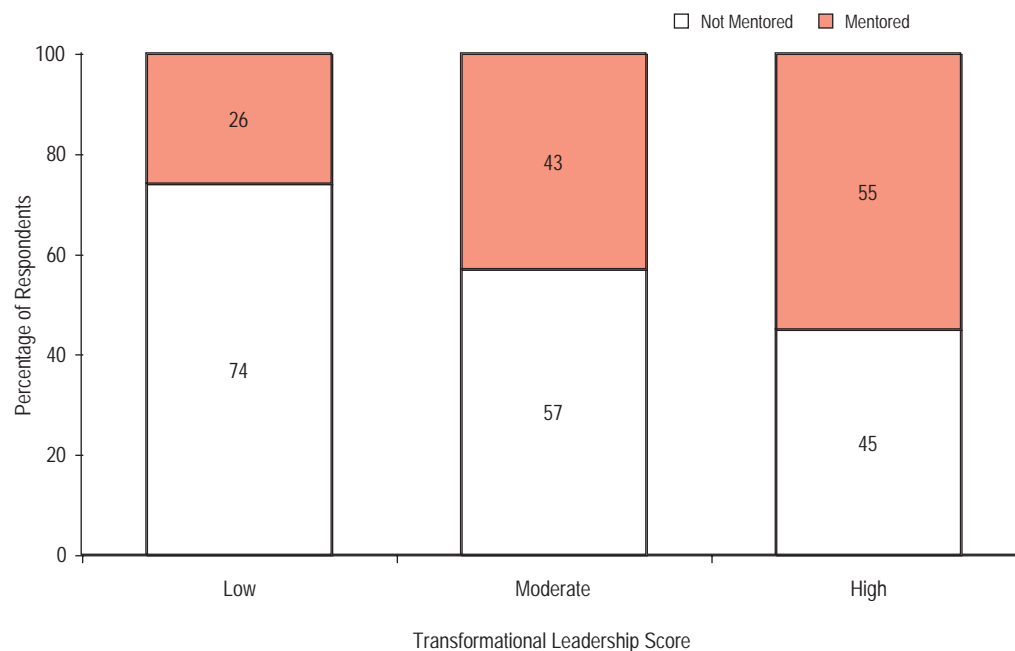
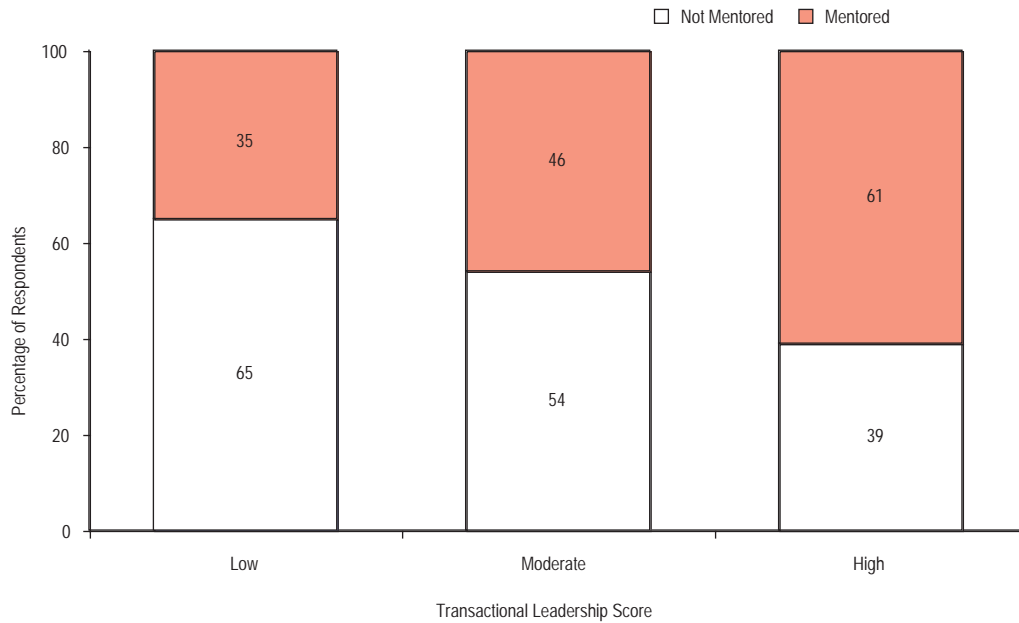


Figure 6-4. Have Transformational Leaders Had a Mentor?

Figure 6-5. Have Transactional Leaders Had a Mentor?



and suggests that although individuals can develop good leadership behaviors without a mentor, they're less likely to do so than those with mentors.

Mentoring and Aspirants to Top IT Position

The relationship of mentoring to leadership style is further reinforced by looking at the components that constitute trans-

formational leadership and comparing the senior-most IT leaders, aspirants, and other IT professionals. For each group, Table 6-3 shows the percentage of high transformational scores for each of the four transformational behaviors, for those with and without mentors. For example, 59 percent of senior-most IT leaders who had a mentor had a high Inspirational Motivation score, compared with only 49 percent of those who did

Table 6-3. Percentage of Respondents with High Transformational Leadership Behavior Scores, by Role and by Mentorship

Transformational Leadership Behavior	Had a Mentor?	Senior-most IT Leaders	IT Professionals: Aspirants	IT Professionals: Other
Idealized Influence	Yes	74	74	70
	No	68	70	53
Inspirational Motivation	Yes	59	63	44
	No	49	51	33
Intellectual Stimulation	Yes	66	63	48
	No	58	56	42
Individualized Consideration	Yes	63	57	46
	No	51	47	38
Overall Transformational Leadership Style	Yes	57	55	37
	No	46	42	26

not have a mentor. For all three populations, respondents with a mentor had significantly more transformational leadership scores in the high range. Overall, mentoring appears to most strongly influence the aspirants.

These observations on mentoring are particularly important and promising for the development of future higher education IT leaders because they strongly suggest that leadership behaviors can, to an extent, be taught. In other words, we can develop better leaders by establishing and nurturing mentoring relationships with other good leaders. This research strengthens the already strong body of literature supporting the importance of mentoring and contradicts the popular belief that leadership style is a personality trait that cannot be learned.

We asked our interviewees about their own mentoring experiences and found wide variation in how IT leaders think about mentoring—from very informal to carefully planned and structured arrangements. Some pointed to influential bosses who demonstrated strong leadership skills that could be observed and adopted. The University of Toronto's Eva Swenson said, "I do not think anyone was consciously mentoring me. Whenever I had a boss whom I respected and [who] was effective, I tried to learn from him or her." Vijay Kumar, director of academic computing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, added, "I was mentored through ideas, exchanges, and interactions. By witnessing conversations, the level of your thinking, the bandwidth of considerations, and your perspectives on IT expand."

Others reported more traditional mentoring. Marilu Goodyear found her mentor early. "At my first job, my boss was a very smart, articulate, and assertive woman with superior skills. She gave me lots of experience, independence, and opportunity to learn but kept me from doing anything drastically wrong! She is a lifelong mentor and friend.

She always gives me career advice, and she is the person I go to when I am stuck on a problem." Robyn Render of the University of North Carolina System noted, "I will clearly say there is nothing better than to have direct mentoring. I watched my bosses get challenged and saw how they worked their way through it. They were very encouraging and supportive of me. My district boss at AT&T was a female. She clearly saw no barriers or obstacles to where I could go."

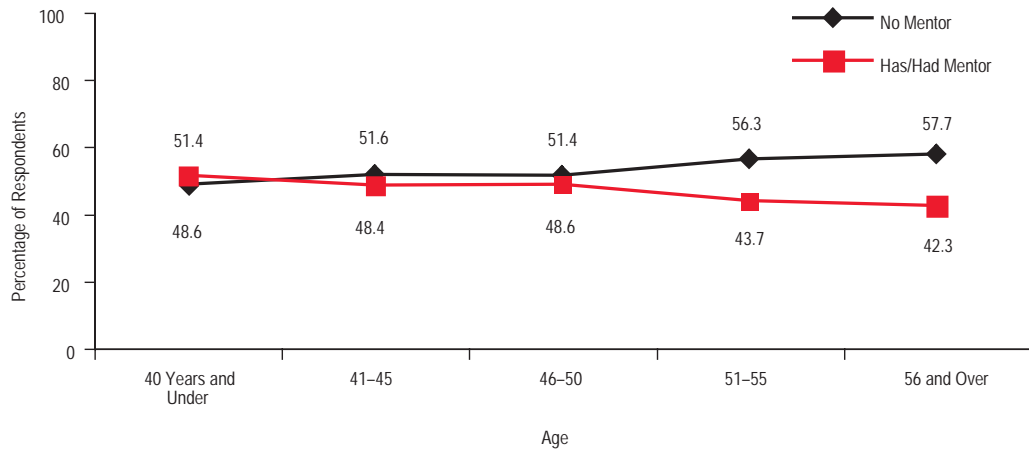
Those who have personally benefited from mentoring often make strong mentorship commitments to their own staffs. Marilu Goodyear now has a mentoring group of middle-manager employees who meet once a month for drinks to discuss problems and issues. She also meets with her middle managers and their supervisors at least twice a year in a mentoring session to talk about their career paths and the skills they need.

Mentoring and Age

We saw other interesting patterns in the data related to mentoring, including a relationship between mentoring and age. As Figure 6-6 shows, respondents under age 51 were more likely to have (or have had) a mentor than respondents over age 50. Looking more closely at this subgroup of individuals under age 51, we discovered that those who have (or have had) a mentor also had significantly higher transformational leadership scores. This suggests a very important finding: that those under age 51 may be gaining transformational leadership skills in part from their mentors.

Turning our attention to individuals over 50, we found that those with higher transformational leadership scores are the senior-most IT leaders rather than those who have had a mentor. Given the short history of IT itself, it is quite possible that those over 50 had no available role models or senior mentors in IT. Those with strong leadership

Figure 6-6.
Relationship
Between Age and
Having a Mentor



behaviors moved into the senior positions and probably learned those behaviors on the job or elsewhere. This may explain why prior studies show that the most effective senior IT leaders have come from outside IT. As Martin Ringle, chief technology officer at Reed College, put it, "You fall into the profession, bringing your wooliness and inventiveness."

We find it promising that individuals 50 years and under do have more mentors and role models than those over 50 years of age, and that, further, this future generation of IT leaders has, and will likely continue to develop, strong transformational behaviors. In the population of respondents under 51 years of age, mentoring appears to make a difference in developing transformational leadership behaviors.

Endnotes

1. J. M. Burns, *Leadership*, Harper & Row, 1978.
2. K. Lowe, K. G. Kroeck, and N. Sivasubramaniam, "Effectiveness Correlates of Transformational and Transactional Leadership: A Meta-Analytic Review of the MLQ Literature," *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1996, pp. 385-425.
3. The MLQ short form (MLQ-6S) was developed by Bernard Bass and Bruce Avolio and is available through the Center for Leadership Studies at Binghamton University as well as several other sources.
4. Adapted from chapter 8 of P. G. Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice* (2nd ed.), Sage Publications, 2001, pp. 131-159.
5. We chose the most conservative approach to creating an overall transformational leadership score; respondents were scored high on their overall transformational leadership score if they scored high on all four behaviors constituting transformational leadership (Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration).