

Mentorship: A Key to Advancing Women in Aviation

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring can be useful across all industries, especially in aviation and aerospace. In industries where women remain significantly underrepresented, mentoring becomes not only beneficial, but necessary.

Despite gradual progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in the global pilot workforce. ICAO and industry sources consistently indicate that **women account for approximately 4–5% of licensed airline pilots worldwide**¹, with some regions reporting even lower participation. This imbalance has remained largely unchanged over the past decade, highlighting that recruitment efforts alone are insufficient to address systemic barriers to entry, progression, and retention.

Addressing this challenge requires targeted, structured interventions that complement recruitment and training initiatives. Mentorship represents one such intervention, offering a practical and scalable mechanism to support women throughout their aviation careers while strengthening workforce sustainability and safety culture.

The lack of female peers and role models can negatively affect confidence, career visibility, and long-term engagement. These effects can be mitigated through structured, supportive mentorship, which provides guidance, perspective, and access to professional networks otherwise difficult to access in traditionally male-dominated environments.

Mentorship can be defined as a relationship between two individuals in which one person provides guidance to help the other achieve personal or professional goals. In a professional context, mentoring supports individuals in progressing from their current position to the position they aspire to reach, particularly by helping them navigate informal systems, career decisions, and leadership pathways.

1. https://www.icao.int/sites/default/files/APAC/Meetings/2023/2023-ADA2023/3-Documents/ICAO-aviation-personnel-and-gender_2023.pdf?utm_source

Not all Member Associations or airlines have established mentorship programs. Prioritizing mentoring is therefore a strategic step toward improving career development, retention, leadership continuity, and gender equity within the aviation profession.

MENTORSHIP IN AVIATION

Workplace mentoring programs have been shown across industries to reduce turnover, improve engagement, and support diversity and inclusion outcomes. In aviation, these benefits are amplified due to the high cost of training, long career timelines, and the safety-critical nature of the profession. Retaining skilled pilots and supporting their development directly contributes to operational stability and safety culture.

For women pilots in particular, mentorship addresses challenges that are not always visible within traditional training or management frameworks. Research cited in the IFALPA Briefing Leaflet *Mentorship, Sponsorship and Women*² indicates that **85% of women benefit from “navigational support”**—guidance on how to progress, whom to approach, and how to make informed career decisions. Mentors play a key role in providing this insight, while sponsors actively advocate for opportunities and visibility.

Successful mentoring programs should therefore address issues specific to women pilots, ensuring they can enter the aviation industry confidently and have access to the resources, knowledge, and support networks needed to navigate challenges unique to them.

MENTORSHIP ACROSS THE PILOT LIFECYCLE

Mentorship can occur at multiple stages of a career, including aspiring pilots considering a career in aviation, during pilot training, newly employed airline pilots, and ongoing professional development within the airline or Pilot Member Association.

This lifecycle-based approach aligns with ICAO's *Next Generation of Aviation Professionals* (NGAP) initiative³, which emphasises coordinated action across attraction, education, development, and retention to ensure a sustainable and diverse aviation workforce. Mentorship supports each of these elements by providing continuity of guidance across career transitions.

² <https://www.ifalpa.org/publications/library/mentorship-sponsorship-and-women-3535>

³ https://aviationbenefits.org/un-sustainable-development-goals/sdg-5-gender-equality/?utm_source

Benefits to Mentees

- Gain leadership attributes and a clearer understanding of leadership as it relates to personal and professional growth
- Learn to apply leadership strategies through exposure to diverse experiences and perspectives
- Receive constructive feedback in areas such as communication, interpersonal skills, technical development, and change management
- Develop clearer focus on what is required for progression within the organization
- Gain insight into organizational culture and informal norms critical for success, enabling faster adaptation
- Expand professional networks within the company or association
- Have a trusted sounding board to share challenges and successes
- Develop the skills and confidence to become future mentors

Benefits to Mentors

- Gain personal satisfaction from contributing to the development of others
- Support the organization by helping build future leaders and role models
- Enhance coaching, communication, and leadership skills
- Re-energize personal career development
- Gain exposure to new perspectives, thinking styles, and generational insights
- Strengthen professional networks based on trust and shared learning
- Contribute positively to organizational culture and safety

BEST PRACTICES AND SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

All mentoring programs share the same core values: sharing information, inspiring others, building connections, and motivating growth. Effective mentoring leverages the

knowledge, skills, and experience of a more seasoned individual to support and guide a mentee's development.

Experience from existing mentorship initiatives indicates that successful programs require clear governance, administrative support, and appropriate resourcing. As highlighted in the IFALPA Briefing Leaflet, mentorship programs should not rely solely on informal arrangements, but instead be supported by defined processes, trained mentors, and regular review mechanisms to ensure consistency and sustainability.

When defining success in mentor relationships, it's important to consider each distinct role and how best to use them throughout career planning and progression. Mentoring is distinct from tutoring, training, teaching, or formal coaching. A mentor does not need to be a qualified trainer or a subject matter expert in every area. Rather, an effective mentor should have the ability to listen and ask questions that will challenge the mentee to identify the course of action that needs to be taken regarding the mentee's own development.

The most successful mentorship practices are voluntary and based on active participation between the mentor and the mentee. Both mentors and mentees must be willing to commit time, listen openly, and engage in mutual learning. Mentorship cannot be forced; its effectiveness relies on trust, openness, and sustained engagement.

POSITION

IFALPA believes that mentorship is a critical workforce development tool for advancing women in aviation and calls on airlines and Member Associations to implement structured, culturally aware, and voluntary mentorship programs as part of their long-term workforce strategies. Mentorship provides female pilots with access to role models, professional guidance, and supportive networks that are critical in an environment where women remain underrepresented. By fostering these relationships, organizations can promote career development, retention, leadership growth, and gender equity.

This position is aligned with ICAO's Gender Equality Programme, which encourages States and industry stakeholders to take concrete actions to remove barriers to women's participation across all aviation domains, as well as ICAO Assembly resolutions supporting gender equality and workforce sustainability. IFALPA asserts that prioritizing mentorship is not optional, but a strategic imperative for the future of the profession.

CONCLUSION

In summary, mentorship is pivotal in advancing pilots at every career stage whilst fostering a supportive environment. The distinct roles of mentors amplify this impact, creating a dynamic support system also crucial for the advancement of women pilots.

This paper provides practical action steps to help guide tailored mentorship initiatives, ensuring cultural sensitivity and effective communication. By adhering to these principles, organizations create adaptable programs that addresses the specific needs of women pilots. Best practices highlight active engagement, voluntarism, and a commitment to lifelong learning, all supporting career advancement.

By adopting structured mentorship initiatives supported by clear governance and measurable outcomes, airlines and Member Associations can take immediate, meaningful action to strengthen their pilot workforce. Mentorship not only supports individual development but contributes to broader industry goals of safety, leadership continuity, and sustainability.

Annex 1

PURPOSE

The following action steps are intended to support airlines and Member Associations in implementing mentorship programs in a practical, scalable, and culturally adaptable manner. These steps may be implemented incrementally and tailored to local operational and organisational contexts.

ACTION STEPS TO HELP SET UP A MENTORING PROGRAM

1. Tailor the Program to Specific Cultures and Individuals

- Conduct a thorough assessment of the existing organizational culture
- Identify the unique needs and preferences of both mentors and mentees
- Customize the program structure, content, and format to align with the cultural context and individual requirements

2. Clearly Define Expectations for Mentors and Mentees

- Develop a comprehensive mentorship handbook or guide outlining the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for both mentors and mentees
- Clearly communicate the objectives of the program and the anticipated outcomes for participants
- Host orientation sessions to ensure all participants understand their roles and responsibilities

3. Establish a Platform for Record-Keeping and an Application Process

- Consider Implementing a secure online platform or database for mentorship program management
- Create a user-friendly application process for mentors and mentees to express their interest in participating
- Include criteria for matching mentors and mentees based on skills, experience, and goals

4. Train Mentors to be Effective

- Develop a mentor training curriculum that covers effective communication, active listening, goal setting, and advocacy skills
- Provide resources and guidance on addressing diversity and inclusion issues specific to the aviation industry
- Consider workshops or seminars to enhance mentors' skills and leadership abilities
- Create a toolbox for mentor use (effective resources)

5. Promote the Program Through Various Channels

- Utilize email newsletters and internal communications to raise awareness about the program
- Share the mentors' availability to training organisations
- Use social media platforms to reach a wider audience, sharing success stories
- Organize roadshows within the organization, featuring informational sessions and Q&A opportunities
- Conduct school visits to inspire aspiring pilots and promote mentorship opportunities
- Sponsor and actively participate in local aviation events to promote the mentorship program

6. Maintain Open Communication with Mentors and Mentees

- Establish regular check-ins and feedback sessions for mentors and mentees to discuss their experiences
- Foster an open-door policy for participants to voice concerns, ask questions, or seek guidance
- Facilitate networking where mentors and mentees can interact informally

7. Conduct Regular Reviews Through Anonymous Surveys

- Consider surveys as a method of collecting feedback on the mentorship program
- Distribute surveys at regular intervals to assess participant satisfaction, identify areas for improvement, and measure the achievement of program goals
- Analyze survey data to make informed adjustments to the program structure and content

8. Allow Mentors and Mentees to Opt Out or Change Partners

- Provide a mechanism for participants to request a change in mentorship partners, ensuring flexibility and compatibility
- Consider exit interviews or surveys for those opting out to gather insights for continuous program improvement

By following some or all of these detailed action steps, a robust and adaptable mentoring program can be tailored to the needs of all pilots in different stages of their careers. In the absence of a union, company-driven mentorship programs should remain voluntary for both mentors and mentees. Goals should be established to define the success of the program, respecting the best practices outlined in this paper. In the simplest form, mentorship is a voluntary and openminded meeting between two individuals.

To ensure effectiveness and sustainability, organisations are encouraged to establish simple success indicators such as participation rates, qualitative feedback from mentors and mentees, and retention or progression outcomes. Regular review of these indicators enables continuous improvement and demonstrates organisational commitment to mentorship as a long-term investment.

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