

Big Brothers Big Sisters NYC leader on the lasting benefits of mentorship



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By Raina Lipsitz

Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC, founded in 1904, is the country's first and the city's largest youth mentoring organization.

Alicia Guevara, the first woman to lead the organization, says she feels incredibly privileged to serve young people and advance diversity, equity and inclusion in her professional life. The businesses most likely to succeed at recruiting and retaining talented, diverse staff are those with "a willingness to embrace [employees] in their fullness," she says. As a mother of two young children, she understands the need for and is proud of having created policies that offer much-needed support to her staff members and their families.

Guevara spoke with *Crain's* about how mentorship can yield profound and lasting benefits for mentors and mentees alike.

BBBS of NYC pairs “Littles” (young people from ages 7 to 22) with “Bigs” (adult mentors). How do adults benefit from these relationships?

The benefits to the mentors are tremendous. Very often I’ll hear mentors say they get so much more out of the program than they give. Ninety-six percent of the volunteers in our workplace mentoring program say that they made a meaningful difference to the young people they mentored. There’s also a tremendous direct impact to them in terms of business benefits. Research has found that employees reported almost 30% higher career and job satisfaction when their companies support mentoring, compared to those that don’t. It certainly contributes to increased job retention, and many of our mentors find it increases access to promotion as well.

How do you find the right mentors for the young people who request them?

I would define the right mentor as someone who is caring, compassionate, and invested in making a consistent commitment in the life of a young person, someone who’s committed to igniting potential and investing in the inherent potential of others, especially young people. Our ideal mentors have a readiness to enter into a relationship and a readiness to listen, to coach and to express empathy. Beyond recruitment, Big Brothers Big Sisters also extends support and training through our qualified staff. We have youth development professionals who understand the demands and the experiences of our mentors and are able to very thoughtfully match them with Littles who have similar career interests and aspirations.

What does power mean to you and how does it connect to BBBS of NYC’s mission?

To me, power is exercising the influence and the license to make a difference. And that’s precisely what we do by investing in a mentoring relationship. What we offer the mentor is an opportunity to ignite potential for the mentee, and for the mentee, what we offer is their own Big, through whom they can lean into their own inherent potential and power. Not only do I see [power] as leaning into your influence and your license to make a lasting difference, but [it’s also] a responsibility to ensure lasting impact.

POWER MARKS

EMPLOYEES 100

ON HER RÉSUMÉ Chief executive officer, Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC; executive director of Part of the Solution; executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Brooklyn Children’s Museum; executive director at Year Up New York

BORN Manhattan

GREW UP Fordham, Bronx

RESIDES Riverdale, Bronx

EDUCATION Bachelor of Arts in political science and history from Columbia University and executive education certificate in nonprofit management from Columbia University’s Business School

BREAKING THE MOLD Guevara is the first woman to lead BBBS of NYC in its 119-year history.

Do the people paired through Big Brothers Big Sisters stay in touch?

Our matches stay together for a little over three years on average, and it's not unusual to find pairs who have been together for decades, where the young person serves as the best person in the Big's wedding or the Big is there for all of the major milestones in that young person's life, everything from graduation to entering college to signing their first apartment lease and accepting their first job offer.

What can Bigs do to make their Littles feel comfortable and eager to engage?

The first is to listen. And to ensure that mentorship continues to be a vehicle through which young people can feel safe and receive a sense of security, especially in the workplace, where that sense of safety and security can mitigate the isolation that sometimes surfaces in a professional environment. I ask our mentors to be open to what our Littles are interested in exploring and not have the expectation that they're going to do it exactly the way you did. The invitation is to stand with that young person and explore opportunities alongside them.

BBBS of NYC serves 2,532 young people across all five boroughs. Roughly 97% of the young people it serves identify as people of color. After being paired with a mentor, 97% advance to the next grade and 93% are accepted into college.

Besides a lack of mentors, what are the biggest obstacles to success for the young people you serve?

For many of the young people that we serve, access and opportunity have been limited by systemic obstacles. And what mentorship offers is a leveling. Mentorship creates equity in a way that increases access and opportunity for young people. What a young person gains through mentoring is another member in their circle who is committed to them, who believes in them and believes in their potential. That experience of having someone believe in you can be so incredibly grounding and boosting for one's self-confidence and belief in self.

What do young people get from mentors that they can't necessarily get from their families?

Our families are very much part of the experience. We see the mentors as a complement to the family unit. Often our Littles are the "first" in their families: They may be first-generation Americans or first-generation high school graduates or college students. And so they may not have someone in their immediate families who can serve as a reference through their personal experience. What they gain from their Big is someone who has a personal experience of having completed a goal that our Littles are focused on or been challenged in the ways that our Littles are being challenged.

Mentors typically have more power than mentees. How can organizations ensure that mentees get as much out of the relationship as mentors?

It's about centering the young person and ensuring that there is a commitment to center the interests, the needs, the aspirations, the goals, the challenges of the person being mentored. For mentors, entering the relationship with an awareness that there is so much for them to learn creates a leveling and increases equity in the relationship . . . having that awareness really shifts whatever preconceived power dynamic may have been there. Our most successful relationships are not predicated on a savior complex; quite the contrary, the most successful relationships are those where our Little and the Big enter on equal footing.

Do you think mentorship is more effective when mentors and mentees share a racial and either an ethnic or gender identity or both? Why or why not?

I think that it is critically important that each of us sees reflections of ourselves in the roles that we aspire to. And for young people in particular, it is important that they see reflections of themselves and their diverse identities in positions of authority and success. That said, what's most important in a mentoring relationship is that there be identified commonalities, identified shared interests, whether or not those span race- or gender-based identities. And it's equally important that when those [shared identities] aren't there, there will be other shared interests to anchor [the relationship].

A 2019 [paper](#) on “Experiences of Cross-Racial Trust in Mentoring Relationships” found that students of color often prefer mentors of color but can't always find them. How can white mentors build meaningful and productive relationships with young people of color?

What that really points to is a need for increased representation across all business sectors. All sectors are embracing that need, and the businesses that are succeeding at closing those representational gaps are doing so by investing in programs like mentorship that help identify and support emerging talent in their full professional development. What I would offer to any mentor who is committed to a young person is to take an interest in understanding that young person's culture—not just their interests, but really invest in learning about their culture and identities. Suspend the urge to relate and lean into the opportunity to learn.

A 2019 survey conducted by [LeanIn.Org](#) found that 60% of male managers in the U.S. were uncomfortable mentoring female colleagues. How can organizations foster productive working relationships between colleagues regardless of gender?

2019 was the year that I arrived at BBBS of NYC and I'm the first woman to fill the seat as CEO. I

understand, have experienced and can relate to some of the lack of representation that my gender has experienced in roles of authority. But I would also venture to say that I have benefited tremendously from male-identifying mentors. What has been most effective is anchoring in the commonalities. In the workplace, those tend to be around career experience or aspiration and workplace culture. At BBBS we have removed gender as the leading indicator for making matches. Today we focus more on shared interests, shared aspirations, and identifying the commonalities beyond gender that our Littles and their Bigs are most interested in exploring.

Do young people tend to request Bigs who share their gender?

I think young people want someone they can identify with and gender isn't always the leading indicator. It may be that we have a young man who's interested in being paired with a specialist in aeronautics. And if that happens to be a woman, then what becomes most important is their accomplishment and their experience. Or we may have a [female] Little who really wants to be paired with a mentor who speaks her native language, and that may be a male mentor and that's OK too. One of the ways in which removing gender matching has been beneficial to our Littles is that it [helps support] our LGBTQ community. [That said], we are always looking for male mentors. While we welcome all mentors, we're finding that we have an increased need for male mentors and especially men of color.

How have you benefited from mentorship in your own life?

I am someone who benefited from mentorship in the early stages of my development, in my home, in my schooling and certainly in the workplace. And my mentors didn't always look like me and weren't always the same gender, but undoubtedly they were people who were invested in my potential and created access and opportunity for me. And that is what Big Brothers Big Sisters does every day: We match young people with caring, compassionate adults who are invested in their potential. A commonality that we see is that [our volunteers] want to find a way to give back what was offered to them and make the same difference [in others' lives].