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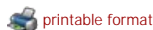
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## Making Connections Through Peer Groups

Women-only mentoring groups are gaining traction and helping women tackle both personal and professional issues.

by Cynthia Krischer Goodman

**It's the first Tuesday of the month** and a half-dozen women are gathered in discussion, their BlackBerry's muted, around a long table in a Miami conference room. On this particular day, Kim Stone, executive vice president and general manager of the American Airlines Arena, presents a plan for how she will draw more business to her facility. The women chime in, offering suggestions based on their own efforts to lure customers during the recession. By the time Stone leaves, she has tweaked her strategy, adding a few elements, including the idea of packaging arena events with overnight hotel stays.



"As a woman, when you assume the higher ranks, there are fewer and fewer of you around," says Kim Stone, right, with Jodi Cross [Photo: Donna Victor]

The gathering embodies a trend: Peer-mentoring, long a feature of the broader business world, is finding a new expression in women-only groups that are forming all over Florida. The groups typically consist of between six and 20 upper-level executives and business owners who meet monthly for a few hours at a time.

No single organization is behind the trend; the mentoring efforts have spun out of a number of existing women's organizations as businesswomen network and turn to each other for practical advice and personal support. The women at the Miami gathering, for example, are all members of the Florida branch of The Commonwealth Institute, a non-profit group for women entrepreneurs and executives that now operates six forums in Miami-Dade and Broward counties and will launch one in Palm Beach County this summer. Elsewhere, the Women Presidents' Organization, with chapters in Miami and Tampa Bay, also recruits high-level women executives for its roundtables; the Florida Women's Business Center operates mentoring circles for profitable business owners in Fort Lauderdale, Fort Myers, Melbourne and Jacksonville.

While the formation of the groups reflects the fact that more women have entered the ranks of top management and entrepreneurs, it also indicates how few women are in major leadership roles, particularly in the executive ranks and boardrooms of public companies and major law firms. In 2008, for example, only 7.4% of the board seats at the 150 largest public companies in Florida were held by women — "the same level as in 2007 but significantly down from 2006 (8.7%)," according to the Women Executive Leadership group, which works to link qualified women executives with companies needing directors.

That dynamic leaves many women searching for what they consider a true peer group. "As a woman, when you assume the higher ranks, there are fewer and fewer of you around," says Stone. "Sometimes it's good to have people at the same level outside your company to get good ideas and help with strategy."

Rosemary DiDio Brehm, president of turningpoints2results and a founder of the Tampa Bay chapter of the Women Presidents' Organization, also cites the "I'm-not-alone" factor. "Most of the time, when someone brings up an issue they are dealing with, others will say, 'I'm dealing with the same issue and here's how I'm handling it.'"

One difference some notice between women's peer-mentoring groups and all-male or mixed-gender groups is the willingness of women to share personal information and problems in a group setting. In one recent forum, an owner discussed her hesitancy about her pending marriage and its potential effect on her business. "These women have work-related issues and home-related issues. One impacts the other," says Jodi Cross, executive director of The Commonwealth Institute/South Florida. "They look to their peers for help to meld the two."

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**jn** It's absolutely needed and any negative side-effects are worth it.

**jn** It's a complicated balancing act. I need more specifics on the legislation.

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