

## Building Bridges: A Powerful Partnership in Diverse Mentorship

By: Tephania Hopper, Schriever SFB DEIA Coordinator

Programs that focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) are essential for promoting a more diverse and inclusive workplace. As a black woman in the DEIA Coordinator position, I've experienced firsthand the challenges that come with being underrepresented in the workforce. Fortunately, having a mentor who believes in your abilities and advocates for your success can make all the difference. My mentor, John McKinley, is a white man. At first, I was hesitant to approach him, but our unlikely pairing has proven to be a valuable asset to my career development. He has not only helped me develop my skills and knowledge but has also introduced me to valuable connections and opportunities. Through his guidance, I have been able to overcome obstacles and achieve goals that I once thought were out of reach.

As a black woman in the workforce, it's reassuring to know that I have a mentor who understands many of the challenges I face and is willing to help me navigate them. Our conversations about DEIA topics have been enlightening for both of us, and I appreciate his willingness to learn about my unique perspective. Mentorship programs that focus on DEIA can help bridge the gap between different backgrounds and identities in the workplace. It's not always easy to find a mentor who shares your values and understands your unique perspective, but the benefits of having a mentor who does are immeasurable.

In a study by the Center for Talent Innovation, it was found that many black women feel that they need to prove themselves and work harder than others to advance in their careers. This can lead to feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome, which can be incredibly challenging to overcome. Having a mentor who can be empathetic to these feelings is crucial for overcoming them.



John McKinley, Schriever SFB Mission Support Director  
Tephania Hopper, Schriever SFB DEIA Coordinator

Photo by Dalton Prejeant, Schriever SFB Multimedia

I truly believe that having a mentor who comes from a different background can be an incredibly valuable asset in career development. My own experiences with my mentor have shown me how much wisdom and insight can be gained from working with someone who has a unique perspective and a different set of life experiences. With the right mentor by your side, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve your goals, no matter what your background or identity may be.

## Mentee Perspective



**Tephania Hopper, Schriever SFB DEIA Coordinator**

Photo by Dalton Prejeant, Schriever SFB Multimedia

The day I met John McKinley, Schriever's Mission Support Director, was one that I will never forget. Initially, I sensed that he was a bit reserved, but we quickly connected over our mutual frustration with the snow in Colorado Springs. During one of the Family Days at Schriever Space Force Base, we were some of the only individuals in the office, and I had my music playing a little loud. John surprised me by recognizing the song by SWV and politely requested that I lower the volume. From there, we began to chat more about my role as the DEIA Coordinator, and John was always supportive in offering helpful advice whenever I needed it.

As we continued working together, I discovered more about John's impressive career and unwavering dedication to supporting others. His exemplary leadership skills and willingness to go above and beyond for his colleagues and employees have inspired me. He encouraged me to strive for excellence in my role. Moreover, I appreciate how approachable he is, always making time to listen to my concerns or ideas. He has become my mentor and friend, and I am grateful for the bond we have forged.

## Mentor Perspective

As Tephania stated, she is a black woman, and I am a white man; however, race and gender were not at the forefront of my mind when we first met and during our initial conversations. Over time, though, as we shared more about our life experiences, it was important to appreciate how race and gender shaped each other's lives personally and professionally. Through thoughtfully listening to each other, asking questions, and even challenging perceptions or ideas at times, Tephania and I have developed a deep level of trust. I value what she brings to the team as our Diversity & Inclusion Coordinator and am grateful for her contributions to my continuing professional development.

Tephania and I never discussed establishing a mentor-mentee relationship. This professional relationship just came about through our conversations. I prefer this to the formal mentorship programs that organizations put in place. These programs, which can be a good starting point, typically designate the mentor, the mentee, and the specific roles of each. A meaningful mentor-mentee relationship is not so straightforward, it can be quite fluid. For example, in certain conversations, Tephania serves more as a mentor by way of sharing her professional insights on a topic. She can offer her unique perspective and be a sounding board just as I can on other topics. In short, we learn from each other.



**John McKinley, Schriever SFB Mission Support Director**

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