

I Am Why's Mentorship Model:

**A Nested Ecosystem of
Intergenerational
Learning and Growth
White Paper**

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**I AM WHY. YOUNG WOMEN
LEAD THE WAY TO JUSTICE**

www.iamwhy.org

Introduction

I Am Why's mission is to bring young women and gender-expansive activists together with researchers and other partners to celebrate young activists' strengths and stories, increase their individual and collective power, and catalyze a power shift to advance their visions for policy and justice. We accomplish this by centering emerging leaders of color ages 17-26 with lived experience in disruptive systems, and providing an activist space where they can claim their personal and collective voice.

Mentorship is the core of our work. Mentorship allows us to ground our relationships in meeting folks where they are, understanding their learning curves and setting goals that lead to growth. This is essential to the development of emerging leaders as we learn to create new systems that are by us and for us.

I Am Why began as an intergenerational organization with elders and youth coming together to develop and implement a shared vision of mentorship and growth. At I Am Why, we mentor hands, minds and hearts—expanding the power of young women and gender-expansive activists by uplifting their collective knowledge, sharing and sharpening skills, and building relationships. Our mentorship model uses a nested, interdependent and adaptive framework that reflects our values, theory of change and organizational structure.

“I’ve had several unofficial mentorships in my life, but I found the ones at I Am Why to be the most influential. None of my past mentorships have been as extensive as the ones I gained in I Am Why.”

–Aliyah



Overview of I Am Why's Nested Mentorship Ecosystem

Our mentorship program represents I Am Why's broader organizational values of humility, authenticity, centering young women and gender-expansive youth, working in partnership, basing our work in research, and working in an iterative and reflective way. It is consistent with the restorative lens we apply to all our work.

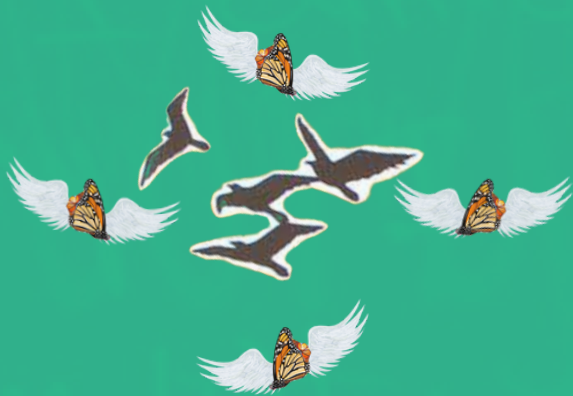
Young women and gender-expansive activists enter I Am Why by participating in our power-expanding workshops centered on storytelling and visual representation. These workshops are offered through our partnerships with community-based organizations across the country. Youth then can become I Am Why consultants who are independent contractors working under six-month contracts, which typically run for three cycles (18 months total). During that time consultants are offered a range of mentorship opportunities:







Mutual 1:1 Mentorship: Mentorship pairs are created with two consultants who may be age peers or intergenerational. Matches are made based on mutual interests, balance of skills, and learning goals. Mentorship pairs set mutual and individual goals and meet weekly.



Group/Peer Mentoring: Within I Am Why's four learning pods, consultants share skills and experience and set norms for working in professional spaces. I Am Why also offers group trainings and professional development on a range of skills such as restorative practice, policy advocacy and writing for social change. Our Motherhood Support Group (a sub-group of the Reproductive Justice pod) is a collective space for system-impacted young mothers to share experiences, knowledge and inspiration. Through these collective learning and support spaces, peers develop organic, reciprocal and trusted mentoring relationships.



Mentorship in Action: Based on their interests, consultants join learning pods to work on specific issues and policies as part of I Am Why's broader organizational plan.

-  Embrace Creative Freedom creates a space to embrace poetry skills and apply them to social justice work.
-  Self-Advocacy looks at how to use advocacy skills rooted in narrative and research to change local policy.
-  Speak On Us explores ways to build communication skills through research and writing, and to utilize lived experience to create tools for social justice change and policy.
-  Reproductive Justice focuses on the right to determine one's own sexuality, gender, work and reproductive choices.

Each pod is led by young activists and advised by elders. Peer, group and 1:1 mentorship happens in real time through this shared, project-based activism.

I Am Why's Mentorship Framework

Our mentorship model is rooted in a nested, interdependent and adaptive framework.

Nested: I Am Why offers nested layers of mentorship built into our organizational structure, which provide support when needed and also allow for growth so that consultants can leave the nest when they feel ready to fly. These nested layers include:

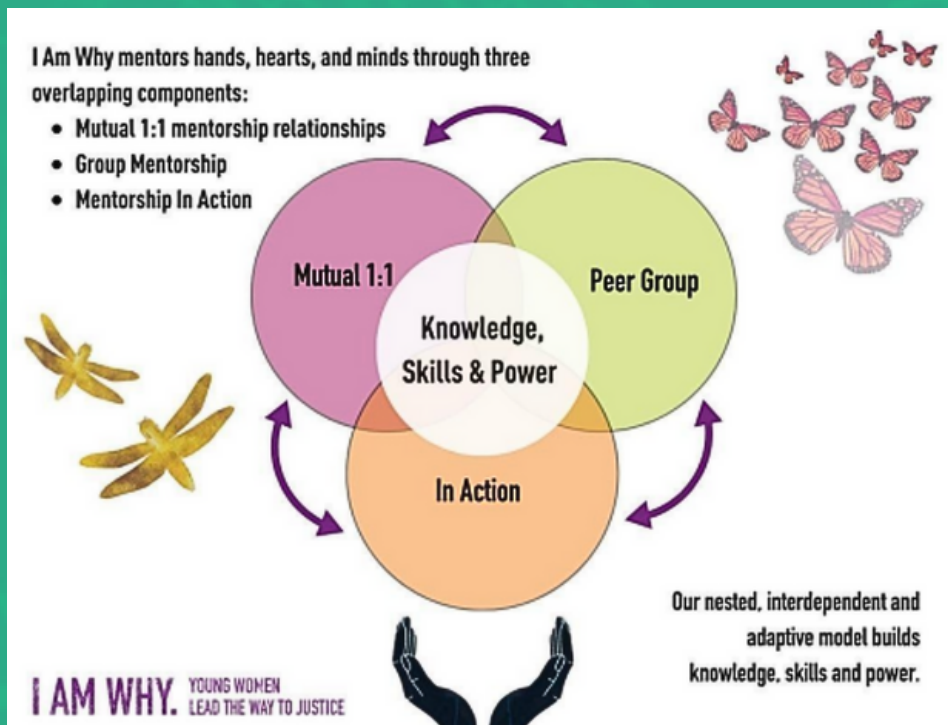
- Opportunities to mentor and be mentored;
- Growth opportunities through different mentorship “tiers”; and
- Different kinds of mentorship, including 1:1 (longer-term intensive mentorship), peer (mentorship relationships/partnerships between experienced consultants and newer consultants), group/team (learning pods with multiple young people and one or more elders), reverse (younger mentoring older), and flash (short, project-focused mentorship).

Interdependent and Decentralized: At I Am Why we lean on community and reflect our lives, experiences and expertise through our shared work. We are a multidirectional web of relationships,¹ weaving from different angles to shape an organization rooted in shared power through mentorship. This means:

- All people in mentorship relationships have wisdom to share and areas for growth, and we can all learn through our reciprocal process.²
- Intergenerational relationships create connections between generations to lift up the wisdom of both youth and elders.³ As elders learn from youth, they are better able to support young people’s professional development.
- We lean into shared power, acknowledging that one mentor group with centralized power does not reflect our values. We share the responsibility of decentralization among all of I Am Why.

Adaptive:⁴ At I Am Why we move as we need to move, meeting people where they are and honoring all our experiences. We adapt to meet the needs of all our consultants, youth and elders, with different capacities and different goals.

- We are flexible, and adjust our mentorship programming as we learn from our community.
- We know that one size does not fit all and are not constrained by a singular mentorship practice. We create pairings and groups that support the growth of emerging leaders within a range of spaces that reflect the varied experiences, needs and goals of our youth.



What Differentiates I Am Why's Mentorship Model?



We focus on professional mentorship of **transitional age youth** 17-26,⁵ which allows us to combine concepts of both youth and professional development and have an impact at a particularly critical stage of individual growth and young adulthood.



We focus on **young women and gender-expansive** young people, particularly **youth of color**, and our three-pronged model uplifts **intersectional lived experience**.



Our ecosystem creates space for mentorships rooted in **shared experience and joint action**, through which we practice and apply new skills in a supportive and activist environment.



We **openly examine typical power dynamics** in mentoring relationships (see addendum), working to develop critical consciousness of the role of power in our relationships and those we encounter as we work to create change.

Literature Review: The Research Base for I Am Why's Mentorship Ecosystem

Building on a range of well-researched strategies and models, I Am Why has created a mentorship ecosystem that is specifically tailored to the needs and goals of young women and gender-expansive activists of color. At the same time, evaluation of our mentorship model can fill a gap in the literature on professional mentorship, where there is scant research on mentorship for transition-age (17-26) women and gender-expansive youth of color with lived experience in disruptive systems.

Professional and Academic Models: I Am Why's mentorship program is supported by key principles and approaches emerging in professional and academic spaces.



In line with increasing advocacy by scholars to let go of the "expert/novice" binary in mentorship, I Am Why treats mentorship as a mutual experience where the mentor is a **critical friend and learner**⁶ on an equal level, offering their experience and perspective while also seeking learning and growth for themselves—building "power with" rather than engaging in "power over."⁷



Research supports our **two-way or co-mentoring** approach to 1:1 mentoring relationships: Regardless of status, both people in the mentoring relationship act as peers and engage in bi-directional, synergistic mentorship rooted in humility and continued learning.⁸



We use **nested or hybrid multi-mentoring**, which scholars describe as a **fluid, non-hierarchical, partnership** model involving a community of people networked in "collegial relationships of mutual benefit" where people provide reciprocal support based on their respective expertise.⁹ This pushes back against the paternalism, dependency and power imbalances that can arise in traditional one-directional mentorship pairs¹⁰ and nurtures relationships that are "multiple, malleable, contingent and dynamic."¹¹



We build **intergenerational relationships**, supported by a growing body of research recognizing that both age and youth bring their own wisdom: "Everyone leads, everyone learns."¹²

Youth Empowerment Models: Successful youth development mentorship stresses youth competencies, and instead of hand-holding and direction, works to increase supportive and empowering environments for youth that will in turn create opportunities for building skills.¹³





Emerging adulthood, which is the age focus of I Am Why, has been identified as a critical stage for mentorship because of new independence, risk and opportunities;¹⁴ however, most youth mentorship is focused on younger adolescents and teens. By offering mentorship during emerging adulthood I Am Why "can create experiences that help young people learn to navigate challenges, communicate with others, ask for help, and try again" in a **healthy environment of safety and support**.¹⁵





Achieving **self-determination**—control and agency over one's decisions and life—is a necessary part of career growth and a key component of economic mobility for emerging adults.¹⁶ I Am Why's provision of mentorship in a professional space during the emerging adult stage helps young people achieve growth and progress by developing hard and soft skills, honing executive functioning, identifying their career goals, and working toward goals with intention and purpose.¹⁷


Credible Messenger Models: While I Am Why’s mentorship model is not a credible messenger program,¹⁸ the research uplifting the value of shared lived experience in mentorship supports the approach of I Am Why’s peer and group mentorship.¹⁹

 The “team-based culture” of “shared accountability and support”²⁰ at the heart of credible messaging is also a key component of I Am Why’s mentorship: **Peers with shared life experiences find fellowship** with one another through team-based work, aspire toward common visions of justice, support one another’s growth, and collectively create an **environment of responsibility and professionalism**.


 Like credible messaging, I Am Why’s mentorship program is **fluid and flexible**: We meet young people where they are and adapt to a person’s here and now.²¹ This creates space for growth and healing—which is especially important for young women and gender-expansive youth of color with systems experience—and balances goals and expectations with the ebbs and flows of emerging adulthood.


 I Am Why provides “**supportive employment**” akin to that in credible messaging. We employ youth as consultants in a space of nested mentorship from peers and elders where young people have access to flexible “ladders of opportunity.”²²

 Credible messaging’s emphasis on **lived experience as data and expertise**²³ is an element at the core of our peer and group mentorship spaces, where shared backgrounds and experiences nurture trust and **deep connections rooted in authenticity**,²⁴ and enable young people to draw on their own experience in the service of others.²⁵


 A focus on professional as well as personal development is fundamental to both credible messaging and I Am Why’s mentorship model.²⁶ We offer mentorship from **elder advisors**—established professionals with particular content expertise—who help young people sharpen particular skills, build their capacity, better market themselves in the career space, and grow professional connections.

Ethics and Power Dynamics in Mentoring: The literature on critical mentorship is reflective of I Am Why’s approach to mentoring, especially in its framing of mentoring at the heart of youth-led liberation work.²⁷

 I Am Why intentionally considers the power dynamics present in typical mentorship models (see addendum) and we place young people at the center of our process, “challenging norms of adult and institutional authority and notions of saviorism.”²⁸ Being **authentically youth-centric** means recognizing the capability of young people, and mentoring youth in leadership spaces where they can exercise **meaningful decision-making power**.²⁹

 Critical mentoring is rooted in **critical consciousness**—an awareness of the context in which oppression occurs—and critical mentoring seeks to “decolonize mentorship,”³⁰ leveraging mentorship to address the root causes of oppression, rather than manage symptoms of oppression.³¹ We apply the lens of critical consciousness to confront power imbalances in our mentoring relationships; promote humility and learning among those in positions of privilege; and deliberately shift power to young people with lived experience by increasing their knowledge, skills, capacity and connections.³²

 Challenging colonized ideals also means **prioritizing cultures of self-care**, community-care and wellbeing over cultures of hyper-productivity.³³

 **Reciprocity**—meaning that the focal point of the mentorship is relationship-building, rather than “helping”—is another key consideration related to power and ethics.³⁴ With a foundation of **authentic, trusting relationships** that prioritize self-determination, both young people and elders at I Am Why can push themselves into new spaces and try new skills knowing they have a nest of support to catch them if they fall.

Conclusion

I Am Why's mentorship model fills an existing gap by focusing on professional mentorship of transition-age young women and gender-expansive youth of color with lived experience in disruptive systems. Through our mentorship model, we aim to support young people as they shift and build power, deepen skills, establish competence and strive toward economic mobility. Importantly, I Am Why is a learning organization:³⁵ We study and evaluate our own mentorship model and apply our learnings in an iterative process. We continue to hone our mentorship model as we learn so we can best support the needs and interests of our young people.

“I Am Why mentorships have helped me become a full individual, and I have been able to witness others grow. I am now motivated to push other people to be the best they can be.”

–La’Nesha

I Am Why's Mentorship Model

Addendum on Power and Mentorship

By Aliyah Young

Introduction

Creating safe and successful mentorships requires trust, which can be established by decentralizing power within mentoring relationships. To accomplish this, I Am Why facilitates interdependent, decentralized and adaptive mentorships that nurture participants' growth and their activism. Within each mentorship there is a complex web of power that shapes the relationship. This addendum explores the issue of power in mentorships through analysis of data I Am Why collected from a series of interviews in 2023 about mentoring relationships throughout the organization. Our research revealed the following themes:

Theme 1: Mentoring relationships are dependent on trust, relatability and shared purpose.



There "needs to be foundational relationship-building to connect and really understand where [we both] are coming from." -Felicia



"My mentor's/mentee's life experiences differ greatly from my own. However, we were able to establish a bond based on common interests such as activism." -Aliyah



"[Despite the age difference between my mentor and me, we had] similar childhood experiences and career paths. We both used our experiences to progress further and we established a strong bond because of that." -La'Nesha

Finding common values and experiences within mentoring relationships is essential; this allows participants to establish meaningful relationships and trust. Mentorship participants will often have differing backgrounds and experiences. These differences can influence power dynamics within the relationship, making it critical for power imbalances and personal agency to be acknowledged. When participants are openly wary of power, it builds safe and intentional relationships. Similarly, supporting agency and autonomy can redistribute power within these relationships. I Am Why encourages participants to utilize their agency to build trust, find common ground and decentralize power.

Theme 2: Systems of power and structural inequities shape mentorship participants and relationships.



"It's not a power thing if you lay out the right foundation. ... [My mentors] don't use their power against me because they are open to giving back. ... It also depends on...how the mentee moves in their own power." -Ebony



"[At I Am Why we are trying to] figure out power—what does it look like, what are concrete active steps to shared power, [how do we] identify the roles and the final say. ... It is important to be super intentional. Power looks different in a meeting or how a meeting is run versus the structure of power within a person, place or thing." -Felicia



"Power is related to decision-making and if someone is not in a powerful decision-making [position] then it can feel [hierarchical]. It needs to be clear when decisions are being made and why. ... [It is important to] recognize your power and take a step back." -Nadia



"The non-hierarchical nature of the mentor/mentee relationships at I Am Why creates reciprocal relationships with the consultants in I Am Why. Everyone has an opportunity to learn." -Lauren

Mentoring relationships do not exist in a vacuum; therefore, systems and social identities should be acknowledged as they relate to power. Advantages and disadvantages inherited from systems of power impact individual participants, which affects their relationships. However, automatically assuming stereotypical power dynamics can reinforce the systems we are trying to dismantle. It is key for all participants in a mentoring relationship to be cognizant of systemic power dynamics, structural inequities and how those realities influence the distribution of power within an organization and relationship. I Am Why creates space within mentoring relationships and the whole organization to openly explore and challenge traditional notions of power, and thereby enable growth in multiple directions.

Reciprocal Intergenerational Mentorship Can Shift Power

- “Everyone, regardless of age or education, can teach you something.” -La’Nesha
- “[I Am Why mentorships are] different because you start to reflect on your purpose and attitude of learning. ... [W]hen [you are] a certain age or experience they assume that you are...coming in to teach. However, I learned that I was the one learning a lot.” -Felicia
- “Both of my mentors/mentees were older than me. There were several advantages to our age gaps. They offered different perspectives and support.” -Aliyah
- “Everyone is a mentor because everyone can learn from [any]one.” -Ebony

Older or more experienced participants in a mentoring relationship are often placed in positions of power. While older participants may have a wealth of knowledge to offer, age is not synonymous with experience. Each person in a mentoring relationship has invaluable lived experiences and unique perspectives that enrich mentorships. Encouraging reciprocal intergenerational relationships and recognizing the value added by younger participants can foster adaptable and equitable relationships. I Am Why intentionally develops intergenerational mentoring relationships to elevate the knowledge of youth and bridge the gap between generations

“[I Am Why’s] mission of connecting to [our consultants’] narrative[s] is rooted in their community; and as a mentor I feel like their needs [are] foundational [to] relationship-building.”

-Felicia



Theme 3: The way participants communicate shapes the structure of the mentoring relationship and professionalism within the work space.



"[In my I Am Why mentorships,] I was able to develop friendships, discuss my personal accomplishments and struggles, and workshop my skills as a consultant." -Aliyah



"Communication is key. ... I communicate with people and I expect the person to communicate back to me [with] a level of honesty and honor [so we can] support each other." -Felicia



"I allow my mentor/mentee to set the pace while remembering that this is a professional relationship." -Lauren



"Self-reflection and developing a feedback mechanism can be a skill because there is a lot of listening that happens in a [mentorship]...to help grow the relationship. ... [I]t's something you practice, which leads to communication and analytical skills." -Nadia

Standards of professionalism vary and need to be adjusted to suit the mentorship participants' professional styles and goals. However, implementing professionalism can create or exacerbate power imbalances in mentoring relationships. Therefore, each participant's interpretation of professionalism, regardless of age or role, should be considered when establishing boundaries and expectations. I Am Why creates space for participants to redefine professionalism based on their lived experience and professional goals.

Conclusion

I Am Why's mission is to center young women and gender-expansive activists as we reimagine power and justice, and we support those who have lived experience in oppressive and disruptive systems. I Am Why aims to enact social and legislative changes that dismantle systems of oppression. Mentorships are essential tools in this process because they nurture trusting relationships, foster personal and professional growth, and build power. By building a network and strengthening our activists' skills, I Am Why's mentorship program allows our young people to reclaim their power and create a more equitable world.

**"This work can be personal. . . you can learn from
someone you never expected to learn from.
. . . [I]t's not a one-sided thing."**

-Nadia



Endnotes

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