PS: You are chair of the mentorship program administered by ASSE’s Women in Safety Engineering (WISE) Common Interest Group. Describe the process of matching mentors with mentees.

Louise: Most of the women who apply to be mentees are honest in their applications about how they portray their situation, what their perceptions are and what they hope to get out of a program. Through that, we learn about them: their education, their technical experience, their current and past jobs and, in a sense, get an overview of what they think their strengths and weaknesses are.

Applicants also let us know if they have particular goals and objectives, which is what I use when finding the mentor match. We try to find some commonality, be it industry, technical knowledge, managerial experience and so forth. I have gotten to know many of our mentors at ASSE events and annual conferences. This has helped me gain a sense of their skill sets and personalities, which also helps in the matching process.

Mentoring is a time investment for both parties, but there is extra homework for mentors. This is a yearlong program and applicants must make a 1-year commitment up front. This involves talking by phone or e-mail at least once a month. They have to set goals and objectives within the first 3 months of the program. Not all mentees have that in mind when they sign up. I reinforce to mentees that they need to drive the communication with their mentors. We do not want mentors to have to chase mentees down. Mentees must be actively engaged in setting their goals and in leading off communications.

PS: Why is it particularly important for women in OSH to have mentors within the field?

Louise: I think it is important that everyone has access to a mentorship program. Women have some unique workplace challenges and opportunities. The WISE mentoring program allows women to share and discuss the whole spectrum of their challenges and opportunities. Everyone’s needs are unique. We sometimes pair mentees with women who have experienced similar challenges and successfully overcome them.

For example, working with my mentee gave me insight on the current challenges that women entering the field experience. Some things are the same and some are different. I told my mentee, “We know how to overcome the things that remain the same; we already have a solid strategy. For the things that are different, let’s work together to apply our experience and skill sets by brainstorming a solution on how to overcome that.”

PS: What are some unique challenges women face?

Louise: Things such as work-life balance or returning to the workplace after taking care of ill family members or having a baby. Another challenge is entering typically male-dominated industries.

In my experience, OSH professionals are humble. They do not like to toot their own horns. However, OSH professionals must understand how corporate presence works. They should know how to find corporate sponsorships and ways to make themselves visible to higher-level people in their companies. That way, their contribution can be seen and recognized.

Sometimes mentees have the perception that work ethic completely correlates with career advancement. Universally, no matter your profession, people think all they have to do is be smart and work hard to be successful. Go to every meeting well prepared with reams of notes and eventually, good things will come. Then they wait, thinking a promotion or new job opportunity will come to them because they are smart and worked hard. But, that is only 50% of it.

Corporate presence is the other 50% they need. It is about speaking up in the right way and making yourself visible, but in the correct way. We know safety is a worthy profession, but when we align ourselves with business objectives and values, then we are more likely to get the necessary resources to succeed. It’s a Kaizen approach; continuous improvement is the responsibility of every worker, not just a select few.

Our mentors help their mentees learn how to toot their own horn in the right way. Often, mentees have managers who are content with how things are going. Mentees are doing their jobs and maintaining the status quo. Mentees, however, have greater aspirations than that. They want to develop and be recognized for the work they do. There’s a how-to-manage-your-manager component to this situation, as well as a bit of a political balance.

We want people to develop confidence. I’ve heard many times from mentees that their mentors gave them the base support they lacked. Their
mentors gave them good ideas for opportunities, ways to help them advance, and guidance on how to tackle political, technical and communication problems.

WISE’s true advantage is in our members’ ability to understand female safety professionals’ experiences. We can give our mentees added insight. At work, people must be careful about what they say, but with their mentors, they can just lay it all out. Their mentors offer a safe place. Sometimes a person’s issues are valid and sometimes they are just a person’s perception. Mentors help mentees determine which issues are real and which issues are perceptions, and work through them from there.

Most WISE mentees are women who really want to advance their careers and want support during a critical time. Many mentees sign up during their bridge time, when they are graduating from college and beginning their job search. Although we do not find a job for them, we can help them with the process by giving them confidence, ideas and networking help.

Other mentees are trying to bridge to a new career across industries. If they are trying to get into consulting, for instance, we will connect them with mentors who are consultants.

**PS: How is WISE’s program serving as a model for other ASSE groups?**

**Louise:** WISE’s success has caused other ASSE groups to become interested in our program. Many have asked about our process after hearing about the experiences of our program’s alumni. We are glad to share this with them as they shape their own objectives and ideas about how to develop their programs.

Practice specialties and common interest groups love to work together. We love to exchange ideas and evolve them to suit our specific needs. Many of us belong to multiple ASSE communities and carry the word back and forth between groups. It has been a positive experience reaching out and working together. Exchanging ideas helps us learn about topics, such as mentee/mentor acquisition strategies, nontraditional mentoring program options and communication/monitoring processes that we might want to implement within our own programs. Many of the communities WISE has helped have since launched their own programs.

We also help universities develop mentorship programs for students who need help finding an internship or job. Mentors can certainly help students craft resumes, network, prepare for certification exams and guide them on how to professionally present themselves. We sometimes conduct mock interviews as well. But truly, among our groups, it is about advancing the profession.

WISE’s program also creates visibility for the OSH profession within organizations. It is about aligning safety initiatives to business objectives. Most safety professionals are in a limited pool within their company. As a service entity, OSH is not always a priority from a resource standpoint. OSH professionals often need guidance on how to promote and market safety initiatives within their organizations. To do that, they need to determine their business’ objectives and align their safety cause to that. It is so important to develop respect within the organization.

When various communities embrace these types of programs, it helps ASSE members advance their careers. It is also great from a marketing perspective because it encourages more members to join these groups.

**PS: Are men eligible to join this program?**

**Louise:** We currently have one male mentee and two male mentors. It took a lot of courage from them to reach out and participate. They reached out because they wanted to promote the advancement of women safety professionals. That was the specific reason they gave us. Each mentor has a leadership role in a local ASSE chapter.

Our male mentee joined because it was the only ASSE mentorship program he was aware of. He has gotten a broad diversity of insights that he did not have before.

**PS: Where can candidates apply?**

**Louise:** Interested mentees can apply on our website (www.asse.org/ps/wise/mentoring). Mentors can apply by sending their resume to me at louisevallee7@gmail.com.

To participate, you must be an ASSE/WISE member (ASSE members can join WISE at www.asse.org/practicespecialties/wise).