



FOSTERING SPONSORSHIP SUCCESS AMONG HIGH PERFORMERS AND LEADERS

WHAT IS SPONSORSHIP?

Sponsorship is focused on advancement and predicated on power. It involves active support by someone appropriately placed in the organization who has significant influence on decision-making processes or structures and who is advocating for, protecting, and fighting for the career advancement of an individual.¹

WHY IS SPONSORSHIP IMPORTANT?

- Sponsorship is a powerful career accelerator for high performers.
- Sponsorship is a critical leadership behavior for leaders committed to talent sustainability in their organizations. Leaders demonstrate forward thinking and build reputational capital when they sponsor a highly talented employee in an organization.
- Sponsors receive valuable information from protégés, including a more diversified understanding of business needs and opportunities.
- The organizational benefits of sponsorship include increased pipeline strength, enhanced employee engagement, and a stronger culture of talent stewardship.²
- Research shows that women continue to lag men in both pay and promotions and report feeling over-mentored yet are typically under-sponsored;³ the need for more targeted action to move the needle for women's advancement is evident. Sponsorship can accelerate the career velocity of high-performing women.

SPONSORSHIP TAKES MANY FORMS

Catalyst recognizes that sponsorship can take many forms. Sponsorship can be either informal or more formalized through an organization-wide program. Informal sponsorship, too, can vary: sponsorship relationships can develop where both parties are aware of the relationship, or sponsorship can occur without a protégé's knowledge.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MENTORING AND SPONSORSHIP

Mentoring and sponsorship may overlap, though not necessarily; at their best, they work in concert. Sponsors have both the influence and active willingness to get you into a role, assignment, or position that advances your career, while mentors offer support, guidance, and advice that can benefit you in this new role.⁴

"A coach tells you what to do, a mentor will listen to you and speak with you, but a sponsor will talk about you."

— Kathy Hopinkah Hannan
National Managing Partner,
Diversity and Corporate Responsibility
KPMG LLP US

¹Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carter, and Christine Silva, "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women," *Harvard Business Review* (September 2010): pp. 80-85.

²Heather Foust-Cummings, Sarah Dinolfo, and Jennifer Kohler, *Sponsoring Women to Success* (Catalyst, 2011).

³Ibarra, Carter, and Silva.

⁴For more information on the distinctions between mentoring and sponsorship, see Ibarra, Carter, and Silva.

ADVICE FOR HIGH PERFORMERS: HOW TO SET YOURSELF UP FOR SPONSORSHIP

“I had to earn the sponsorship of anyone who ever sponsored me, and they [have] to do the same thing.”

—Man Sponsor

Earn Your Sponsorship

Make no mistake, sponsors are earned. Your talent, consistent high performance, visibility, and collegiality are what secure sponsorship in the first place. These same elements also keep a sponsor committed to advocating for you. There is no one silver bullet for ensuring the attention of sponsors; however, the following considerations may put you in a position to be noticed.

- Strive to be a “known entity.” Make your work, strengths, and skills evident to those around you, as well as those above you.
- Look for opportunities for enhanced visibility. This may include volunteering within your organization, attending conferences, or organizing networking activities where influential leaders are present.
- Communicate effectively, be it during presentations, meetings, or conversations with leaders. Your communication style forms a lasting impression.
- Make efforts to build a reputation as a respected colleague: be reliable, flexible when it’s required, and collegial.⁵ Demonstrate your ongoing commitment to your career development. For example, express interest in training or leadership development, take on a leadership role in a professional network, and share what you have learned.
- Prepare an elevator speech that offers a clear and concise summary of your current projects, your unique value-add to the

organization, and your passion for the work, and be ready to share with senior-level individuals when appropriate opportunities arise.

The recommendations in this tool are derived from suggestions made during interviews that Catalyst conducted with 93 executives and high performers at six top global organizations.

Attract Multiple Sponsors

- Cultivate multiple sponsors who reflect different points of view (e.g., both women and men; people from different functions or divisions).
- Develop more than one sponsorship relationship to maximize your support base and ensure your continued support should one of your sponsors leave the organization.
- Recognize that not all relationships with senior-level individuals will develop into a sponsorship relationship.

Manage Your Career

- Take the time to examine your skills, growth areas, and interests to gain a clear picture of what you want career-wise. Understanding where you want to go is an important part of positioning yourself to make it happen.
- Make efforts to assess and manage your professional reputation and perceptions of both your strengths and weaknesses; ask for and take action on feedback.

⁵For more information, see Laura Sabattini, *Unwritten Rules: What You Don’t Know Can Hurt Your Career* (Catalyst, 2008).



“...YOU HAVE TO BE WILLING TO TAKE THOSE HIGH-RISK ASSIGNMENTS, BECAUSE THAT’S WHERE THE ACCELERATION COMES FROM.... IF YOU TAKE THOSE HIGH-RISK ASSIGNMENTS AND YOU SHINE, YOU GET ACCELERATION.”⁶
—WOMAN SPONSOR

- Be ready to take advantage of opportunities when they are offered. If possible, talk through any hesitations with your sponsor to better understand the value of particular opportunities to your career.

Share Successes, and Be Appreciative

- Find ways to consistently inform your sponsor(s) about your accomplishments. Send a brief update on a project just completed or forward an email from your manager on a job well done to keep your sponsor in the loop regarding your achievements.
- Thank your sponsors for their efforts, and find ways to support or add value for them. For example, connect your sponsors to individuals in your growing network, or volunteer to support activities or projects they are spearheading.

Keep These Things in Mind

- Remember that you are the primary architect of your career. Sponsors are invaluable catalysts for career advancement and growth, but you are in control of your career, including your decisions and the related consequences.
- Recognize that your actions and performance impact both you and your sponsor.
- Maintain reasonable expectations for the relationship, and guard against developing an expectation that opportunities will come effortlessly as a result of sponsorship.
- Understand that sponsors may not be able to advocate for you in every situation.
- Consider paying it forward. You can help build a culture of sponsorship by doing for others what your sponsors have done for you. As you progress, look for high performers you could be in a position to help. You don’t need to be at the very top of an organization to sponsor someone.

WHAT IF I’M STILL NOT BEING SPONSORED?

If you are a high performer, ask for and act on feedback, make yourself visible, develop a reputation as a respected colleague, and continually exceed performance expectations, it is very likely you will be sponsored at several points in your career. Consider that you may be sponsored without knowing it. Continue to work on what you can control—driving your career forward by working hard, sharing your successes, networking, and making your career desires and aspirations known—and sponsorship could be right around the corner.



⁶The quotes that appear in this tool come from individuals who participated in Catalyst’s study on sponsorship, *Sponsoring Women to Success*. For more information on risk-taking and sponsorship, please see *Maximizing Mentoring and Securing Sponsorship*.

ADVICE FOR LEADERS: HOW — AND WHY — TO BE AN EFFECTIVE SPONSOR

Creating an Environment Where Sponsorship Thrives

A truly inclusive workplace culture sets the stage for effective and successful sponsorship. Leaders can help foster a culture that not only acknowledges talent but that actively propels the next generation of leaders to the top. Leaders should be open with other leaders about their sponsorship, and

organizations can further encourage a culture of sponsorship by showcasing leaders who are active sponsors and talent stewards. Finding ways to leverage existing touch points between high performers and leaders—including mentoring programs, special projects, leadership development programs, and reciprocal mentoring—can also help foster sponsorship.

“... IF I’M REWARDING PERFORMANCE AND SHOWCASING PERFORMANCE AND RECOGNIZING VALUE CONTRIBUTIONS, THEN EVERYONE HAS A FAIR SHOT AT MY SPONSORSHIP...”

—MAN SPONSOR

Recognize Sponsorship as a Leadership Imperative With Benefits for You

Sponsorship is a necessary activity for cultivating future talent, particularly for leaders concerned with the sustainability of their organization’s greatest resource: people. The decision to sponsor can be spontaneous; you spot a talented, high-performing employee and decide to advocate for her. It can be more intentional, part of a broader, conscious talent development effort on your part or the part of your organization. However the relationship develops, it will provide benefits not only to your protégé but to *you* as well.

- Develop the right talent to build your reputational capital, add value to your organization, and become known as a more effective leader who encourages more engaged and committed followers.
- Identify and sponsor high-performing individuals and become recognized as a leader who is attuned to the talent pipeline.
- Refine your leadership skills and organizational perspective by receiving

valuable feedback and learnings from your protégés.

- Gain personal and professional satisfaction in the knowledge that you will be leaving a legacy of high-quality talent that will help sustain the organization in the future.

Become a Sponsor

Protégés can be found in many places. In most instances, leaders take note of a high performer who has significant potential and decide to sponsor him or her for a specific role or opportunity.

- Look broadly, look deeply, and look often. For example, look across business lines or functions, look for those who may be several reporting levels down from you, and look often to remain aware of talent that should be sponsored.
- Pay attention to the full range of high-performing talent in your organization, and look to sponsor someone unlike yourself. Better understanding of differences as well as more diverse leadership help foster diversity and inclusion and are directly related to improvements in the bottom line.

Understand What Sponsorship Entails

Catalyst recognizes that sponsorship occurs in different ways, sometimes outside the context of an explicitly defined sponsorship relationship.⁷ Regardless of the form it takes, at its core, sponsorship means you are using your influence to advance the career of an employee you feel has potential to benefit the organization.

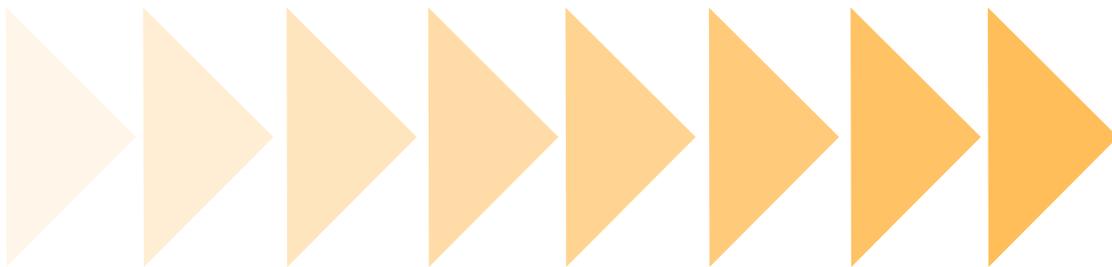
- Be prepared to defend the unique strengths and value-add of the protégé to others, and communicate your expectations to your protégé. Sponsorship implies that the future performance and actions of the protégé may reflect on you as the advocate.
- Cultivate an understanding of the protégé's strengths *and* weaknesses as well as future goals and ambitions to advocate in an effective, targeted way.
- Use your “chips” wisely: remember that you can't advocate successfully for every high-performing employee; therefore be prudent about whom you agree to sponsor. You are not compelled to sponsor each individual who may request it of you, particularly if you have concerns based on prior performance or other factors. Do try to provide honest and constructive feedback to the individual as to why you can't act as a sponsor at this time.

Be an Active Advocate

- Provide visibility and offer connections by introducing your protégé to members of your network who might serve as valuable resources or levers for future opportunities.
- Reference your protégé (strengths, unique skills, experiences, etc.) in conversations with influential others.
- Advocate for your protégé when critical opportunities arise that will both leverage *and* expand her existing skill set, including stretch assignments and high-visibility opportunities.
- Champion your protégé for promotion opportunities, when appropriate.

Provide a Foundation of Support to Help Ensure Success

- Continue to support your protégé, if possible, both during and after critical assignments and/or promotions; an extra level of support can help ensure success.
- Be prepared to help turn a failure around. If a protégé is struggling with a new role or opportunity, provide targeted and specific advice and coaching to help course-correct or find a placement more aligned with the individual's talents and goals.



⁷See “Sponsorship Takes Many Forms” on page 1.

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