

# Attract Influential Sponsors

“There is a special kind of relationship—called sponsorship—in which the mentor goes beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for the mentee. Our interviews and surveys alike suggest that high-potential women are overmentored and undersponsored relative to their male peers—and that they are not advancing in their organizations.”

— Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carter, and Christine Silva, “Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women,” Harvard Business Review

Sponsors spot your potential, believe in you, and are willing to lay their career capital on the line to publicly advocate for you. A sponsor uses their seat at the decision-making table to champion you for coveted career opportunities. It's no exaggeration to say that one sponsor's advocacy can completely transform your trajectory. Simply put, a sponsor can be like rocket fuel for your career.

What's the difference between mentors and sponsors?

- Mentors give you perspective, while sponsors give you opportunities
- Mentors will talk with you, but sponsors talk about you
- Mentors help you skill up whereas sponsors help you move up.

**Which type of support are you most in need of right now?**

## Six Behaviors for Attracting Sponsors

While there's no silver bullet for attracting the advocacy of an influential sponsor, here are some behaviors that you can adopt to increase the odds.

### **6. Learn to spot sponsors**

If your company is like most, there will be a limited number of people in your organization or industry who have both the desire and the influence to act as sponsors. So how will you know potential sponsors when you see them? They'll show up as respected, influential talent spotters. Those are the leaders you want on your side. Let's take a closer look at these three characteristics.

- Respected

Pay attention to leaders who have earned the trust of their peers and superiors. Look for those whose values and ethics are in line with your own and with those of the organization. Ideally, sponsors are widely respected by others such that when they speak on your behalf, their recommendation will carry weight.

- Influential

If sponsors are going to open doors for you and connect you with new opportunities, their word must carry authority. They must have the influence to persuade their peers that YOU are worth taking a risk on.

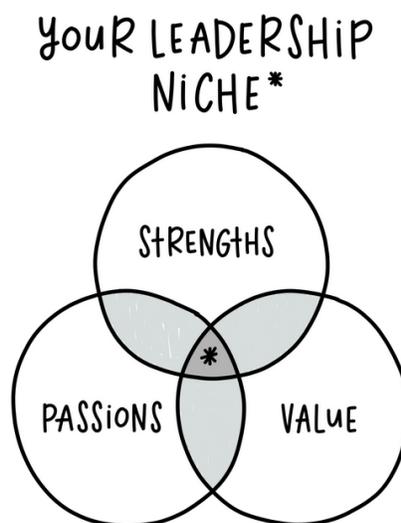
- A Talent Spotter

A sponsor is someone who is willing to place a bet on untapped potential and as-yet-unproven talent.

**Make a list of potential sponsors in your organization and/or industry.**

**5. Bring something unique and distinctive to the table**

A successful sponsorship relationship will benefit your sponsor, too. If you're talented and hardworking and your sponsor helps you land where you shine, it's seen as a smart move on her or his part. Your sponsors benefit when you bring something unique and special to the table, i.e. your leadership niche.



**4. Raise your hand for exposure opportunities**

Sponsors need to become familiar with your work, so creating career-defining moments is a must.

Raise your hand for opportunities to work with or for potential sponsors. Seek out opportunities that showcase your leadership strengths and niche, so that prospective sponsors can see you in action and directly experience your unique value and the quality of work you can deliver.

### **3. Make your performance known**

Sponsors have finely honed instincts for identifying strengths—ones that may be underdeveloped, that their owner might not even be aware of. But before sponsors can place a bet on you and your raw talent, they need to become familiar with your work and your track record.

If they get questioned or challenged about their decision to endorse you, they'll need evidence, based on their experience. If you keep your head down, buried in your work, your performance won't be apparent to them.

If you want a sponsor to believe in you, encourage you, and throw you into situations in which you'll develop and grow, you need to make your strengths and accomplishments visible.

### **2. Have clear, courageous career goals**

It's a lot to ask of a sponsor to match you with your next great opportunity if you don't know what you want for yourself. To take away the guesswork, identify your career goals and practice crisply and memorably articulating what you want.

A sponsor's advocacy can be like rocket fuel for your career. So have sponsor-worthy aspirations, and make no small plans for where you'd like to boldly go.

### **1. Share your goals with leaders**

Once you have laid the groundwork by identifying potential sponsors, making your value and performance apparent, and setting clear, courageous career goals, the final step in securing sponsorship is a relatively simple one: sharing your goals with potential sponsors.

By articulating and reiterating what you want to do, you can make a leader's life easier the next time there's a role to fill, a special project to assign, or a team to staff up. And once you've earned their respect, communicating your aspirations with your manager, your mentors, and other leaders in your upper-management chain (and beyond) can often be enough to enlist their sponsorship.

### **Which of the above behaviors will you work on?**

# Lift Others as You Rise

Sponsorship begets sponsorship. People who have been sponsored pay it forward. They are more engaged and committed leaders. They are more likely to become sponsors themselves, and they are more likely to develop other engaged and committed leaders. This is especially true of women and minorities. Diverse talent pays it forward by sponsoring diverse talent. If you care about closing the sponsorship gap, drop a pebble into the pond by sponsoring someone. The ripples can be far-reaching.

If you have clout in your organization, there are tangible ways you can make a difference to closing the gender and race sponsorship gaps and changing the culture around sponsorship:

- Be open about what it would take for you to sponsor someone.
- Talk to other leaders about what sponsorship is and why it matters.
- Be a champion for reevaluating who gets identified as high potential, ensuring diverse talent isn't overlooked.
- Match talented employees with sponsors.
- Bring sponsorship out from behind closed doors, so it becomes more open, transparent, and equitable.

If you don't yet hold that level of influence, I want you to know that smaller, everyday actions can be real difference makers too. "Micro-sponsorships" are small acts of support and advocacy.

Examples include:

- Speaking up to affirm a peer's competency.
- Calling attention to a key contribution.
- Correcting the record when someone's idea is attributed to someone else.
- Saying "let her finish" when someone is being interrupted.

We typically have more influence than we think. Are you exploiting yours to the fullest extent to advocate for others?

## What action can you take to sponsor others?