
Beyond Career Ladders: Levitate Others Through Sponsorship

The next level beyond
coaching and mentoring

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IN THE WORLD OF SUPERHEROES AND organizational structure, there is always a power dynamic at play. Whether you have power by position, expert power, or power by influence, also known as referent power, you have the ability to either lift others up or tear them down. As leaders, we can use our “power” for good through sponsorship of others.

Think about sponsorship in sports. An athlete is “up and coming” ... they have the potential. To make it big and get their name out there, they seek a more well-known organization to “sponsor” them. That organization utilizes its power and influence to lift another up. Sponsorship as a leadership tool, however, not only focuses on high potential and/or performing individuals but on giving everyone in an organization more visibility so as to maximize their growth and show that they are valued, and not just valuable, to the organization.

The inclination of a solo practitioner is to seek advice and support, or peer coaching, and knowledge and insight, or peer mentoring, from others who are utilizing the same model. And that makes sense it’s lonely out there mastering all the aspects required to make a business fly on your own. And it’s busy. However, making time to find a sponsor or two is critical for developing personal leadership skills and the contacts that result will only help your business. A great way to start is anywhere that business leaders in your community meet such as the Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce. Showing up demonstrates your interest in making your community a better place, and an established leader is likely to recognize that and take you under their wing, inviting you to attend future events and making introductions. And before you know it, you are asked to join a Board of Directors for a non-profit in your community and are sponsoring others.

Think About Who

Now think about who, in your leadership journey to date, has coached, mentored, or sponsored you? Who has utilized their social or political capital to help elevate you to the next level by bringing you to the table of opportunity and influence? Providing and seeking sponsorship isn’t just about achievement of the next rung on the career ladder or that next promotion, it’s about personal and professional development. Engage in sponsorship and the “upward mobility” will emerge organically whether you are new to practice, a mid-level manager, an executive, or a solo practitioner. And remember, we are not just talking about work, but also involvement in professional associations, community organizations, and governance. And the last is a “call to action”, as we need more physical therapists and physical therapist assistants in local, state, and national offices to advocate for our profession and health care in general. So, get out there, get a sponsor, and get elected!

Sponsorship vs. Coaching

How does sponsorship differ from coaching and mentoring? Coaching typically addresses immediate, specific challenges and goals, while mentoring is focused on long term development of knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Sponsorship is about advocacy, acting with intention to enhance others’ impressions of another and opening doors that might otherwise remain closed to help others accelerate their career growth and professional development. Sponsors use their influence, network, brand, and reputation ... their social, organizational, and political capital ... to champion others in strategic and decision-making circles. Sponsors highlight others’ accomplishments and achievements when they are not in the room. Sponsors provide “air cover” for sponsees to explore out-of-the-box ideas and work on stretch assignments that set them apart. Such active endorsement instills a deeper sense of confidence and

The ABCDs of Sponsorship (Chow R, 2022)	Example Behavior(s)	Intended Goals
Amplify	Being aware of and talking up a protégé’s accomplishments	Create or increase perceivers’ positive impressions of the protégé
Boost	Formally nominating a protégé for specific opportunities; writing letters of recommendation, attesting to the protégé’s future potential	Increase others’ expectations of protégé’s potential and readiness for advancement
Connect	Introducing a protégé to high-status individuals; inviting a protégé to exclusive events or meetings	Create or enhance perceives’ positive impressions of the protégé; increase the protégé’s visibility
Defend	Challenging others’ negative perceptions of pa protégé; providing an alternative explanation for performance; protecting a protégé from harmful exposure	Reverse or neutralize others’ uncertainty or negative perceptions of the protégé

belonging, motivating others to excel and contribute to the organization's success at an elevated level.^{1,2} Rosalind Chow, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory at Carnegie Mellon University and a thought leader in DEI&B defines the ABCD of sponsorship: Amplify, Boost, Connect, and Defend (Figure 1).³

Oftentimes the relationship between a sponsor and sponsee develops naturally because sponsors tend to identify individuals who remind them of themselves earlier in their professional journey. Insightful leaders recognize this affinity bias, working to really “see” others and their potential, making sponsorship more accessible, especially to the underrepresented. Herminia Ibarra, a sponsorship dynamics researcher and author of the book *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*, and Rachel Simmons, an executive coach and author, describe what goes into being a great sponsor. Most importantly, great sponsors create authentic connections with their sponsees, moving beyond transactional conversations such as “Where do you want to be in a year from now”. They are patient and non-judgmental even when a sponsee is uncertain, creating psychological safety and nudging them forward. Effective sponsors are candid and provide sponsees with detailed, developmental

feedback, including how they are perceived. Additionally, they think broadly about ways to elevate their sponsees, understanding that even small actions can generate big changes.⁴ And lastly, they have the extra “juice” or energy to pour into a protégé.

Finding Your Sponsor

So maybe your question is how can you be tapped and become a “great sponsee”? Sponsors seek those with aspirations, ability, engagement, and trustworthiness, since after all, they are handing off a piece of their brand. Successful sponsees focus on making a good impression while remaining authentic, presenting both their successful self and their work-in-progress self. They are proactive, reflective, and well-prepared, giving their sponsors clear directions on how they can best support their overall professional trajectory. They “lead with yes”, leaping to opportunities when presented.

However, sponsorship, unlike mentoring and coaching, is deeply reciprocal and sponsees must give to get, bringing currency, something the leader doesn't have but wants or needs, and making their value apparent.

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and provide more effective treatments.



Simmons suggests sponsees be able to communicate the following⁵:

- What skills do you want or need to develop and what experiences or opportunities do you seek or need to progress?
- What might you want feedback on from your sponsor?
- What obstacles might be delaying your progress?
- What role or opportunity might be a fit for you that you may not be quite ready for and what would it take to be ready?
- Who are leaders with whom you would like to connect, share your impact or possibly work with in the future?

Those Who Benefit

Those who benefit most from sponsorship come with an open mind and heart, leaving snap judgments about sponsors behind. They understand that what people offer them will be shaped by what they are open to receiving and that they may discover a valuable connection where and when they least expect it. They recognize their own affinity bias so as to differentiate between a sponsor and a role model, the latter who may or may not have the capital to elevate them. Women and underrepresented individuals more often fall into this trap. Women are often drawn to other women leaders who are collaborative and inclusive and underrepresented individuals because it is “safe.”⁶

Organizations benefit greatly from sponsorship, whether it is occurring organically or through a formal sponsorship program. When others recognize and root for us, we are more motivated, engaged, and satisfied in our role and, therefore, likely to both give it our all and stay. Nurturing leaders from within can be efficient and cost-effective. Sponsorship of those experiencing “otherness” and potential subsequent Imposter Phenomenon is a powerful way to keep both at bay and increase diversity, inclusion, and belonging which unlocks innovation and drives growth. Any opportunity for information to run up the flagpole, providing insight and innovative ideas to leaders is a win. Larger networks for all members of the organization almost always lead to positive results for the organization. Leaders acting as sponsors become better leaders and accomplish more using their deep bench of talent who expand their skill set and, in turn, experience greater upward mobility and satisfaction.²

Two-Way Street

Sponsorship is a two-way street but not one that is easy to navigate. Many aspects are not clear cut: these relationships often start informally and therefore are not always “named”. Subsequently, support for and commitment to them is not always well-defined which affects accountability. As a result, the business literature suggests not leaving sponsorship to chance but to the creation of a formalized program around these 5 steps⁸:

1. Identify the need and goals for the program.
Improve employee engagement? Internal talent mobility? Diversity and representation?
2. Get organizational and leadership buy-in
3. Build the framework and identify resources
4. Educate and train participants
5. Measure and showcase the results

Proceeding with purpose is critical if the goal is to increase sponsorship opportunities for women and underrepresented populations as the research shows a notable lag for these groups.⁵

However, smaller organizations can reap the benefits of sponsorship by incorporating the tenets into their culture, including education about and pathways to this aspect of professional development. And, as an individual charting your future course, have your radar tuned to potential new sponsors and put yourself in situations where you might meet one. Whether you want to lead a company or drive a community campaign, in her book *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor: The New Way to Fast-Track Your Career*, Sylvia Ann Hewlett reveals a map to forging the relationships that have the “superpower” to deliver you to your destination.⁵ **1**

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