

SPONSORING WOMEN



What
Men Need
to Know

By Ida O. Abbott, JD

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About the Author



Ida O. Abbott specializes in developing and retaining professional talent. An expert on mentoring, sponsorship, and leadership, much of her practice is devoted to promoting the advancement of women at work. Ida is a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management, Co-Founder of the Hastings Leadership Academy for Women, and on the Executive Committee of the National Legal Mentoring Consortium. Prior to starting her consultancy, Ida was a trial lawyer for twenty years. She has held leadership positions in numerous local, national and international professional associations. She is the author of several books and numerous publications, and is a popular speaker at professional meetings, conferences and retreats. Ida's newsletter, *Management Solutions*, can be found on her website, www.IdaAbbott.com.

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Sponsorship Is More Than Mentorship

The practice of mentorship is well known and well established in today's workplace. A mentor is someone who helps a more junior person learn, develop and achieve her professional goals. Mentoring is the process by which the mentor and mentee work together to identify and help the mentee move toward those goals. As shown in Table 1 on page 16, mentors serve a variety of roles and functions. Some of these roles support professional development, socialization and confidence building, while others are directed at career advancement. A mentor may serve several of these functions or only one or two, and many mentors who advocate for their mentees eventually become sponsors. Sponsorship can therefore be seen as a set of mentoring functions that are intended specifically to promote an individual's career advancement.

Defining Sponsors and Sponsorship

What we call "sponsorship" today is similar to the old-fashioned notion of mentorship. In the past, a mentor was someone who took you under his wing, shared his wisdom with you, protected you, sent good work your way, introduced you to influential contacts, and generally paved the way for your career success. You were known as the mentor's protégée, which derives from the French word for "protected." The term acknowledged the fact that the mentor had made a personal commitment to you and that your future success was linked to his ongoing support.

As the concept of mentorship has become popularized and programmed, it also has become diluted. Today, mentors are seen primarily as advisors and counselors. They support a mentee's career but do not necessarily go out of their way to promote her advancement. While

mentorship remains vitally important for professional development, it is insufficient as a person moves closer to the top where the competition for leadership and partnership are greater and the stakes become higher. At those junctures, what she needs is someone who will be a strong advocate for her — a sponsor, not just a mentor.

A sponsor is an advocate who has power and influence to make his advocacy produce positive career results for the person he is sponsoring — his protégée. He identifies and helps the protégée plan new career moves, helps her develop strategies to move up into new positions, and publicly endorses her. A sponsor takes risks on her behalf, arguing that she should get a bigger pay raise or urging that she is ready for equity partnership or a significant leadership role. He alerts her to opportunities and uses his influence to get her appointed to key posts. He has her back when she takes on new responsibilities, making it safer for her to take risks. He defends and advocates for her behind closed doors when she is not there, and also opens doors and invites her in. Sometimes he calls in favors, puts pressure on colleagues, or puts his reputation and credibility on the line for her.

Specific sponsorship activities are dictated by the unique circumstances of the sponsor and protégée, such as the sponsor's role and range of influence in the company, the protégée's seniority and experience, her career objectives, and the available job openings and opportunities. While the specifics will vary for each sponsor-protégée relationship, Table 2 on page 17 lists some of the things sponsors commonly do for their protégées.

Comparing Mentors to Sponsors

Mentorship may transition seamlessly into sponsorship if the sponsor is in a position of power and believes strongly in the mentee's potential. Mentors may also serve limited sponsorship roles for their mentees. But there are several key distinctions between mentors and sponsors, as described below and summarized in Table 3 on page 18.

Mentorship is supportive, focuses on professional growth and development, and is particularly useful for skills development, socialization,

identity formation, emotional support, and personal growth. Sponsorship is predicated on power and focuses on career advancement.

Mentors help people learn how to be reliable and confident performers. Sponsors focus on proven performers, those seen as “stars” or “high potentials.”

Mentors are useful throughout your career, especially in the early stages. Sponsors become more important as your career progresses, especially as you near key junctures in your career path or when fewer positions are available, the competition for those limited spots is fierce, and decisions about candidates are not just up to an individual manager.

Mentors can work with several people at once. Sponsors are far more selective; they rarely sponsor more than one or two people at a time.

Mentors can be anyone with more knowledge or experience than you. Sponsors must have sufficient organizational clout to make good things happen for the protégée.

Mentors can be within or outside the organization. Sponsors must be able to influence events within a company or firm, so sponsors are usually found inside the protégée’s company. In professional services firms, clients or other powerful outsiders can serve as sponsors because of their ability to influence decisions and practices in the firm.

Although a mentoring relationship depends on mutual trust, mentoring generally involves little risk. Sponsors deliberately take risks on a protégée’s behalf and sponsorship therefore demands a great deal of trust. Sponsors trust that protégées will live up to their promise and up to the sponsor’s expectations. Similarly, the protégée must trust that the sponsor has her best interests and career goals at heart, the influence to make things happen, and the commitment to follow through.

TABLE 1. COMMON ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF MENTORS

ROLE	FUNCTION
Host	Welcomes mentee into the organization; Makes introductions, promotes social integration; Provides information about systems, operations and firm culture
Teacher	Teaches technical skills and work processes
Advisor	Advises about work assignments, career decisions, and professional dilemmas; Explains unwritten rules
Facilitator	Helps mentee get good work assignments and make network connections
Protector	Provides cover for risk taking; Runs interference
Coach	Encourages goal setting, monitors performance and progress; Gives feedback; Builds confidence
Role model	Demonstrates appropriate behavior and professionalism
Sounding board	Listens to ideas and plans; Offers reality checks
Confidante	Listens to mentee’s doubts, fears and problems; Troubleshoots and consoles
Publicist	Promotes mentee within and outside the firm; Builds mentee’s credibility and visibility
Champion	Advocates for mentee’s promotion and compensation
Catalyst	Makes things happen; Inspires mentee to act

TABLE 2. SOME ACTIONS SPONSORS TAKE FOR PROTEGEEES

ACTIONS
Publicly endorse the protégée’s qualifications
Publicly recognize her achievements
Send new business and clients to her
Nominate and support her for promotion or partnership
Introduce her to and foster her relationship with influential people in the firm
Introduce her to and foster her relationship with current and potential clients and contacts
Appoint/nominate her to a leadership position in the firm
Assign her to lead a high-visibility project
Get her a stretch assignment that will spotlight her leadership abilities
Ensure that she gets adequate recognition, credit and compensation for her work
Protect her from unfair criticism
Alert her to new business opportunities
Include her in client pitches and the subsequent work that comes in
Include her/feature her in professional events (e.g., panels, presentations)
Include her/feature her in marketing/business development events
Create marketing/business development events that highlight her interests and talents
Appoint or nominate her for leadership posts in outside organizations
Move her to an office near you or another influential leader

TABLE 3. MENTORS VS. SPONSORS

	MENTOR	SPONSOR
Primary Function	Career support	Career advancement
Experience level of mentee/ protégée	Learner	Proven performer
When assistance is most important	Early and at any time during career	When aiming for promotion or leadership
Number of mentees/ protégées	Several concurrently	One at a time
Qualifications	Anyone who knows more than the mentee	Person with clout
Where found	Anywhere	Usually inside your firm or company
Level of trust required	Moderate	High
Level of risk involved	Low to moderate	High



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