Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor
The New Way to Fast-Track Your Career

Sylvia Ann Hewlett

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Key Concepts

• Supportive mentors are useful, but cannot turbocharge a career the way a sponsor can. Rather than a one-way street, sponsorship is a transactional relationship in which both protégé and sponsor receive benefits.

• A sponsor need not be someone with whom the protégé shares a leadership style or even someone the protégé particularly likes. Trust, rather than affinity, is the most important part of the relationship.

• Sponsors deliver high-octane advocacy, go out on a limb on behalf of their protégés, advocate for their promotion, and provide “air cover” that allows protégés to take risks. Sponsors may also make connections to senior leaders and clients, give the kind of harsh feedback a mentor might shy away from, and give advice on developing executive presence.

• Protégés deliver high-octane support. They outperform and over deliver. They are faithful to their organizations and unfailingly loyal to their sponsors. They contribute distinct personal brands to burnish their sponsors’ brands and build sponsors’ legacies.

• The budding protégé should have a clear picture of what the future looks like in 25 years. Then comes an assessment of their skill set, their unique characteristics, and their “currency” within the organization. Finally, the protégé identifies the levers of power and structures that constrain advancement within an organization.

• Protégés should identify leaders who are already aware of their skills and strengths, stand to benefit from their help, and have the clout to move protégés forward toward their goals. Above all, they should have “juice,” or influence within the organization and field.

• A portfolio of sponsors should be diversified so as to distribute the risk should any one sponsor fall from grace. In a larger organization, the protégé
should find a sponsor within the department, a second sponsor from another department, and one from outside the firm.

- Women and people of color face particular risks when working with sponsors. Young women must remain wary of the appearance of sexual impropriety. People of color need to overcome distrust from whites as well as from their fellow minorities. Women and people of color need to develop an executive presence that avoids fueling negative stereotypes about them.

**INTRODUCTION**

Mentors serve a useful purpose, but only sponsors can effectively turbo-charge a career. In *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor*, Sylvia Ann Hewlett provides a road map to help professionals find and develop a portfolio of sponsors who can open doors, based on polls and research conducted by the author’s Center for Talent Innovation. Sponsors are senior-level champions who advocate to earn their protégés raises and promotions. Protégés, in turn, build the sponsors’ currency and burnish their legacies. The reciprocity of this relationship makes it especially strong and critical to career advancement. Without sponsors to throw their hat in the ring and provide the cover that allows risk taking, individuals can expect to reach their full potential and the highest levels in their organization.

**SPONSORSHIP CAN BE LIFE CHANGING**

Hewlett learned the value of sponsorship as a child. One of six daughters of a “working-class bloke” in a depressed Welsh mining town, Hewlett was lucky enough to have a father who pushed her to apply to elite colleges in England. She eventually matriculated at Cambridge University, thanks to the support of her father, the tutoring of her high-school English teacher, and those who supported gender equality in 1960s Britain.

At Cambridge Dr. Jean Grove took the first-year student under her wing, bringing her to Ghana as a research assistant. The trip sparked a lifelong interest in economic development, leading eventually to a PhD from London University. Hewlett landed her first job as an assistant professor at Columbia University in New York. But she had no sponsors in her academic career and ultimately failed to earn tenure, driving her from the academy. Again she turned to a sponsor, Harvey Picker, a Columbia dean. He found her a job at the Economic Policy Council, a New York nonprofit. Hewlett’s takeaway: to succeed, it is essential to have powerful sponsors.

**SPONSORS VERSUS MENTORS**

Pat Fili-Krushel had risen to become head of NBCUniversal News Group thanks to hard work and the sponsorship of Bob Iger, now CEO of Disney. Every time Iger was promoted, he recommended Fili-Krushel to fill his vacancy. She developed a similar relationship with Steve Burke, who eventually brought her to NBCUniversal to help reform the conglomerate’s corporate culture. Later, Burke put her in charge of the company’s news division, though she had never been a journalist. The choice may have upset those in the newsroom, but they soon came to see her as an excellent and empowering executive.

In contrast, Marina, an assistant finance manager at Lloyds Banking Group, could not seem to get ahead, despite hard work, excellent reviews, and plenty of mentoring. She remains hopeful that her mentor will...
one day promote her to a higher level in the organization.

The difference between these two high-potential women is that one had mentor but no sponsor. Women and professionals of color in particular often find it hard to understand the value of a sponsor/protégé quid pro quo relationship, one based on a mutual investment in one another. Mentors take an interest in an individual because they see something of themselves in that person and therefore want to donate their time. Unfortunately, this means that mentorship programs can inadvertently reinforce existing power structures with white men at the top. Mentors are certainly useful in providing support and offering advice, but the energy flows in only one direction.

A sponsor is someone who expects to see a return on their investment in an individual. Sponsors can share many characteristics with mentors: they can provide advice, give feedback, and serve as role models. But they need not be any of those things, or even have a particular personal affinity and like mindedness.

The main difference is in outcome: the author’s research at the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) shows that having a sponsor makes it more likely that a person will confront their boss and ask for a raise. Only 30 percent of women without a sponsor ask for a raise while 38 percent of sponsored women do. The results are similar when it comes to asking for plum assignments and finding satisfaction in a career. The sponsor effect helps everyone, but especially women and people of color.

How Sponsorship Works

Sponsors do three things that mentors do not:

1. They go out on a limb on behalf of their protégés.
2. They provide support in the form of defense against critics and advocate for promotions.
3. They provide “air cover” that allows protégés to take risks.

The author’s research shows that a sponsor also does at least two of the following:

• Expands the protégé’s perception of his or her potential.
• Connects the protégé to senior leaders in the organization.
• Increases the protégé’s visibility within the firm and industry.
• Provides opportunities to stretch talents.
• Gives advice on how to present oneself as a professional leader.
• Makes connections to clients and customers.
• Gives the kind of honest, critical feedback on skill gaps that a mentor may not recognize or want to provide.

Unlike a mentor/mentee relationship, the sponsor/
protégé relationship is transactional. The protégé has to deliver something to the sponsor. In return for their “high-octane advocacy,” sponsors receive “high-octane support.” The protégé will:

1. Contribute 110 percent so as to outperform peers and surpass expectations.
2. Remain fiercely loyal to the sponsor and the organization.
3. Contribute to the sponsor’s personal brand.

They will also deliver in at least two of the following areas:

- Remain unfailingly trustworthy and discreet.
- Provide cover, or “have the back” of the sponsor.
- Promote the sponsor’s legacy.
- Add value by bringing a new perspective and skill set that the sponsor does not have.

Above all, these findings reveal the reciprocity of the sponsor/protégé relationship. The sponsor benefits by having “deep pockets” of talented people who “owe them one.”

**Mentors matter. You absolutely need them. But they’re not your ticket to the top. Mentors give, whereas sponsors invest.**

**The Road Map to Sponsorship**

Women often have trouble embracing what the author describes as a “God-given right to power, influence, agency, and impact.” Sponsors enable dreams, so the protégé needs to give them a big, bold, and clear dream to work with.

Mentors are ideal partners in dream development. Looking to role models, envisioning a future, and gaining specific feedback from industry diagnostics such as a 360-degree review will all help. The inventory should be wholly positive.

A set of “who, what, where” questions will begin to bring this dream into focus:

- What place makes one feel magical? What is the view out the window?
- With whom does one want to meet? Who is most intriguing and exciting?
- What sort of change does one want to drive?

There is a large collection of motivational literature to consult for sharpening this focus.

With a big dream in hand, a frank assessment of assets and liabilities follows:

- What are one’s core competencies and top skills?
- What qualities and experiences make one’s brand unique?
- Where does satisfaction come from? What accomplishments earned accolades?
- How do one’s values and goals align with those of the organization?

The final step is to map out the organizational landscape to develop a clear route up the career ladder by asking the following questions:

- If the organization is flat, without titles and hierarchies, how does one navigate?
- What deliverables will earn a promotion?
- What are the unwritten rules in the organization?
- Where are the uncharted or hidden pathways to leadership and influence? A mentor who knows the lay of the company and who has successfully navigated it can help identify these. A sponsor can then help power through them.

**Searching for Potential Sponsors**

After envisioning and embracing a dream, an individual is ready to find a sponsor. A sponsor should be someone who can enter usefully into a transactional relationship with a protégé. The ideal sponsor is aware of the protégé’s skills and accomplishments already, stands to benefit from the protégé’s success, and has the appropriate clout.

Rather than asking for sponsorship, protégés need to show what makes them worthy. Proposing a “quid pro quo” works well as it cuts to the chase and describes mutual benefits. For example, the author tells the story of a young woman who found a potential sponsor to advance her career goals. She went to the executive and proposed taking on his project over the three others vying for her time if he would, in return, help her land a position in one of the company’s overseas offices. Rather than simply asking for sponsorship, she had presented a proposal, a quid
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pro quo.

A common mistake women and people of color make is to attach themselves to individuals whose leadership style they admire and would like to emulate. Women, for example, may prefer a more collaborative leadership style. Unfortunately, collaborative leaders often do not have the “juice” to help a career. Most organizations still rely on a command-and-control style of leadership, so the most powerful leaders within the organization are those who adhere to this style. Efficacy is far more important than affinity, and respecting a sponsor does not mean that one hopes to become friends or to follow in the sponsor’s footsteps.

Once candidate sponsors are identified, a supportive manager can provide stretch assignments that put the protégé in their “line of sight.” The approach to a sponsor can come at a conference or networking event, but requesting a meeting for career development advice works as well. The protégé could suggest a project of mutual interest with a promise to do the grunt work, or propose a specific work transaction to begin the relationship.

One Sponsor Is Not Enough

The modern workplace is far less secure than it once was. Attaching oneself to a single sponsor can spell doom when, for whatever reason, that sponsor leaves the company. Losing a high-level backer can cause isolation or job loss. Even if the sponsor stays put, organizational change can drain his or her power and influence.

The author’s research shows that three sponsors are necessary. One should be within the company division, a second outside it, and a third from outside the firm. She calls this the “2+1 Rule.” Diversity ensures that even if one sponsor falls, they do not take the others with them.

Getting on the radar of sponsors outside of one’s own department requires taking on roles beyond the job description. This might mean entering a company mentoring program as a mentor, or joining a philanthropic board.

A diverse portfolio of sponsors also makes it easier to move within the firm or to a new firm altogether. Still, one must remain proactive and be alert for changes in a sponsor’s status.

Understand That It’s Not All About You

According to CTI polls, women continue to misunderstand the sponsor/protégé relationship. Three quarters of male managers saw sponsoring others as a boost to their own careers while three quarters of female managers considered sponsoring protégés a selfless act. In other words, men recognized the strategic value of sponsorship while women simply saw it as another word for mentorship. This confusion has been exacerbated by years of mentoring programs aiming to boost the chances for women and people of color.

Some supporters, including mentors, can be converted into effective sponsors. It’s a matter of taking an existing relationship and making it instrumental. But it’s up to you to initiate that conversation.

Through the mentoring lens, any relationship with a senior person becomes a chance to benefit only the protégé’s career. A career boost is a gift to be thankful for rather than an investment that demands a return. By failing to appreciate the reciprocity of the relationship, the protégé alienates the sponsor.

Instead, protégés must acknowledge the pact between themselves and their sponsors. They should keep in regular contact with their sponsor because as a protégé they carry the sponsor’s brand. They must anticipate the sponsor’s needs and over deliver, taking on tasks even outside their job descriptions.

Performance and Loyalty Above All

To win and keep sponsors in one’s corner and to ensure that they will pass on the golden opportunities when they arise, a protégé must come through simultaneously on the performance and loyalty fronts. Stellar performance means delivering outstanding bottom-line results, hitting targets and deadlines, and demonstrating a strong work ethic and impressive availability.

Loyalty includes the obvious traits of trustworthiness and discretion, but also means burnishing the sponsor’s brand across the organization and growing the
The ideal life raft in larger organizations, CTI research shows, consists of three sponsors: two within your organization – one in your line of sight and one in a different department or division – and one outside your firm.

For example, when a protégé at Whirlpool saw his sponsor’s commitment to the local Boys & Girls Club charity, he joined the board, eventually becoming president. He helped balance its books and build a new facility. In so doing, he burnished the legacy of his sponsor.

Another aspect of loyalty is demonstrating that one will not shrink from criticism, no matter how brutal. Women in particular need to ask for criticism because organizational cultures tend to treat women more gently than they do men. By the same token, women may find it difficult to brag about their accomplishments. But being able to recite one’s achievements in terms that align with the company’s key drivers makes it easier for the sponsor to convince others and clear the path to promotion. Working with peers to sing each other’s praises avoids the appearance of self-aggrandizement.

Identifying Unique Value

Highly capable women and people of color find themselves stuck in positions of “permanent lieutenancy,” or always being the number two in command. They end up fulfilling their sponsor’s ambitions, but not their own. They remain blinded to their own special currency, the distinct value that they bring to the organization.

As with the diagnostics described above, finding a unique selling point begins with a self-assessment. This assessment should identify innate qualities that are unique, such as a rare background or schooling or specialized skills.

Ironically, aspects of identity that formerly might have needed to be suppressed have become the very qualities that can help a protégé stand out. For example, a senior financial adviser at Merrill Lynch explains that being gay gave him the inside track to the LGBT community, a market that his employer wanted to mine. Similarly, a Latin background and fluency in Spanish can help a company trying to expand into Mexico.

Beyond natural differences, protégés can acquire skills, or currency, that help them reach beyond their current jobs. They can also “reverse mentor” their sponsors, helping them develop new skills. Being a rainmaker, bringing in new business or revenues, is the most valuable currency of all.

Lead with Yes

The right answer is always “yes.” Women are especially unwilling to take on responsibilities until they are completely sure that they will be able to deliver. They do not want to fail or disappoint. Worse, they insist on being totally honest up front. Men, in contrast, will overstate their ability to deliver and exude “can do” energy.

When asked to take on an especially onerous or distasteful task, a woman may want to provide caveats and qualifications before agreeing. But the author advises saving qualms until after the job has been accepted in principle. In other words, waiting until a more favorable negotiating position develops ensures not only getting the job but also having a better chance of succeeding by tailoring it carefully. Proposing solutions rather than presenting problems will also show enthusiasm and gratitude for the opportunity.

Sponsorship’s Third Rail: Sex

Sex, whether actual or presumed, can topple leaders and derail careers. CTI research shows that 64 percent of senior men hesitate to have one-on-one relationships with female protégés because they fear the appearance of impropriety. Meanwhile, three quarters of women remain convinced that promotions at a firm are based on hard work and strong credentials despite the evidence of sponsorship’s role. They consider sponsorship a dirty game. Fully 83 percent of men agree that “who you know” matters most.

Sexual tension cannot be ignored or eliminated, and it will continue to cause young women to be excluded...
from the paths to power. But neither should the threat of scandal or innuendo prevent women from cultivating sponsors.

The first and most obvious advice is not to have an illicit affair with a superior. Everyone agrees that junior women will bear the brunt of any fallout, and potential future sponsors will not want to risk their own reputations.

Women must remain relentlessly professional, avoiding flirting, off-color humor, or inappropriate attire. A style that might be normal in one locale or at one firm may still be considered inappropriate elsewhere. They should meet their sponsors in public and on-site if possible. A trickier balance is communicating family and spousal commitments without imposing the personal on the professional. The goal is to demonstrate a full and rich emotional life outside of work so as not to appear receptive to, or eager for, any special attention.

Even after taking these precautions, the gossip mill may still grind away, especially when a woman is singled out for plum assignments or praise. Rather than try to deny their special status, women should own it. Otherwise, the attention might seem undeserved.

In a worst case scenario, leaving before the ax falls or before false perceptions undermine effectiveness may be the only choice.

**Overcoming Distrust**

Minorities continue to believe that the top jobs are reserved for white men. As a result, minorities feel compelled to play down the very diversity that should be a source of currency. Coupled with hidden bias and a culture bent on denying its existence, this distrust prevents proteges of color from seeking sponsors of color and vice versa. It is a far safer bet to choose a white sponsor or none at all.

To overcome this distrust, the author recommends mastering the office small talk and getting to know people personally across the color divide. Taking up golf, joining a running team, or otherwise participating in the sports culture of the company can be a great ice breaker. More substantively, minorities can create opportunities to leverage their background in support of corporate objectives.

In any case, the best way to avoid nagging feelings that race played a role in losing a promotion is simply to ask for explicit feedback.

**Executive Presence**

Executive presence is the aura of confidence and competence that convinces people to follow. It encompasses gravitas, communications, and appearance, three intertwined pillars. For example, gravitas flows from the ability to command a room through appearance and voice.

A CTI survey finds that confidence and “grace under fire” is the most important quality, according to senior leaders. Decisiveness follows closely behind, a problem for women who prefer to seek consensus. Finally, appearance matters, especially for women and people of color.

Fairly or not, gaining access to the inner circle demands “joining the tribe” by looking and acting the part. Cultural stereotypes and inherent contradictions make the quest for executive presence especially fraught for minorities. African American men have to overcome a latent perception that they are aggressive or angry; Hispanics may have to balance respect for their culture with a white corporate culture.

In the end, however, being perceived as leadership material is a prerequisite to getting the best projects and promotions. The goal is to look and act appropriately for the work environment but still to be true to oneself.

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**Features of the Book**

**Estimated Reading Time: 2–3 hours, 256 pages**

Although written for a general reader, *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor*’s main audience is professional women. The author’s research suggests that women and people of color struggle against traditional roles to become leaders. The book includes three parts. Part one argues for the importance of sponsorship over other professional relationships such as mentorship, part two provides a “how two” for protégés, and part three explains how to avoid the pitfalls that often derail women’s careers. Throughout
the book sidebars profile successful women and list specific tactics. The chapters are best read in order, though readers short on time may want to begin with part two.

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