

DIVERSITY

# Want More Diverse Senior Leadership? Sponsor Junior Talent.

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With renewed corporate attention to racial equity — and a growing body of evidence showing that diversity programs don’t work, especially for Black employees — many companies are turning to a different approach for diversifying their pipelines to the top: sponsorship.

As Herminia described it in a recent article on increasing gender diversity at senior levels, sponsorship is a “helping relationship in which senior, powerful people use their personal clout to talk up, advocate for, and place a more junior person in a key role.” Sponsors not only give feedback and advice, they also use their influence with other

senior executives to advocate for your promotion and to ensure that you're visible to key decision-makers. Mentors share their knowledge, perspective, and experience, whereas sponsors wield their power on behalf of their protégés. This crucial difference makes sponsorship a valuable tool for actively promoting employees from underrepresented groups into senior positions, stretch assignments, and mission-critical roles.

Sponsorship efforts only work, however, if they are designed with care — pairing sponsors and protégés in ways that align with goals, training them on the impact of difference in career developmental relationships, and iterating on what they learn through experience. How you approach a sponsorship initiative can make all the difference between one that fails and one that achieves results, so take the time to get it right.

### **Know what you want and need.**

Although most HR leaders understand the distinction between mentorship and sponsorship, when they enlist sponsors for employees from underrepresented groups, they often make choices that are more in line with enlisting mentors.

In one organization we worked with, for example, leaders aimed to increase sponsorship for their employees of color. But they worried that top executives would be over-solicited by their mid-level and early-career protégés, and so wondered if they would be better off simply defining a sponsor as “somebody who is senior to you.” That’s not good enough, though, because it can let senior executives off the hook. When it comes to promotion decisions, managers need position power in order to play a true sponsor role — which is to say, they need to be in the “room where it happens.” To that end, we recommended selecting sponsors who are more senior than protégés’ direct bosses.

Another organization we worked with wanted to provide sponsorship for women working at the two levels below the top leadership team. Three women who served as non-executive directors of the company wanted to help with the effort, and the CEO was eager to bring them in as sponsors. But when we all discussed the aims of the sponsorship program, we realized that these women, as company outsiders, would not be able to navigate political waters on behalf of their protégés or advocate for their

promotion — both key sponsor roles. So we recommended to the CEO that they instead be enlisted as mentors, reserving the sponsor role for insiders — in this case, members of the executive committee.

This example also highlights an important point: Yes, sponsors are crucial, but enlisting them should not preclude protégés from building a broad and diverse network of helping relationships that can and should extend to peers and people outside their organization.

### **Consider how to best pair sponsors and protégés.**

To be able to play the sponsor role, managers have to *want* to spend their hard-won political capital on their protégés — but they're only likely to feel that way if they've had sufficient exposure to their work and developed some chemistry. Thoughtful matchmaking on this front is important, and two key questions often arise here. Both involve trade-offs.

First, should sponsors and protégés be in the same business unit, function, or direct line?

It's complicated. To champion protégés with conviction, sponsors need to know how they perform and what they can deliver. Naturally, that's much easier if sponsors belong to the same unit as their protégés. But organizations often have multiple priorities to juggle in their matchmaking efforts. Many want to increase their protégés' visibility within the organization as a whole, for example, or to avoid intra-departmental politics. Others seek to provide role models for high potentials who are members of underrepresented race and ethnicity groups. Often that leads them to designate sponsors who work outside of their protégés' reporting lines.

In one organization we worked with, a number of the designated sponsors were located in different businesses and geographies than their protégés, a racially and ethnically diverse group — and this made it difficult for them to see and therefore vouch for their work. The HR leaders tried to reassure the sponsors by explaining that the protégés had been already vetted as high potential, and by encouraging the sponsors to reach out to the protégés' line managers. But, not surprisingly, even managers who are willing to

sponsor and connect the participants are sometimes reluctant to put their hard-won political capital on the line for someone whose performance they themselves haven't scrutinized and evaluated.

Second, should sponsors and protégés be matched to be as similar as possible?

Ideally, yes. Having a similar background can help people click initially. This can be particularly helpful to up-and-coming juniors from underrepresented groups, who, naturally, want advice from seniors who have faced some of the same dilemmas and challenges as they have.

For example, research shows that employees who differ from the majority in religion, gender, sexual orientation, and/or socio-economic background often hide important parts of themselves at work for fear of negative consequences. A study by Patricia Faison Hewlin, at McGill University, found that Black employees often create “facades of conformity,” suppressing their personal values, views, and attributes in order to do what they think is needed to fit in their organizations, and, as a result, feel deeply inauthentic. Likewise, a Center for Talent Innovation study found that a majority of Latinx executives modify their appearance, body language, and communication style in an effort to increase credibility at work, which also gives rise to feelings of inauthenticity.

Having sponsors who have experienced similar dilemmas helps a lot. But high-level executives from underrepresented groups are often in in short supply — far too short to sponsor all of the talented protégés below them. Not only that, the risk to their reputation from sponsoring can be much greater, because they're more likely to be seen as partisans if they choose to sponsor protégés of the same race, gender, or ethnicity. So matching for similarity has both advantages and limits.

Even without good matches for similarity, however, sponsorship has shown demonstrable benefits. A study conducted by David Smith and Brad Johnson at the U.S. Naval Academy and War College, for example, found that when women are sponsored by men, they make more money, get more promotions and have better career outcomes — not because men are better sponsors but because they have more power.

## **Train both sponsors and protégés to manage “like me” bias.**

In human relationships, likes attract. Research has shown consistently that we are most likely to feel chemistry and build relationships with people who are most like us — in demographics, identity, and life experiences. That adds complexity to cross-race and cross-gender sponsorship relationships.

For one thing, when we code another person as “not like me,” what we hear from them is less likely to resonate as true, valuable, or comprehensible, and we are less likely to give them the benefit of the doubt. In this situation, it is easy for protégés to feel that their sponsor’s advice doesn’t “fit” or make sense for them, and, when they don’t act on it, sponsors, can easily feel that their protégés aren’t receptive to their feedback.

To avoid these relationship tripwires, it’s important that both sponsors and protégés understand the key role of identity and identification in learning from others.

Herminia’s research shows that when people acquire certain intangible leadership skills, such as how to exude gravitas or how to influence without authority, they do it by observing how successful people do it and then emulating them. But that’s only one part of what they do. As they observe, they also ask two important questions: “Would what that person is doing work for me?” and “Do I want to be like them?” When the answer to either of those questions is “Maybe not,” the natural role-modeling process falls apart, and people face authenticity dilemmas that can hold them back from accepting feedback and heeding feedback that might otherwise be helpful.

Although questions like these can arise for anyone, they are exacerbated for people from underrepresented groups, who, because of the “not like me” problem, are more apt to find the behaviors and personality styles that serve as indicators of potential in traditional corporate cultures unappealing or unnatural. It’s easy to feel your sense of authenticity compromised if you feel you have to go against your own nature to conform to tacit leadership requirements.

Would-be sponsors need to keep this set of challenges in mind. Even if protégés know and respect potential executive sponsors, they will not necessarily see all of them as people whose leadership styles they want to emulate.

But you can still be a great sponsor even if your protégés don't want to be just like you “when they grow up.” You can provide stretch opportunities and advocate for them in promotion meetings, and you can connect them with *other* executives who might be more suitable role models. In doing all of this, it's critical that you recognize the authenticity dilemma that your protégés might be struggling with. Don't mistake their struggles on that front for a lack of confidence or commitment.

### **Learn and iterate with experience.**

Some sponsor relationships last for decades and evolve in ways that are mutually beneficial, both personally and professionally; others never take off, or run their course after a short time. Likewise, some sponsorship initiatives sustainably increase the flow of protégés into senior roles; others devolve into little more than “tick-the-box” exercises.

We've found that few organizations get it right from the outset. Because of that, a mindset of learning and iteration is vital. A good example of how this can help came when one of the organizations mentioned above realized that it had a natural experiment it could learn from: One of its corporate sponsorship initiatives allowed protégés to select their own sponsors, and another relied on HR to handle the pairing. The leaders responsible for each of the programs are now comparing notes, in an effort to inform choices for next year's iteration. That kind of communication and collaboration can be enormously productive.

Finding ways to capture the experience and questions that arise for both sponsors and protégés as they get to know each other is also vital. For example, as a part of an executive-education program in which Herminia provides training for both groups, we learned that sponsors tend to get stuck in the middle range of the “sponsorship spectrum” (see Figure 1), which Herminia presented in her article on women and sponsorship last year. In that middle range, they're comfortable having strategic conversations and making network connections for their protégés (roles “2” and “3” on the spectrum) but not with providing high-visibility opportunities or advocacy (roles “4” and “5”).

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## **A New Way of Thinking**

# About Sponsorship

Sponsorship is not an either/or role—either committing fully or not at all. It's a spectrum of different kinds and degrees of support.



Source: Herminia Ibarra



When we asked what it would take for them to feel comfortable moving up a notch, several said they wanted to see participants express more confidence. This led to a rich discussion about whether confidence should be earned or given, and about how

evaluators mistakenly use expressions of confidence as a proxy for competence, particularly when assessing women — a discussion that was built into the next iteration of the training.

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As the sense of urgency grows for better diversity, racial equity and inclusion outcomes, companies are being challenged to figure out what works. A robust approach to sponsorship, while far from being a magic bullet, offers a tangible roadmap toward real progress.

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