

You've Got a Friend in High Places: The Power of Sponsorship for Women

Article By:

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Although [women in the legal profession](#) are now advancing in greater numbers to partnership in law firms and upper level positions in corporate legal departments, getting there and continuing to advance remain daunting tasks.

Mentorship and sponsorship are complementary activities that can help a woman meet this challenge. For a young woman lawyer who is just starting out, a mentor can be an invaluable resource, offering advice and support in navigating both the demands of the profession and culture of the workplace. As she moves along in her career, gaining experience and developing expertise, this same woman may find that the key to taking the next step is finding women and men in senior positions who are willing to act as a sponsor – high level supporters who will advocate for her and make opportunities available so that she can develop and thrive.

I've been in practice since 1999 – first as a prosecutor handling criminal matters and for the last 15 years as a civil litigator with international law firms. In every setting, I've witnessed the important role that an effective mentor can play in the advancement of a woman's career but I've come to believe that sponsorship is even more important and that the real key to advancement lies in the cultivation of sponsors both inside and outside one's own firm or organization.

Men in leadership positions have been doing this for years – mentoring and sponsoring young male lawyers who are like themselves, helping to bring them along and advance. This issue of like supporting like is difficult to overcome when men dominate the work place and a reason why corporations and law firms in these more egalitarian times are focusing resources on this issue. We see many examples of firms and companies developing programs and making a conscious effort to give women the benefits of both mentorship and sponsorship to support their career development.

As mentioned above, the roles of mentor and sponsor are complementary. A good mentor can be a buddy and a guide, providing advice on setting priorities and learning how to work effectively within an organization, as well as providing tips on how to become a better lawyer and colleague along the way. One of the mentor's most important roles can be to help their mentee identify potential sponsors both within the organization and outside it. I define a sponsor as an individual in a leadership role who can not only provide the younger lawyer with valuable counseling but will also take concrete steps to make opportunities available that advance her career.

Experience has taught me that sponsors rarely come knocking at your door – you have to seek them out and ask for their support. Putting yourself out there like that can be difficult. I have represented clients in nearly 100 courtroom trials – shyness is not a word people use to describe me. And yet, I still felt awkward asking someone I did not know well to be my advocate.

My sense is that many women don't speak up or ask because they view it as rude or bothersome to do so. I certainly fell into that category early in my career. But I know now that most professionals are flattered when they're asked to be a sponsor. That's why I urge the women I work with to identify potential sponsors and reach out to them early and often. Doing so can accelerate a career by years.

Many firms and corporate legal departments now have formal mentorship and sponsorship programs which help raise the profile and highlight the importance of those roles. However, as much as I appreciate the formal programs, I think it's more effective in the long run for each woman to choose her own mentors and sponsors from those with whom she's already established a relationship.

I recently moderated a panel of women leaders in law firms and legal departments who spoke passionately about their commitment to providing opportunities to women inside and outside their organizations. It was inspiring to hear the stories that these women told about their own struggles to obtain leadership positions and about their commitment to giving back to those who are now coming after. They provided examples of things that a sponsor can do to help their protégé, including appointment to a pivotal committee, assignment of an important role in a key case, or perhaps a transfer to a new department where better opportunities await.

Mentorship and sponsorship are both key to the advancement of women in the law. I hope everyone reading this article, especially those of you in a position to make a difference for your younger colleagues, will consider your own situation and find an opportunity to open doors for those who are now coming up through the ranks.

Here are a few quick tips for identifying a potential sponsor and making the ask:

- You and your sponsor should share a core set of values.
- Don't limit yourself to people you know personally.
- Potential sponsors sometimes underestimate their influence. Be clear about how they can be helpful.
- Ask your mentor or others for suggestions on who might be a good sponsor.
- Be willing to allow your sponsor to get to know you and your work product before she is willing to advocate on your behalf.

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