



Sponsorship Programs: An Effective Advancement Strategy for Women or a Waste of Time?

**Ida Abbott
Genhi Givings Bailey**



How Important Are Sponsors?



- Increased satisfaction with career development opportunities
- Increased satisfaction with rate of advancement
- Increased engagement and retention *of women*



Women and Sponsorship



- *Women get advice, men get promotions*
 - Fewer career benefits from mentors
 - Support but not career advancement

- Most potential sponsors in law firms are men
 - Vast majority of partners, leaders, rainmakers
 - Most men sponsor men

Sponsorship and Mentorship



- What's the difference between sponsorship and mentorship?

- How does a sponsorship program differ from a mentoring program?

Mentorship/Sponsorship Functions



- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Mentors▪ Career development<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Information▪ Advice▪ Support, inclusion▪ Knowledge transfer▪ For any lawyer, especially associates | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Sponsors▪ Career advancement<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Promotion▪ Clients▪ Leadership▪ Compensation▪ For “proven” lawyers, including partners |
|--|---|

Mentors vs. Sponsors



- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Mentors<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Anyone with more knowledge, experience▪ Personal, professional development▪ Inform▪ Advise, guide▪ Support, confidence, self-worth | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Sponsors<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Have power, influence▪ Career advancement, promotion▪ Advocate, champion▪ Present/create opportunities▪ Protect▪ Take risks |
|---|--|

Mentoring Activities



Program Objectives



- What are the sponsorship program's objectives?
 - How do they differ from mentoring program objectives?
 - How will you measure successful achievement?
- How will your program design achieve your objectives?

DLA Piper's Champions Program



EVERYTHING MATTERS

CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

DLA Piper's Champions Program was launched in 2011 to support the firm's goal to recruit, develop and advance diverse lawyers. The program ensures that high potential, diverse lawyers are provided meaningful opportunities to develop truly successful careers.

The program pairs protégés (diverse lawyers who demonstrate a high potential for advancement) with champions (senior-level, influential partners who work to progress the protégés' careers). Specifically, associate protégés are diverse, senior associates who have consistently achieved the highest review ratings, while partner protégés are diverse lawyers who have recently joined the partnership.

According to an article published by *Harvard Business Review*, initiatives like the Champions Program work because of the champions' positions of influence, which they leverage to open doors and create opportunities for protégés. This is done through:

- providing the protégés with exposure to other executives, networks and clients, both inside and outside of the firm
- helping the protégés best present themselves to other senior executives
- advocating for the protégés and ensuring they are considered for promising opportunities and challenging assignments

The Champions Program is yet another example of DLA Piper's commitment to develop our people and our recognition of the power of diversity and inclusion. Achievements in recruiting and developing diverse, successful partners will help us sustain and grow our competitive edge in the marketplace and better meet the demands of our clients and the legal industry as a whole.

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Champions are personally invested in the success of their protégés. It is the mutual goal of each pairing to see the protégé promoted.

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Sponsorship Programs: Essential Elements



- Make Sponsorship Robust
- Lead from the Top
- Watch the Pipeline
- Make Sponsorship Safe

Harvard Business Review, *The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling*, Dec. 2010

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Additional Program Considerations



- Feasibility
 - Nature and culture of law firm partnerships
- Ongoing sponsorship activities
 - Touch points and engagement
- Accountability challenges
 - Follow through and measuring progress

Program Oversight



- Who will be in charge
 - Of design and rollout?
 - Of ongoing oversight?
- How much oversight will the firm provide?
- What kind of oversight and support will the firm provide?

Program Participants: Protégées



- What will you call the lawyers being sponsored?
 - Why is terminology important?

- Who will be eligible?
 - At what levels of seniority?
 - How will they be selected?
 - What criteria will you use?

Program Participants: Sponsors



- Who will be eligible?
- At what levels of seniority?
- What criteria will you use?
- How will sponsors be identified?
- How will they be recruited to participate?
- *Why would they agree to do it?*

Matching



- Who will make the matches?
 - Will sponsors and protégées have any input?

- What criteria will they use?
 - Will you consider lawyers' current work or mentoring relationship or lack thereof?

- What will be the approval process?

Expectations



- What will sponsors be expected to do?
- What will protégées be expected to do?
- How will you tell them?
- How will you prepare them?
 - What will you need to teach them?

Challenges and Pitfalls



- Gender and age differences
- The “Double-Bind”
- Fixed Durations
- One-size does not fit all

Measuring Success



- Visibility/Leadership
 - Internal and External
- Client Base
 - Matter Manager, Relationship Partner, Institutional Clients
- Compensation
 - Salary, Bonus, Origination Credit
- Other

Contact Information



Genhi Givings Bailey	Ida Abbott
Director of Diversity & Inclusion	President
DLA Piper LLP	Ida Abbott Consulting LLC
312-984-5229	510-339-6883
Genhi.bailey@dlapiper.com	IdaAbbott@aol.com

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Considerable confusion exists about coaching, mentoring and sponsorship. Many people refer to coaching and mentoring interchangeably. While both processes provide personalized professional development, require special interpersonal skills and have a significant impact on a lawyer's career, there are some important distinctions between them. Coaching is also distinct from sponsorship, which is an advanced form of mentoring. Let's examine these processes and clarify their similarities and differences.

Coaching

Coaching deals with performance. It is *functional* and *results-oriented*. Coaching helps someone become more productive and effective at a specific set of functions, tasks or practices. A coach helps you identify and set goals in a particular area (or function) and develop a plan to achieve those goals. Then the coach gives you support while you implement your plan and achieve your desired results. Because you check in with the coach as your plan moves forward, the coach also keeps you disciplined and focused.

Lawyers who receive coaching usually fall into one of three categories: new or existing leaders who want to optimize their leadership effectiveness; high potential lawyers who want to achieve their highest level of performance; and under-performing lawyers who must improve their performance or change certain behaviors in order to stay in the firm and on track. A large and growing number of coaches today help partners and some high potential associates with areas like business development, leadership development and leadership optimization. Firms also hire specialists to provide coaching in areas like communication and presentation skills, writing, time and work management and team management. Many firms also provide transition coaches for lawyers returning to work after taking leave for the birth or adoption of a child.

A few firms have coaches on staff but most firms hire outside coaches to work with particular lawyers on an as-needed basis. These coaches are *paid* specifically to provide coaching services. Mentors, sponsors and supervisors might all act as coaches when they help someone improve performance or set career goals, but if the issue involves adopting new behaviors or changing problematic behaviors, law firms and individual lawyers usually hire outside coaches.

Coaches can help lawyers recognize barriers to top performance and develop strategies for overcoming them, or identify counterproductive behaviors and develop techniques for changing them. While coaches hired as skills experts (e.g., in presentations or writing) use their expertise to offer advice and guide a lawyer's skill development, most coaches act more indirectly. They help individuals look inside themselves to find solutions and achieve desired results. They are trained to use powerful questions that help individuals discover their strengths and deploy them to achieve their career goals. Some coaches are certified to administer psychometric assessments, helping lawyers increase their self-awareness. They might conduct interviews with co-workers, or study the lawyer's performance evaluations, to collect feedback for the lawyer. Then they help the lawyer process this internal and external information and use it to enhance performance.

Mentoring

Mentoring is broader in scope and purpose than coaching, and is based on a deeper, more meaningful relationship than coaching. It is *relational* in nature and *career-oriented*. Both the quality of the mentoring relationship and the factors that determine quality – trust, mutual respect, and mutual learning – are critical to the mentoring process. Mentoring covers more wide-ranging career issues than coaching because it deals with mentees' overall professional development and advancement, not simply performance goals. Although mentor and mentee might

spend time on improving performance, the relationship usually expands to larger and longer-term personal and professional career issues. Mentors often employ coaching as one of their tools, along with confidence building, role modeling, counseling and advocacy.

Within a law firm, mentors are predominantly lawyers with greater career experience and expertise than mentees. They act as mentors both informally in the usual course of work and through formal mentoring programs that have particular objectives and guidelines. They are *not paid* to be mentors; it is expected of them as part of their responsibility to the firm and its lawyers. However, given the time constraints and billing pressures in law firms today, many mentors lack the time to devote to mentoring and do not make it a priority. Consequently, firms are filling in gaps by hiring coaches to help with certain performance aspects of development, leadership and rainmaking. Coaching that targets specific areas where performance can be improved or optimized may be narrower in scope yet more effective than inadequate mentoring.

Mentoring is especially important, however, for career advancement. Unlike coaching, mentoring has a role in knowledge transfer and skill development. (Skill-focused coaching is an exception, as noted above). While coaches do not need to be lawyers, mentors within a firm usually are. They therefore play an important and direct role in helping lawyers become better, more highly skilled legal practitioners. Because they have relevant work and career experience, mentors are more likely than coaches to use their own experiences, insights and advice to help the mentee learn and progress. Coaches can help lawyers create a plan that calls for developing certain skills and getting certain work experience, but mentors can teach and model the specified legal skills and create the work opportunities needed to achieve those goals.

Another reason mentors are so valuable is that because they are lawyers in the same law firm, they know about the firm's decision-making processes and political dynamics. They can give mentees inside information about firm management and politics that enable associates and junior partners to develop and execute smart career advancement strategies. They can offer insights into client relationships and make introductions to business contacts. Mentors can welcome lawyers into firm networks, make them feel appreciated, and promote a sense of inclusion and camaraderie that heighten engagement and personal identification with the firm. Most significantly, mentors are part of the firm. They can transmit firm values, culture and professionalism to young lawyers and future leaders.

In sum, mentoring and coaching are both important for professional development. Coaches can be very helpful in mapping out performance goals and supporting lawyers as they execute plans and strategies. At a time when accelerating development is of paramount importance, coaching is a useful resource for improving effectiveness and productivity. But for purposes of learning, engagement and career advancement, coaches cannot replace the importance and value of mentoring by an established lawyer in the firm who takes an active and personal interest in helping a younger lawyer succeed.

Sponsorship

A sponsor is a strong advocate who has power and influence and uses that advocacy to produce positive career results for you. Sponsors publicly endorse your qualifications and take risks on your behalf, arguing that you should move up to a higher compensation tier or urging their partners that you are ready for equity partnership or a significant leadership position. They alert you to opportunities and appoint you to key posts. Sometimes they call in favors, put pressure on colleagues, or put their reputation and credibility on the line for you. Partners become sponsors when they perceive special value in you and actively help you advance. It can occur for any number of reasons: they might see you as a natural successor, as having rainmaking potential that could benefit them, or as having expertise necessary to support their clients. Sponsors and champions may not guarantee success, but they make it easier and improve your odds of receiving a coveted leadership appointment, a fatter paycheck or a new client.

When we talk about sponsorship today, it is basically mentoring at the highest level. Sponsorship is the same as the traditional concept of mentorship: a prominent and wise individual takes you under his wing, supports and protects you, and promotes your career success. Current conversations about sponsorship call attention to these traditional notions of how powerful people can help others succeed in a law firm (or any organization). They also direct attention to a critical factor in sponsorship: the sponsor must be someone with power who purposefully champions the other lawyer's career.

The importance of sponsorship was underscored in a 2010 publication that found men enjoy greater career benefits from mentoring than women do.^[1] The research data showed that women are promoted less often than men because mentors actively sponsor men for promotions far more often than they sponsor women. Both women and men get career advice from mentors, but advice consists of words and good intentions. Sponsorship involves taking action on another's behalf to advance their career interests, and having sufficient clout to produce results. Because mentors do not sponsor women, women do not receive the same career benefits from mentoring that men do. In response, some law firms are starting initiatives to increase sponsorship for women and diverse lawyers. These programs generally target a group of mid- to senior associates or junior partners who are paired with one or two influential partners. Relationships tend to focus on creating high quality work and business development opportunities for the junior person. Most sponsorship programs are in the pilot stage, but early experience shows the need for very careful pairings and oversight. Although similar to other mentoring programs, sponsorship demands more of mentors, requires more focused effort from those being sponsored, and considerable ongoing involvement by program coordinators.

[1] Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carver and Christine Silva, "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2010; Nancy M. Carter, Ph.D., Christine Silva, "Mentoring: Necessary But Insufficient for Advancement," *Catalyst*, 2010

Ida Abbott helps employers develop, manage and retain legal talent. She also serves as a mentor and coach to high achieving individuals seeking professional success. This article is excerpted from her book, Lawyers' Professional Development: The Legal Employer's Comprehensive Guide, 2nd Edition (NALP 2012).

Ida O. Abbott, *Management Solutions*, Issue 36, Spring 2013

Many law firms are thinking about starting sponsorship programs to help retain and advance women. Their recognition of the importance of sponsorship for women's career advancement is welcome as is their desire to support women by ensuring they receive adequate sponsorship. But many of these firms may not appreciate the challenges and traps that formal sponsorship programs can pose. Here are some questions to consider if your firm is contemplating a sponsorship program.

1. **What is your objective in starting a sponsorship program?** You must be very clear about what the program proposes to accomplish and why the firm is determined to achieve that objective. You must be able to show how the program fits into the firm's strategic plan and will advance a specific strategic objective. In order to get participants' buy-in, there must be no doubt about the importance of the program as a means to achieve a critical firm goal. Even more than in a mentoring program, having clear objectives at the outset will enable you to monitor progress and measure success.
2. **Do you have a thriving mentorship program?** Sponsorship has several unique elements, but it can be viewed as a high-level function of mentorship. (Some refer to sponsorship as "mentorship on steroids.") If mentoring programs have been successful in your firm, you have a good institutional foundation for a sponsorship program. But if your efforts to promote mentoring in your firm have been unsuccessful, you can expect an even more difficult time trying to institute a sponsorship program. Sponsorship places greater expectations on both parties than mentorship and involves more action, trust and risk; sponsorship focuses primarily on advancement, not on advice, guidance and information; and sponsorship requires a track record of high performance and proven potential that make the sponsor see the protégée as worthy of sponsorship.
3. **What will sponsorship program participants do?** Sponsorship program participants must fully understand and commit to sponsorship program objectives and what will be expected of them in the program. Sponsorship requires more active engagement by sponsors than most mentorship programs ask of mentors. So it is important to be as precise as possible about expected actions and achievements.
4. **How will you determine and select the lawyers to be sponsored?** Sponsorship targets a more narrowly defined group of lawyers than does mentoring: high-performing lawyers who have demonstrated their ability, drive and commitment to success. This group can be further narrowed by targeting high performing women and/or minority lawyers, as most current and contemplated law firm sponsorship programs do. And because an established record of performance and achievement is essential, the group can be further limited by including only lawyers who have reached a certain seniority or competency level, e.g., senior associates, counsel, non-equity partners, and/or junior equity partners. In order to identify the lawyers to be sponsored in your program, you must have specific objective criteria for qualification and for selection. You can review performance appraisals, work experience, involvement in specific firm or community activities, client relationships, and other designated factors over a period of years. You can invite potential participants to submit applications explaining why they want to participate, and/or ask partners to nominate lawyers for sponsorship.
5. **Who will be the sponsors?** If your program is truly intended to help senior women associates become partners and junior women partners become rainmakers and leaders, then the pool of potential sponsors will be small. Sponsors need to be willing to act as advocates and promoters and to expend political capital on behalf of the protégée. In addition, sponsors must have enough clout to provide real benefits to the protégée. The more influential the sponsor, the greater the career benefits that may accrue to the protégée. Most influential partners already act as sponsors for a few associates and/or partners they perceive as making vital and valuable contributions to their practice or as having great potential to do so. They are very circumspect about the lawyers they sponsor because they have limited political capital and time, so they invest where they anticipate a significant payoff: the associate who will become a partner or the junior

partner who will help manage the sponsor's clients, bring new clients to the practice, or become a firm leader and powerful ally. You will need to persuade potential sponsors that the protégée is worthy of their effort and that sponsoring that protégée will not interfere with their sponsorship of lawyers they would otherwise select.

6. **How will you make your matches?** Because the nature of the sponsor-protégée relationship is intense and risky, and requires trust and active engagement, it works better when it starts naturally. A straight match between people who do not know each other well, or have not worked together before, is very challenging. It is better to start with lawyers who already have an existing relationship of trust, admiration and respect and to build on that foundation, educating the sponsor about how he or she can best serve in that role, and educating the junior lawyer about how to be an effective and worthy protégée. You can pair up individuals who do not work together or have a pre-existing relationship by matching a protégées' career advancement needs and a sponsors' ability to address them. However, it will require extra effort for the paired individuals to carry out the obligations of a sponsor-protégée relationship, and program coordinators will need to provide greater involvement, support and oversight.

An alternative, less programmatic approach is to have partners become more intentional about sponsoring women. Raise their self-awareness, ascertain what they already do as sponsors and determine the extent to which they sponsor women. If they do not sponsor women as readily as they do men, find out why not and help them learn how to include women as well as men as protégées. Ask them to identify specific women they will sponsor and designate certain actions they will undertake. Hold them to their commitment, and monitor and support their efforts.

7. **How will you help men overcome any reluctance to sponsoring women?** For many reasons, men, who are most of your potential sponsors, sponsor men far more frequently than they sponsor women. They may have past experience with a woman lawyer who disappointed them by leaving; they may hold unconscious biases that make them doubt women's long-term commitment or visualize leaders as men; they may overlook women because they automatically select men, whom they know better or hang out with; they may feel less comfortable with women than men or worry that having a close relationship with a woman lawyer may be misperceived. Helping men recognize and address these kinds of issues can increase their readiness to sponsor women. And as they become less wary and more intentional about including women, they will begin to see and choose more women candidates to sponsor.
8. **How will the sponsorship program interrelate with other firm initiatives?** Sponsorship can easily tie into diversity and inclusion efforts, women's initiatives, leadership development, succession planning, and other development activities and programs. Include representatives of those programs and initiatives in the planning process and try to find ways to make them reinforce each other.
9. **What support and oversight will sponsorship program coordinators provide?** If you are the program coordinator, here are questions to consider:
- a. What kind of training, group activities, and program events will you offer? Will you provide continuing support for the participants from an internal or external consultant? Will you use this program to create bonds among all program participants? Will you have social events for all sponsors and/or protégées?
 - b. What will be done to further the lessons learned during training programs or group events? Will you provide broader access to movers and shakers inside and outside the firm beyond what is offered by each sponsor?
 - c. Will you provide a great deal of detailed oversight, with members of the Diversity and Inclusion or Professional Development teams scheduling and monitoring activities closely? Or will you leave the planning and implementation of a career advancement plan up to the sponsor and protégée?
 - d. How will you determine if any sponsor-protégée pairs are not working well? What will you do about them?
 - e. How large is your budget? Who will be responsible for the operation of the program and what kind of staff will be needed?

10. **How will you support sponsorship beyond the program?** For a sponsorship program to have a meaningful impact, the firm's institutional processes and cultural norms must support sponsorship beyond the program. Sponsorship is an important factor, but by itself is not enough to propel women forward. If the firm's decision-making processes as to partner elevation, compensation, business development opportunities, leadership selection or client transitions are not made transparent and objective, and if they continue to favor men, then the benefits of sponsorship programs will be muted at best. Many women pull away from firms and from leadership because they believe those processes are unfair and unfriendly to women. If the firm is really committed to women's advancement, it must examine and reshape the way lawyers are expected to work, the behaviors and activities it rewards, and the way it decides who will succeed and how.

Ida Abbott helps employers develop, manage and retain legal talent. She also serves as a mentor and coach to high achieving individuals seeking professional success. As a lawyer and consultant to the legal profession, Ida has been a leader in efforts to advance women in the legal profession for more than three decades. She is author of many books and resources, including Women on Top: The Woman's Guide to Leadership and Power in Law Firms (Thomson Reuters, 2010). Her newsletter, Management Solutions, contains this article and others on related topics, and is available at www.IdaAbbott.com.