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Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

How To Get A Sponsor, Be A Sponsor, And Make The Most Of The Relationship

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Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

[Note: This article was published as part of our original "Leadership Moments" series. The series has since been changed to "Leading in the B-Suite" for a new focus on conversations about race in corporate America. The first interview in that series is [here](#).]

If you were to ask a colleague or acquaintance to mentor you, it is a pretty good bet that you might hear a “yes.” As long as the time commitment is reasonable, people with a few gray hairs often are more than happy to share their hard-earned lessons, and to be a sounding board as you navigate challenges at work

But if you switch the conversation to asking someone to be your sponsor, that raises the stakes considerably. Suddenly more is on the line, with greater expectations on each side. And while there is near universal support for the idea of sponsorship within companies – such programs increase engagement and help with talent development – the demand for such programs appears to be greater than the supply, particularly for women (“A Lack of Sponsorship is Keeping Women from Advancing into Leadership,” according to a Harvard Business Review [article](#) last summer).

Even if your company doesn’t offer an official sponsorship program, that doesn’t mean you can’t have a sponsor; it just means you’ll have to make it happen on your own. As part of an ongoing series that [Kathy Murphy](#) and I are doing on navigating workplace challenges (we’ve covered [asking for a raise or promotion](#), [networking](#), and [getting your voice heard](#) so far), we’ll share the advice from several of our

colleagues and other leaders on how to get a sponsor, how to make the most of your relationship with your sponsor, and how to be an effective sponsor. Because a sponsor relationship is more complicated than a mentor relationship, it helps to clarify the responsibilities of each party.

What is a sponsor, and how are they different from a mentor? A sponsor is typically someone who is a couple of rungs higher on the ladder in your organization, can be on the lookout for opportunities for you, and can put in a good word for you when candidates are being considered. They feel invested in helping you succeed, and are willing and able to spend their political capital to help you advance. They give you visibility, open doors and influence others to bet on you. They open your eyes to possibilities and challenge you to take on stretch assignments.

They may be doing it because it is part of their job – at some companies, each member of the C-suite leadership team may be assigned to sponsor a high-potential, and will be held partly responsible for their success. Or they may be doing it because they are committed to helping groom future leaders.

Such relationships can be tremendously rewarding for each party, and offer a real career accelerant for the person being sponsored. People at the top of their careers will often share stories about the big breaks they got because somebody was willing to bet on them and help lift them up. The key to an effective sponsorship relationship is trust, and that doesn't happen overnight. It takes explicit conversations about expectations, and deliberate effort.

Here's a quick how-to guide.

HOW TO GET A SPONSOR

If you work for an organization that is committed to the idea of sponsorship and has an established program in place, congratulations. You've got a running start. But even if they don't, you can recruit your own sponsor.

First, make sure you are getting involved in projects around the company that go beyond your simple job description. Just putting your head down, working hard, and hoping you'll get noticed is not enough. Organizations are always forming inter-disciplinary teams and committees to tackle a company-wide goal, such as improving some aspect of culture, and they can be powerful ways to get exposed to senior leaders beyond your boss and boss's boss.

Keep in mind the priceless advice I heard from **Joseph Plumeri** when he was CEO of Willis Group Holdings. His biggest career inflection points, he told me, came from chance meetings, giving rise to the expression: "Play in traffic."

"It means that if you go push yourself out there and you see people and do things and participate and get involved, something happens," Mr. Plumeri said. "I tell people, just show up, get in the game, go play in traffic."

So put yourself in a position where you'll be noticed, but you also

should be thoughtful about who you want to get to know better in the organization, and why. Make sure they are in a position to actually help you if they want to, because of their expertise or place in the organization. Understand their network and span of influence so that if they want to do something for you, they can make it happen.

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And start small. You risk scaring people off if you ask them outright to be your sponsor. Just start with asking to grab a coffee or a quick meal, and show that you're interested in them personally. How did they get where they are? What career experiences have been helpful to them?

Ask them for their thoughts on some career options you are exploring. Briefly share with them your education, job history and career interests. Ask for their advice on whether your aspirations are realistic, what additional experience you need and how you could position yourself to be considered for opportunities. Show genuine interest in their responses. Ask "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Follow up the meeting with a thank you, acknowledging the value of the advice, and follow through on delivering anything you committed to do. Take action on the advice – hone your skills, communicate your career goals to your leadership and human resource manager. Then

keep your sponsor informed about your progress, accomplishments and evolving interests so they can advocate on your behalf.

Final point: Don't limit yourself by thinking you can only have one sponsor. Develop more than one in different parts of the organization. There's no reason not to, and you'll be in a better position than if your lone sponsor suddenly leaves to go elsewhere.

HOW TO BE A GOOD PROTEGE

The first rule is that you are not outsourcing your career development to your sponsor. Own the responsibility for your success, hold yourself accountable for everything that happens (or doesn't), and be fully appreciative of whatever help your sponsor can provide. It's up to you to earn your promotion. See the sponsor as someone who can provide visibility and speak up for you at the right time. The less help you expect from your sponsor, the more likely they are to want to help you. Remember, having a sponsor is not a guarantee of anything.

Make sure you have a substantial track record of performance that you can build on. A sponsor is always gauging whether to put their reputation on the line and go to bat for you, so give them plenty of reasons to be confident that you will keep delivering. And once they are on your side and want to help, be clear on what you want, because your sponsor can only help you if you are clear on what you want for yourself. Ideally, that goal should be in the sweet spot of specific and broad.

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For example, if you are too narrow in your goals – you want a specific job but the current occupant of that role isn't likely to leave anytime soon – then you'll be limiting your sponsor's ability to help you. But if you're clear that you want to move up to a certain level of the organization to work in a particular aspect of the business, then they will keep their ears open for you in meetings on succession planning and talent pipelines.

And make sure the focus in those conversations is as much about how you can help drive the business as it is about your personal aspirations. It's a subtle distinction, but an important one. "You shouldn't be looking just to climb the ladder, but be open to opportunities that let you climb that ladder," said **Kim Lubel**, the former CEO of CST Brands, a big operator of convenience stores.

Beyond acting in all the ways that are the foundations of a good relationship – responsive, appreciative, honest, reliable, flexible, etc. – make the relationship easy for the sponsor. Take the initiative to set up meetings at appropriate intervals and keep the sponsor informed. You set the table for the conversation. All your sponsor should have to do is show up, answer your questions and share their advice. And when you do meet with them, listen more than you talk.

Be ready to step up. As your sponsor scans the horizon for opportunities for you, they may come to you with an idea that you weren't expecting, even some job that may have responsibilities for which you feel you're not quite ready. You may want to turn down the job for certain reasons, like it involves a move that your family isn't willing to make.

But don't say no because you worry you're not ready or because it doesn't align with the linear path you have in mind for your career. If your sponsor believes you can do it, so should you, and they shouldn't have to twist your arm, because there is an element of an unwritten contract with the sponsor — if they're going to help you, you should be inclined to act on their help.

HOW TO BE A GOOD SPONSOR

There are so many reasons to want to be an effective sponsor. Because you believe in paying it forward – you recognize that you were helped up by others to achieve success, and you want to do the same. Because you understand that developing the next generation of leaders is an important contribution that you can make to ensure the long-term success of the company. Because you want to do your part to help promote diversity and inclusion at the more senior levels of companies. While sponsorship should be seen as a core responsibility of every executive, not everyone sees it that way.

If you are going to actively sponsor someone, be sure to have a conversation with that person's direct supervisor to let them know (they

shouldn't hear about it from others). Ideally, the manager of the person you're sponsoring will be grateful for the help, and proud that one of their direct reports is considered a high-potential within the company. And yes, we say “ideally” here because not every manager is wired that way. Some people prefer to hoard their talent because they want to hold onto people who are going to make them look good, rather than having a more selfless approach.

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blind spots.*

Another benefit of talking to your protege's boss is that you may get unvarnished feedback about areas they need to work on – and that maybe didn't come up in their performance review. Armed with those insights, you can be more helpful as a sponsor in shoring up any perceived weakness. Those conversations should also provide you more insight into the particular culture in the employee's department.

Ultimately, as a sponsor, you want to help close any gaps that exist between how the organization sees the person you're sponsoring – their strengths, weaknesses and perceived potential – and how they see themselves. In other words, it's your job to help remove blind spots. To do that, you have to be willing to have difficult conversations. And the person may not want to hear it, but they will know that you are simply trying to help them succeed.

Finally, as much as your protege should be taking responsibility for

guiding the discussion, you can also provide a framework to help make conversations as productive as possible. One starting point is to use these five questions developed by Deepak Chopra: What is it that you really want to be and do? What are you doing really well that is helping you get there? What are you not doing well that is preventing you from getting there? What will you do differently tomorrow to meet those challenges? How can I help, and where do you need the most help?

Those questions, and an investment of time to think through the answers, can help form the foundation of a powerful sponsorship relationship.