

What Women Need to Know

Understanding the Mentorship-Sponsorship Continuum

Mentors and sponsors play a pivotal role in women's career development, paving the way for their advancement. This section illuminates what women need to know to reap the benefits of men's professional involvement.

LEARN ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MENTORS AND SPONSORS

It's important for women to understand how mentorship and sponsorship differ. Distinct from formal mentoring relationships organized through a company effort, informal mentoring often begins with the sharing of knowledge about a specific business issue. That interaction may set the stage for further interactions which grows into a mentoring relationship (whether called by that name or not). Mentors, formal or informal, may provide wise counsel, helping a mentee to handle a challenging situation or make a difficult decision.

Mentorship is a predecessor for developing a relationship that involves sponsorship. While mentors are sources of information and guidance, sponsors employ their professional capital for the benefit of someone they know and trust and in whom they see potential. A sponsor may provide introductions to people in their network or use their influence in supporting an idea, project, or strategic direction. Sponsors play a pivotal role in women's access to opportunities that broaden their visibility and position them for advancement. They help women to build confidence through experience and the deepening of their competence in managing aspects of the business.

The progression from mentorship to sponsorship is not automatic and should not be assumed. Men become sponsors for women they come to know well, whose performance, strengths and challenges they understand and for whom they feel able to make a positive difference.

EXPERIMENT WITH THE MALE APPROACH TO SEEKING MENTORING

While male allies provided mixed feedback about the advisability of asking someone to be one's mentor, they were in complete agreement in encouraging women to reach out to ask about or share their perspective on a business issue. Men typically use language such as, "I'd like to learn more about marketing and wondered if we could meet for an hour," or "I'd like to share some observations about product research," or "I'm wondering if I could pick your brain about an issue in my group." These initial conversations can pave the way for developing a relationship and minimally provide exposure and demonstrate interest to learn and grow.

UNDERSTAND OBSTACLES TO MEN MENTORING WOMEN

A primary reason for men not stepping up to mentor women is they may not understand the value of mentoring nor had strong mentors in their careers. Men may shy away from mentoring because they don't feel equipped to be an effective mentor or aren't clear how they can be helpful. In addition, some men (and women) are self-focused and do not prioritize supporting the careers of others.

Men may be concerned that without clear parameters, the mentoring relationship has no end. While many mentoring relationships endure in an informal way beyond the agreed upon timeframe, planning a time-limited arrangement is important at the outset.

KNOW THE SUCCESS FACTORS FOR EFFECTIVE MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

There are many ways in which women can influence the success of their mentoring experiences. First and foremost among them is to have clarity about the objectives for the mentoring relationship. The goal might be to learn more about research, explore the stepping stones for a position to which you aspire, or strengthen business development skills. If the mentoring request is not part of a formal program, the importance of being explicit with goals is even more important. Women are more apt to receive the mentoring they desire if they have determined what type of support they seek.

INSIGHTS FROM HBA HONORABLE MENTORS

I identify someone who will self-edit or limit themselves and I'm going to help move them along. The woman is afraid or not being pushed. I'll say, "Let's talk about it," or ask, "Why are you not taking a bet on yourself?"

BRIAN GOFF
chief commercial and global operations officer, Alexion Pharmaceuticals

You can't go from 0 to 60, or from not knowing someone at all to sponsoring her. That's very unrealistic. Mentorship is a precursor for sponsorship and allows you to learn more about a person and how they solve problems. We can't increase sponsorship until we address the lack of mentorship.

I used a number of people to be mentors based on their expertise in an area. I never asked anyone to be my mentor. Some people think a mentor is like a marriage. Instead, I asked, "Can you help me learn more about (specific subject)?" and they usually helped.

People are inclined to mentor or they are not. It's something people are expected to do but there's one thing that separates people. Some take it to heart and make it a meaningful experience with planned outcomes that you work toward and others say they're mentoring and view it as incredibly low value work.

STUART SOWDER
vp, compliance, Asia Pacific, Africa, Middle East, Pfizer

What Women Need to Know: Understanding the Mentorship-Sponsorship Continuum cont.

KNOW THE SUCCESS FACTORS FOR EFFECTIVE MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS cont.

Another important consideration is identifying individuals who demonstrate qualities signaling they would be a strong mentor such as being a good listener and having a reputation as someone who supports others professionally. Women can think about what value they can bring to the mentoring relationship rather than assuming knowledge exchange flows in one direction. They may be able to provide a perspective on what's working well in their department or what the company could do to better support gender diversity. Male ally leaders reported they often receive as much from mentoring relationships as they provide. A woman can also simply ask a potential or new mentor how she can be helpful.

Male allies reported that men, in some cases themselves included, tended to be less direct in providing challenging feedback to women because they were fearful of upsetting them. But they had learned advising women on challenges that could be holding them back, as well as calling out their strengths, was valuable information for helping them achieve their professional goals. Women can short-circuit the hesitancy men may feel by empowering them to provide candid feedback.

DEVELOP MULTIPLE MENTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Women are advised to think about developing relationships with multiple mentors serving different needs. A woman who has been newly promoted to a team of all men may seek a male mentor who is a peer in the group and a female mentor at her level who works in a different part of the business as mentoring resources. Women may seek mentoring guidance from different individuals as they move through stages of their own careers and have new questions and challenges. Some mentoring relationships may endure while others may be more time limited but they share the commonality of learning from the experience of others.

One of the benefits of having multiple mentors is the probability that some may not work out as hoped. Male allies shared their personal experiences of disappointing mentoring relationships in which they did not connect well with the mentor or the mentor did not prioritize the time. Male allies advised women not to be shy about reaching out as well as to not take personally if a man (or woman) is unable to say yes to the mentoring request.

ASK MEN ABOUT WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION

It's easy to assume male leaders (and female leaders) work constantly but in reality, they too have limitations on their time and energy. It can be illuminating to ask men about the work-family trade-offs they've had to weigh or how they approach work-life management. Because men tend not to be asked about their personal work-life integration, it can open up an interesting vein of conversation and provide a more nuanced, real-life perspective on how men juggle work and family.

RETHINKING THE LANGUAGE OF MENTORING

Mentoring is typically thought of as a more senior-level person in an organization imparting guidance and knowledge to an individual earlier in their career journey.

Male allies indicate that often, and in the best mentoring relationships, the knowledge exchange and learning flows in both directions. Given that context, efforts to promote gender equity should be named

reciprocal mentoring, capturing the spirit of mutual exchange.

This language encourages men in leadership and management who may not understand how they benefit from mentoring women (and diverse employees broadly) who are earlier in their careers.

It also signals to women, sometimes shy about seeking mentoring, to consider the

value they add in the relationship, which includes educating men on how to effectively support women's professional growth and development.

The idea of reciprocal mentoring also encourages women to think not only about what they hope to gain from the mentoring experience but also what they hope to give and how they can be a resource.

INSIGHTS FROM HBA HONORABLE MENTORS

MALE ALLIES ON THE RECIPROCITY OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

I went into mentoring and coaching not with the specific intention of mentoring women but because I really believed in the power of developing people, mentoring and coaching and I believe it goes both ways. I probably learned more from the relationships than I gave.

It has to be a two-way street. It's the definition of a great mentor that they will say they get more out of the relationship than the mentee. It's learning, beginning with listening and being insightful. That's the dual responsibility of the mentor and the mentee.

When I talk to people, I am giving them perspective and I'm getting an ear to the ground. I am getting something too. I do think that reciprocal piece is critical. I make time because I get something out of it.