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MANAGING YOURSELF

The Relationship You Need to Get Right

How to be an effective sponsor—and a good protégé—throughout your career *by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Melinda Marshall, and Laura Sherbin*

Katharine, a senior HR executive at a global financial services firm, takes pride in developing rising stars. After a vice president on one of her teams consistently impressed her, she recommended him for a more challenging role in another part of the company. Months later Katharine heard through the grapevine that he was struggling in the job. She asked to meet with him. "You know we're in this together, right?" she said. "I put my reputation on the line, but I have no idea how you're performing and whether you need help or air cover." He promised to keep her in the loop, but communication dropped off again. Katharine realized that his commitment to the firm, and to her, had waned. She met with him once more and told him she could no longer be his sponsor.

When Maria, a manager at a U.S. health care firm, was invited to join a mentoring program for high-potential women, she anticipated getting guidance that would help her advance. But her assigned mentor, a physician and vice president, took little interest in Maria's career; instead she lectured to the group about her own path and gave direct advice only to the participants who were also MDs. In the end Maria turned to existing allies for career support. "Not everyone in leadership knows how to be an advocate," she reflects.

In 2003 Mark McLane, an openly gay innovation consultant at Whirlpool, was asked to serve on the company's diversity council, headed by then-COO Jeff Fettig. He excelled at the work and in 2004 sought an appointment to southwest Michigan's Council for World Class Communities, a nonprofit that furthers economic and social growth in the largely African-American community of Benton Harbor, Michigan, where the company is headquartered. Fettig supported his bid and also persuaded CEO David Whitwam to make McLane Whirlpool's director of diversity, enabling him to be the council's executive-on-loan. That year Fettig moved up to the CEO job and gave his protégé a new mission: to ensure gender balance among senior managers globally. McLane set four-year goals and aligned Whirlpool's recruiting strategy accordingly. "Mark not only grasped our vision for key areas of the company, he played a critical role in implementing it," Fettig says.

McLane also demonstrated his allegiance to Fettig outside the office. The CEO is a trustee of the local Boys and Girls Club, a nonprofit he sees as key to making Benton Harbor a "world-class community" that might have greater appeal to Whirlpool recruits and be more likely to yield local talent. McLane joined the board and, with Fettig's coaching, became president after six months. He instituted reforms that turned the organization's $125,000 deficit into a $500,000 reserve and nearly doubled its membership within a year. "If someone believes in you and gives you an opportunity, it is incumbent upon you to go the extra mile," he observes.



The best sponsors offer not just vision but also the tactical means of realizing it.

ILLUSTRATION: CAMERON LAW

A Sponsor-Protégé Checklist

SPONSORS	PROTÉGÉS
ADVOCATE FOR YOUR NEXT PROMOTION	CAN BE TRUSTED
CALL IN FAVORS FOR YOU	CONTRIBUTE 110%
EXPAND YOUR PERCEPTION OF WHAT YOU CAN DO	COVER YOUR BACK
MAKE CONNECTIONS TO SENIOR LEADERS	PROMOTE YOUR LEGACY
ADVISE YOU ON EXECUTIVE PRESENCE	ALLOW YOU TO HELP SHAPE THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

The Dynamics of Sponsorship

As the examples above show, the relationship between sponsor and protégé works best when it helps *both* parties. Katharine, who requested anonymity to protect her firm's reputation, cut ties with her former vice president because he failed to demonstrate basic responsiveness, let alone deliver the standout proactive effort she'd expected. Maria, who asked for anonymity because she still works with the physician once assigned to mentor her, found that the older woman lacked a grasp of the give-and-take intrinsic to effective guidance. By contrast, Fettig and McLane worked together on the twin goals of hitting Whirlpool's business targets and enhancing their reputations as leaders in the community.

Sponsorship can help catapult junior talent into top management while also greatly expanding the reach and impact of senior leadership—but only when both sponsor and protégé recognize that it's a mutually beneficial alliance, a truly two-way street.

Our recent research bears this out. We conducted three national surveys of nearly 4,000 professionals in large corporations, held focus groups with more than 60 vice presidents and senior vice presidents, and interviewed nearly 20 *Fortune* 500 executives. The best sponsors, we found, go beyond mentoring. They offer not just guidance but also advocacy, not just vision but also the tactical means of realizing it. They place bets on outstanding junior colleagues and call in favors for them. The most successful protégés, for their part, recognize that sponsorship must be earned with performance and loyalty—not just once but continually.

We repeatedly heard CEOs and top managers say that they wouldn't be where they are without strong sponsors *and* loyal protégés. One *Fortune* 500 CEO gave a powerful illustration. When interviewing candidates for senior positions, he always asks them, "How many people do you have in your pocket? If I asked you to pull off something impossible that involved liaising across seven geographies and five functions, who owes you one and could help you do it?" He told us, "I'm not interested in anyone who doesn't have deep pockets."

Ensuring that you have sponsors is a lifelong project no matter what your position. As she neared retirement age, a senior partner at Ernst & Young belatedly recognized that she hadn't "refreshed" her pool of sponsors. "I had always looked forward to a second career as a board director, but I'm realizing that being selected for a board seat is all about sponsorship," she says. "You can't apply for these positions; you've got to be tapped." Nor is it ever too early for a junior executive to start cultivating protégés. Kris Urbauer, the manager of veterans' initiatives at GE, acknowledged that to achieve CEO Jeffrey Immelt's goal of making the company an appealing employer for returning vets, she would have to develop a posse of high-performing subordinates. "With all eyes on me to deliver, I'm going to need some dedicated help," she told us.

Our first exploration of sponsorship, a 2011 HBR special report titled "The Sponsor Effect," revealed the impact a sponsor can have on virtually every aspect of an employee's career, boosting the ability to ask for and get raises and promotions and find satisfaction at work. Yet relatively few of the employees we surveyed—19% of men and 13% of women—reported having a sponsor. The use of a sponsor as a career lever is sometimes poorly understood, other times perceived as rife with risk. And corporate initiatives designed to jump-start sponsorships have had at best mixed results. Leaders can't lobby convincingly for up-and-comers they don't know, and junior employees paired with sponsors don't see what they can contribute or can't deliver it.

Seeking to better understand these relationships, we launched a second round of research. Our initiative, Sponsor Effect 2.0, enabled us to map the quid pro quo: how protégés can attract, sustain, and deploy sponsors to progress in their careers, and how sponsors can use the dynamic to extend their reach, expand their skills, build networks, and demonstrate leadership.

The Sponsor's Role

What exactly does a sponsor do? According to our research, it boils down to two things: putting one's reputation on the line for a protégé and taking responsibility for his or her promotion. A good sponsor will groom you to audition for a key part in a prominent production, nudge the director to choose you, and coach you on your performance. While you're onstage, she'll train a spotlight on you so that everyone takes note of your abilities and potential. Should you stumble, or should the audience turn hostile, she'll come to your aid (at least the first time). After all, "protégé" means "one who's protected."



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When we asked managers what they hoped for in a sponsor, 74% said they want a sponsor to provide honest feedback, specifically by suggesting ways for the protégé to narrow gaps in skills and experience. Other frequent responses included "provide feedback on how to look and act like a leader" (59%), "provide opportuni-

ties for visibility internally" (49%), "help me define career goals" (44%), and "be willing to defend me" (41%).

The degree to which a sponsor will come to the rescue of a protégé varies considerably, however. A Siemens executive told us her sponsorship has to be clearly merited lest it look like favoritism. "If you screw up, I may step in, but if you continue not to thrive, I'll have to step away," she says. At the law firm White & Case, by contrast, partner and tax attorney Jim Hayden supported his protégé Someera Khokhar repeatedly. When Khokhar had a conflict with another partner, Hayden intervened to mend fences. When long-term clients demurred at liaising primarily with an associate, Hayden vouched for Khokhar's expertise. In subtle and overt ways he ensured that she could thrive—which indeed she did, eventually making partner. "Every time I needed something, he made it happen, whether by his presence or his influence," Khokhar recalls.

The Protégé's Part

What protégés should do for their sponsors is less well understood. Our survey indicated that the top two imperatives are demonstrating trust and showing loyalty. (Some 61% agreed with the former idea and 49% agreed with the latter one.) When we asked potential sponsors, 62% said protégés should "assume responsibility and be self-directed," 39% said they should "deliver 110%," and 34% said they should "offer skill sets and bring a perspective different than mine." One respondent summed it up this way: "A protégé who doesn't do everything in her power to make her sponsor look smart for backing her is wasting the sponsor's time."

Ed Gadsden, the chief diversity officer at Pfizer, emphasizes that a protégé should keep her sponsor apprised of critical developments, conversations that might be off his radar, and constituencies outside his circle. He recalls a conversation with his sponsor, the late legal scholar and federal judge Leon Higginbotham. Early on Gadsden asked Higginbotham what he got out of the relationship. Higginbotham replied, "You're nothing like me. The people you're around, the things you see, what you're hearing—you provide a perspective I wouldn't otherwise have." Today Gadsden appreciates this quality in his own protégés.

Several successful protégés spoke of achieving their sponsor's vision (recall Mark McLane). At a large government contractor, one team leader, a former member of the military, described a boss whose



Successful protégés ask for career guidance, feedback, and stretch assignments.

big-picture goals required great tactical expertise. "I'd see where he wanted to go, and I didn't say 'That's never going to work' but rather 'Yes, sir!'" he told us. "I found solutions—and he appreciated that. Together we really drove results and fast-tracked both our careers."

Finding Each Other

Most sponsors cultivate protégés not from self-serving motives but because it's "the right thing to do" and can be a gratifying experience. "Paying it forward is my way of paying back the people who helped me get where I am today," says Annmarie Neal, the chief talent officer at Cisco.

Leaders will give their time, attention, and relationship capital only to people who perform exceptionally well. Katharine's vice president caught her attention, she told us, because he was "the kind of guy you could put in a room and he'd come up with that big idea." Sponsors also get behind those who are hungry for backing. Cynthia Rivera, a senior diversity



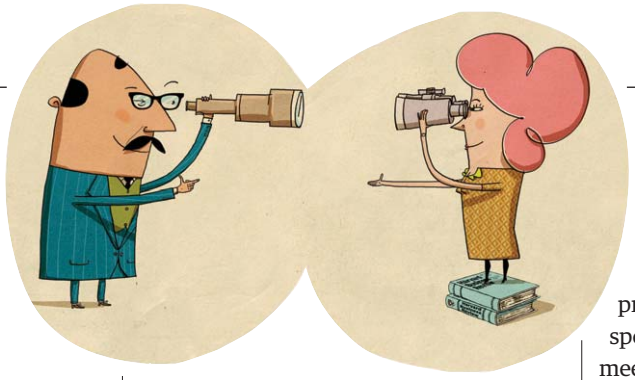
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Sponsors seek out exceptional performers. Protégés scan the horizon for leaders who embody their values or value their strengths.

specialist at Freddie Mac, notes, "They've got to show me they're going to make the most of what I have to give." Finally, while many sponsors seek protégés who balance their own strengths and weaknesses, they also tend to support people with similar values, mind-sets, or backgrounds. "My race and gender often form the basis for my affinity, because there are so few female multicultural leaders in tech," says Rosalind Hudnell, the chief diversity officer at Intel. "I see myself in them and in the challenges they'll face, which allows me to help them in ways others might not be able to."

Junior executives should be just as selective when seeking sponsors, and they should take a proactive approach. One IT professional highlights a common mistake. "I was great at building business and had tons of cheerleaders, but I had that typical Asian keep-your-head-down-and-you'll-get-taken-care-of mind-set," he recalls. "My boss had to take me aside and tell me that if I didn't actively cultivate her as my sponsor, I would never progress beyond senior associate."

The most successful protégés are not content with one sponsor. Throughout their careers they scan the horizon for leaders who either embody their values (the quality most sought by 45% of the protégés we polled) or value their strengths (43%). They target leaders whose style they can complement—bringing tactical follow-through skills to visionaries or offering pushback to collaborators. They target leaders they think could benefit from their networks as well as their expertise.

And they routinely *ask* for career guidance, feedback, and stretch assignments. A vice president with 26 years of experience remembers consistently approaching her bosses for more responsibility. "Sponsors cannot be clairvoyant," she explains. "If you want to grow in the organization, then spell out how—and the introductions or team postings will follow."

Cynthia Rivera recalls that early in her career she asked for an appointment with the executive vice president; when his assistant pressed to know her business, she said it was a personal matter. During the meeting she laid out her career history and desired trajectory, soliciting feedback on the skills and experience she might need. "Ask for input, not a job," she recommends. "You don't want to go in there waving a résumé." The strategy paid off: By the end of the meeting she had won a sponsor.

Women seem particularly reluctant to be so proactive. "They don't want to have to toot their own horn," explains Subha Barry, a senior vice president at Freddie Mac. During a previous job at Merrill Lynch she found an alternate strategy. She asked three female colleagues, all reporting to different executives, to meet monthly over lunch to discuss one another's work. That way they could knowledgeably promote the others to those in their own circles. "When women talk about each other, we can be quite eloquent," Barry observes. "So I might say to my boss in response to a problem he was airing, 'This is something my colleague Lisa's been working on; she's got some great ideas. You need to talk to her.'" The strategy was remarkably effective, gaining Barry and her lunchmates C-level positions within and outside the firm.

Respondents offered several additional sponsor-winning tactics. Chief among them was "leading with a yes": voicing enthusiasm when offered a challenging assignment. (If you have reservations, don't air them right away.) Others included bringing in new business, keeping potential sponsors "in the know," and developing a product or service on their behalf.

Maintaining the Relationship

Winning a sponsor is just the beginning. The relationship must be consistently nurtured and periodically refreshed—tasks that fall to the junior player. Successful protégés understand that sustaining sponsorship looks a lot like earning it: meeting deadlines, exceeding targets, and proving you will advance the larger mission. They recognize the importance of regular meetings, whether face-to-face or by phone or e-mail. They know to look for opportunities to forge bonds. And they find ways to support a sponsor's passion or help build his or her legacy outside the organization.

Protégés can also strengthen their relationships with sponsors by becoming sponsors themselves, because harnessing and growing talent is arguably the best demonstration of leadership ability. "Tiger" Tyagarajan, the CEO of Genpact, is a case in point. During the 17 years when he was the protégé of then-CEO Pramod Bhasin, he distinguished himself by building highly effective teams from scratch. "I had to hire people with background and depth and then sell them a vision, because I was putting them into what looked like a small job and making it their business to grow it," he recalls. "My ability to attract big people, get them excited, and keep them excited was one of the main drivers of my career."

Mark McLane is now the director of diversity and inclusion at Booz Allen Hamilton and is mindful of cultivating his own protégés. He recently lobbied for a team member's advancement, and that associate is returning the favor, ensuring that what's near and dear to McLane gets communicated across divisions. "He's promoting not just the percentages I've driven but the cultural changes I've effected," McLane says. "I'll continue to expend capital on him because he's taking my mission forward in ways neither of us could have foreseen."

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