

Building your support team

10

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER

- Why *do* you need a support team?
- Who should be in your support team?
- The difference between mentoring and sponsorship
- The crucial role of mentors and sponsors
- Mentoring, sponsoring and women, black and ethnic minority professionals
- The benefits of mentoring and sponsorship

“Making partner is not a do-it-alone project! Every potential partner needs a mentor and a champion.”

ANITA WOODCOCK, AW CONSULTANTS

If reading the last few chapters about how your role will change, and the skills you need to develop, has left you slightly overwhelmed do not worry. Your journey to partner is a marathon, not a sprint. Like every successful athlete, you wouldn't get to partner without a support team behind you. Your

support team is composed of people who are drawn from your personal, professional and family networks. All the members of your support team have an important role to play in helping you achieve your career and life goals. However, as a minimum you must have a mentor on the team. Ideally, you should have both a mentor and a sponsor. Throughout your career you will need influential partners in your firm who will look after your interests in partnership reviews regarding your perceived potential and current performance. Often these advocates for you and your career will already be supporting you in a formal or informal mentoring capacity. In this chapter, we provide the information that you need to build the right support team around you, in particular helping you find the right mentor.

Why do you need a support team?

The commitment to go for partner while still having a life outside work is a very serious intent, and at times will be all-consuming. As you will have already seen in this book, this isn't something you can achieve in isolation. This is why you need a support team. They will be at your side throughout your journey to get to partner. For example, they:

- allow you to see the wood for the trees;
- buck you up when your commitment and motivation to achieve your career and life goals take a dip;
- help you celebrate your successes;
- commiserate with you when you hit bumps in the road;
- provide contingency plans for your life in and out of work.

Who should be in your support team?

Everyone's support team will be different. However, we suggest that an effective support team will have people playing six different types of role.

- *Sponsor*: Sponsors are influential backers who identify high performers (the protégés) and actively champion the protégé for partnership. A sponsor can help a protégé (you) to gain high-visibility, career-accelerating opportunities and influence decisions about their promotion and remuneration, client opportunities, leadership and entry into networks of influential business and community contacts.

- *Mentor*: A mentor informally or formally helps you navigate your career, providing guidance on career choices and development. Having someone in your firm who is more experienced and can act as a sounding board, provide objective guidance and feedback is essential if you are going to make partner.
- *Business coach*: A coach provides guidance for your development, often focused on the personal, leadership and management skills (rather than technical skills) required to make partner. There are many benefits to having your own coach who is independent from your firm, although your firm may be paying for their time. Your own coach helps you to take time out from the hurly-burly of your work life to focus on what really matters to you. See Chapter 9: How to develop yourself on the way to partnership.
- *Family*: Having a supportive and happy home life is important if you are to become a well-rounded individual who is properly equipped to handle the stresses and strains that are part and parcel of the everyday life of a professional adviser.
- *Friends inside work*: You are going to be at work for a significant part of your working life. Therefore, if you are going to 'fit in' (see Chapter 12) and enjoy your time at work, then you need to have friends at work.
- *Friends outside work*: Good friends unconnected to your work life give you the opportunity to truly let your hair down, relax and let off steam outside work. It is important not to let your friendships outside work slide, as you never know when you may need them.

The difference between sponsorship and mentoring

The best way to build and advance your career is through developing mentoring and sponsorship relationships.

Many people confuse sponsorship with mentoring. A mentor is someone who formally or informally helps the mentee to navigate his or her career, provides guidance on career choices, and helps them to learn, develop and achieve their career goals. The mentors' roles can also include providing professional development, confidence building, emotional and personal support (see Table 10.1 for a list of the mentor's roles and functions).

In the past, a mentor was someone who took you under their wing, shared their knowledge and experience with you; explained how things work in your firm, made sure you got good work, introduced you to their clients and influential contacts, protected you and promoted your career.

Now, as the concept of mentoring has become widespread in many firms, mentors are increasingly viewed as advisers and counsellors – they support your career but do not necessarily go out of their way to promote and advance it. So, while continuing to be important for professional development, as your career moves closer to the top and where competition for partnership is fierce, you will need a sponsor – a powerful and influential person who will be a strong advocate for you.

Sponsorship happens when people in positions of power and influence see exceptional performance from and potential in an individual, so much so that they want that person to have greater opportunities to excel. Without doubt, these critical opportunities benefit high performers, giving them the chance to shine, gain valuable visibility and develop skills they may not otherwise get – all of which are crucial for advancement.

A sponsor is someone who *selects* you and takes a chance on you, someone who takes risks on your behalf, pushing for better compensation, or arguing that you are ready for partnership or leading a high-profile initiative. A sponsor advocates (including sometimes putting pressure on colleagues or calling in favours on your behalf) for you behind closed doors, defends you and also opens doors and invites you to join influential networks or gives you access to senior leaders and powerful role models within the firm and in the business community. In essence: a sponsor is someone who will put their reputation and credibility on the line for you.

A mentor expects you to drive the mentoring relationship and is responsive to your needs. A sponsor drives the relationship, advocating for you in many settings.

The crucial roles of mentors and sponsors

A mentor talks *with* you and a sponsor talks *about* you.

Mentors in positions of influence may become sponsors and actively advocate and promote your career advancement. However, there are a number of key differences between mentors and sponsors (also see Table 10.3):

- Mentorship is supportive, focuses on professional growth and development, socialization, and emotional and personal support. Sponsorship is based on power and focuses on career advancement.
- Mentors can help you to learn how to become a competent and confident professional. Sponsors focus on proven high performers, those seen as 'stars' or with high potential.
- Mentors are useful particularly in the early stages of your career. Sponsors become more important as your career progresses, especially as you get close to key points in your career or when there is greater competition for limited positions, such as entry into partnership
- Mentors can have a number of mentees at the same time. Sponsors are much more selective and rarely sponsor more than one or two people at a time.
- Mentors can be anyone with more experience or knowledge than you. Sponsors must have sufficient credibility and influence within a firm to be able to make things happen for the protégé.
- Mentors can be internal or external to the firm. Sponsors must be credible and able to influence events within a firm. Consequently, sponsors are usually found within the protégé's firm. In professional services firms, clients or other powerful people can serve as sponsors because of their ability to influence decisions and practices in the firm.
- Although a mentoring relationship requires mutual trust, usually it involves little risk. However, sponsorship is high stakes for the sponsor, who takes conscious risks and puts their reputation on the line for the protégé and so the relationship demands a lot of trust. Sponsors trust that the protégé will deliver the goods, and live up to their promise and their sponsors' expectations. Equally, the protégé must trust that the sponsor has his or her best interests and career goals at heart, and the influence to make things happen and deliver the goods. Table 10.2 lists some of the things sponsors do for their protégé.

While sponsorship can open doors for high performers, simply providing someone with an opportunity does not guarantee success. As a protégé, it's up to you to deliver once given the opportunity. Not all relationships with senior-level individuals will develop into a sponsorship relationship.

In our experience, most if not all successful professionals have or had a mentoring and or sponsoring relationship, whether or not they recognize it the time. Women and BAME professionals with sponsors are more likely to be satisfied with the rate of their career advancement than their peers without sponsors. Furthermore, full-time working mothers with sponsors are more likely to continue working than those without sponsors. A sponsor's backing empowers professionals to stay in the game and play more strategically – both men and women are more likely to ask for salary increase and stretching assignments with a sponsor in their corner.

TABLE 10.1 Typical roles and functions of a mentor

Role	Function
Host	Welcomes mentee into the firm. Makes introductions, promotes social integration. Provides information about firm culture, systems and processes.
Teacher	Teaches technical skills and work processes.
Adviser	Advises about work assignments, career decisions and professional concerns. Explains unwritten rules.
Facilitator	Helps mentee obtain good work assignments and make network connections.
Protector	Provides cover for risk taking.
Coach	Encourages goal setting, monitors performance and progress. Gives feedback. Builds confidence.
Role model	Demonstrates appropriate behaviour and professionalism.
Sounding board	Listens to ideas and plans. Provides reality checks.
Confidante	Listens to mentee's doubts, fears and problems. Troubleshoots and consoles.
Publicist	Promotes mentee within and outside the firm. Builds mentee's credibility and visibility.
Champion	Advocates for mentee's promotion and compensation.
Catalyst	Makes things happen. Inspires mentee to act.

TABLE 10.2 Typical actions sponsors take for protégés

Actions
Publicly endorse the protégé's qualifications
Publicly recognise his or her achievements
Send new business and clients to him or her
Nominate and support him or her for promotion or partnership
Introduce him or her to and foster his or her relationship with influential people in the firm
Appoint or nominate him or her to a leadership position in the firm
Assign him or her to lead a high-visibility initiative
Get him or her a stretch assignment that will highlight his or her leadership abilities
Ensure that he or she receives adequate recognition, credit and compensation for his or her work
Protect him or her from unfair criticism
Alert him or her to new business opportunities
Include him or her in client pitches and the subsequent work that follows
Include him or her in marketing or business development events
Feature him or her in marketing or business development events
Include him or her in professional events, eg panels, presentations
Feature him or her in professional events, eg panels, presentations
Create marketing or business development events that highlight his or her interests and talents
Appoint or nominate him or her for external leadership posts
Move him or her to an office near you or another powerful and influential leader

TABLE 10.3 Comparing mentors and sponsors

	Mentor	Sponsor
Primary function	Career support	Career advancement
Experience level of mentee/protégé	Learner	Proven performer
When help is most important	Early and at any time during career	When going for promotion, partnership or leadership
Number of mentees/protégés	Several at the same time	One at a time (two maximum)

TABLE 10.3 *continued*

	Mentor	Sponsor
Qualifications	Anyone who has more knowledge and experience than mentee	Person with influence
Where located	Anywhere	Usually within your firm
Level of trust required	Moderate	High
Level of risk involved	Low to moderate	High

Mentoring, sponsorship and women and black and minority ethnic professionals

Firm-sponsored mentoring programmes are often used as a means of increasing diversity in organizations, to support women and BAME professionals' career development. A key benefit is that mentoring gives them greater access to senior management and influential figures in a firm and the business community, increasing the individual's exposure and visibility, and so enhances their career prospects. A successful mentoring relationship can provide mentees with an understanding of their firm's culture, power structures, access to informal networks within the firm, and crucial access to unwritten rules and important knowledge.

Cultivating a strong network (see Chapter 14) and ensuring you have powerful and influential advocates in your corner is critical for advancing and developing your career. It is especially crucial for women and BAME professionals, who are often overlooked or left out of informal activities. While mentoring is essential, it is not enough by itself to help women and BAME professionals advance. Mentoring and sponsorship are critical for women and BAMEs, who face stereotypes and biases.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article, 'Why men still get more promotions than women', Herminia Ibarra and her colleagues noted that women are over-mentored and under-sponsored. In interviews with 40 high-potential men and women, the women confirmed that they gained valuable career advice from their mentors; they explored their preferred styles of operating and what they

needed to do to get promoted.¹ The men, on the other hand, talked about how they planned their next moves, how they could take charge in new roles and how their mentor could advocate for them publicly; more of a sponsor's role. For these reasons, it is vital to understand the differences between mentoring and sponsorship.

Women, in spite of their high numbers at entry-level and middle-management ranks in firms, have not been able to break into the higher levels of power and leadership in firms. For example, there is currently in the UK a 50/50 split between male and female accounting students. The accounting profession, in the UK, then leaks females at every level of the firm. In 2018 *Accountancy Age* found that 18 per cent of partners in the top 100 UK accountancy firms were female.² It is a similar situation for law firms. Research by the Center for Talent Innovation, reported by Hewlett in *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor*, found that the reason more men than women get promoted is not because of any inherent differences in ability between them, but because significantly more men than women are sponsored by influential leaders who accelerate their careers.³ The research also shows that when women also have senior-level sponsors, they are promoted at the same rate as men.

Finding your sponsor(s)

Your sponsor can help you to get to positions of power and influence by increasing opportunities for you to obtain plum, high-profile assignments, promotions and salary increases. Sponsors take a more active role in advancing your career than mentors; your career success is their legacy.

From mid-career level, if you are in the minority at your firm, you will need to make a greater effort in making connections with your colleagues and leading people. Sponsor relationships are rarely established on the basis of work performance. Instead, they are often based on cultural affinity, ie the tendency of people to like others similar to themselves, in social background, racial identity and/or gender. They are sometimes described as championing a 'little me', ie a mirror versions of a sponsor based on their shared cultural or leisure or sporting interests with their protégée.

It would be a serious error to assume that these relationships will happen without you taking matters into your own hands. You need people in your corner who are willing to use their power and influence to advocate on your behalf. It is not easy to do, but it will be worth the effort and time you put in. Both research (for example, Friedman and Laurison's *The Class Ceiling*)⁴ and

our experience shows that, without sponsors, women and BAME professionals make partner at a later age, and their average length of service to attain partnership is significantly longer at every stage.

Therefore, it's important to understand the difference between mentors and sponsors. If your mentor lacks the necessary power and influence to act as a sponsor, or is unwilling to advocate on your behalf, then your mentor is not a sponsor. However, as a mentor they are a key member of your supporters' club. It is vital to find the people with the right combination of power, influence and willingness to champion your career into senior and leadership positions. Given the small number of women and BAME in leadership positions, it is highly likely that your sponsor will be a white male. However, it's more important that your sponsor fully understands your career challenges (it's your job to ensure that they do), guides, advises and advocates for you when you are not in the room.

Building your sponsor team

Identify people with power and influence in the circles that you want to join. Usually, sponsors are senior leaders within a firm. Where possible, you should have at least two sponsors, one internal and one external to your firm. Don't put all your eggs into one basket. Each sponsor will bring a different perspective and add value to your career.

Men sponsoring women: Some concerns

Women need the sponsorship of men because men are in positions of power and influence – they are in control. However, men can sometimes deliberately or unintentionally avoid sponsoring women, particularly if the woman is much younger and single, because of fears of rumours of a sexual relationship between them and their protégé. The possibility of speculation and rumours should not prevent women and potential male sponsors from forming strong and professional relationships. Women protégés and the male sponsors need to define and develop a transparent professional relationship. (See Abbott's book, *Sponsoring Women*.)⁵

If you are a woman in the lucky position to have a sponsor advocating on your behalf, you will be in the spotlight, with positive and negative consequences. If your peers question the attention shown to you by your sponsor, they are implying that you don't deserve it based on the merits of your hard work.

Rather than being defensive, trying to explain or justify the decision, be confident and prepared to clearly state your value.

Tips for forming a professional relationship with your sponsor:

- Clarify the purpose and goals of your relationship: ask your sponsor to explain how to get ahead, including the unwritten rules.
- Be clear what your sponsor expects of you, and be clear regarding boundaries.
- Act professionally at all times.
- Schedule meetings at the office or at a nearby café, as the intent for your meeting is less likely to be misunderstood. Unless an evening or weekend meeting is essential, meet during breakfast, lunch or breaks during the day.
- Make it clear that you have a happy personal relationship and you are solely looking for professional guidance.
- Ask a sponsor out to drinks or a meal in a group setting. You could arrange a joint invitation with other colleagues. A group event is less likely to be perceived as romantic.
- Get to know your sponsor's family or significant other if possible. Talk about your family or significant other and, where appropriate, invite them to attend firm events. Use the firm's social events as opportunities for all of you to get to know each other.

What to look for in a mentor

You should have more than one mentor through your career, each one for different purposes. You will need to think about the gaps in your knowledge or skill set, identify a potential mentor who can help you fill those gaps and then ask them if they are willing to mentor you.

You, the mentee, are driving the mentoring relationship. It's not recommended to just pick anyone as your mentor within the firm. Your mentor must be someone who is already influential within the partner group in your practice area, or, if this option is not available to you, someone who is seen as an up-and-coming star of the firm or department. There is no point in having someone fight your corner who isn't listened to by other partners!

The gender of your mentor does not matter as much as their interest in your career and willingness to make time for you. The reality is that as professional service firms are male-dominated, it is vital to look for a male as well as a female mentor as they provide different perspectives. Women must be comfortable with men, and get an insight into their viewpoint, as they are often the key decision makers with real influence and access to the 'inner circle'. They can help you broaden your perspective and enable you to engage with more senior players than you would be able to do on your own. Of course, this means that all those involved need to address the issues that underlie unconscious bias, stereotypes, concerns about career goals, and worries that how they look, and what they say and do, may impact their prospects.

Trust and respect are essential to a great mentoring relationship. It is vital that you and your mentor trust and respect each other.

Do not assume that a mentor must be from within your firm. While there are benefits to being mentored by someone internally, this approach may miss some of the benefits to be gained from external mentoring.

Do not assume that your firm will find the best mentor for you. It's your responsibility to find the right mentor. If you are assigned a mentor through a firm-sponsored mentoring programme, and there is no rapport and trust between you and your mentor, find another mentor with whom you have a connection – it's essential for the relationship to work. Use the box below to find the right mentor for you.

An effective mentor is:

- at least two levels above you – a senior person, someone who knows your firm's culture and unwritten rules;
- a good role model, respected within the firm and by you;
- open-minded and a good listener;
- a strong coach, with a willingness to help their mentee grow;
- a person who challenges their mentee;
- a person who provides constructive criticism.

This is a two-way relationship. A mentor provides informal support to improve your development, which benefits not only you but also the mentor and your firm.

What should you expect from a mentoring relationship?

Your relationship with your mentor is personal to you and your mentor. Clear communication about what is expected on each side is important. You should explore why you have approached this particular person as a mentor. You should also mention some of your goals, and how long you wish the relationship to last, which will help them to decide whether it is the right partnership. Once agreed, both your expectations should ideally be written down and referred to over time to see whether you and your mentor are meeting them.

Regardless of your individual requirements for your mentor, you should, as a minimum, ask for and expect the following from your mentor:

- They will get to know you at a deep enough level that they give you (almost) unconditional support, and champion your cause.
- They will assist you to lift up your head out of the detail, to see the bigger picture as you develop.
- They will be an inspiring role model.
- They won't provide you with all the answers, but help you to solve your own problems.
- They will be a supportive but critical friend who will provide timely analytical feedback that is constructive.

How to get the most from your mentor

A strong mentoring relationship provides you with an ally in the firm. However, mentors themselves face many challenges. Although mentoring is usually an optional role in most professional services firms, it can impose considerable time demands on the mentor, eg one to two hours per month. This is non-chargeable time, for which they may not always receive credit. Consequently, the easier and more rewarding you are to work with, the greater the likelihood that your mentor will want to spend quality time with you.

To get the most out of your relationship with your mentor, do the following before, during and after you meet with them:

Before

- Prepare thoroughly for any sessions with your mentor and be ready to put forward your own views and ideas.

During

- Be realistic about what you can achieve when agreeing action items with your mentor.
- Be prepared to listen to and evaluate new ideas, consider uncomfortable questions, and accept critical feedback; but be prepared to challenge (with facts) your mentor if you do not agree.
- Be honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses.
- Be honest with your mentor – say if things are not working.
- Write down your action points as the meeting progresses.
- Finally, give your mentor feedback. Everyone likes to know whether our advice and guidance are hitting the mark. Given the multiple demands on your mentor's time, they will want to know that their time with you is well spent and that they are making a valuable contribution.

After

- Make every effort to progress and complete the actions you have agreed to do. Your mentor will want to help you if you are motivated, enthusiastic and do what you say you will do.
- Make clear notes of what was covered, how the session went, what you got from it and any follow-up action points for you.
- Think carefully how you can apply what you learnt from the session.
- Diarize any actions.
- Agree the date of the next session and make sure that it is in both your diaries.
- Review and refine your objectives between meetings, noting any progress made and problems or opportunities that you would like to raise for the next session.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, getting to partner is a marathon, not a sprint. There will be times when your 'marathon' training becomes hard.

Therefore, the next chapter looks at how you can keep yourself motivated and positive during some of these tough periods.

Summary

It is very important to understand the difference between mentors and sponsors. To advance your career and increase your chances of a successful career, from mid-career level and beyond, you will need to find at least one sponsor. Choose your advocates carefully. Do not rely on only one person throughout your career because the advice, guidance and support that you need will change as your career progresses. You should have four or five sponsors and mentors who will support your career; advise you on whom to work with and whom to avoid; and who will publicly champion and defend you during your promotion time or should political problems arise.

Having your own support team who help and cheer you along the way is vital if you are going to make partner and still have a life. The fact is that not having a mentor or sponsor will have a negative impact on your career advancement. Every partner can point to someone who has acted either in an official or unofficial capacity, as a mentor and or sponsor, to help them achieve their career ambitions.

A good mentor will play many roles for you, but ultimately will be someone whom you respect and like. They will help you solve problems – sometimes by enabling you to see the bigger picture. The right person will emotionally want you to succeed, so they will voluntarily champion your cause within the partnership. A great mentor will be good at helping you hold a mirror up to yourself, and if necessary gently letting you know a few home truths.

With the many calls on a good or popular mentor's time, the easier and more rewarding you are to work with, the stronger the likelihood that your mentor will invest their own time, emotions and resource in your future success.

Sponsors are essential to achieving your potential and career success. Frequently, sponsors play a very active part in accelerating your career – including influencing work allocation, introducing and passing on particular clients or creating opportunities that, in turn, provide the required experience to move upwards. While sponsorship does not guarantee success, it does provide significant advantages.

Action points

- Identify people who have the power and influence to help you reach your goals and identify actions to help you get noticed positively by them. This could be volunteering to be on a cross-firm project, or doing a secondment at a client, or speaking up in a meeting where they are present, etc.
- When asking a partner to be your mentor, make sure you clearly state your worth and value, what you are committing to in your career, and why you want that person to be your mentor.
- Be open to constructive criticism. Listen carefully to what your sponsor or mentor says. You may feel uncomfortable with the feedback but, if it's constructive, then you will benefit from acting on it.
- Communicate honestly with your mentor and sponsor about your expectations, goals and any challenges you are facing.
- Look for role models, within and outside your firm, who are recognized leaders in their field; do some research to find out how they have achieved their success: what can you learn from their experience, and how can this help your own career?
- Look around you. Who is in your support team? Who is missing from the team? What action could you take today to build stronger relationships between you and your support team? Do you need a One Big Focus to help you build and strengthen your support team?

Notes

- 1 Ibarra, H, Carter, N and Silva, M (2010) Why men still get more promotions than women, *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2010/09/why-men-still-get-more-promotions-than-wome> (archived at <https://perma.cc/WFU9-SCS6>)
- 2 Accountancy Age (2018) www.accountancyage.com/2018/09/19/top-5050-how-diverse-are-top-uk-accountancy-firms (archived at <https://perma.cc/G9AA-U8QB>)
- 3 Hewlett, S A (2013) *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor: The new way to fast-track your career*, Harvard Business Review Press
- 4 Friedman, S and Laurison, D (2019) *The Class Ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*, Policy Press

- 5 Abbott, I O (2014) *Sponsoring Women: What men need to know*, Attorney at Work

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Kay, K and Shipman, C (2014) *The Confidence Code: The science and art of self-assurance – what women should know*, HarperCollins

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