Best Practices for Sponsorship Programs

April 2016
Mentoring and sponsoring can blend together to the untrained eye. Mentors provide advice and counsel while sponsors are senior executives with the clout and the desire to advance their protégés.

“A sponsor is someone who is pounding the table for you to get the raise, the promotion, or the chance to work on a high profile project,” says Susan Bulkeley Butler, author of “Women Count: A Guide to Changing the World.”

The sponsor and sponsored relationship is beneficial on both ends. The high level executive has the opportunity to create a reputation of being able to spot and nurture high potential talent. The junior employee has an ally that will offer individual guidance, give critical feedback inside the company and most importantly, stick their neck out and publicly support the individual. This symbiotic relationship has incentive for all involved.

A recent Diversity in the News article, Sponsorship, Making a Game Changing Move Part 1 and 2 shares tips for professionals of color and D&I practitioners for finding and working with sponsors. The following are corporate examples of executive sponsorship programs that can apply to women or any underrepresented employee group.

**Aetna** – The Strategies for Success Sponsorship Program provides a forum to address and remove barriers to the career growth of women at Aetna. It helps women to prepare for executive-level roles through mentoring, sponsorship and collaborative programs with the Aetna Women’s Leadership Alliance and the Women’s Employee Resource Group. The program is a partnership with Hewlett Consulting Partners. Additionally, Men Advocating Real Change (MARC) Leaders Program - MARC is designed to engage men in candid conversations about gender and its impact in the workplace. MARC members in leadership positions mentor and support women who seek executive positions. They discuss how to lead change through member-generated advice, insights, and best practices. MARC leaders also are members of the Aetna Women’s Leadership Alliance internal advisory board.

**Cisco** - A several-month-long program called JUMP is available throughout the company for higher-level female employees. It’s also piloting a 12-month sponsorship program to make sure women at lower levels interact meaningfully with senior talent.

**Citi** - Women Leading Citi, which was launched by Citigroup several years ago, is an excellent example. The 18-month sponsorship program is designed to foster the mobility of Citi’s high-performing senior women. Managing director- and director-level women who have expressed an interest in advancing their careers through mobility are nominated by their business leaders. Participants are provided with opportunities to network and to broaden their leadership skills with a four-person support team that includes their manager, a human resources partner, a talent professional, and a senior advocate who serves as their sponsor. Participants receive in-depth assessments, personal coaching, and attend leadership workshops and webinars led by industry experts. 59 women took part in the initial program, 70% of whom experienced career advancement over the 18 months. The program was re-launched a few years later with 54
women, 36% of whom had experienced career mobility through year-end. Citi has an additional sponsorship program called Women in Risk that is dedicated to those working in risk management. Female directors or senior vice presidents in the risk function are identified and nominated by members of the risk executive committee, who then become their sponsor for the program. The multi-faceted one-year program provides visibility, training, career planning, and access to senior leadership within the risk unit and across Citi. According to a 2013 Glass Hammer article, more than half of the participants moved onto bigger roles within their first year.

**Deloitte** - Deloitte has an Emerging Leaders Development Program. This eight-month program officially connects high-potential managers from underrepresented groups to formal sponsors, who commit to at least a two-year relationship. Deloitte goes to the protégés and asks whom they would like as a sponsor, factoring in geography, service line, growth opportunities, what gaps the protégé has and where she needs visibility.

**Dell** – Members of the Dell leadership team participated in Men Advocating Real Change (MARC), a program that strives to cultivate male leaders’ potential as diversity change agents to encourage gender equality in the workplace.

**EMC** – Women are nominated by EVP to reflect a balance across the organization. Director level and above, identified as High Potential, 1+ years of tenure, completed 360 assessment. Must commit to 100% of the integrated program. Goal is to help women navigate corporate cultures, overcome traditional obstacles for female advancement. Works as an extension of a leadership partnership with Simmons College

**EY** – The Navigator program gives high-potential female managers formal opportunities to discuss and debate the issues that impede their progress to partner.

**Holland & Knight (law firm)** - Holland & Knight selects a group of talented and dedicated women lawyers in their seventh year and beyond to participate in Rising Stars, a yearlong program of leadership, marketing, management, and professional skills development, professional mentoring, and experiential learning. The program has been in place since 2003. Since then, based on the participants listing on the firm’s website, more than 60 women have gone through the program, the majority of whom are still at the firm and now carry the title “partner.”

**JP Morgan Chase** – Executives are given a menu of diversity and inclusion programs and initiatives to choice from. Sponsorship is included in that list and executives are required to demonstrate an actionable and measurable result which is incorporated into their yearly performance plan.

**Kraft** - The company has formal sponsorship for high-potential employees from underrepresented groups. All of the top-level executives in the company participate. Its cross-
cultural mentoring program includes virtual, reverse and peer mentoring. Mentors receive cultural-awareness training. In addition, there is mentoring aimed specifically at new hires.

**Target** – Target has just begun a formal sponsorship program starting at the entry level. Mid-senior level executives are invited to a speed-dating like reception with the newly recruited under-represented minority populations. The diverse professionals meet individually with each executive to match up with goals and chemistry. The executives are accountable to their Executive Diversity Council direct report for the performance and advancement over a 2-year period.

**Conclusion**

Executive sponsorships specifically for women work not only towards personal achievement but also toward the global movement for gender parity. Currently, women are 4 percent of S&P 500 CEOs and women of color are 3.9 percent of executive or senior level officials and managers in S&P 500 companies. The 2016 International Women’s Day theme was “pledge for parity.” Companies that engage in sponsorship programs are making their effort to make gender equality not just a goal, but a reality.

An advocate at any level is an advantage. For under-represented minority groups at the mid-senior levels an executive sponsorship is the force needed to reach their highest potential and become even greater assets.

---

**End notes**

[International Women’s Day Webinar](#) – Manpower presentation
[International Women’s Day Webinar](#) - EMC presentation,

“**No. 45 Kraft Foods, DiversityInc. Top 50**” – Diversity Inc. (Citi, Holland & Knight)
“**Trends and innovations boosting diversity in the Law and beyond**” - Law Practice Today
“**The Women’s Leadership Gap**” – Center for American Progress
“**Women CEOs of the S&P 500**” – Catalyst