Best Practices in Corporate Sponsorship Programs

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Introduction
Sponsorship, where a senior leader uses political clout to advocate for another employee’s advancement, can do big things for talented employees—and for women, in particular. In fact, a new story in Working Mother magazine finds that sponsorship programs may be just the thing to get more women into top executive roles.

A report released earlier this year by the Center for Work-Life Policy (CWLP) notes that “the pipeline is fairly bursting with proven female talent.” And yet, according to the New York City-based think tank, “women who are qualified to lead stall out in their careers not for lack of drive, but rather for lack of push. They simply don’t have the powerful backing necessary to inspire them, propel them, and protect them through the perilous straits of upper management.”

While sponsor programs vary from company to company and may be targeted to all races, experts say they’re especially critical to women of color because they offer a powerful avenue for advancement.

This report highlights some of the key differences between sponsorship and mentoring programs; reviews recent research on sponsorship and mentoring programs; and provides several examples of corporate sponsorship programs that include information on the selection process for sponsors and protégés, the sponsorship relationship, and program assessments.

Sponsorship vs. Mentorship

What is sponsorship? Too often sponsorship gets confused with mentoring, but the two roles have important differences. Mentors provide advice and counsel. By contrast, 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 results of sponsorship can be dramatic. Deloitte, for example, paired each woman in a tax leadership training program with an executive sponsor. Within a year, 18 of 21 participants had received promotions. Based on these successes, Deloitte is working to embed sponsorship into its culture.

To be successful, companies that opt to offer sponsorship must make sure to market these programs internally so that everyone understands the stakes and goals. Arin Reeves of Nextions, a Chicago-based consultancy specializing in leadership and inclusion training for Fortune 500 companies, suggests, for example, offering team-building exercises where senior people can mingle with rising talents.

Tammy Allen, professor of psychology at the University of South Florida and co-author of “Designing Workplace Mentoring Programs: An Evidence-Based Approach” (Blackwell-Wiley Publishing, 2009), even recommends a “speed dating” approach where mini-meetings serve as icebreakers between executives and rising stars. Senior leaders should understand that by sponsoring talent they build up a personal bank of loyalty and goodwill to draw upon later. Says Allen, “It enhances your reputation to be known as a star maker, someone with the ability to spot and cultivate talent.”
In fact, even apart from promotions, sponsorship can help women succeed. When sponsors are powerful, people are more likely to pitch in to help their protégés’ initiatives succeed. On the flip side, they will think twice before interfering with the protégés’ teams and projects. “With a sponsorship, the negative gets mitigated and the positive accentuated,” says Reeves.

Other differences between mentoring and sponsoring can be a matter of age or timing. For those early in their career, the quality of the mentoring matters more than the power the mentor has in the organization, according to the Harvard Business School's David Thomas. However, once employees reach management level, after approximately the first five to seven years, their connection to a powerful mentor becomes more critical.

Yet, high-potential women are over-mentored and under-sponsored relative to their male peers, according to the Center for Work-Life Policy. According to recent research, women have three times as many mentors as men. But men have more sponsors. Additionally, men are more likely to also have informal sponsor-like relationships. Without sponsorship, women not only are less likely than men to be appointed to top roles but may also be more reluctant to go for them.

Despite the noted benefits of sponsorship, men are much more likely to embrace sponsorship, while some women shy away from the notion that they need a “favor” to get a promotion. “What research has shown is that excellent skills will get you far—but only so far,” notes Reeves. She says women over-rely on mentors (where the goal is not necessarily advancement) and underestimate the importance of getting the political backing of a sponsor.

But finding a sponsor can be challenging. Because of the nature of the sponsorship relationship, it is unlikely that a company can provide one for employees. But it can provide pathways to build those relationships. Mentors can be a pathway to sponsorship. Building strong relationships with individuals above, as well as with peers, can help make potential sponsors aware of employees and provide an entryway into networks of power.

Still, the effectiveness of sponsor programs depends on many factors. To make such programs successful, corporations need to help middle managers find job opportunities that feed the executive level and assist those employees in forging significant relationships with top management. In addition, companies need to hold their senior executives accountable for ensuring that women and minorities are given opportunities for top jobs.

In addition to providing the necessary supports to cultivate and grow sponsorship relationships among senior leaders and high-potential employees, a number of companies are taking it a step further by encouraging, and even requiring, sponsors to participate in formal evaluation processes.

Sponsors at Accenture, for example, are required to evaluate their own performance in many areas, including sponsorship. Every year, partners put together personal objectives, such as their commitment to their business operation or how they will generate sales and revenues, while also advancing diversity and inclusion. By the end of the year, when sponsors are reviewed, they refer back to their personal objectives.
"You're given a rating at the end of the year based on performance of your personal objectives," says Kedrick Adkins, Accenture's Chief Diversity Officer. "Your individual rating in some ways is contingent on the success of helping your sponsoree grow professionally." After the first year of the program, Accenture saw a 20 percent increase in the number of minorities up for promotion at the senior executive level, Adkins says.

Joining entities like Accenture, other leading companies are beginning to understand the vast benefits of sponsorship programs and are leveraging them to build employee satisfaction, promote advancement among women and minorities, establish themselves as employers of choice, and generate increased revenue share. A few of these companies, profiled below, include American Express, Cisco, Citi, and Deloitte.

**Corporate Examples**

**American Express**

When American Express examined its workforce at the end of 2008, it discovered that, while women constituted more than half of its employees overall and one of every three of the company's top 500 positions was held by a woman, like many other major corporations, women were still under represented at the highest tier. To crack this barrier, American Express created "Women in the Pipeline and at the Top." With full CEO support, the program aims to identify and develop women with the potential to reach the top two levels and give them more opportunities to interact and get exposure to the executive team.

When asked to explain the program, Kerrie Peraino, SVP of Human Resources, says:

“Basically, it’s three work streams. The first is building a women’s community, which is really to solve one of those barriers that’s often cited. We have over 30 percent women in our senior ranks, yet they didn’t feel connected or feel the strength of that network in a major way. We hosted our first global women’s conference in September and 170 senior women came together.

“The second one is what we call Pathways to Sponsorship. We looked at the career paths of men and women and they were looking pretty similar, but the one thing we could point to was sponsorship relationships that the men enjoyed. Mentorships are great, but there’s this notion that we mentor women to death. A mentor invests time in you, but a sponsor invests in you. We don’t believe you can have a sponsorship program like you have a mentoring program. In the end you earn sponsorship, we can’t do it for you. One of the key things we’re doing with approximately 20 very senior women are in a very individualized development approach based on what they need and that includes pairing them with senior leaders who are getting to know them.

“[And the third] is becoming a more gender-intelligent organization. There are different ways men and women’s brains process information—one is not better than the other, one’s not right and the other wrong. It’s about having both brains at the table, so you can move forward faster and better understand your customer base.”
Cisco

In 2008, Cisco launched its Inclusive Advocacy Program (IAP) to open doors, create new networks, and enable the organization at a very senior level to help develop a diverse talent pipeline across the company. Thirty highest-potential diverse talent were identified and paired with a VP or SVP “advocate” in a different function and geography and two levels above over a nine-month period to expand the advocates' network of new sources of knowledge capital and the talents' network of influential contacts. Talent advocates must possess the following characteristics, according to Cisco: experienced, well-connected, and well-regarded; personal interest in being an advocate; influential; and committed to the IAP program.

The talent/advocate pairs, which have been slightly lowered to 26 from 30, are divided into four cohorts, whose diverse make-up reflects the larger IAP participant pool and supports the program’s larger vision of building networks across geographies, generations, cultures and business functions. The talent comes from six different functions, and their advocate partners are located in Australia, Canada, France, Singapore, the U.K. and the U.S. Meanwhile, the smaller numbers encourage more open dialogue and deeper relationships within the cohorts, as well as with the other IAP participants.

The time line of the program has expanded from nine months to one year, with required monthly meetings among talent/advocate pairs and periodic get-togethers for the cohorts and entire group. But many pairs connect on their own even more frequently, either traveling to each other’s country or taking advantage of Cisco’s TelePresence and WebEx technology.

The resulting relationships have exceeded expectations. When the program began, it was given a timeline of 18 months to produce any measurable result. In less than a year, one of the high-potentials received a promotion and another received a new geographic posting.

Citi

Citi has several ongoing initiatives to support women’s professional development. Until 2006 most of these efforts were conducted on a regional basis through women’s councils and networks. In March 2006, leaders from 20 women’s councils and four women’s employee networks came together to launch “The Citi Women’s Initiative.” The meeting was designed to leverage existing diversity councils and networks to share best practices, create champions and role models and build a pipeline of talented women for senior management.

Citi Women’s Development Program

Leadership development has been a priority of Citi's women's initiative, and in 2008, the Citi Women's Leadership Development Program was designed and created in conjunction with the UCLA Anderson School of Management. The program combines lectures, discussions, small group work and personal assignments. Participants learn the "how to" of demonstrating executive readiness, becoming champions and role models for the organization and growing professional networks. The program is offered twice a year and includes a maximum of 35 high performing talented women from all businesses.
and geographies. Nearly 20 percent of participants have had a change in grade level or title.

**Women4Citi**

In 2009, the Global Women's Initiative was renamed Women4Citi and expanded to include the Women Leading Citi program. The pilot program launched at the end of 2009 is designed for high performing female participants who have the potential to assume significant leadership positions at Citi. It is designed to promote and accelerate advancement through opportunities which broaden and enhance leadership skills by supporting individual development and identifying networking opportunities. A participant has the support of her manager, a talent professional, and a senior manager advocate.

**Coaching for Success**

Citi also provides leadership training for emerging female talent. An example is Coaching for Success—a long standing development program targeted for mid-level women. The program is delivered through a series of workshops and engages senior management as coaches. One of its goals is to improve retention and increase promotion and opportunities for internal mobility among participants.

**Deloitte**

**Leading Edge**

Leading Edge, an executive education program developed collaboration with the Simmons School of Management in 1999, is a five-day residential program that helps a select group of women partners, principals, and directors gain invaluable insight into their leadership capabilities, opportunities to strengthen negotiating and networking skills, and preparation to take on senior leadership positions.

When the program launched over a decade ago, Deloitte’s women represented less than 10 percent of the firm’s leaders. Since that time, this leadership program has graduated nearly 300 high-performing women, and 100 of the Leading Edge graduates currently hold senior leadership positions, including three who are members of the company’s U.S. board of directors.

Deloitte chose Simmons because the school’s progressive thinking and expertise about women, leadership, and organizational effectiveness supported their company-wide strategic effort to retain, develop, and advance a greater number of women leaders.

Simmons faculty work closely with Deloitte leaders—male and female—to ensure that Leading Edge content supports the firm’s current practices and expectations. For example, case studies and exercises are based on actual Deloitte scenarios. Alumnae credit the program with increasing their abilities to make focused career decisions and to better negotiate elements that support their overall career success.

**Leading to WIN**
When Leading to WIN began in 1993, Deloitte had fewer than 100 women partners, principals, and directors (P/P/D). Too many women were leaving the company, and not enough women who stayed were advancing to senior levels. Harnessing and retaining that talent was an urgent business imperative.

Since the start of the program, Deloitte has experienced great gains in its retention and advancement of women. Today, the company has more than 1,000 women P/P/Ds, and its gender turnover gap has virtually disappeared.

Leading to WIN is an 18-month course, which addresses the needs of women P/P/Ds as they work to develop senior leadership skills and advance their careers. Participants create their own Leadership Action Plan for the program, under which they meet once a month with an executive coach, receive feedback from senior leaders and peers, and shadow key leaders who also act as their career sponsors and provide them with development opportunities. In addition to one-on-one coaching, participants attend leadership meetings, giving them direct exposure to executives and potential sponsors. They also visit one of the international offices of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu to gain invaluable global experience.

Last year, Deloitte took the program to the next level by launching Leadership Acceleration, involving participants from its four businesses. This development program aligns with the company’s focus on sponsorship as a key success factor to advancing more women into leadership roles. Designed to enhance to the development of the company’s high potential P/P/Ds, the program includes multiple, in-person sessions over an 18-month period, creation of a leadership action plan, a Deloitte career sponsor, and one-on-one sessions with an external coach. Participants in the inaugural class are gaining more exposure to senior leaders, assessing their readiness and desire to advance to leadership positions, and developing into more inspiration and visionary professionals.

**Conclusion**

At present, formal sponsorship programs are relatively rare. However, to be successful in retaining and advancing top female talent companies must go beyond traditional mentorship relationships and programs. More than mentors, sponsors are individuals in a senior positions who are willing to advocate for and facilitate career moves, make introductions to the right people, translate and teach the language of success, and most important, capitalize on their connections and influence to help pave the way for success on behalf of their protégés.

Today, leading-edge companies are making relationships between sponsors and their protégés an increasingly integral and transparent part of their corporate cultures. Companies that foster sponsorship of their standout women—such as Accenture, American Express, Cisco, Citi, and Deloitte—will gain a competitive advantage in talent markets around the world.
How to Secure a Sponsor at Work
(Source: Working Mother Media)

- **Use your mentor.** If your company doesn’t offer formal sponsorships, join its mentoring program and ask for a mentor several levels up from you who can develop into a sponsor.
- **Network with senior execs.** At every company meeting, introduce yourself to two people who could influence your career. Volunteer for cross-functional projects.
- **Enlist your boss to help.** Ideally, your sponsor will be a level or two above your boss. To defuse any political stickiness, explain to your boss what you’re seeking and see if she will introduce you.
- **Consider connections.** Choose a sponsor who is well-liked and networks well.
- **Cultivate the relationship.** Once you have a sponsor, set an automatic meeting once per month, such as 15 minutes every third Wednesday (it’s easier to cancel than to reschedule).
- **Come prepared.** Choose a “nugget” to discuss each time you meet, and email it in advance. Good choices include success on a recent project or a goal you’d like to meet over the next year. “Don’t always go in seeking advice. Make sure your sponsor knows what you’ve accomplished,” says Arin Reeves, president of Nextions, a Chicago-based consultancy specializing in leadership and inclusion training for Fortune 500 companies. For instance, if a project went well, ask for a chance to present what you learned to a larger group.
- **Think frequent, not long.** Routine contact is more important than duration—so six ten-minute meetings will do more for the relationship than a single hour-long lunch.
Quotes

“We work to keep our leadership pipeline filled by identifying high potentials for the top 200 roles in our firm and engaging our entire senior leadership team in sponsoring them and supporting their ongoing development—the board of directors, the entire management committee, and numerous managing partners. Our goal is, ultimately, to have all of our senior leaders want to be actively involved in sponsorship initiatives, because they want to be associated with success. As these leaders share with each other some of the successes of the people they are sponsoring, it will spur others to succeed. It creates a desire to be excellent.”

“We have a two-year leadership program at McDonald’s that specifically targets high potentials. The management team selects the participants and has ownership of the program. Three teams of six are each given a real-life project that we might have otherwise hired a consultant to tackle. Through working on the project, participants are exposed to a variety of people across the business, both in terms of departments and around the world. Each team presents results to management, and not only have the majority of the participants been promoted soon after completing the program but management has adopted many of their recommendations. We recognize that we will lose high potentials if we don’t do something with them, and people fight to get their mentees into the program. We intentionally pick a diverse class and ensure we are developing employees who will provide a diverse and talented pipeline.”

"Corporations have always focused on creating access to mentoring relationships that help people with their career development and their knowledge of the organization. But now they are focused on making sure that people get the opportunity to move into higher-ranking positions. That's where sponsorships are critical."
Sources:
Citi company website, http://www.citigroup.com/citi/citizen/people/diversity/
Cisco company website, www.cisco.com