

## Sponsoring Women: What Women Need to Know

BY IDA O. ABBOTT, JD, AUTHOR "SPONSORING WOMEN: WHAT MEN NEED TO KNOW"



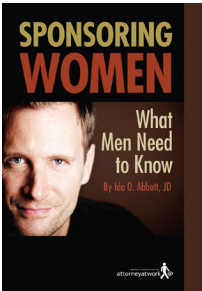
The importance of mentors for career advancement is well established, but the particular value of a sponsor is unique. Sponsors do more than other mentors; they have significant influence in their organization and they use that influence to advocate on behalf of their protégées.

A 2010 Harvard Business Review study looked at the extent and impact of mentoring on more than 4,000 high potential women and men with MBA degrees. The researchers found that while women had more mentors they were promoted less often than men because mentors actively sponsored men for promotions far more often than they sponsored women. Sponsors may not guarantee success, but they make it easier and improve your odds of receiving a coveted leadership appointment, a fatter paycheck or a new client. Clearly, it is desirable to gain the support of a sponsor for your career to move ahead.

### **A Woman Seeking a Sponsor Must Understand Certain Things**

Someone may become your sponsor over time as he comes to know the quality of your work, your work ethic and your capacity for leadership. Sponsorship often grows out of an existing mentoring relationship. If you are seeking a sponsor in your firm, it's important to understand a few things about what a sponsor does, what you can expect of him and what he will expect of you.

**1. There is a difference between a mentor and a sponsor.** Simply put, a mentor is generally someone who advises and guides a less experienced or less knowledgeable person. Your mentor may be older or younger, but has a certain desirable area of expertise or wisdom and a willingness to engage with you so you can learn through the relationship. A



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sponsor is a special kind of mentor — a strong advocate who has power and influence to produce positive career results for you. Sponsors may be men or women, but because most of the powerful people in organizations are men, most potential sponsors are men.

**2. A good sponsor sticks his neck out for you.** Sponsoring someone puts the sponsor's own political capital at risk. A sponsor endorses your qualifications, argues that you should move up to a higher compensation tier or urges that you are ready for equity partnership. Sponsors may put their reputation on the line by calling in favors or putting pressure on colleagues to get you appointed to a key post. A misstep like pressing for promotion of a candidate who becomes a disappointing performer could have very personal and long-lasting implications for the sponsor, whose credibility and judgment may be called into question. So the person you hope to have as a sponsor needs to feel that the risk is justified and trust that you will deliver. He wants to feel confident the outcome will be a good one for him as well as for you.

**3. Take responsibility.** As a protégée, a great deal of responsibility for the success of the sponsorship rests with you. Sponsorship is a two-way process, not just something that is bestowed upon you. Superior performance as a lawyer is always required for advancement, but especially so when someone is championing you. You must handle yourself well both professionally and socially. By consistently demonstrating your loyalty, honesty, commitment and reliability you will assure your sponsor and others that you are to be valued and trusted. By investing your own time in building and practicing leadership skills, you will be prepared when your sponsor offers you an opportunity.

**4. Know what your goals are and speak clearly about them.** For someone to sponsor you, he must be aware of your ambitions, not just your achievements. If you get married or become pregnant, let your sponsor know your plans are to remain on track for partnership or leadership. Most importantly, you need to tell him about your career goals and aspirations. Let him know you want to move to the top and would welcome his sponsorship to help you get there.

**5. Get out of your comfort zone.** Sponsors support people who are willing to do what it takes to become leaders, rainmakers, and stars in their field. You have to take on tough



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new assignments and responsibilities that place you in the spotlight — even if you don’t feel fully prepared to do it. While you may feel more comfortable doing what you already do well, simply continuing to rely on what you know and do now will limit you.

To move up, you need to engage with new people, handle new situations, and try on new roles, responsibilities and styles. It may be scary but it’s the only way to get the experience, insight and credibility you need to become a leader. If you expect a sponsor to take a risk on you, you need to be ready to take a risk on yourself.

*Ida O. Abbott specializes in developing and retaining professional talent. An expert on mentoring, sponsorship, and leadership, much of her practice is devoted to promoting the advancement of women at work. Ida is a Fellow of the College of Law Practice Management, Co-Founder of the Hastings Leadership Academy for Women, and on the Executive Committee of the National Legal Mentoring Consortium. Prior to starting her consultancy, Ida was a trial lawyer for twenty years. She has held leadership positions in numerous local, national and international professional associations. She is the author of several books and numerous publications, and is a popular speaker at professional meetings, conferences and retreats. Ida’s newsletter, Management Solutions, can be found on her website, [www.IdaAbbott.com](http://www.IdaAbbott.com). “Sponsoring Women: What Men Need to Know” is available at [www.attorneyatwork.com](http://www.attorneyatwork.com).*



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