



Mentoring & Sponsoring Resources

Women Need a Network of Champions





TIPSHEET

What's the Difference Between a Mentor and a Sponsor?

A **mentor** is an advisor who provides guidance and support to help someone develop, understand, and navigate their role, the organization, and their career. A mentor is typically an experienced individual who helps someone who is less experienced. A mentor may (or may not) also be a sponsor. A **sponsor** is a specific type of mentor who goes above and beyond giving advice. A sponsor is an advocate in a position of power who helps create opportunities for another person and champions their potential. This includes in off-the-record or closed-door meetings with other executives.

	MENTOR	SPONSOR
Role	Experienced person at any level	Senior leader in the organization
Goal	Provide guidance for career choices and decisions	Use influence to help employee obtain high-visibility assignments
Who drives the relationship?	Both mentee and mentor; requires mentor to be responsive to the needs of "mentee"	The sponsor, who chooses to advocate for "sponsee," including behind closed doors with other leaders
Actions	Helps mentee determine paths to meet specific career goals	Advocates for sponsee's advancement; champions her potential

5 Things Mentors Do

Mentors and sponsors do similar things to support their "mentees" and "sponsees," including the 5 actions below. (Sponsors also do additional things above and beyond this list.) If you're thinking of finding a mentor — or being one — use this guide to understand what's involved. Typically, mentors:

1.

See and assess opportunities and threats.

Mentors help mentees explore the pros and cons of working on projects or pursuing a new opportunity. They keep a watchful eye out to spot roles and projects that offer development, visibility, or good "press," as well as helping their mentee identify potential allies, resources, or shifting circumstances. They also stay alert for rumors and unjust perceptions, emerging conflicts, potential adversaries, "red tape" complications, "no-win" assignments, or organizational changes that may negatively impact the mentee.

2.

Guide, counsel, and coach.

Mentors serve as confidants, sounding boards, and personal advisors. They listen and help mentees think through key challenges, gain perspective, and consider options. They may address leadership skills and behaviors and help mentees explore and understand emotional reactions, relationships, and organizational culture. Personal factors, such as life stage or non-work commitments or problems, may or may not be part of conversations, especially early on.

3.

Teach.

Mentors transfer their knowledge, teach skills, and share their experiences. They do this directly, but also by telling stories relevant to the mentee's situation. They may invite the mentee to shadow them on a project or join them in meetings, then debrief the experience later. They may also do the reverse: shadowing the mentee and then providing feedback.

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4

Model.

Mentors need to be keenly aware of their own behavior. They should be willing to discuss how they handle situations, as well as their ethics, values, and standards; style, beliefs, and attitudes; and methods and procedures. Mentees pick up many things through observation and will likely follow the mentor's lead, adapting what they see to their own style and situation.

5

Motivate and inspire.

Mentors support, validate, and encourage their mentees. They engage collaboratively, building on ideas, rather than being authoritative and directive. They seek to link their mentee's values, aspirations, hopes, needs, and passions to the developmental or organizational agenda.

Keep in mind, though, your experience will vary based on purpose and the people involved — so don't expect to focus on all of the above at once in every mentor-mentee relationship.

Getting Started Guide

Exercise for Mentors: Considering this list of things mentors typically do, **write down the names of people you currently mentor — either formally or informally:**

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Are there any women on your list? (If no, see [Why Women Need a Network of Champions](#), and please find a high-potential woman to mentor!) **If yes, think about what you might start, stop, or continue to be a more effective mentor to her.** Set up a time to meet with her and ask her what she needs and how you might be most helpful to her. Consider whether you are in a position to advocate for her directly to help her accomplish her career goals, or if you could help her find a sponsor. (For more on the additional role of sponsors, see [How to Sponsor Women](#).)

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If you're not currently mentoring any women, consider who you could mentor. Do you have a current or former direct report who has potential to advance? Is there a woman in another work group or function whose work you've noticed in the past 6 months? Is there a talented female leader who you would hate to see leave your organization? Do you know someone outside of work (in the community or a professional association, for example) who might appreciate you reaching out? If you're unsure whether that would be appropriate or helpful, could you talk to a peer or an HR business partner about it? **Write down your next steps.**

Exercise for Mentees: Write down a current challenge or goal you are working toward.

Considering this list of things mentors typically do, **brainstorm ways you think a mentor could be most helpful to you in the coming 6-12 months.** What do you need to learn? What do you see as challenges or potential stumbling blocks? What kind of opportunities are you seeking? Is having a mentor enough, or is it time to find a sponsor?



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Write down the names of 2-4 people who might help you figure out the right next steps or guide you through.

This might be a current or former supervisor, a peer, an expert or manager in another part of the business, or someone outside your organization. If you're unsure, could you ask a co-worker or an HR representative about it? How might you seek out an introduction or arrange a conversation to talk about your challenge or goal with these people?

Setting Expectations

Mentoring relationships don't always evolve naturally. If you're in the beginning stages of a new mentor/mentee relationship, you'll want to talk about expectations — and plan to reassess them periodically.

Setting this groundwork is important for every mentoring relationship, but it's particularly beneficial when men are mentoring across genders or other differences. For instance, because people naturally tend to gravitate to other people who are like them, men may feel more comfortable mentoring other men. Clarifying and formalizing the purpose, expectations, and processes up front can be a helpful for knowing how to interact with one another going forward. Some things to discuss:

1

Agree on the purpose or focus of the mentoring relationship.

- *What is the mentee currently working on?*
- *What are their goals, challenges, aspirations, and interests?*
- *Does the mentor have helpful knowledge, experience, opportunities, or connections to share that relate to these goals, challenges, or interests?*
- *How might the organization benefit from your conversations with each other?*



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2

Confirm expectations.

Whether the mentoring relationship was initiated by the mentee or the mentor, ask clarifying questions, such as:

- *How often and where will you meet?*
 - *Who will initiate the meetings?*
 - *What type of guidance would be helpful?*
 - *Which topics are confidential?*
 - *How long might this last?*
 - *Any other goals or expectations?*
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3

Identify potential problems and strategies to address them.

Consider and discuss any concerns:

- *Are either of you concerned about not having enough time to get together?* If so, decide whether it might make more sense to arrange shorter, more frequent meetings, or if longer, less frequent appointments make the most sense with your current calendars.
 - *What will the mentor do if the mentee does not ask for help or seems unreceptive to feedback? What will the mentee do if the mentor does not provide help or relevant support?* It's a good idea to communicate up front that feedback, both positive and critical, is an essential part of the arrangement. Be transparent with one another about expectations.
 - *What if it turns out that the mentor/mentee relationships is not the best fit?* Like all relationships, sometimes things don't work out as planned. It might be smart to formally designate an assessment meeting in a few weeks or months, with the specific intent of pausing to review your progress and recalibrate your arrangement if needed.
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7 Ways You Might be Overlooking Talent

How Unconscious Bias Can Play Out in the Workplace

Everyone has implicit associations about groups of people that we are unaware of, and may not even consciously believe.

In these 7 ways, unconscious bias makes it more difficult for people not in the majority group to gain experience or be given opportunities:

- 1. Likeability**
Depending upon one's dimension(s) of diversity (race, gender, ethnicity, etc.) one's likeability may be perceived differently.
- 2. Similar to Me**
Supervisors may unintentionally give higher ratings to employees who are similar to them.
- 3. Personal**
Individual preferences (both likes and dislikes) may prevent objective analysis of the employee.
- 4. Horns & Halos**
Managers may make assumptions that a particular type of employee is naturally good or bad at the job.
- 5. Stereotyping**
People may find themselves assigning positive or negative attributes to an entire group and acting upon these ideas.
- 6. Shifting Standards**
Leaders may not realize they're applying more stringent standards to one similarly situated employee over another.
- 7. Confirmatory**
Once a judgment or recommended action is made, people are highly motivated to find or produce evidence to support or justify it.

Women Face Competing Expectations

Research has repeatedly found that female leaders often face several additional predicaments due to bias and stereotypes:

- **Extreme perceptions:**
Women leaders are seen as too soft or too nice; too tough or too bossy...never just right.
- **Higher competence threshold:**
Women workers are often assumed to be less competent, until proven otherwise.
- **Competent but disliked:**
Women leaders who are perceived as highly competent are sometimes seen as less likeable.

See references & recommended resources for more information.

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Strategies for Fighting Unconscious Bias at Work

Here are some questions to help your organization avoid common mistakes, and check your own thinking.

Looking back, what talent conversations (either formal or informal) have you been a part of where unconscious bias might have been at play? Can you think of a time when you wish you had spoken up, or reconsidered what you said? Is there a situation in the past that you might handle differently now?

Don't let assumptions go unchecked as you discuss talent and make decisions that impact the careers of others. Have you ever heard (or thought) statements along these lines?

- *She's too nice; she wouldn't want this job...*
- *She has young children; the travel schedule will be too demanding...*
- *She won't want this promotion; she'd have to relocate her family...*
- *She hasn't done this before; she won't feel up for the challenge...*

If so, how could you explore these assumptions before acting upon them?

Was there a time when you were considering several candidates for a role and they were all men, perhaps all white men?

If so, how did that come to be? If mostly white men applied for the opening, consider whether the way the position description was written or something about your hiring practices may have discouraged others.



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How might you recognize when you or your workplace is overlooking talent? How could you be a better advocate for yourself and others in the future? What are some objective measures that should be used to gauge success at your organization? What should not play into how talent is evaluated?

Realize that *you* may face unconscious bias from others as you advocate for more diverse talent. **What can you do to prepare for that?** (Arming yourself with some of the facts we lay out in [Women Need a Network of Champions](#) is a good place to start.)

References & Recommended Resources

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How to Find a Mentor or Sponsor

Successful leaders don't go it alone. They have a network of friends, colleagues, coaches, mentors, and sponsors who, over the years, play various roles in helping them learn and advance in their careers. But establishing those key relationships requires intention and effort.

It can feel awkward to say, "Will you be my mentor?" or "Will you sponsor me?" when you don't know someone well. And, a potentially great mentor might hesitate or decline to commit if they're unclear about what you expect from them. So, it's helpful to have a specific request or clear connection first.

Use this guide to think through how you might to line up a willing and able mentor and/or sponsor.

1 Know what you want.

Take time to identify strengths and development needs and clarify what you are working toward. Busy, talented people will respond more positively to helping you with a specific goal or challenge rather than a vague request to be your mentor or sponsor.

My strengths and interests:

My goals and aspirations:

My challenges:

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2

Consider who already knows what you need to learn or could offer a perspective you would value.

A mentor could be a peer or colleague at any level in the organization if they have a skill or ability you want to learn. A mentor can also be outside your organization — a former manager, or someone in your community. If you aren't sure, consider:

Who do you admire? You might notice someone for the skills they show (e.g., negotiating with a client, facilitating a meeting through heated debate, technical ability); their style or mindset (e.g., how they put people at ease, how they approach a problem); or the experience they have (e.g., worked in a different division, held an expat role, followed a similar career or life path). **Names of people with qualities I admire:**

Who knows your work? Who have you worked with previously? Was a senior leader involved in a project team you were on? Has an executive told you they appreciated a presentation you gave? Think both inside and outside your organization. You may have worked with someone at another organization, for example at a conference or training, in a church or volunteer setting, at a professional association or chapter meeting, etc. Think particularly of people who are further along in their careers or who are in positions of influence or authority. **Names of people who know my work:**



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Who advocates for others? Do you know a leader who openly advocates for their team? Do you see movement, visibility, and promotion within their group? **Names of people who visibly advocate for their team:**

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Could your manager help you select and secure a mentor or sponsor? Let them know why you are looking for a mentor, or that you feel you need sponsorship to grow in your career. Ask for their suggestions about who might help — and an introduction, if necessary. Ask directly if they are willing to vouch for you, either for a specific opening or when an opportunity arises. **Name(s) of people with whom my manager has a relationship:**

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Does your organization have a formal or informal mentoring or sponsoring program? Talk to your HR business partner about your goals, what support HR can offer, and if they can connect you to someone directly or steer you in the right direction. **Name of contact(s) in my HR department:**

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Build the relationship, then reach out.

Don't "cold call" someone to be your mentor or sponsor. If you have your eye on someone who you want to mentor you, build your connection with them before you ask.

If you've connected in a positive way in the past, how could you reconnect? If you see a manager who clearly advocates for their team, try to pursue projects and opportunities that will allow you to work more closely with them or their group. Or if your manager or HR department can connect you with someone, ask for an introduction, then follow up with the person directly. For example, in person or via email:

- **You could reach out with an update that may be relevant to their objectives:** "We've just completed the rollout of X. Our team reduced time to market by 25% over previous programs we have run. If we could apply this more broadly in the organization, it would have a significant impact on bottom line revenue. I'd love to share more detail with you and explore options of where to go from here."
- **You could ask them if they'd be willing to share more with you about their experiences:** "I noticed how you did X... You are really good at Y... I know you've done Z... Would you be willing to talk with me about that?"
- **You could make a clear, specific request:** "This is what I'm trying to do. Would you be willing to spend 30 minutes with me to talk about opportunities you see?" or "You know I have done X and Y. Would you be willing to help me build on that to get the strategic experience I need?"

Then, go ahead and get that meeting on the calendar. You can do it!

Here's how I could reach out to these potential mentor(s) or sponsor(s):



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Questions to Ask Your Mentor or Sponsor

How to Start Conversations with Your Mentor

You've got a mentor or sponsor, which is great! Now what?

Asking good questions and having open conversations will prompt insight and action. So, consider preparing for each meeting with your mentor or sponsor by selecting a few of the questions or topics from this list that apply to your current goals or issues. Keep returning to this list of questions over time as you build your relationship and as new opportunities and challenges emerge.

Relationship Questions

Goal Get to know each other, set parameters, create rapport, build trust.

Learn ways that your experiences have been similar or different. You may connect quickly, or it may take time.

- *Tell me a little more about yourself and your career journey.*
- *What would you like to know about me and my current work?*
- *Let's clarify objectives and expectations.*
- *What do you see as your role as a mentor?*
- *This is what's been going on with me — what's your take?*
- *I'm struggling with this. Have you been through something similar?*
- *I'm interested in X and Y. Where do we start?*

Assessment Questions

Goal Identify areas for guidance, opportunities for growth, and possibilities to consider.

Let your mentor know about feedback others have given you, as well as your assessment of yourself and your aspirations.

- *How do I build on or leverage my successes in current role?*
- *What might I do about this mistake? What can I learn?*
- *These are what I see as my strengths and weaknesses. How are they affecting my success now?*
- *I'd like to get clearer on my career goals and next steps. What do you recommend?*
- *I'm struggling with this feedback I received. Could you help me think through it?*
- *I think there's a gap between what I'm doing and known for, and where I'd like to be. What insight can you share about creating my leadership brand or clarifying my unique value?*

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Challenge Questions

Goal Explore current constraints and new possibilities.

Ask your mentor to provide another perspective on what is in your control and how organizational systems or biases may factor into where you are today and how you proceed.

- *I'm challenged by X, or working on Y. What would you do? How would you approach it?*
- *Could you help me think through next steps with this challenge? What do you advise?*
- *Will you give me feedback on how I handled this recent situation?*
- *Who else do I need to involve in this decision?*
- *How else could I approach this situation? What are some alternatives?*
- *Is there something I have overlooked? What am I not considering in this situation?*
- *How could I prepare for this upcoming event/challenge?*
- *What am I doing that is working well? What else is in my favor?*
- *How am I getting in my own way? What else is holding me back?*
- *I've been successful in this area/comfortable with this type of work. What might give me a new challenge?*

Support Questions

Goal Access resources and support needed to make changes and achieve goals.

Be direct about asking for what you need from your mentor, or asking them to steer you in the right direction if they are unable to help.

- *Who else do we need to get involved?*
- *How could I work through this with my boss?*
- *What else do I need to accomplish this task/goal?*
- *Will you help me prepare for this interview/presentation/difficult conversation?*
- *Do you know someone who would have insight/information/influence that would be valuable? Would you make an introduction for me?*



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Results Conversations

Goal Clarify what success would look like.

Ensure things stay on track and you know how to make progress and sustain motivation.

- *What goals should I be setting along the way to get to X?*
- *How do I measure progress?*
- *What might help me get back on track?*
- *Who else should I connect with to accomplish this successfully?*

Sponsoring Questions

A mentor's role is to work with you — a sponsor's role is to engage with others on your behalf. While you may never know who is advocating for you behind the scenes, you do need to line up one or two people you know will take action to ensure you gain skills, experience, connections, and visibility you need to advance in your career.

Your mentor may — or may not — be a great sponsor for you. It's a conversation you need to have once you have built your connection. If you have a good relationship with your mentor and they're in a position of some power, but have not really used their influence on your behalf yet, they probably would be happy to sponsor you if presented with the idea. Some questions you might ask, when the time feels right:

- *Do you think I'm ready for more responsibility?*
- *Would you recommend me for this role that has opened up?*
- *Is there an assignment you can give me that is a step toward my goal?*
- *If you hear of an opportunity for me to do X, will you put my name forward?*
- *Could you please mention my name to ___?*
- *I've applied for X, would you be willing to put in a good word for me?*
- *When you meet with them, would you let them know that I was responsible for Y?*

And, yes, go ahead and ask if they will be your sponsor to help you accomplish a next step.



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How to Sponsor Women

Have you heard it said that women are over-mentored and under-sponsored? Wondering what it takes to sponsor a woman in your organization? You may already be mentoring someone who you believe has potential, either formally or informally, and that's great!

If you're in a position of some power or influence and would also like to act as a sponsor for her, here's what you need to know to get started.

First, know the difference between a mentor and a sponsor.

- **A mentor is an advisor who provides guidance and support** to help someone develop, understand, and navigate their role, the organization, and their career. A mentor is typically an experienced leader assisting someone who is less experienced.
- **A sponsor is a specific type of mentor who goes above and beyond giving advice.** Sponsors are active advocates. They campaign for their "sponsee" to take on challenging assignments and willingly provide or recommend her for opportunities. Sponsors will tout a sponsee's accomplishments and potential, connect her to others in their network, put her name out for bigger roles, and actively advance her career progression — including in off-the-record or closed-door meetings with other leaders. Because of these attributes, by definition, sponsors are people who have some power in an organization.

And understand the dynamics at play...

- **If you're a man sponsoring a woman:** You may feel unsure about how an opposite-gender mentoring relationship can work, or feel wary of an outsider misinterpreting your motives. We recommend *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women*, a book by two men and a great resource for you.
- **If you're a woman sponsoring another woman:** You may feel cautious about creating the impression you are somehow "favoring" other women. (Unfortunately, this concern may be warranted — as explained in our research on "Queen Bee" Syndrome.)

Then, consider:

Am I positioned to play the role of sponsor for someone I'm mentoring, either formally or informally? What dynamics do I need to be sensitive to?

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Ask your mentee what she's looking for.

More challenging tasks? More visibility? More connections? Key experience? What benefits could she bring to the organization if she had a bigger role? And, learn more about her background, career interests, and long-term aspirations.

What I've learned:

Now, *be proactive on her behalf.*
**You have clout — when the time is right,
use it!**



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15 Simple Ways to Sponsor Women

- 1 Bring her with you to meetings. She may shadow you and learn through observation. Or give her a specific way to contribute.
- 2 Give her opportunities on your team. Reconfigure work and make assignments based on where she needs to develop or has interest.
- 3 Put her name out there to others. Recommend her for a task force, committee, event, interim position, project team, or job opening — within your function and across to other groups.
- 4 Think about opportunities to bring people together. Who would benefit from knowing your sponsoree? Who should she know? And then make it happen. Book the 3 of you for lunch or coffee.
- 5 Introduce her in a way that supports her brand. Mention a key skill or recent success rather than glossing over her role or accomplishments.
- 6 Provide her with exposure to senior leadership. This might be a direct opportunity (presenting for the team, involvement in a high-priority project), but it also requires you to talk about her in a positive, on-brand way.
- 7 Expand her network beyond her business or function. Help her learn who she should get to know or how her work overlaps or connects with others.
- 8 Challenge her. But don't make her prove over and over that she has the skills before putting her in new roles.
- 9 Trust her to own complex projects and roles. Don't be over-protective or swoop in and pull rank at the last minute.
- 10 Help her identify and strengthen the skills needed for promotion readiness. Give clear feedback about what she needs to improve or experience.
- 11 Fill her in on opportunities across the organization that she wouldn't know about from her vantage point. Help her see a clear career path to take on bigger roles.
- 12 Recommend her for training or leadership development opportunities that are available for high-potential leaders.
- 13 Make her aware of priorities, challenges, and processes in other areas and different functions to get a better understanding of how different parts of the business operate.
- 14 Be direct in supporting her in talent reviews, succession planning, and other performance processes.
- 15 Encourage other managers to see her potential and take the "risk" of putting her in roles, even if she does not fit the traditional image of a leader or is not viewed as "ready now."

Specific actions I will take on her behalf as opportunities arise:



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Conversation Guide for Mentors and Sponsors

How to Hold a Developmental Conversation

Whether you're new to mentoring, preparing for your next meeting with a mentee, or considering how you might sponsor a woman who is a rising star, you'll want to brush up on how to have a developmental conversation.

You won't ask all of the following questions at once, but you can use them to prompt meaningful conversation during initial meetings with a mentee or sponsoree, and return to this list as you learn how to advise and advocate for them in the future.

The process and questions are the same, regardless of your gender or the person you are working with. But as you engage in developmental conversations, keep in mind that the experiences of women at work are different than those of men. We've noted a few tips to keep in mind in each section below.

Relationship Questions

Goal Build a relationship for connection and success.

The first goal is to build the relationship, get to know each other, build trust, and establish boundaries.

- *Tell me a little more about yourself.*
- *What would you like to know about me?*
- *Tell me about some of the challenges you're facing.*
- *What would you say is your key priority or goal?*
- *What do you like best about your work?*
- *What are your interests in terms of a next role?*
- *How will we best work together?*
- *Let's clarify objectives and expectations.*
- *Let me talk about how I see my role as a mentor.*



TIP

If you are mentoring or sponsoring someone who is not "like you," you may take more time to create rapport and build trust. Try to be attuned to your own biases and assumptions; be open and willing to learn and adapt as you build the relationship with your mentee.

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Assessment Questions

Goal Identify areas you can provide guidance, opportunities for growth.

Seek to gain deeper understanding of your mentee or sponsoree and prompt her reflection, self-discovery, and insights.

- What have been your biggest successes?
- Tell me about a failure and what you learned from it.
- What do you see as your current strengths?
- What gaps do you see in your current skills that may be holding you back from success in your business challenges, or getting other career opportunities?
- What are your career goals — both short-term and long-term?
- What would others say about the impact you have had? Is that the impact you wanted to have?
- Tell me more about your key challenges.



TIP

Research shows that women tend to underrate their accomplishments and abilities, while men tend to overestimate their importance in their networks. Keep this in mind, as women mentees may undersell themselves. Additionally, research shows people tend to want women to be more accomplished before giving them the same roles as men. As a mentor — and particularly as a sponsor — you should be on the lookout for instances in which it seems that your mentee is not being given the same opportunities as male colleagues, and be ready to advocate on her behalf.

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Challenge Questions

Goal Encourage areas of success, challenge thinking or actions, push greater responsibility or taking reasonable risks. Be sure not to give all the answers to your mentee or sponsoree. Help her to think through current constraints and explore new possibilities or behaviors.

- *Regarding this challenge you're facing, when have you seen something like this before?*
- *What are you currently doing or not doing that is getting in the way?*
- *What are alternatives you might imagine?*
- *With whom do you need to network to solve this?*
- *How can you look at this differently?*
- *Have you ever thought about taking on the role of X?*
- *You really seem to be successful in this area. Let's look at this other area and think about X.*
- *What type of feedback have you received from your manager or others?*
- *Has anything held you back from reaching your goals?*
- *I know you're very comfortable with this current project or situation. Let's think about a larger challenge for you.*
- *What will you begin to do differently? What would that look like?*
- *What's the first step?*



TIP

Challenge your mentee to think or do things they may not have considered before — but also know that doing so may carry different risks for men and women. If your mentee is hesitant, explore the possibility that she sees a downside that you are unaware of.

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Support Questions

Goal Show genuine curiosity, stay open to helping but not doing, find places to partner with your mentee's manager or supervisor, and discover opportunities to make a helpful introduction.

Ensure that your mentee or sponsoree has the resources and support needed to make changes and achieve goals.

- *How can I best support you?*
- *Who else do we need to involve?*
- *It sounds like you were successful. How did that feel?*
- *How can we help your boss set you up for success?*
- *What else do you need?*
- *There's someone I know who may be helpful for you to talk to. Let me introduce you to him/her.*
- *As you prepare for that interview, let me know how I can help.*
- *I've experienced something similar — here's how I dealt with it.*
- *Let's set up another time to discuss what's working and what might need adjustment.*



TIP

Sometimes support should come from someone who can relate, or who has gone through something similar. If this isn't you, that's okay. Encourage her to connect with a peer in another group who has had a role similar to one she is about to take, who has dealt with the same type of challenge, has had similar life experiences, etc. Make an introduction, if need be.

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Results Conversations

Goal Help your mentee or sponsoree clarify what success would look like.

Don't allow the mentoring relationship to lose focus. There will be times when conversations are based on immediate issues, but be sure to help her set goals, keep on track, and sustain motivation.

- *What goals will you set and by when?*
- *How can you break down your goal into smaller pieces and progressive deadlines?*
- *What progress have you made?*
- *What's slowing you down?*
- *How might you get back on track?*
- *Who else could be involved in helping you accomplish this?*



TIP

Circumstances shift and, at times, both work and personal demands create overload or pull people off track from their longer-term goals. You can be a steadying force, a truth-teller, and an accountability partner. Remind your mentee of her larger purpose and direction, and help her find ways to overcome barriers and continue to make progress.

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How Organizations Can Support Mentorship & Sponsorship

Ideally, men and women in positions of power would mentor and sponsor talent — regardless of gender. That way, women who are rising stars would have the mentors they need to help them navigate their careers, and senior executives would see their skills and potential and enthusiastically sponsor them. But since this isn't happening by default in many organizations, there's a leaky pipeline of talent, particularly talented female leaders.

What can be done about that? What's the role of HR, L&D, and Talent Management professionals when it comes to mentorship and sponsorship?

Smart senior executives and HR teams understand that mentorship and sponsorship programs may be the needed next step to grow their organization's pipeline of women leaders. Whether you already have a formal program in place, or are considering starting one, keep these recommendations in mind.

What Makes Formal Mentorship & Sponsorship Programs Successful?

Use these proven strategies and questions as a guide for developing or improving an organizational initiative.

- 1 Be purposeful.** What are your goals? How do these goals fit your overall development efforts? Does mentoring fit into your overall Talent Management framework?
- 2 Be strategic.** How will this mentoring program fit into your overall business plan and human resources strategies? What is your current and desired culture?
- 3 Engage leaders.** What role can the CEO and senior team play in the process? Who else in the organization will help make the formal mentoring program work?
- 4 Consider the numbers.** How will your demographics change over the next five years? Who will be retiring and who will backfill these roles?
- 5 Learn from the past.** What experiences have people had with mentoring before? What worked and what didn't? How will this experience be different?
- 6 Be bold.** How can mentoring a diverse group of leaders (all genders, people of color, different levels/career stages, etc.) create a competitive advantage for you? What can you do that is unique and fresh?
- 7 Select purposefully.** Who will participate? How will you pair mentoring partners? Is there a thought partner who can help you throughout the process?
- 8 Provide support.** How can you best support mentors? What resources can you leverage to ensure mentors have the know-how to be effective and maintain their commitment?
- 9 Consider the benefits.** What is most important to your key stakeholders? Consider the specific needs of the mentoring partners, HR and business leaders. Review employee retention, promotion, engagement, and satisfaction. Explore organizational collaboration and innovation.
- 10 Measure and share.** What is most important for the organization and those participating? How can you publicize any early wins in order to build momentum?
- 11 Adjust quickly.** What is working? How can you make it better?

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Which of the those 11 items most resonated for you and your organization?

No Formal Program? No Problem.

If you don't have a formal program in place, talent management professionals can still attract and retain more talent by building mentorship and sponsorship into leadership development efforts and onboarding processes; creating formal programs to pair high potentials with specific mentors and sponsors; and encouraging a culture where mentoring and sponsorship of talent is expected. To make those things happen, consider these 3 recommendations.

1. Understand & communicate the system-level barriers that women face.

How can you help senior leaders understand what might be seen as supportive or dismissive of talented women at your organization? Also, take a close look at your talent data:

- *Do women comprise 5% of senior leadership, but 50% of the pipeline?*
- *Where in the organization are women advancing?*
- *Where are they leaving the organization?*

What does your data tell you? What does your senior executive team need to know about the pipeline of women leaders at your organization?



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2 Ask questions that invite your systems to evolve.

- **Challenge assumptions when you hear them.** For example, suggest “Let’s ask her” if decision-makers question whether a woman would want to relocate or try a new role.
- **Try to open up possibilities for different styles and skillsets.** Ask who or what we might be overlooking as we fill positions: “Here’s the profile of the last person in this job... but what abilities might we need now?”
- **Identify and prioritize learning agility in candidates.** Having the right skills and qualifications is helpful, but for many roles, the ability to learn from experience and to apply that learning to future challenges is critical.

Which of the above suggestions would be relatively easy to start doing at your organization?

3 Train managers and leaders in mentoring and sponsoring.

Don’t assume senior leaders are clear about their role in helping other leaders, or that they know how to have developmental conversations, particularly with a mentee or sponsoree.

- If senior leaders are “expected” to mentor and sponsor more junior high-potentials, ensure these expectations are explicit and transparent — for example, included in the talent management, succession planning, or performance review processes. For building awareness, changing a culture, and shifting norms, unwritten rules are not as effective as clearly stating expectations.
- Prepare executives for the unexpected by providing them with guidance through tools, other leadership development efforts, and coaching support.

What are some specific ways you can help managers and leaders, both mid- and senior-level, grow their skills in the areas of mentoring and sponsoring? How can you make unwritten expectations about developing talent more clear and transparent?



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Recommended Resources & Additional Reading

Catalyst (2011). *Sponsoring Women to Success*.

Gentry, W. A. and Walsh, Richard J. (2015). *Mentoring First-Time Managers: Proven Strategies HR Leaders Can Use*. Center for Creative Leadership.

Notes:

A series of horizontal dotted lines provided for taking notes.



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