



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H0525R
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
AUGUST 07, 2019

ARTICLE **GENDER**

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Advocating for women’s advancement at work is integral for improving [financial results](#), gender balance, and diversity in our workplaces and leadership teams. Yet data from the [Working Mother Research Institute](#) finds that, while 48% of men say they have received detailed information on career paths to P&L jobs in the past 24 months, just 15% of women report the same. And, while 54% of men had a career discussion with a mentor or sponsor in the past 24 months, only 39% of women did.

Why? Because leaders, the majority of whom are male and white, don't adequately sponsor or mentor people who don't look like them. [Recent research](#) from the Center for Talent Innovation reported that a full 71% of executives have protégés whose gender and race match their own. That means that women and minorities don't benefit from sponsorship like their male colleagues do, and organizations lose out by not gaining the full potential of diverse talent.

Confusion about the #MeToo movement may have unintentionally exacerbated the situation. Two 2018 surveys by [Lean In](#) and [Bloomberg Media](#) found that, in the wake of those high-profile workplace sexual harassment and assault allegations, some men began to avoid professional work relationships with women. It was even a [topic at the most recent World Economic Forum](#): senior male executives talked about avoiding one-on-one mentoring relationships as a risk management strategy.

This response is not productive. There are plenty of men who want to do what's best for their businesses and employees. We find that sponsorship and advocacy make the biggest difference.

Sponsors, by definition, use their position and power to achieve business objectives by advancing a protégé's career. [They are not benevolent benefactors](#). They are influential leaders who intentionally invest in, and rely on, the skills and contributions of their protégés to achieve their own goals and their protégé's highest potential. A sponsor needs to know the skills and capabilities of their protégés, see their potential, and be able to orchestrate their advancement — but they don't have to show them how to play the instrument or encourage them to practice.

And while mentors may or may not have the same level of power as sponsors, they frequently have a great deal more influence than they actually use. We regularly see mentors who support their mentees privately but are reluctant to advocate for them.

If companies truly want to improve their financial results and diversity, they need to do a better job of developing sponsors for diverse talent at all levels of their organization. Leaders are regularly taught about strategic thinking, championing change, making financial decisions, and managing people, but they are not taught how to become sponsors or maximize their impact in the role. As a result, white men don't have the skills to advance women and people of color — even though they unconsciously help other white men to do so. Rather than be frustrated by or blame male leaders, companies need to better enlist and equip them to excel. And men need to consistently implement what they learn.

All of this starts with understanding what the best sponsors do, and how they do it. Here are the eight key steps we've identified based on our experiences advising global leaders and companies.

Identify high potential diverse talent. Great sponsors purposefully look for people who bring different experiences and perspectives from their own and also have the results, potential, and

ambition to make a larger contribution. If they can't identify someone on their own, they go out of their way to ask HR and other leaders to recommend candidates.

One of Rania's coaching clients, Stan, an executive director of a regional bank, is a great example of this type of sponsor. He recognized the potential in one of his employees, Beth. Even though she had no prior financial services experience when she joined the bank, she was great at developing client, community, and internal relationships, and Stan could see that, if she held a senior leadership role, she could make a broader contribution. He decided to sponsor her to fast-track her into a senior market role.

Determine the best stretch role. It is vital to identify high-visibility opportunities that could benefit from your protégés' perspectives, talents, and experiences — and in which they can excel. These should be roles or projects that, if executed successfully, will clearly benefit the business as well their career. The best opportunities to develop protégés are those that meet some of these conditions: involves profit and loss; high risk; strategic clients; strategic importance to the business; starting something new; or fixing a business problem.

Stan did this by recognizing that Beth's management skills would make a notable improvement in their market's retail division. Similarly, when Jay, an executive at a fast-growth financial services start-up, recognized that Lexi had the talent to achieve more significant results and advance, he assigned her several complex business challenges that required her to interact with senior leaders across the organization. After she successfully addressed them, she gained positive visibility.

Position the role. Stretch assignments can be challenging, so great mentors ensure that their protégés understand that the organization values and thinks highly of them. Many women want and appreciate this type of encouragement and [may be reticent to take a challenging role](#) without it. Protégés should be provided with context on the importance of new opportunities, what a sponsor believes they can accomplish, and how the sponsor and the company will support them. Have their manager and mentors encourage them to persist in spite of the obstacles they will inevitably encounter. In Stan's case, he talked to Beth about why he thought she'd excel in leading the retail banking group and what success in that role could mean for her in the future.

Provide opportunities for development and support. Sponsors must ensure that people in their organization invest time, expertise, resources, and budget to help give protégés the skills and experiences they need to be successful. This is where mentors and other advisors come in. As Beth demonstrated results, Stan arranged for her to have technical skill and leadership development experiences. Both Beth and Lexi were provided with executive leadership coaching.

It's also important to educate leaders who will work with a protégé about the challenges women, people of color and especially [women of color, often encounter](#) in the workplace. It's also worth exploring if a protégé can be connected with people in similar life and career stages or those who have had prior success navigating through personal and professional challenges.

Pave the way. Sponsors have a responsibility to introduce their protégés to influential and powerful people in their organization or industry, including clients, especially if they are crucial for success in their work. In Lexi’s case, this meant having her travel internationally to meet with key partners and an important leadership role assignment on a transition team. She delivered stellar results. In both Beth’s and Lexi’s cases, their sponsor regularly communicated their results and advocated for them with other senior executives.

Ensure protégés receives candid, performance-based feedback. A [2006 McKinsey study](#) found that women don’t get the same type of direct, candid commentary on their performance as their male counterparts, and [research](#) shows that women consistently receive less feedback tied to business outcomes. Sponsors may or may not be the people who provide protégés with this. But they must make sure that protégés get clear performance assessments that include specifics guidance to help improve results and promote advancement. For example, instead of feedback like “Be more assertive,” an example of actionable feedback is: “When the client raised these types of objections, acknowledge their concerns but come back in with specific examples of other clients for whom these factors have not been an issue. This will help you close more business.”

Help protégés persist. No matter the stretch assignment, there will always be challenges and setbacks. Sponsors must make sure criticism, mistakes, failures, or naysayers don’t derail their protégés. That doesn’t mean sheltering them from adversity; it does mean ensuring that the organization is understanding and patient if everything doesn’t work out the first time. More often than not, success takes more than one assignment.

Champion promotions and recognition. Sponsors advocate for raises, promotions, and recognition to deserving protégés. As Beth delivered, Stan gave her additional responsibilities which have prepared her for a significant promotion. Lexi recently advanced into a senior leadership role. It took her excellent performance, advocating for herself, and Jay’s advocacy to the rest of his executive committee teammates.

Our experience and the data show that women receive less sponsorship and advocacy in mentorship than their male colleagues. This imbalance is one of the [primary reasons](#) they don’t advance at the same pace as men and why they leave their places of employment.

Leaders who take these steps will become better, more inclusive sponsors, which will improve their own results, the careers of protégés, and the organizations where they work. Gender balance in companies and on teams improves a host of outcomes including [financial results](#), [innovation](#), [decision making](#), [organizational commitment](#), [retention and job satisfaction](#). And managers who identify and develop all high-potential talent are [more successful](#) and recognized for this approach.

Companies can encourage this kind of sponsorship by clearly defining the steps, behaviors and expectations for people in formal programs. They can deliberately address the mandate and process for advocacy and sponsorship of diverse talent in their employee development programs and

performance assessments. And, finally, they hold senior managers accountable for sponsorship. It is not only good for women and people of color; it's also good for business and for the [sponsors](#).

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