

How can mentees get the most out of sponsorship?

Sponsorship is a strategic and proactive relationship developed between a senior leader and a high-potential team member. The senior leader sponsors the high-potential individual by providing tactical counsel, access to power networks and advocating on their behalf, gaining them access and exposure to high-profile projects and promotional opportunities within the organisation.

While a mentor is someone who has knowledge and will share it with you, a sponsor is a person who has power and will use it for you.

Who Do You Look to for Sponsorship?

Sponsors have both the influence and active willingness to get you into a role, assignment, or position that advances your career, while mentors offer support, guidance, and advice that can benefit you in this new role.

As a mentee, ask yourself;

- Who is the most powerful person who knows you and your work well enough to be willing to vouch for your capacity?
- If those who know you and your work are not influential enough to advocate for you, where on the spectrum can they help?
- Can they help connect you to someone who is? Or, give you a project that has you presenting to such a person?

How Can You Access Sponsorship

Accessing sponsorship is about relationship building. A leader cannot sponsor you if they don't know who you are, what are your strengths, and what you aspire to achieve in your career. So tell them!

- Identify which person/people you would like to engage as a sponsor.
- Work out how you can your personal brand/career strengths/work profile in front of them
- Ask for a meeting (online, a cuppa, 15 min stand-up, lunch) being clear that you want to talk to them about your career at your company and how you can set yourself up for success.
- Follow up after the meeting with a thank you, re-iterate your strengths and career goals, and ask them to keep you in mind for future opportunities.
- Add them on LinkedIn!

Earn Your Sponsorship

Make no mistake, sponsors are earned. Your talent, consistent high performance, visibility, and collegiality are what secure sponsorship in the first place. These same elements also keep a sponsor committed to advocating for you. There is no one silver bullet for ensuring the attention of sponsors; however, the following considerations may put you in a position to be noticed.

- Strive to be a “known entity.” Make your work, strengths, and skills evident to those around you, as well as those above you.
- Look for opportunities for enhanced visibility. This may include volunteering within your organization, attending conferences, or organizing networking activities where influential leaders are present.
- Communicate effectively, be it during presentations, meetings, or conversations with leaders. Your communication style forms a lasting impression.
- Make efforts to build a reputation as a respected colleague: be reliable, flexible when it’s required, and collegial

Demonstrate your ongoing commitment to your career development

For example, express interest in training or leadership development, take on a leadership role in a professional network, and share what you have learned.

- Prepare an elevator speech that offers a clear and concise summary of your current projects, your unique value-add to the Advice for High Performers: How to Set Yourself Up for Sponsorship organization, and your passion for the work, and be ready to share with senior-level individuals when appropriate opportunities arise.

Attract Multiple Sponsors

- Cultivate multiple sponsors who reflect different points of view (e.g., both women and men; people from different functions or divisions).
- Develop more than one sponsorship relationship to maximize your support base and ensure your continued support should one of your sponsors leave the organization.
- Recognize that not all relationships with senior-level individuals will develop into a sponsorship relationship.

Manage Your Career

- Take the time to examine your skills, growth areas, and interests to gain a clear picture of what you want career-wise. Understanding where you want to go is an important part of positioning yourself to make it happen.

- Make efforts to assess and manage your professional reputation and perceptions of both your strengths and weaknesses; ask for and take action on feedback.
- Be ready to take advantage of opportunities when they are offered. If possible, talk through any hesitations with your sponsor to better understand the value of particular opportunities to your career.

Share Successes, and Be Appreciative

- Find ways to consistently inform your sponsor(s) about your accomplishments. Send a brief update on a project just completed or forward an email from your manager on a job well done to keep your sponsor in the loop regarding your achievements.
- Thank your sponsors for their efforts, and find ways to support or add value for them. For example, connect your sponsors to individuals in your growing network, or volunteer to support activities or projects they are spearheading.

Keep These Things in Mind

- Remember that you are the primary architect of your career. Sponsors are invaluable catalysts for career advancement and growth, but you are in control of your career, including your decisions and the related consequences.
- Recognize that your actions and performance impact both you and your sponsor.
- Maintain reasonable expectations for the relationship, and guard against developing an expectation that opportunities will come effortlessly as a result of sponsorship.
- Understand that sponsors may not be able to advocate for you in every situation.
- Consider paying it forward. You can help build a culture of sponsorship by doing for others what your sponsors have done for you. As you progress, look for high performers you could be in a position to help. You don't need to be at the very top of an organization to sponsor someone.