

Supporting careers: mentoring or sponsorship?

Perspective Paper

Introduction

Mentoring has traditionally been understood to be the relationship between a more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced individual, which helps the younger person to develop their career. The mentoring function has changed over time, and has branched into two distinct types of relationship: mentoring and sponsorship.¹ A 'mentoring' relationship provides the protégé with psychosocial support, whereas 'sponsorship' involves proactive instrumental help to advance a person's career.²

One measure of the success of gender equality initiatives is increased representation of women at senior levels, and mentoring has in the past been used by organisations to support and develop female talent. Over the last two to three decades, mentoring-for-women initiatives have been standard in gender equality and diversity initiatives, but women still rarely make it to the tops of organisations.³ This casts doubt on the ability of mentoring to increase the numbers of women in senior leadership roles.⁴

Sponsorship, on the other hand, has been found to be effective in increasing objective career outcomes such as promotions and pay increases by providing proactive career-related support.⁵ This type of support may be more effective than mentoring to increase the numbers of women moving through the management pipeline to senior leadership. Women, however, are more likely to be offered relationship-focused mentoring with a relatively junior mentor, whereas men are more likely to be actively sponsored by a senior member of the management team.⁶

Differences between mentoring and sponsorship

Both mentoring and sponsorship seek to improve a person's career by increasing the amount and value of their human capital. 'Human capital' is a person's accrued knowledge, skill, experience and ability, gathered over time in a variety of settings such as in education and the workforce. The rewards a person receives for their human capital – a higher salary, better standard of living etc. – provide a measure of its value. The growth of human capital is affected by opportunity and continuity of employment, and when human capital stops growing it also loses value.⁷

Psychosocial support – the traditional form of mentoring – involves friendship, counselling, acceptance, role modelling and a place to discuss anxiety and uncertainty. It has little direct influence on human capital, but may empower protégés to take steps that could increase their human capital or its value. Research has so far failed to provide strong evidence of the effectiveness of mentoring in influencing the representation of women in senior roles.⁸

Career-related support – the main component of sponsorship – provides protégés with direct human capital enhancement opportunities and connections with powerful individuals who can assist their career progression.⁹ A sponsor goes beyond giving emotional support to advocating for career advancement.¹⁰ Being in a higher position and having more power than a protégé is a necessary feature for a sponsor.¹¹ Sponsorship is a strategy to accelerate the careers of high-performing individuals, regardless of gender.

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Sponsorship can be used to achieve greater female representation at senior levels of organisations by increasing the numbers of women moving through the management pipeline, and helping them stay on their career tracks.

Mentoring and sponsorship have been found to produce different outcomes for protégés. Objective career outcomes, such as pay increases and promotions, have been associated with career-related mentoring (or sponsorship), whereas subjective career outcomes, such as career satisfaction, have been associated with psychosocial mentoring.¹²

Sponsoring women³⁷

In 2011, Catalyst released two reports specifically addressing sponsorship for women, named 'Sponsoring Women to Success' and 'Fostering Sponsorship Success among High Performers and Leaders'. Below are several summary points based on these publications.

What can sponsorship achieve?

- accelerate the careers of high performers
- help individuals meet the unique challenges of executive roles and alleviate the perceived risks associated with moving into new areas with little experience
- address the challenge of female representation at senior levels by targeting the career advancement of women in general and advocating the progression of high performing women in particular
- guide an individual towards opportunities that can maximise movement towards career goals, especially those [opportunities or career goals] that may not be so obvious
- develop the leadership skills and reputation of senior leaders who act as sponsors. They are able to gain feedback, as well as learn more about the way the organisation operates at all levels
- ensure that high performers are visible within the organisation.

What are the expected outcomes of sponsorship?

Sponsorship aims to promote the advancement of high performing individuals who would otherwise be left behind. This is true for all high performers, but it is even more critical for women. Organisations lose a lot of great talent through the attrition of women beyond mid-level roles and sponsorship is an effective mechanism for increasing female representation at senior levels. Barriers such as informal networks between men can be overcome by sponsorship, allowing women the opportunities to overcome these challenges and reach higher levels in the organisation.

How does the organisation benefit?

There is a plethora of research that shows how organisations that increase female representation at the top perform better. However, successful sponsorship has great benefits for the individuals involved in the relationship and these benefits flow onto the organisation. It can lead to increased job satisfaction and organisational commitment, higher-performing teams and leaders, and increased diversity at senior levels.

What can the organisation do to make it happen?

The work environment plays a big part in making sure sponsorship relationships thrive. So, what does a supportive look like?

1. There is an expectation that senior leaders will act as sponsors, either officially or as part of the culture.
2. Leading by example. It becomes normal within an organisation if there are role models doing it well. As time progresses, those who were sponsored become sponsors.
3. For some, the process is explicit and transparent. When left to chance, there is no guarantee that it will work as planned and be inclusive of those who need it most.
4. There are processes in place to educate and build awareness of sponsorship and adequate training is available.
5. Sponsorship is linked to talent management programs through succession management or performance assessment. Sponsorship can be a KPI for senior leaders. If this is focused on women, it has the potential to break down unconscious bias that would enable only men similar to those already in powerful positions to succeed these roles.

It can be argued that perceived positive outcomes of mentoring and sponsorship relationships are largely determined by the types of people who engage in them. That is, certain types of people may be more likely to be selected for mentoring or sponsorship than others, as mentors and sponsors seek out and focus on those who are capable and likely to succeed.¹³ Research shows that having a strong promotional history and undertaking proactive career behaviours (such as seeking feedback, senior colleague consultation and

engaging in training and development) increases the likelihood of developing an informal mentoring relationship.¹⁴ The often disjointed career paths of women who have family or caring responsibilities may make them less attractive protégés to prospective mentors or sponsors. There is also potential for the focus of mentoring relationships to differ by gender, and this could impact on their effectiveness.

Gender differences in support programs

Research has shown that sponsorship often leads to more positive outcomes than mentoring, but gender stereotypes may make it more common for women to be provided with psychosocial (mentoring) rather than instrumental career-related support (sponsorship), while men receive more instrumental than psychosocial support.¹⁵ Neither type of support relationship can be seen as a ‘magic bullet’ that will fix all gender inequalities in workplaces.

In 1990, Dreher and Ash¹⁶ showed that even though both women and men were equally integrated into mentoring programs and having a mentor was associated with more frequent promotions and greater satisfaction with wages, there was a persistent gender difference in pay which could not be explained by the mentoring relationship. Research 14 years later returned similar results: even though women and men received similar types of mentoring and at the same rate, women were still promoted less often, were less satisfied with their jobs and had lower salaries.¹⁷

The proactive advocacy of sponsorship can alleviate some of the issues women typically face when they seek to progress their careers. That is, women who advocate for themselves in the workplace can be penalised for doing so,¹⁸ whereas having a sponsor speak up on their behalf can reduce any backlash effect. In this way, sponsorship has the potential to break down the barriers women face when they are excluded from influential networks.

In some respects, providing support programs only for women can unintentionally suggest that women are less capable than men, and this can lead to a number of negative outcomes. The provision of development programs for women can be seen by some as evidence that women who succeed have been given an unfair advantage, or that they need extra help to get to the same positions as men.¹⁹ In this way, the competence of female leaders is sometimes questioned if they achieve success after being part of a development program for women.²⁰ Female leaders may also not be seen as ‘natural’ leaders because leadership is generally defined as a set of stereotypically masculine traits which women are not expected to possess to the same extent as men.²¹ Any targeted program for the development of women also has the potential to be seen as unfair simply because it is not available to all employees.²²

Implementing sponsorship or mentoring in the workplace

Consider whether to develop informal or formal relationships, as they may have differing outcomes.²³

Establishing a culture that encourages and rewards supportive relationships can be the catalyst for informal relationships to emerge. It is important to ensure that the support, resources and training are available for those who want to explore supportive relationships.

Focus on design. Identify areas of the business that would benefit most from sponsorship/mentoring activities and consider at which levels a program would be of most benefit. Is there an area of the organisation that is in particular need of help? Is there a well performing area that could provide guidance? Look for broader outcomes, for example, would the development of cross-functional relationships help to broaden networks and increase knowledge sharing across boundaries?

Consider the organisational context that may impact the career progress of women. When initiatives such as mentoring or training are implemented with the intention to improve gender equality, they have been shown to only be effective when the core organisational structures support diversity initiatives more broadly.²⁴ What other diversity initiatives are currently in place or planned? What is the history of such programs? If you implement a sponsorship/mentoring program that is targeted to women, how will it be received? Sponsorship and mentoring alone may not lead to better outcomes in gender equality generally, but as part of a larger gender equality framework, these support mechanisms can have a positive impact.

Remember that it is not just the protégés who benefit. The concept of ‘reverse mentoring’ is becoming more widely known,²⁵ where the sponsor or mentor can also develop through their involvement in the relationship. This is particularly useful in the gender equality context, as a woman may be able to provide her male sponsor with particular insights of which he may otherwise have been unaware. The challenge of creating a more equitable and diverse workforce is one that leaders may be assisted with through this reciprocal relationship.

Look beyond traditional mentoring structures. Not all mentoring relationships have to occur in one-on-one relationships, they can also be in the form of group mentoring, where a leader works with a group of women.

Articulate and communicate the intended outcomes of the program. For greatest effect, the stated outcomes should be linked to strategy and business imperatives. Is it to stimulate the talent pipeline? Is it to retain female talent? Is it to improve equity in promotions and pay? Is it to make more women board-ready? Does it encompass other diversity initiatives, or is it just to address gender inequality? Understanding what you hope to achieve in terms of clear objectives is key to the success of any gender equality program.

Understand that there is a continuum of relationships that can emerge. These range from psychosocial through to career-focused and may contain many variations. Not all will fall within the expected frame of mentoring and sponsorship.

Ensure that sufficient information, support and resources are available. Having good training, support and resources available is vital to the success of these initiatives. Lack of planning, inadequate resources, poor design and low levels of buy-in generally result in the failure of many gender equity practices and the same is true for mentoring and sponsorship.

Make sure the programs are available to all. Sponsorship and mentoring are not exclusive to the advancement of women. They are strategies to accelerate the careers of high-performing individuals, regardless of gender. However, they can also be implemented as part of a broader strategy for achieving greater female representation at senior levels of organisations.²⁶

Summary

Originally, mentoring relationships focused on the provision of emotional support and advice to help people achieve greater subjective career outcomes (improved job satisfaction, for example). Sponsorship is now recognised as another type of support relationship in which a sponsor is necessarily in a more powerful position in the organisation and is pro-active in helping a protégé to develop their career. While the evidence is clear that sponsorship leads to more positive career outcomes than mentoring, there are challenges in both types of support relationship.

Women are more often provided with mentoring than sponsorship and may not receive the same positive career benefits as men (who are more likely to receive sponsorship). For this reason, it could be useful for organisations to ensure that women are provided with sponsorship support that may increase their chances of progressing to senior leadership.

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