

## Find A Mentor – Sylvia Ann Hewlett

### Introduction

I now understand that climbing the ladder in any competitive field required heavy-duty support from a senior person with heft and influence.

So I finally got it—sponsorship, that is. I did my utmost to never again let it go. My career journey was complicated (more on that in the final chapter). But from here on out, I knew that if I was going to amount to anything, I needed powerful sponsors.

### Part 1: The Sponsorship Imperative

If you're interested in fast-tracking your career, in getting that next hot assignment or making more money, what you need is a sponsor. Sponsors give advice and guidance, but they also come through on much more important fronts. In particular they:

- Believe in your value and your potential and are prepared to link reputations and go out on a limb on your behalf
- Have a voice at decision-making tables and are willing to be your champion—convincing others that you deserve a pay raise or a promotion.
- Are willing to give you air cover so that you can take risks. No one can accomplish great things in this world if they don't have a senior leader in their corner making it safe to fail.

It is this kind of heavy lifting that distinguishes a sponsor from a mentor. The data that underpins this book shows that sponsorship has a measurable impact on career progression. Men and women with sponsors are much more likely to rise up through the ranks and hang on to their ambition. Sponsors—unlike mentors—give you serious traction.

But one of things I've done well—and I don't know that it's conscious—is that I've always made my boss look good. All the people I've worked for will tell you, "I like having Pat around, because I know she's got my back."

"Do your job well, make sure your boss is fully informed, and don't be afraid to ask for help," she explains. "That is how you build the trust vital to any long-term professional relationship."

"Pat was someone you could absolutely count on to the right things," Burke told me. "She wasn't intimidated by projects or people, and she didn't play politics. I knew her motivations at all times—and that made her 100% trustworthy."

After two years of exhaustive inquiry, I can tell you why: high-potential women have mentors but lack sponsors. They fail to cultivate strategic alliances with individuals capable of propelling them into leadership positions and protecting them from other contenders. Often, like Marina, they have would-be advocates, senior-level leaders who've taken note for their capabilities. But they don't know how to turbocharge these relationships. They don't understand the quid pro quo, the mutual investment that ensures both parties remain incentivized to help each other over the long run. So, like Marina, they put their heads down, work harder, and wait, hoping that their mentors and role models will see to their success.

Don't get me wrong: mentors matter. You absolutely need them. But they're not your ticket to the top. Mentors give, whereas sponsors invest.

A sponsor, as we shall explore, is also someone who takes an interest in you and your career, but not out of altruism or like-mindedness. A sponsor sees furthering your career as an important investment in his or her own career, organization, or vision. Sponsors may advise or steer you, but their chief role is to develop you as a leader. Your role is to earn their investment in you. Indeed, throughout the relationship, you're delivering outstanding results, building their brand or legacy, and generally making sure that whatever dividends you realize in the way of promotions, pay raises, or plum assignments are manifestly dividends that you earned. Sponsorship, done right, is transactional. It's

an implicit or even explicit strategic alliance, a long-range quid pro quo. But provided you're giving as good as you're getting, there's nothing about this dynamic that warrants distaste. Sponsorship isn't favoritism or politics; it doesn't rig the game. On the contrary, it ensures you get what you've worked for and deserve.

Dougan credits his ascent to his boss, to whom he reported for nearly twenty years, not because he made it easy for Dougan, but because he made it hard. "I became the person he gave the toughest assignments to, the things that needed fixing," Dougan observes. "He piled on the responsibilities. But because he believed in me—because he was clearly betting on me and giving me a leg up—I felt I owed him a lot and should do whatever he asked and come through with whatever he needed.

**What is a sponsor?** Delivers high-octane advocacy  
**A sponsor is a senior leader who, at a minimum:**

- Believes in me and goes out on a limb on my behalf
- Advocates for my next promotion
- Provides "air cover" so I can take risks

**And comes through on at least two of the following fronts:**

- Expands my perception of what I can do
- Makes connections to senior leaders
- Promotes my visibility
- Provides stretch opportunities
- Gives advice on "presentation of self"
- Makes connections to clients/customers
- Gives honest/critical feedback on skill gaps

What protégés do, in a word, is *deliver*.

To position themselves for the top job, protégés must therefore contribute something the leader prizes but may intrinsically lack: gender smarts or cultural fluency on a team that lacks diversity...

Just as your sponsor is someone who supports you when you're not in the room, so too much you protect him or her from employee gossip, from harsh outsiders opinion, even from collegial criticisms. "Who do you want in your bunker?" an African-American executive at Johnson & Johnson asked me in an interview, "a loyal comrade-in-arms who, if you turn your back, guns for you, not at you."

What this means is that the nature of your support relationships is *up to you*. If you're a high-potential or strong performer, you'll attract the interest of your superiors, but whether that interest translates into mentorship or sponsorship is a function of your investment. You might be tapped for development, but you're not going to be given a ride on the coattails of anyone who doesn't see you pulling your weight (and then some). Mentors may pick you, but *you* pick your sponsors by committing yourself to their best interests.

Just how important protégés are to their sponsors was made clear in a conversation I had with a Fortune 100 CEO. He told me that when he does that final interview with an executive at his company who is being considered for a promotion to the C-suite, he asks the all-important questions: "How many people do you have in your pocket?" What he means by this, he explains, "How many talented young people have you sponsored over the years—people who now hold key positions in this company—so that if I asked you to do something impossible next week that involved liaising across seven geographies and five functions, you could pull it off? How many leaders out there "owe you one," think you're wonderful, and would give you huge priority to your project?" Fundamentally, he told me, "I'm not interested in anyone who doesn't have deep pockets."

So have that bench strength and you will go far, as far as you make clear you want to go (you need a destination

in mind, as discussed in part II). Don't wait to be tapped for special projects or asked to assume a leadership role. Act like a leader, and leaders will take you under their wings. Show vision, and visionaries will invite you to do more of it.

## Part 2: Road Map for Protégés

Do you have a vision for yourself? A clear picture of your career destination? Do you know what success—your success—will look and feel like? Executive coach Gail Blanke suggests that anyone contemplating an arduous undertaking remember Walt Disney's advice to executives planning the Magic Kingdom: *build the castle first*. Back in 1971 when he was spearheading that first theme park, he understood that everyone involved in achieving his—from the Madison Avenue ad men selling it to the guys hacking their way through the mosquito-infested Florida swamp—needed literally to see the majesty and the beauty of this vision, lest they forget what they were working toward. So the first thing to rear up out of the Orlando swamp was, in fact, Disney's castle, which, with its fluttering flags and soaring gilded turrets, was the very embodiment of the magic he intended to make. It worked wonders, lifting morale, enhancing performance. As Blanke observes, “nothing really big, really bold, or really beautiful was ever created in a country, in a company, in a family, or in a life without vision—a vision so powerful that people will work miracles to bring it to life.”

Once you've honed in on a would-be sponsor, do not ask for sponsorship. Rather, show what makes you worth sponsoring or describe what you can bring to their team or project.

When scanning your horizon for would-be sponsors (yes, you'll need more than one), bear in mind that the best candidates are very likely not going to be people with whom you'd want to share your innermost secrets. They may not even be leaders you hugely admire. Rather, the best candidates are people in a position to get you where you're keen on going—people inside or outside your company who have clout in the circle you aspire to join or influence in the community you're eager to embrace.

Our data and our interviews show that many high-potential women make the mistake of aligning themselves with role models rather than powerfully positioned sponsors.

Would-be sponsors in large organizations are ideally two levels above you, with line of sight into your performance and your career.

Building your portfolio of sponsors means increasing the number of arenas in which you play a leadership role. Your job isn't a big enough stage to put you on the radar of powerful individuals outside your team, department, or division. If you work for a large company, as many of our focus group participants do, volunteer for formal mentoring program as a mentor, because a conspicuous role in any leadership development program invariably makes you visible to a wide range of high-level managers across divisions. Consider taking a leading role in an employee network or affinity group. If you're not already participating, here's a perfect example of why to get involved.

What sponsors are looking for, above all, in a protégé is someone who will deliver standout performance and be loyal and reliable.

Get the word out on your success. Since it can be difficult to brag about yourself, work with peers to sing each other's praises. A vice president at Merrill Lynch describes how she and three other women, all up-and-coming leaders but in different divisions of the firm, met monthly for lunch to update each other on their projects and accomplishments. The idea was to be ready to talk positively about each other, should an occasion arise.

Her boss, a West Point graduate, has worked with her to break a pattern she's repeated her entire career: what she calls “permanent lieutenant syndrome.”...In CTI's data set, permanent lieutenant syndrome turns out to be frighteningly typical...unless you have decades to spare, you'll need a different strategy. You'll need to differentiate yourself, not to win sponsorship, necessarily, but absolutely to leverage it to your own ends. You'll need to identify, develop, and

deploy a personal brand. Or you'll wind up fulfilling your sponsor's ambitions instead of your own.

"Next time," he urged, "just say yes. You can save the caveats for when you've gotten the job."

It bears repeating: just say yes. Hold back on sharing your reservations until you're in a position to negotiate.

When they throw a stretch assignment or a fear-inducing opportunity at you, they want to gauge your attitude, a critical component of the loyalty they value so highly, and not your ability, which they've already assessed. CTI research shows that 57% of sponsors value a can-do attitude in their protégés; 44% agreed that protégés should deliver 110%. Yet among protégés, only 32% say they "lead with a yes." A great many women, and at least some men, inadvertently dim their prospects for advancement or opportunity by failing to demonstrate their commitment first, their reservations later.

### Part 3: Pitfalls and Trip Wires

Minority professors who have sponsors are 65% more likely to feel satisfied with their rate of advancement.

Katherine Phillips – Paul Caello Professor of Leadership and Ethics at Columbia Business School, has women numerous awards for her insights into leadership development and team management

"That was one tough discussion," Hui Zhong laughs, recollecting that her initial reaction was to feel like a total failure. But in hindsight, she sees that counsel from her sponsor as a defining moment in her career. "Now I step up and say 'Okay, we're not going to talk about this anymore. Here's the decision I've come to, and here's why.' It could be the wrong decision. I've made those, every leader has. But at least you're making it. And *that*," she adds, "is what marks you as someone others will follow."

Whether you work on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley, how you act (gravitas), how you speak (communication), and how you look (appearance) count for a lot in determining your leadership presence.

While all three pillars contribute to EP, they don't contribute equally. Gravitas provides the real heft, according to 67% of the 268 senior executives we surveyed, more salient than either communication (28%) or appearance (5%).

The most important of these, we discovered, is the first. "Grace under fire." This amounts to keeping your cool no matter how much heat you're subjected to...exuding confidence is something any good actor can manage, but projecting credibility as well as confidence as you're riding out a crisis is truly the mark of a leader...

- When you know you're right, stick to your guns
- Show your teeth – assure others that you mean business
- Assert your integrity – you can afford to make a few mistakes, provided you acknowledge you erred, publicly—and provided you put them right

### Epilogue

Today as the founding president of the Center for Talent Innovation and chair of the Task Force for Talent Innovation, I (the author) lead a private-sector consortium of some seventy-five global companies committed to changing the face of leadership around the world.