

Law firm sponsorship programs are becoming a hot item. It has long been known that having a sponsor is critical for career advancement, but recently published research has found that women receive less sponsorship than men do.¹ As a result, their careers and compensation lag behind those of men. Firms that are concerned about retaining and advancing women are trying to make sponsorship more available to them. Toward that end, some firms are instituting sponsorship programs that pair up women (and in some firms, minority lawyers) with influential partners who agree to serve as their sponsors. Most of these programs are in the early stages, so it is premature to measure their impact. What is clear, however, is that these programs face considerable obstacles and must therefore be very carefully planned and managed.

The special nature of sponsorship

Sponsorship is a highly beneficial form of mentoring. While mentors perform a wide variety of functions, sponsorship is a strategic relationship that requires more active involvement and greater risk than ordinary mentoring. Sponsors personally invest in a lawyer's success; they may consider her a protégée in the old fashioned sense of the word. They praise her to partners and clients, back her for high visibility work assignments, include her in business development events, direct business to her, invite her into powerful networks, see that she gets credit and better pay, and generally use their political influence and social capital to help her succeed. This is risky business. People with power wield it carefully. They will go out on a limb to champion someone only if they trust that person to excel in and make the most of the opportunities presented. Turning a client over to someone or supporting someone for an important committee leadership position means putting one's own practice and credibility on the line. There can be serious repercussions if the person you sponsor fails to perform.

Because sponsorship is more of a high-stakes relationship than mentoring, its importance becomes more pronounced for senior associates and junior partners. Powerful partners will have little interest in sponsoring anyone who is not considered a top performer with a highly promising future. Senior associates have a track record that can be judged and they have earned a reputation as a star or an average performer. Junior partners have proven themselves by making it into the partnership. But even in those cases, a potential sponsor must believe that their investment will pay off.

Another important distinction between "basic" mentoring and sponsorship is that mentors just need more knowledge and experience than the mentee, while sponsors necessarily have power to make good things happen for the protégée. Sponsors are decision-makers or have access to those who make key decisions about work assignments, client relationships, leadership roles, compensation, and career-enhancing opportunities. Most mentors can be helpful whether or not they have any exceptional influence in the firm or community. But for sponsors to make a significant difference in someone's career success they must have enough clout and connections to get her appointed or promoted, ensure she gets sufficient credit and compensation, or produce other kinds of positive career outcomes.

¹ Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carver and Christine Silva, "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2010; Nancy M. Carter, Ph.D., Christine Silva, "Mentoring: Necessary But Insufficient for Advancement," *Catalyst*, 2010

Sponsorship programs

Sponsorship programs in law firms tend to be similar to mentoring programs but with some important distinctions. They target a limited number of experienced women (and sometimes minority lawyers) who are top performers, and they specifically emphasize career advancement activities rather than educational, supportive or advisory aspects of mentoring. Sponsorship activities include creating challenging, high visibility opportunities for senior associates and/or junior partners in areas like work assignments, leadership posts, client relationships and business development.

Sponsorship programs in law firms are difficult to sustain. Some of the reasons include:

- Law firm partners are not rewarded or held accountable for talent development, retention or advancement. Without incentives or penalties, programs have to rely on assigned sponsors' good will and personal follow-through. Some sponsors will carry out their responsibilities, but many will not.
- It is hard to "assign" partners to serve as sponsors. Sponsorship in law firms occurs naturally but selectively, as partners find junior lawyers they respect, trust and rely on, or want to help succeed for specific personal or client-related reasons. Because of the special nature of this relationship, an assigned sponsor must be eager – not just willing - to accept the responsibility.
- Law firms are uncomfortable labeling lawyers or treating associates differently. Firms hire only lawyers who are considered "high potential." Over time, it becomes clear that some have greater ability and potential than others. But even firms that move to merit-based systems avoid openly differentiating among associates this way. Sponsorship programs necessarily require selectivity.
- Sponsorship programs cannot flourish in a competitive, eat-what-you-kill culture. They cannot succeed where partners are reluctant to champion anyone whose success might encroach on their own power, compensation or client relationships. Sponsorship requires a collaborative culture that views the success of every lawyer as a benefit for the entire firm.

In spite of such challenges, sponsorship programs can succeed in law firms if they are well planned and managed. Law firms that are considering such programs should keep the following points in mind:

- **Have a well-defined purpose and program objectives.** Set specific goals and explain how the sponsorship program will help you achieve them. The clearer and more specific you can be, the better.
- **Focus on power and purpose, not on gender.** In matching women with sponsors, what counts is what a woman's career goals are and which partner is in the best position and has enough influence in the right places to provide the most opportunities and support.
- **Have men take the lead.** Most sponsors in your program will be men, since they represent the vast majority of partners who fit the model of a sponsor. Men, beginning with the top firm leadership, must therefore give the program strong, genuine and visible support.
- **Build on pre-existing relationships.** Relationships will have a greater chance of success if the sponsor knows the person with whom they are matched and believes in her talent, ability and ambition. The more work and client matters the two have in common, the better. And the more familiar the sponsor is with the protégée's experience, prospects and career goals, the easier it is for the sponsor to advocate on her behalf.
- **Help sponsors face and fight unconscious bias.** Most partners already sponsor one or more lawyers informally. Most of their protégés are men. Sponsorship programs should encourage male partners to expand their sponsorship to women and show them how to do it. Teach them about unconscious bias and how to prevent it from interfering with their sponsorship of women.

- **Make it voluntary.** Sponsors must be enthusiastic about participating. The more they believe in the protégée, the more likely this will happen. Protégées must also participate willingly. Some may resist; they will be reluctant to be involved with programs that are perceived as remedial, reverse discrimination, or undermining meritocracy.
- **Focus on action.** Sponsorship is more than talking or advising; it involves creating career opportunities. Protégées and sponsors should have very clear goals in their work together. If they intend to focus on expanding or deepening the protégée's client relationships, they should identify which clients they will target and the specific steps each of them will take toward that goal.
- **Provide ongoing oversight.** Like any kind of program that asks people to do more than they normally would, a sponsorship program will fail if participants are not reminded and supported as they go along.

Alternatives to sponsorship programs

Formal sponsorship programs are not the only way to make career champions available to women. Another approach is to expand partners' consciousness of the importance of sponsorship for women and give them tools and incentives to sponsor women. Sponsorship can be integrated into leadership, diversity or women's initiatives. These initiatives can arm women with the mindset, tools and opportunities to find their own sponsors, and they can take steps to ensure that partners buy into the business case for sponsoring women and actively include women in the networking, business development, and leadership activities that are markers of sponsorship. But in order for any approach to show positive results in terms of retention and career advancement of women, the firm – and especially the men who run it - must fully and heartily embrace those broader initiatives, not just in words but in action.

*This article is reprinted from Management Solutions, Issue 34, Fall 2012,
<http://www.idaabbott.com/publications/newsletter>*