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Leadership Experts Weigh In: Why Women Leaders Need A Mentor And A Sponsor

Once you know you need a mentor and a sponsor, you can form those relationships and take advantage of all they have to offer.



By [Joelle K. Jay@JoelleKJay](mailto:JoelleKJay)



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Getting mentors and sponsors who can help you sustain the confidence and momentum it takes to succeed and who can pave the way for future success is more than beneficial, it is necessary. In order to build strong mentoring and sponsoring relationships, we need to distinguish clearly between the two.

A mentor is a guide who offers you advice, helps you solve problems, provides a sounding board, and shares his or her years of experience to help you learn and grow. A sponsor is a powerfully positioned champion who advocates for you, opens the door to new opportunities, introduces you to the right people, increases your visibility, and makes the case for your advancement.

To simplify, mentoring is taking an interest in you and sponsorship is taking action for you.

In her research, Sylvia Ann Hewlett reveals that leaders are advised to have a mentor, but they need a sponsor. Sponsorship turns out to be crucial to all leaders. The trouble is, it is less accessible to women. Only 13 percent of full-time, female employees at large companies have sponsors compared to 46 percent of men.

A number of obstacles can prevent women from getting sponsorship. Some of these include: hesitancy to ask for help or showcase their talents, real or imagined boundaries across power relationships, the tendency to under-reach for promotions, and sometimes even fears about what others might think.

As a result, even women who do have a healthy network can end up over-mentored and under-sponsored. Do not let these obstacles stop you. Once you know you need a mentor and a sponsor, you can form those relationships and take advantage of all they have to offer. As an integral part of your network, your mentorships and sponsorships are deeper, more focused relationships that deserve special attention.

Mentorship gives you a distinct advantage. It shortens the learning curve, provides support in a challenging time, and offers a way to learn the nuances that lead to mastery in a skill- not to mention it can be the foundation for a lifelong relationship, often treasured on both sides. Women who take advantage of mentoring opportunities maintain their ambition and self-confidence in their careers.

In addition, people who are mentored "garner more promotions, higher salaries, and more career satisfaction and even report being less stressed than those who lack such guidance." Mentorships are invaluable because you can learn and grow with little risk. However, if you want to advance, you need a sponsor.

The sponsorship advantage gives women the chance to stretch beyond their own boundaries into opportunities they may not have had otherwise. When women have a strong sponsor, the likelihood that they will seek other ways of advancing their career, such as a stretch assignment or a raise, goes

up 8 percent-- a small but significant impact. In addition, men and women with sponsors are most satisfied with their career advancement. In this regard, they obtain a "sponsor effect" from 19 to 23 percent. The benefits are even more impressive for mothers, at 27 percent, and minorities, up to 65 percent.

When leaders have strong mentors and sponsors in place, they feel supported and championed. Women in leadership must educate themselves about the benefits of mentors and sponsors, fill those roles, and cultivate and leverage the relationships. When you do, you will be surrounded by opportunities where you can add value and gain benefits in returns.

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Dr. Joelle Jay is a principal with the Leadership Research Institute, as well as an executive coach, keynote speaker, and the author of *The Inner Edge: The Ten Practices of Personal Leadership*. Joelle specializes in the advancement of executive women, and she is proud to have supported the development of top talent into positions of leadership for many successful companies, including MetLife, Adobe, and Microsoft.