

PUBLICATION

Baker's Dozen – How to Get Serious About Sponsoring Women

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It remains unfortunate – but true – that men hold a disproportionately large percentage of the power positions in the world, "meaning there are not enough powerful women sponsors available yet to sponsor all of the ambitious deserving women," according to Ida Abbott, researcher and author of *Sponsoring Women – What Men Need to Know*. How can this statistic change? Abbott stresses that companies that are serious about growing top female talent must encourage direct, personal involvement by its male leaders to act with determination in ensuring women have the same career-elevating experiences and opportunities that men have.

While mentoring programs remain an important component of most companies' training and development programming, Yuliya Laroe noted in her article "Why Women Lawyers Need Sponsors, Not Just Mentors" "that a mentor can only take you so far." Mentors focus on development, not advancement, typically. To achieve measurable progress in developing a sustainable pipeline of women leaders, a firm must be intentional in challenging and equipping its existing leadership to undertake individualized sponsor relationships and "serve as a catalyst for cultural transformation," according to Abbott. In their book *The CEO Next Door*, Elena Bothelho and Kim Powell note that there are steps that women proactively can take to identify a sponsor and help grow that relationship.

What is Sponsorship?

According to Laroe, a sponsor is "someone who uses chips on his or her protégé's behalf and advocates for his or her next promotion." Laroe asserts that a "brick wall/glass ceiling/iron curtain" exists "when it comes to senior leadership and management positions." Laroe also notes that a sponsor is a "champion who promotes you and your talents at the partnership or management level." An active sponsor intentionally focuses on building a vibrant relationship with their younger colleague, gaining knowledge, and understanding of the protégé's passions, interests, and talents. Then, the sponsor is in the position to identify opportunities and advocate for their colleague, including (i) expanding the perceptions of what their protégé can do, (ii) making connections to senior leaders, (iii) promoting his or her visibility, (iv) opening up career opportunities, (v) offering advice on executive presence, (vi) making connections outside the company, and (vii) giving career advice.

Laroe believes that an ideal sponsor is your "person on the inside...someone who will not just vote in your favor, but will also make the affirmative effort to convince their partners to do the same." A sponsor offers guidance on career decisions, strategic choices, and access to clients and senior leaders. Bothelho and Powell note that support from an influential sponsor can accelerate a woman's path within an organization, as sponsors "take action, provide valuable access and effectively lend you their credibility." Companies need to take the serious action to step up and build sponsorship into its fabric, including management measurement, review, and compensation.

What Male Leaders Can Do to Sponsor Women

Even when women try to get ahead using the same career advancement strategies as men and do "all the right things," they earn less and progress more slowly than men," said Abbott. This disparity is traced back to the phenomenon of men getting sponsored at rates that far surpass women. Once sponsors are identified as what Abbott calls "powerful backers who identify high performers and actively champion their advancement," it becomes easier to fathom that a sponsor could make all the difference in a career. While firms have a corporate responsibility to nurture diversity programs and initiatives, male leaders have a very personal responsibility to change the ingrained norms and "serve as catalysts for cultural transformation" by pushing for gender balance and investing in the sponsorship of women.

Male leaders can intentionally and effectively sponsor women following several practical suggestions in *Sponsoring Women*, including:

- Clarifying the purpose and goals of the relationship;
- Developing an individualized strategy;
- Explaining how to get ahead – including the unwritten rules;
- Priming her for leadership;
- Inviting her to important networks;
- Encouraging her to stretch; and
- Focusing on opportunities to showcase her strengths.

A starting point for every male leader is to read Abbott's book and determine how best to apply it. The suggestions given in the book are a helpful roadmap for charting a course for a sponsoring relationship. But, at the core, each sponsorship relationship will be its own individualized experiment.

As further guidance for what leaders can do to help advance women in their respective groups or teams, Baker Donelson leaders provided the following practical ways they advocate and support the women in their groups:

1. I have found that having a 15-minute recurring mid-week calendar appointment for an in-office "coffee break" with a female protégé provides a tangible reminder to check in, chart progress, and strategize.
2. Be consciously aware of distributing opportunities that come across your desk equally. As an example, when I was approached about speaking at a regional seminar, I was able to turn one speaking engagement into two presentations, both led by women lawyers. I also enlisted a female associate to assist with preparation for the presentation to help her with credentialing.
3. I spend time teaching the women in my group the business and administrative side of our Firm and practice group. This included how to figure a margin; what to look at when considering alternative fees; what metrics must be calculated to manage a practice; and the management organization of our Firm.
4. I identify a woman for any leadership role that comes up in the group, whether it is client-related, firm-related, or some other initiative. I want Baker Donelson to be a leader in having more women in leadership positions. By creating a pathway to leadership, when future opportunities arise, there will be multiple women with leadership experience to step in.
5. I identify networking organizations, such as bar associations, inns of court, and bank and accounting firm events, for women associates to join, and then accompanied them to the initial meeting to encourage them to participate actively in the organization.
6. I schedule lunch every month with all the women associates and of counsel in our office to get to know one another better.
7. I proactively promote women within my practice group, including asking women to lead training programs, making the Women's Initiative an agenda item during retreats, and identifying women who could be a potential leader as my successor and providing them leadership opportunities and training.

8. I sponsor a woman associate in my practice group, including proactive work on her advancement towards shareholder and in her career. In addition, I identified a woman associate in my office, who is not in my practice group, to sponsor, and to help her progress and understand how to succeed within the Firm.
9. I recommend women associates for participation in leadership opportunities in the community and Firm.
10. I created a sponsor relationship with a young woman in another office, and I have a monthly call to discuss on what's going on in our offices, practices, and in life generally.
11. When we have women returning from maternity leave in our practice group, I contact all the partners with whom she has worked to make sure they know the date she is returning and affirmatively make sure that there is sufficient work lined up so that she can hit the ground running the day she steps back into the office.
12. I met with our female shareholders and asked them to help me recruit the top women lawyers in town. As a result, we have recruited a number of outstanding women in the last few years.
13. We actively promote our women in the community by nominating them for awards. A number of our female lawyers have been recognized as "Best of the Bar" and "Women of Influence."

What Women Can Do to Build a Sponsor Relationship?

Commentators also suggest that there are multiple actions that women seeking a sponsor relationship can take to initiate the process. In their book, Bothelho and Powell describe four behaviors that transform ordinary people into world-class leaders, and outline specific steps that women can take to help "build your tribe."

First and foremost, great performances create sponsorships. Laroe notes that it is important to develop quality relationships with a potential sponsor. Quality relationships begin when you identify one or more key partners within the firm (and not just in your home office) and look for opportunities to connect with those identified. Key opportunities include working with the potential sponsor on a matter, or getting involved in a volunteer organization in which they are involved. If they are involved in a firm initiative, see how you can help them succeed in their efforts. The bottom line is that "before someone decides to take you on as a protégé (meaning be willing to put their reputation on the line for you) they need to know you and trust you."

In addition to doing great work, Bothelho and Powell stress some specific tactics to get noticed and cultivate sponsorships:

- **Share your aspirations.** Rather than share problems or issues, talk about your aspirations. This "creates positive energy and demonstrates that your goals are aligned with the business's and the sponsor's objectives."
- **Ask for advice.** If you want to get someone to feel invested in your success, "give her easy opportunities to contribute to it." Advice is a powerful sponsor-building approach. Later, follow up with the sponsor to know how the situation played out and how their advice helped you.
- **Make clear and specific requests** that are easy for your sponsor to fulfill. One example is asking a senior partner to bring you along on a client visit.
- **Provide sincere gratitude to your sponsor.** It is important to "acknowledge anything they did that helped you – no matter how small." Thank them for advice regarding an opportunity they provided and share how it made a difference.
- When you ask for a sponsor's help, **"don't drop the ball."** Make sure to follow through. Take the ball and run with it.
- **"Bring rare goods."** The authors make the point that one way to "break into closed networks and attract sponsorship is to offer new, needed skills." Invest in building valuable expertise and become known as an expert.

Leaders must get more serious about sponsorship if they want to move their company forward and out-perform competitors. This will only happen if senior leaders, and in particular male senior leaders, become intentional about sponsoring a protégé. It will take time, effort, and serious commitment, but it will be among the most rewarding actions you take. You will get better as a firm with increased, diverse viewpoints among senior leadership. What's more, if you are a rising woman, there are steps described above that you can take to increase your leadership skills, access, and long-term success. Importantly, we must all take action now to build a better tomorrow.