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Should Your Organization Consider a Sponsorship Program?

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Should your organization consider a sponsorship program? Absolutely!

An important aspect of an organization's ability to attract and retain engaged and committed employees is how the organization brings out the best in its talent. While mentors play an important role in developing talent, sponsors are a key ingredient that should not be overlooked. What is the difference between a mentor and a sponsor, why should you consider a sponsorship program, and what are some initial steps you should take to start a sponsorship program? Let's explore these questions further.

Differences Between a Mentor and Sponsor

Generally, a mentor is someone who provides support, advice, and guidance to another person (the mentee). A mentor helps their mentee develop a career vision, advises them on how to tackle issues and concerns they may face, and counsels them on how to increase their visibility within an organization. As a result, mentors are often viewed as people with more experience within the organization who teach and advise people who are less experienced or newer to the organization. However, there are reverse mentorship opportunities where, regardless of seniority, individuals work together to learn from each other.

In contrast, a sponsor is someone in a position of power and leadership within the organization who actively advocates publicly and privately on behalf of another person (a protégé) and uses their reputation and position to impact the protégé's career trajectory. The sponsor opens doors for the protégé and connects them with influential people that can result in tremendous growth opportunities for the protégé. Consequently, the protégé is usually someone who has demonstrated high potential and a desire to climb the ranks of the organization. The sponsor gains knowledge and understanding of the protégé's passions, goals, and talents to identify opportunities to advocate on the protégé's behalf.

Advantages of a Sponsorship Program in Your Organization

There are several advantages of having a sponsorship program. Here are just a few:

- 1. Reduce Attrition.** An inability to see a path to success or opportunities for leadership and development within an organization is one key reason individuals from underrepresented groups leave. A well-executed sponsorship program pairs sponsors with protégés to provide the protégé with tangible opportunities for growth and advancement within the organization. The sponsor advocates for the protégé within and outside the organization and opens the door to career growth opportunities the protégé may not otherwise have. This leads to more engagement and higher retention.
- 2. Increase Representation in Leadership.** A sponsorship program not only intentionally pairs top leaders with individuals from underrepresented groups to help foster relationships, but it can also create a pipeline of employees from underrepresented groups for future executive leadership positions. This increases representation and diversity within the leadership ranks of the organization.

3. Enhance Recruiting. A thoughtful and well-executed sponsorship program can attract diverse talent. An organization that shows it is intentional about creating pathways to success for its people, especially people of color and those from underrepresented groups, can often reach talent that other organizations cannot.

Best Practices When Starting a Sponsorship Program

There is no "one size fits all" model when developing a sponsorship program because it has to be tailored to your organizational culture and priorities. Still, here are best practices to consider when creating a sponsorship program:

1. Define the Program. Your organization should understand its "why" and the reasons a sponsorship program is important for your company. The explanation should include the scope, objectives, and goals of the program, who the participants will be, how a sponsor and protégé will be matched, expectations for each participant, and how to measure success.

2. Train. Train sponsors so they have the tools they need to succeed. In addition, ensure sponsors and protégés both understand the expectations of the program and their roles.

3. Track Progress. Develop a method to track progress and evaluate whether the objectives and goals of the program are being fulfilled.

4. Label it as a Pilot Program. Communicate the first iteration of your sponsorship program as a "pilot program." This designation allows the organization an opportunity to make mistakes, obtain feedback, and reevaluate what works and what does not work since people generally appreciate that a pilot program is akin to a test run before a full program is launched.

A sponsorship program can be a game changer for underrepresented groups within your organization. Evaluate how such a program can help your company create a more diverse and inclusive culture and go for it. You can learn more about sponsorship programs in this [recent episode](#) of Baker Donelson's D&I Podcast, *Diversity Ever After*, as Nakimuli Davis Primer, a shareholder in our Jackson, Mississippi office, discusses sponsorship with Paula Edgar, chief executive officer of PGE Consulting Group, LLC.