

SPONSORSHIP DEMYSTIFIED: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Grow It

by Nan E. Joesten

Retaining our high potentials, advancing diverse lawyers and thoughtful succession planning are among the many things we all think about (or lose sleep over) on a regular basis. Yes, strong informal or formal mentoring relationships play an important role in how we achieve these goals, but they may be only part of the solution. By truly understanding the difference between mentors and sponsors and, importantly, why sponsorship matters, we can really take the reins on some of these issues. It's not an easy path, but it's the right one. What's easy in our profession anyway? — Lani Walser, Bingham McCutchen LLP

Too often professional development teams focus their attention on programs and individual interventions designed to help attorneys who are struggling at the firm. Yet the long-term success of the organization depends instead on retaining and advancing your star performers, and regrettable attrition — the attorneys who leave long before you wanted them to, if you ever did — is the worst kind of loss. Mentoring programs can help people learn the ropes and become comfortable in a position, but sponsorship is what matters for moving people up through the firm. To help your organization succeed, you must learn the difference between mentors and sponsors, why sponsors matter, and most of all, how you can plant seeds that will grow a culture of sponsorship in your organization.

Sponsorship Is Predicated On Power and Advocacy

Sponsors are by definition senior attorneys with clout who will go to bat to advance a protégé's career. While mentors might also be able to serve as sponsors, mentors are typically not as senior in the firm, and are more of a sounding board and source of day-to-day advice. Often senior associates or junior partners, mentors usually aren't in the room

when key discussions take place around who ought to be positioned to advance in the partnership, or become the next practice group head or join the firm's executive committee. That territory is the privy of sponsors, and they are the people who can expand the perception of their protégé's abilities, smooth out any rough patches where an attorney might have stumbled, and use their chips to get a protégé placed in a key position.

What's In It For the Sponsor?

Sponsorship is a quid pro quo. Unlike a mentorship, where the mentor may or may not benefit from the experience of mentoring, a sponsor's efforts on behalf of someone more junior in the organization result in a talented, loyal protégé. This is true in part because the sponsor isn't going to bat for a random new associate or partner, but someone who has already proven themselves. Senior partners won't (or at least shouldn't) risk their own reputation to advance the career of an unproven or mediocre attorney. And because the protégés have demonstrated their ability, the sponsor's efforts should be rewarded with a loyal attorney, working their way up through the firm, willing to step in and take care of whatever particular problems that partner might have. In explaining the unique relationship between a sponsor and protégé, a rising star once described it thusly: "I told my sponsor I didn't want to take the assignment that she asked me to consider, and she explained why she wanted me to do it, and said 'I'll now ask you one more time, but there won't be a third opportunity.' I got the message. Don't tell your sponsor 'no' if you can possibly help it." Sponsors reap the benefits of having protégés positioned throughout the firm, particularly when it comes to succession planning.

The Controversy Is Overstated

To the extent the concept of sponsors in the law firm setting is problematic, it is because not every attorney will

have a sponsor since the opportunity to be a protégé is limited to the strongest candidates for advancement. Yet that is no different than the experience of people in organizations everywhere, irrespective of the business structure, and most partners would acknowledge privately that they already have favorites based on their early experiences or perceptions about individual lawyers. How willing someone is to act as a sponsor depends in part on their understanding of both the role and the value of sponsorship, which is how professional development teams can make a difference.

Help Attorneys Become Sought-After Protégés

One way to tamp down any dissension about the notion that sponsorship encourages a mentality of "winners and losers" is to help attorneys understand how they can make themselves into a protégé worthy of sponsorship. The attorney must first know what she wants, which is another reason why junior lawyers are not appropriate for sponsorship. It takes time and experience to develop career goals beyond demonstrating the early competencies of lawyering. Deciding to shoot for becoming a partner, or a member of a firm's executive team, or practice group leader, is a significant commitment that should not be undertaken lightly.

Along the way, a would-be protégé candidate should be creating as meaningful a network as possible, both in and out of the firm. Attracting a sponsor is in part about who you know, and not just what you know, and attorneys who sit on the sidelines expecting a sponsor to magically appear and start waving a wand are sadly mistaken. Network building occurs naturally as lawyers find ways to contribute through local bar projects, pro bono representations, or leadership roles in the plethora of nonprofits eager for attorney volunteers.

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Law Firms Need to Take Care of Their Talent

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studies make clear that Millennials are driven by meaning. They thrive on training and development opportunities, as well as workplace flexibility. Compensation is rarely one of their top three motivators, but many firms believe the myth that Millennials are primarily driven by money. Successful firms of the future will not be fooled. They will maintain a young talent pool by better aligning their incentives with what the Millenni-

als seek in the workplace.

Clients also have a role to play. Clients should care about how their law firms operate because it directly affects the efficiency and costs of client service. Most law firm compensation models reward lawyers for high billable hours and new business acquisition. Outstanding client service, however, requires lawyers who are rewarded for efficiency. Effective mentoring, training

and ensuring that clients receive advice from diverse perspectives should trump the old image of service success. Clients should also pay attention to how credit for their matters is distributed, including who benefits after a partner retires from the “inheritance” of billing credits for the client’s ongoing work. Clients should seek a voice in how their law firms transition their work. When people are your product, your business principles must be singularly focused on talent management. If law firms want to prosper from defining themselves in business terms, they must also commit to stable and sustainable business practices when it comes to managing and developing an engaged workforce.

It is a business imperative that law firms put in place the talent management structures needed to ensure a sustainable future. These are tasks that require more leadership — and more than a few hours a week devoted to management functions.

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Building credibility in the community is another way of becoming visible to potential sponsors, and makes it easier for the attorney to build relationships inside the firm with partners who may eventually be willing to serve as a sponsor. Finally, attorneys who want sponsors should ask! Many senior partners want to be helpful, but can’t know how they can help until someone tells them. Facilitating these conversations is another way the professional development team can help facilitate sponsorship in a law firm.

how they can help, giving constructive, candid feedback, and encouraging the protégé to apply their strengths to new challenges as opportunities arise. And of course, advocating for their protégé in those important conversations that lead to decisions on advancement, staffing, and firm leaders.

As more partners see the benefits of sponsorship in improving retention, expanding loyalty within the firm, and creating stable succession planning, attorneys will become more strategic in positioning themselves to become sought-after protégés, and in turn, attract the sponsors critical to their success. For a professional development team, then, the carefully planted seeds of sponsorship can create a powerful new tool to accelerate the growth and success of your attorneys, and you by association. What are you waiting for?

Encourage Sponsorship In Law Firms

Developing a culture of sponsorship in a firm requires neither the launch of a new “program,” or time-intensive attorney training. First, identify potential protégés who want to advance but are in danger of being overlooked, as often happens for women and diverse attorneys outside the majority white male group that typically wields the power in corporate law firms. Consider the partners that might be good sponsors to a would-be protégé, and invite the most promising of them to talk informally over coffee or lunch about sponsorship. Explain the concept, answer their questions, and address their concerns. Once open to the idea, coach them on how to be an effective sponsor — by being intentional, asking the protégé

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