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# **Don't Just Mentor Women and People of Color. Sponsor Them.**

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**Summary.** Understanding the difference between sponsorship and mentorship is key to ensuring that women and members of historically marginalized communities (HMCs) are fully supported in their careers. Mentorship involves direct support of a

protégé, while sponsorship focuses on others' impressions of that person. The author presents a four-step framework for being intentional in identifying opportunities for sponsorship and using social connections to lift up those who might otherwise go unnoticed. Sponsorship alone isn't enough to address the deep-seated challenges associated with systemic racism, but it is a personal action that all of us can take to help make the world a more equitable place. [close](#)

Mike Smith, president and COO of Stitch Fix, has long been committed to recruiting and developing a diverse workforce. His impetus for doing so came from his mentor, Ken Coleman, chairman of EIS Group, Inc. and a Silicon Valley veteran, who told him, “Be successful, hire, mentor, and sponsor those people of color that come behind you.”

Although Coleman's words of advice, given from one Black executive to another, were offered pre-pandemic, they've taken on a new urgency in the wake of a national reckoning over racial inequity following George Floyd's and countless others' murders. One of the most common recommendations on how to be a better ally to members of historically marginalized communities (HMCs) is to sponsor them.

But what is sponsorship, exactly? Many define it as spending one's social capital or using one's influence to advocate for a protégé. This definition seems intuitive at first glance, but if you ask people to unpack what that actually means in terms of concrete behaviors, most struggle to do so. Many leaders believe that they're sponsoring someone when, in fact, they're providing mentorship. Mentoring is important, too. But the confusion between sponsorship and mentorship is dangerous — an inability to differentiate between the two makes it more likely that leaders will believe they're supporting their HMC workers to their fullest extent when they're actually only giving one form of support.

To clarify what sponsorship is and how it's different from mentorship, I zero in on a key word: influence.

## Sponsorship vs. mentorship

Sponsorship can be understood as a form of intermediated impression management, where sponsors act as brand managers and publicists for their protégés. This work involves the management of *others'* views on the sponsored employee. Thus, the relationship at the heart of sponsorship is not between protégés and sponsors, as is often thought, but between sponsors and an audience — the people they mean to sway to the side of their protégés.

Whereas mentorship focuses on help that a mentor can provide directly, such as guidance, advice, feedback on skills, and coaching, sponsorship entails externally facing support, such as advocacy, visibility, promotion, and connections. Seeing sponsorship as a three-way relationship between sponsors, protégés, and an audience clarifies the difference between it and mentorship.

## The ABCDs of sponsorship

Understanding sponsorship in this way, we can identify specific, concrete behaviors for sponsors to use to lift up others. Here, I take tactics that are typically studied as forms of impression management and translate them into their sponsorship equivalents.

**Amplifying.** Amplifying is the sponsorship equivalent of self-promotion.

When sponsors amplify, they share protégés' accomplishments with others in a bid to create or increase an audience's positive impressions of them.

Consider the story of Sal Khan, the founder of the education site Khan Academy. Khan Academy was struggling to make ends meet until Bill Gates used an interview to declare that it had the potential to change the world. After this unsolicited endorsement, Khan was inundated with funding offers from Google and Microsoft, among others. Note that sponsorship doesn't require a close relationship with the protégé. Bill Gates didn't know Sal Khan personally, but he believed in his product.

To advance in our careers, we need others to know about our achievements and accomplishments. But most people don't like braggarts. When a sponsor trumpets a protégés' achievements, they sidestep the self-promotion and its potential downsides. This is particularly important for women since female stereotypes dictate that they be self-effacing and humble.

**Boosting.** Boosting is the sponsorship equivalent of self-assurance. When people put themselves forward for consideration for a position or opportunity, they're in effect making promises about their future performance. But most of us know that people are motivated to make themselves look good in these situations and may not present an accurate view of their own capabilities. These claims, then, may not hold as much weight as when they're made by a third party who presumably has a more objective opinion on how the protégé will actually perform. Here's where boosting comes into play: When sponsors boost their protégés, they stake some portion of their own reputation on an implicit guarantee about the protégé's future success. They underwrite it.

If you've received a letter of recommendation from a teacher or benefited from a referral made by a friend, you've experienced boosting. Boosting is a particularly important form of sponsorship for women and members of HMCs. Due to biases in how quality is evaluated, many of them receive lower performance ratings and are given lower-quality feedback, making it even more difficult for them to improve and advance. Given their relative lack of representation in many white and male-dominated industries, they are especially in need of sponsors who can lend them the legitimacy they need to be seen as worthy of investment.

**Connecting.** Connecting is the sponsorship equivalent of impression management through association — that is, claiming a relationship with a highly regarded individual or group so that some of the positive feeling others have toward them is transferred to the person claiming the association. This is often referred to as a “halo effect.”

When a high-status sponsor connects, they claim the association with the protégé, rather than the other way around. This enhances others' impression of the protégé because the sponsor has already been "vetted" by the community. Likewise, the protégé has passed the sponsor's standard for inclusion into their network. Connecting can also involve actively facilitating new relationships for protégés, giving them access to people that they wouldn't otherwise be able to meet.

For example, a sponsor might invite a protégé to an exclusive event or meeting in order to increase their visibility to important individuals who might prove instrumental to a future career. For example, when Annie Young-Scrivner, now the CEO of Godiva, worked at PepsiCo, she benefitted from the sponsorship of Indra Nooyi, then CEO, who would invite her to attend meetings in China that proved to be valuable learning and exposure experiences.

Connecting in combination with boosting is an even more formidable form of sponsorship. Take ClassPass's former CEO, Payal Kadakia, who met David Tisch through their mutual participation in TechStars, a startup accelerator in New York City. Tisch recognized that, as a young woman, Kadakia might have difficulties raising money through the traditional venture capital process. He therefore personally introduced her to angel investors, many of whom went on to seed her company with several million dollars.

**Defending.** Defending is the sponsorship equivalent of justifying or making personal excuses in an attempt to change others' perceptions of them from negative to positive. In the same way, when a sponsor defends, they address an audience who dislikes or dismisses the protégé and works to persuade them to change their opinion. Defending is quite possibly one of the most effective sponsorship tactics.

Indeed, it is critical for women and members of HMCs, again because of the often biased ways in which they're reviewed. As an example, Jerry MacCleary, the former CEO of Covestro LLC, found himself consistently defending female employees and employees of color in evaluation meetings because he saw that white male managers were often criticizing their interpersonal styles as too outspoken or confrontational. MacCleary countered with personal examples that directly contradicted the other managers' claims. In this way, under his guidance, Covestro dramatically increased the diversity in its leadership ranks; at the time of his retirement, five of 11 top positions were held by women and people of color.

Of the various forms of sponsorship, defending is the most costly for sponsors. Because it necessitates challenging the attitudes and beliefs of others, it can create conflicts between the sponsor and the audience, sometimes with material costs. For example, Kenneth Frazier, the retiring CEO of Merck, tells a story from when he was working for a law firm in Philadelphia. One of the firm's clients asked that he be removed from a case due to his race. But Frazier's senior partner took a stand to support him, telling the client, "You may take your business elsewhere, but we believe in him and we're not going to replace him."

### **Using sponsorship for social equity**

Most people have benefited from sponsorship in some form or another to advance in their professional lives. The recognition of its power leads many of us to focus on ensuring that we have sponsors who will amplify, boost, connect, or defend us. But if we're truly committed to social equity, we need to start thinking not only about how we can benefit from sponsorship but also how we can help others who need it. To do that, we must first contend with deciding whom to sponsor. Ask yourself: What are my criteria for sponsoring someone? Are they accurate measures of performance and talent, or am I using

a potentially problematic proxy for quality? Am I applying my criteria equitably across all the people I could sponsor? Are there people I see as high-performing who seem to be consistently flying under the radar?

Once you identify a protégé, you should then be attuned to opportunities for enacting sponsorship. If a protégé has an achievement to celebrate, amplify it to people who might be interested. Bragging on behalf of others is often seen as a positive social skill. If a boosting opportunity presents itself, name the protégé and advocate for them. Enhance the protégé's exposure by inviting them to a meeting or connecting them with important people. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, if others are inappropriately impugning a protégé, stand up and defend them.

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## Mapping the ABCDs of Sponsorship to Specific Behaviors and Goals

Examples of behaviors that fall under each sponsorship category and the intended goal of the sponsorship tactic.

<b>Sponsorship tactic</b>	<b>Example behavior(s)</b>	<b>Intended goal</b>
Amplify	Being aware of and talking up a protégé's accomplishments	Create or increase perceivers' positive impressions of the protégé
Boost	Formally nominating a protégé for specific opportunities; writing letters of recommendation, attesting to the protégé's future potential	Increase others' expectations of the protégé's potential and readiness for advancement

Connect	Introducing a protégé to high-status individuals; inviting a protégé to exclusive events or meetings	Create or enhance perceivers' positive impressions of the protégé; increase the protégé's visibility
Defend	Challenging others' negative perceptions of a protégé; providing an alternative explanation for poor performance; protecting a protégé from harmful exposure	Reverse or neutralize others' uncertainty or negative perceptions of the protégé

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Understanding the difference between sponsorship and mentorship is key to ensuring that women and members of HMCs are fully supported in their careers. Allies need to not only offer the emotional support of mentoring but also be intentional about identifying opportunities for sponsorship and using our social capital to lift up those who might otherwise go unnoticed. Sponsorship alone isn't enough to address the deep-seated challenges associated with systemic racism, but it is a personal action that all of us can take to help make the world a more equitable place.

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