



Rapid Evolution LLC

Sponsorship Demystified: What It Is, Why It Matters, And How To Grow It

Nan E. Joesten, Esq.

The long-term success of a business depends on retaining and advancing your star performers, and regrettable attrition – the high-potential leaders 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 a company. For organizations to succeed, you must learn the difference between mentors and sponsors, why sponsors matter, and most of all, how you can become a sought-after protégé or valuable sponsor.

Sponsorship Is Predicated On Power and Advocacy

Sponsors are by definition senior leaders 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 organization, and are more of a sounding board and source of day-to-day advice. Often more junior managers or team leaders, mentors usually aren't in the room when key discussions take place around who ought to be positioned to advance in to senior management, or become the next group head or join the 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 a leader 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 employee or director, but someone who has already proven themselves. Senior leaders won't (or at least shouldn't) risk their own reputation to advance the career of an unproven or mediocre employee. And because the protégés have demonstrated their ability, the sponsor's efforts should be rewarded with a loyal staffer, working their way up through the system, willing to step in and take care of whatever particular problems that sponsor 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 an organization, particularly when it comes to succession planning.



Rapid Evolution LLC

The Controversy Is Overstated

To the extent the concept of sponsors is problematic, it is because not every employee 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 reality for people everywhere, irrespective of business structure, and most senior leaders would acknowledge privately that they already have favorites based on their early experiences or perceptions about individual contributors. 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 programs can make a difference.

Help To Become A 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 everyone understand how they can make themselves into a protégé worthy of sponsorship. First, the employee must first know what she wants, which is another reason why newly-hired team members are rarely appropriate for sponsorship. It takes time and experience to develop career goals beyond demonstrating the early competencies of a position. Deciding to shoot for becoming a senior leader, or a member of the executive team, or group director, 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 organization. Attracting a sponsor is in part about who you know, and not just what you know, and people who sit on the sidelines expecting a sponsor to magically appear and start waving a wand are sadly mistaken. Network building occurs naturally as employees find ways to contribute through local leadership roles in the plethora of non-profits eager for talented volunteers. Building credibility in the community is another way of becoming visible to potential sponsors, and makes it easier for the protégé to build relationships inside the company with senior managers who may eventually be willing to serve as a sponsor. Finally, people who want sponsors should ask! Many executives want to be helpful, but can't know how they can help until someone tells them. Facilitating these conversations is another way a professional development team can help facilitate sponsorship in any organization.

Encourage Sponsorship

If you have responsibilities for professional development in your business, developing a culture of sponsorship requires neither the launch of a new “program,” nor time-intensive training. First, identify potential protégés who want to advance but are in danger of being overlooked, as often happens for women and diverse employees outside the majority white male group that has historically wielded



Rapid Evolution LLC

power. Consider the senior executives 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 in how to be an effective sponsor -- by being intentional, asking the protégé 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 leadership.

As more executives see the benefits of sponsorship in improving retention, expanding loyalty within the company, and creating stable succession planning, would-be contributors at all levels 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 employees, and you by association. What are you waiting for?

About the Author: NAN E. JOESTEN, Esq., is the founder of Rapid Evolution LLC, a consulting firm devoted to accelerating professional development. Nan spent ten years at Procter& Gamble as a manufacturing chemical engineer and brand manager, before going on to law school at the University of California, Berkeley. Nan was a partner in the intellectual property group at San Francisco's Farella, Braun + Martel LLP, and in addition to her litigation practice, she led the firm's Professional Development Committee, and was responsible for implementing mentoring circles to enhance the development of the firm's associates. Nan is a leader in the Litigation Section of the American Bar Association, where she co-chaired the Woman Advocate Committee, and most recently, the Section's Annual Meeting. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the Engineering Advisory Council at the University of Colorado's College of Engineering and Applied Science, and serves on the Board of Trustees of the University of Colorado Foundation. She is a Certified Executive Coach, and a frequent speaker and writer on professional development, leadership, and executive coaching.