



Mentoring and Sponsorship

MENTORING AND SPONSORSHIP: RIVALS OR BEDFELLOWS?

by Melissa Richardson and Prof David Clutterbuck

There is growing impatience across Australia with the slow pace of change in the advancement of women in business. Recently we have seen a surge in female Board appointments in large Australian listed companies, but this is proving difficult to sustain and is not replicated in the pipeline of senior executive women from which Board candidates tend to be drawn. Understandably, questions are being asked – what are we doing wrong? Why can't we make change happen faster? Is sponsorship what women need? Sylvia Ann Hewlett advocates for sponsors for women – “experienced senior leaders who take a personal interest in actively shepherding, coaching and promoting a protégé’s career” and who stick their necks out for their protégé’s promotion in a very public way¹. Yet there are some very real dangers with dyadic sponsorship relationships and sponsorship needs to be introduced carefully. It is certainly not a replacement for mentoring, as some would suggest.

WHAT IS SPONSORSHIP AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

In a sponsorship relationship, a more experienced, usually male executive, connects with someone more junior (the protégé) and actively works to help advance their career. When the relationship is inside an organisation, this may take the form of putting the protégé’s name forward for promotions and for project teams, with the sponsor introducing the protégé to important contacts and generally advocating for them.

When mentoring was introduced in a formal way in the US in the 1970s and 1980s, it was described as “overseeing the career of a young man” and advocacy was adopted as part of the sponsor’s role. However, after decades of research on mentoring in the US, where mentors take on an explicit advocacy and sponsorship role, we know that:

- ▶ Sponsorship mentors tend to create clones of themselves. There is a danger of the protégé becoming dependent on the sponsor.
- ▶ Sponsorship can undermine the position of the protégé’s line manager.
- ▶ Sponsorship heightens the power difference in the pairing and in cross-gender pairs this can reinforce gender inequality.
- ▶ There is increasing research into dysfunctional pairings which result in harassment, exploitation and sabotage². The potential for these outcomes is higher when there is a large power differential.
- ▶ Protégés tend not to reveal their vulnerabilities because they want to look good to a sponsorship mentor. This reduces the likelihood of psychosocial support within the relationship.

Mentoring and Sponsorship

- ▶ Sponsorship tends to work better when it occurs informally.

In Europe and Australia, where mentors work developmentally with mentees, rather than act as sponsors, some of these problems are naturally avoided. In developmental mentoring, both members of the dyad work hard to minimise the power differential and to create a climate of trust so that both parties can authentically discuss weaknesses as well as strengths, mistakes as well as triumphs. It is interesting to note that the US is moving towards the developmental model of mentoring, in recognition of some of the problems that arise when sponsorship enters into mentoring relationships.

WOULD THE SPONSORSHIP MODEL OF MENTORING WORK BETTER FOR WOMEN?

We don't believe so. We would prefer to see sponsorship separated from mentoring – an approach coming into increasing favour amongst multinational companies. Developmental mentoring can deliver many benefits whilst at the same time avoiding many of the pitfalls discussed above. So, how could sponsorship be introduced and what do we know about what works when it comes to mentoring women?

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO SPONSORSHIP

Many of the problems with sponsorship occur because the sponsorship is practised within a dyadic relationship. Both parties, and particularly the sponsor, require a high degree of emotional intelligence to make the relationship work. Standing up for someone who lacks status in a corporate environment involves risk for the sponsor and requires courage and sensitivity³.

If we think that sponsorship might have some benefits for women, perhaps a sensible approach is to de-individualise it. We recommend:

Group sponsorship. Each sponsor works with a group of women rather than in one-to-one relationships. This may reduce the likelihood of dysfunctionality, and in cross-gender pairings, meetings held in a group context could help avoid the nature of the relationship being mis-construed as somehow sexual in nature.

Sponsorship practiced collectively. For example, a group of senior leaders collectively take ownership of a program to get to know and sponsor a group of women. This has potential to increase the protégés' networks significantly more than when working in dyads.

Greater clarity about the distinction between the roles of mentor and sponsor. In terms of relationship longevity, from relatively short-term to relatively long-term, there are clear differences between coaching, mentoring and sponsorship. Mentoring focuses on helping mentees decide what they want from their lives and careers and planning how they will make that happen for themselves; sponsorship focuses on direct intervention to support the process – for example, through making sure there is a plan for exposing the employee to formative experiences and ensuring that line managers do not block their progress.

WHATEVER THE MODEL, OTHER ISSUES THAT CAN ARISE WITH SPONSORSHIP ARE:

- ▶ How is it decided which women can participate and benefit from sponsorship? There may be resentment amongst those that are excluded.
- ▶ How do we avoid the conclusion that a woman only made it to the top because a powerful man put her there?
- ▶ How can sponsorship processes be made so transparent that there can be no suggestion of exploitation or lack of equity of access?
- ▶ How can organisations support talent to identify itself, rather than wait to be spotted? Could women self-nominate for sponsorship programs?

The likelihood of success of a formal sponsorship program would be increased if sponsors and protégés are well trained before starting, there are clear guidelines and appropriate support for the program, and the program objectives are clearly communicated to everyone in the organisation.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT WHAT MENTORING CAN ACHIEVE FOR WOMEN AND HOW IT WORKS BEST?

Little research exists in Australia on what mentoring has achieved for women. However, in a review of US research by McKeen & Bujaki⁴ (2007) it was found that mentoring has helped women identify and therefore address barriers to advancement and to identify and implement new strategies for success. The authors suggest that mentoring has done this by helping women better understand performance expectations, to adopt a behavioural style that men can be comfortable with, to gain access to the informal networks of their more senior mentors, to overcome stereotypes and to assess and choose which challenging assignments and projects to take on.

The developmental model of mentoring has a very real advantage in that developmental mentors grow and develop as a result of the mentoring relationship. In a practical sense, when a male mentor engages with a female mentee, the opportunity is for 'reverse mentoring' to spontaneously occur i.e. the mentor is exposed to a deeper insight into issues for women and can receive advice about how changes in the organisation could better accommodate working women, and in particular, working mothers or carers.

Mentoring and Sponsorship

DIVERSITY MENTORING SEEMS TO WORK BEST WHEN⁵:

1. It is one of a suite of initiatives that support a clear diversity objective. Mentoring on its own cannot deliver for women or any other minority group.
2. It is a well-designed program "working towards enhancing individual capacity to succeed, breaking down barriers to success, and fostering the nobility and value of the mentees"⁶.
3. Program goals, whatever they are, are made clear to everyone, to avoid misunderstandings and to minimise resentment amongst those that are excluded
6. Mentors and mentees are well-trained and their expectations are aligned.

Yes, we believe so. If organisations wish to pursue sponsorship we hope that we have provided some ideas on how to best introduce this concept. We recommend that sponsorship programs are run separately from mentoring programs. Both require a great deal of rigour and support and neither, on its own, can solve what is a complex and difficult problem. Ultimately, we need to evolve the workplace into one within which women, and especially women with caring responsibilities, can flourish. Mentoring and sponsorship, introduced carefully and mindfully, can each play a significant role in creating this environment.

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6. *ibid*, p. 214-215.

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