

# WHAT EVERY LEADER NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT THE POWER OF SPONSORSHIP

*Sylvia Ann Hewlett*

**W**ho's delivering for you? Who has your back? Who's burnishing your brand? Who's expanding what you can get done in this world? Do you have loyal lieutenants who extend your reach?

If the answer to any of these questions is *no* or *I'm not sure*, then you're stacking the odds against yourself—whether you want to rise to the top of your organization or expand what you can do once you're there.

Consider Los Angeles Lakers basketball superstar LeBron James. Like many athletic stars, he has a few old friends who have accompanied him on his rise to fame. But unlike many stars, he didn't just hand out money to his old buddies. He sent them to school and steered them to internships, where they strengthened their management and production skills—skills that he didn't have himself. His old friend Rich Paul, for example, now has his own talent agency, and another friend, Maverick Carter, runs a production company. Paul, Carter, and the rest of James's inner circle have more than repaid the money he spent on them. In 2016, for example, Carter secured an endorsement deal for James with Nike that could be worth \$1 billion.

What sets LeBron James apart from so many athletic stars—and so many corporate leaders—was that he had the foresight to *invest* in the talent that he found. He didn't just do some casual mentoring or write a few checks. He became a *sponsor*, powering up his talented friends with education and access. He helped them become high-performing, loyal protégés who could do for him what he couldn't do for himself: find and develop lucrative business opportunities that will ensure that he remains a successful and influential man long after he leaves the basketball court.

## What Sponsorship Is— and Why You Should Care

Successful men and women understand that no matter how brilliant and driven they are, their time and energy are finite. They can't do it all. Every established leader or emerging star needs people around them who can increase their bandwidth, have their back, and provide a substantial value add, as Maverick Carter did when he produced that ten-figure endorsement contract for LeBron James.

Sponsorship is what enables this kind of opportunity. Sponsorship is a professional relationship in which an executive or manager identifies and chooses an outstanding junior talent, develops that person's career, and reaps significant rewards for these efforts. As a mutually beneficial relationship, sponsorship is much deeper and more rewarding than traditional mentorship, a relationship in which a senior person "pays it forward" by giving guidance to someone more junior, often casually and for not very long.

Sponsorship relationships, on the other hand, require a commitment and an investment—for both the sponsor and the protégé. The sponsor must devote serious attention to identifying top junior talent, developing their skills, scrutinizing their progress, and advocating on their behalf. Protégés must deliver for their sponsor with stellar performance, rock-solid trustworthiness, and a differentiated skill set that adds value to the team and the organization, as well as to the individual sponsor.

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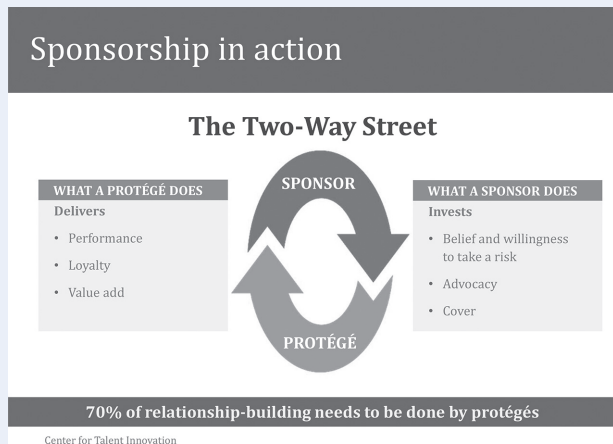
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Sponsorship thus isn't charity or granting a favor; it's a powerful leadership skill. Are you a mid-level manager, hoping to lift your performance, grow your influence, and get promoted faster? The right protégé can fill gaps in your skill set, take responsibilities off your plate when your calendar gets crowded and build your personal brand. Or are you at the top of your organization or near it, seeking loyal lieutenants and the capacity to extend your reach throughout the enterprise? The right protégé will complement your leadership skills, provide honest feedback, leverage your energies, expand your scope and span, and enable your influence to persist even after you've moved on to your next role or opportunity.

If you're at the top, you may know the benefits of sponsorship already: leaders who rise to senior levels of their organization have almost always invested heavily in a select group of outstanding protégés who boost their productivity and become the bench strength for the next generation of leadership. But if you're not actively looking for these individuals, now is the time to start.

The Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), a think tank that I founded 15 years ago, recently conducted a nationally representative survey of full-time employees in white-collar jobs, ranging from entry-level professionals to C-suite executives (see *The Sponsor Effect: How to Be a Better Leader by Investing in Others*, Harvard Business Review Press, 2019). To cite three data points from this research: senior managers with a protégé are 53 percent more likely (46 vs 30 percent) to have received a promotion in the last two years than those without, and junior managers with a protégé are 167 percent more likely (16 vs 6 percent) to have



**FIGURE 1. SPONSORSHIP IN ACTION**

received a stretch assignment than those without. And it is not just a short-term boost, such as a one-time promotion, fully 39 percent of executives and managers with a protégé deemed themselves “satisfied with their professional legacies” at this point in their careers. Only 25 percent of those without a protégé said the same.

For protégés, the data are equally telling. In my 2013 book, *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor: The New Way to Fast-Track Your Career*, I quantified the value to protégés of winning a sponsor: male employees with a sponsor are 23 percent more likely to get that next promotion than those without. For female employees, the figure is 19 percent.

How precisely do protégés and sponsors give each other so much value?

As Figure 1 illustrates, sponsorship is a two-way street and an investment: both parties put in effort and have skin in the game. As stated earlier, protégés provide multiple benefits for their sponsors; but sponsors also deliver for their protégés—going out on a limb for them, advocating for them, and providing them with “air cover” to take the risks that success often demands.

Unlike a mentorship relationship, a sponsorship relationship places both the sponsor and the protégé in the position of actively and publicly *working* for each other’s success.

That mutual commitment and effort (although, as we’ll see, the protégé does much of the work) leads to a relationship that boosts both parties. Consider the example of Larry Summers, eminent economist and former U.S. Treasury Secretary, and Facebook Chief Operating Officer/COO Sheryl Sandberg. In 1990, when Sandberg was just a junior at Harvard, Summers—then a respected professor, but not well known outside his field—recognized Sandberg’s value, believed in her potential, and singled her out for opportunities. She followed him to the World Bank as a research associate and then to the Treasury, where he made her his chief of staff. He then opened doors for her in the business world.

Sandberg certainly benefited from this relationship, but Summers did too. At first, she was his supremely competent research assistant, then his number two and even after she struck out on her own, her support of him remained unwavering. When Summers was president of Harvard, he made several ill-considered remarks about women in science, saying that they were not equipped to progress to the top in STEM fields. Sandberg hit back, used her megaphone as a successful executive to defend him as a man highly supportive of women—and she spoke up for him again and again.

Sponsorship’s reciprocity sets it apart not only from mentorship; it also sets it apart from standard corporate leadership development. Sponsors aren’t just grooming someone to rise higher. They certainly are looking to fill organizational needs, but they’re also taking a bet that their own careers can benefit if they invest in a promising individual’s skill sets, and trustworthiness. Sponsorship is a competency that can make an executive a better leader, both in the short term—with a value add and a boost to productivity—and in the medium and long terms, through commitment and loyalty.

When Mellody Hobson, for example, started at Ariel Investments, she was just an intern, fresh out of college. Fiercely ambitious and hardworking, she soon attracted the attention of John Rogers, the chairman and CEO. Seeing her chance, she ramped up her

energies to earn his serious support. In an in-depth interview featured in *The Sponsor Effect* she talked about becoming Rogers's "grasshopper." What exactly did this mean? Hobson described jumping and leaping to his every need: anticipating his wants, protect his time, and leverage his energies—making Rogers a more effective leader. She also made it her business to feed him new marketing ideas. She was particularly creative in figuring out how to better reach African American women—a natural target for Rogers's firm. Her success in opening up this market has boosted the growth of the firm over many years.

In the interview Hobson was emphatic: her extraordinary commitment to Rogers is based on more than pay hikes and promotions. He inspired her. She was and is a huge fan of his vision and what he has created at Ariel Investments. In her words, "It was easy to get totally vested in the mission of the most successful minority-owned investment company in America." Hobson delivered for Rogers and he delivered for her: by age 31, she had become president of the firm.

## The Risks of Sponsorship

The flip side of sponsorship's power is a certain level of *risk*. In mentorship, if your mentee disappoints, no one holds you responsible; few may even know about the relationship. But what happens if your protégé, in whom you've publicly invested time, responsibilities, and reputational capital, disappoints? Maybe he or she, when push comes to shove, can't grow the bottom line, impress important stakeholders, or take work off your shoulders. Your own productivity and brand could take a hit.

And here's an even bigger risk: What if your protégé, who thanks to you has gained some power, turns on you and betrays your trust? That could threaten your own success and even your role in the organization.

Given this risk, as well as the enormous potential benefits, protégés need to *earn* a sponsor. To put it bluntly, no one will take on a protégé unless that protégé has clearly demonstrated their potential worth and *loyalty*. Sponsors, for their part, must devote energy and intention to identifying, including, inspiring,

instructing, and inspecting a potential protégé *before* they instigate a deal and fully invest their precious clout and capital.

## Playbook: Seven Steps to Effective Sponsorship

The following multi-stage Playbook outlines seven action steps that are crucial for maximizing the value but also for minimizing the risks of this relationship. Just remember if you're going to sponsor someone—linking their career to yours—they're going to be walking around with your brand on their forehead. What tools and tactics work best? How do you sequence and pace your investments in a protégé? Each step in this Playbook offers action steps based on CTI survey data and insights from 15 in-depth interviews with sponsor-protégé pairs.

**Step 1: Identify potential protégés.** Look for impressive performance—this is a must. But also look for loyalty and trustworthiness. You are taking a risk on this person, and you need to be confident he/she is committed to you and your organization and has integrity. Having confidence that your protégé will not engage in any unethical behavior is extremely important.

**Step 2: Include a variety of perspectives.** Proactively seek out those who are different from you—in skill sets, gender, age, or ethnicity. Don't stay in your comfort zone and choose only mini-mes; instead diversify your portfolio of talent.

**Step 3: Inspire to tap into passion and purpose.** Your protégés will go the extra mile for you and the

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organization if you can unlock wider aspirations and align their ambitions to your vision and values.

**Step 4: Instruct to fill skill gaps.** Come to the relationship with specific asks and targeted executive coaching, but expect your protégé to take ownership and responsibility: jumping on opportunities and doing the hard work of sustaining and growing value. He/she needs to “give” before “getting.”

**Step 5: Inspect your prospects.** Be prepared to monitor your pick on a regular basis and make sure to evaluate trustworthiness as well as performance. If your protégé is interviewing with a competitor or badmouthing your team, it’s important to know straightaway and step in to sever the sponsorship relationship.

**Step 6: Instigate a deal.** Once you have developed and vetted your prospect, you’re ready to initiate a reciprocal deal. Lay out the terms (which pieces of value each of you are bringing to the table) and a timeline. This deal need not be detailed since it rests on established trust.

**Step 7: Invest in three ways.** With a deal in hand, it’s time to be “all in.” Tell the world you believe in this talent—and explain why. Advocate vigorously for your pick—particularly in rooms where he/she is not present.

However good the Playbook, it’s not enough to know how to get sponsorship right; it’s also important to know what can go wrong. CTI data show that a significant proportion of executives and managers who self-define as sponsors fall short in two important ways.

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## Two Common Mistakes

First off, many sponsors fail to be sufficiently inclusive. To get the most out of your investment in more junior talent, you need one or two picks who are different from you. A protégé can add most value if he/she can provide something that you lack: tech savvy, gender smarts, or the perspective provided by racial diversity, for example. But only 23 percent of sponsors get out of their comfort zone and look for potential protégés who have attributes they do not have.

The second common mistake is an especially dangerous one: a failure to thoroughly vet a protégé for trustworthiness. Sponsors tend not to inspect a potential pick for loyalty and commitment despite the fact that erosion of trust is the main reason a sponsor–protégé relationship breaks down—explaining 73 percent of all cases. Often sponsors focus exclusively on performance: making sure a prospective protégé works long hours and hits the numbers. They neglect to double-check whether their pick is talking to the competition or badmouthing the team or the product on social media. But surely your organization has many high achievers. The differentiator for a successful protégé pick is a top performer who also has intense level of commitment to you and the values of organization.

## Conclusion

An important piece of good news threads through these findings. Across the economy, executive and managers who self-define as sponsors reap impressive rewards from investing in a protégé *without* totally getting the finer points of this relationship or getting it absolutely right. As noted earlier, a senior manager with a protégé is much more likely than a senior manager without a protégé to have been promoted over the last two years.

But what if executives and managers absorbed the insights and actions steps of the Playbook—and took note of the two most common mistakes—imagine, then, what the payoff would be?

Seven steps may sound like a serious investment of time, energy, and effort—and time is the last thing that leaders have to spare. But sponsorship is an investment that can pay off early and often. From the get-go an excellent prospective pick will lighten your load and free up your time for your highest priorities.

This article is an adaption from my book *The Sponsor Effect: How to Be a Better Leader by Investing in Others*, published by Harvard Business Review Press, June 2019.



*Sylvia Ann Hewlett is an author, an economist, and the founder of the Center for Talent Innovation, a Manhattan-based research organization where she now serves as Chair Emeritus. She is the author of 14 critically acclaimed books, including Winning the War for Talent in Emerging Markets; Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor (an Audible best seller); and Executive Presence (an Amazon “Best Book of the Month”). She has appeared on Morning Joe, 60 Minutes, The Today Show—and has been lampooned on Saturday Night Live. Hewlett has taught at Cambridge, Columbia, and Princeton universities. She earned her PhD in economics at London University.*