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SPONSORSHIP GUIDE





Catalyst Sponsorship Guide

Prepared by Catalyst for Managers'
Association of Slovenia

Overview

Relationships are an important aspect of any work culture. Cultivating a strong network and ensuring you have advocates are critical steps for advancement and development—especially for women, who are often left out of more informal activities. Catalyst research has found that while mentoring is essential to leadership development, it is not enough, on its own, to help women advance. Our research points to a more influential professional relationship: sponsorship.¹ **A sponsor is defined as a senior leader or other person who uses strong influence to help the protégé obtain high-visibility assignments, promotions, or jobs.**²

In a large global sample,³ we found that having a mentor before starting a first post-MBA job results in greater compensation and a higher-level position—but the payoff is greater for men than for women.⁴ Men's first job assignments were more likely to be at a higher rank and with a greater level of responsibility than women's were, and mentoring helped men get these upper-level positions more than it helped women. Findings showed that:

- The mentor's level, not gender, impacted career advancement. Men's mentors were more senior than women's mentors, more highly placed in the organization, and in a better position to provide sponsorship.
- Men who had a mentor received USD \$9,260 more per year in their first post-MBA job than women who had a mentor.
- Men had more promotions than women, even after taking into account prior work experience, time in role, starting level, industry, and region. Highly visible projects, mission-critical roles, and international experiences also predict advancement, and differences exist between men and women.⁵

Why these results? Our research shows that men's "mentors" are actually more senior, more influential, and have access to a wider network than women's mentors.⁶ In other words, the men's "mentors" are often really sponsors, and that is the critical difference. Catalyst research shows that when women have sponsors, women are just as likely as men to be promoted.⁷

DEFINITIONS AND KEY CONCEPTS⁸

A coach talks to you, a mentor talks with you, and a sponsor talks about you.

- **Sponsor:** A senior leader or other person who uses strong influence to help the protégé (the person being sponsored) obtain high-visibility assignments, promotions, or jobs.
- **Mentor:** A person who formally or informally helps the mentee (the person being mentored) navigate his or her career and provides guidance on career choices and decisions.
- **Coach:** Someone who provides guidance for the employee's development, often focused on soft skills (e.g., active listening) rather than technical skills (e.g., financial acumen).
- Unlike mentors, sponsors typically drive the sponsoring relationship by advocating for the protégé in many settings, including behind closed doors.
- Sponsorship is one way to narrow the male-female achievement gap in the workplace.



Why Sponsorship?

Benefits to Sponsors⁹

- Increases personal and professional satisfaction.
- Provides sponsors with valuable feedback and learning from protégés.
- Enhances organizational commitment.
- Leads to more effective teams and leaders.
- Increases satisfaction with and commitment to the organization.
- Allows greater access to information and broadened networks.
- Enhances reputation based on protégés' accomplishments.
- Increases leadership competencies, especially around talent and staff development.

Benefits to Protégés¹⁰

- Prepares individuals for the complexities of new roles and assignments.
- Develops skills that support advancement and career growth.
- Allows for greater visibility.
- Provides access to senior leaders and powerful role models.
- Helps individuals overcome the “double bind” (particularly women and diverse groups).¹¹

Effective Sponsorship

Catalyst research has found that the following four elements must be present in effective sponsorship relationships:¹²

- **Trust:** Trust has to be present on both sides of the relationship to make it successful.
- **Honesty:** Protégés must receive—and act on—candid and transparent feedback to advance their careers.
- **Communication:** Communication serves as a vehicle for trust and candor and is seen as fundamental by both parties.
- **Commitment:** Both sides have to demonstrate commitment to making the relationship work effectively and offering reciprocal value.

Additionally, there are a number of other factors to consider regarding making sponsorship relationships work well:

- Exceptional performance is a prerequisite for sponsorship.
- While sponsorship can open doors for high-performing individuals, simply providing someone with an opportunity does not guarantee success. It's up to the protégé to deliver once given the opportunity.
- Not all relationships with senior-level individuals will develop into a sponsorship relationship.

Implementing Effective Sponsorship Programs

Many leading organizations are developing formal sponsorship efforts as part of their strategies to increase women's representation, particularly in more senior roles, and help build inclusive work cultures. Both formal programs and informal, culture-based approaches to sponsorship can be effective. Deciding between the two is a matter of assessing which approach will work best in your organization and with the intended target participants (protégés as well as sponsors).

While the steps may differ based on the organization and its culture, many organizations follow at least some of the below processes when setting up a sponsorship program:

- **Determine the target population.** Many organizations choose to focus their sponsorship efforts on high-potential talent—those strong-performing individuals who have demonstrated their value and who senior leaders want to sponsor as a result. Many organizations also design sponsorship programs with an eye toward equity by asking, “Among high potentials, which individuals or groups are not currently getting the ‘hot jobs’ and other important opportunities that lead to advancement?” Often, those individuals just need a little extra support—perhaps in the form of a sponsor—to help them gain access to these opportunities.
- **Decide on logistics.** If you're setting up a formal program, it's a good idea to decide on the total number of protégé-sponsor pairs, as well as the duration of the program and any constraints (e.g., work locations, upcoming leaves, etc.) in advance. This information will help

determine the scale of the program and what resources will be needed to support it appropriately.

- **Based on the population involved, identify talent to invite to be protégés.** When evaluating the pre-determined target population, use annual performance ratings, manager feedback, peer reviews, and other qualitative and quantitative information to narrow the pool of potential protégés.
- **Identify sponsors and ensure their commitment to this activity.** For sponsors, key responsibilities include recommending the protégé(s) for important roles and willingly staking their own reputations on the ability of others to succeed. As such, sponsors must be committed to the program's objectives. Sponsors should be approached well in advance of the program to ensure they are on board with being a sponsor, able to participate in all sponsorship elements/activities, and aware of the responsibilities involved. If you plan to hold a kick-off meeting or event, ensure they are available to attend.
- **Issue invitation letters to participants from senior leaders/champions.** Often, invitations are most impactful when they come from the CEO or other influential leaders in the organization, rather than from HR or D&I team members (see Deutsche Bank example, below). Regardless of who sends the invitations, it's important to include the protégé's managers so that they understand the context and opportunity presented for their team member(s). This helps increase buy-in and support, and preemptively answers any questions about the protégé's new professional relationship.



- **Launch the program cohort, including an introductory training session for protégés and sponsors.** Many organizations that implement formal sponsorship programs elect to launch the program with a kick-off meeting or event. This is not necessary, of course, but can help with setting expectations, enumerating responsibilities, and increasing the sense of community among the sponsor-protégé cohort. Also consider making sponsorship and/or talent development resources (e.g., discussion starter questions for sponsor-protégé pairs or templates to help protégés identify professional goals) available to participants.

Practices From Leading Organizations

Deutsche Bank—Accomplished Top Leaders Advancement Strategy (ATLAS)¹³

The ATLAS sponsorship program was launched in 2009 with the goal of improving the gender balance at senior levels and increasing the pool of women eligible for the most senior positions in the firm. ATLAS prepares high-performing women from all business units globally for executive leadership positions by pairing them with a member of Deutsche Bank's Group Executive Committee (GEC) from a different business line. Deutsche Bank's GEC members sponsor ATLAS women by championing them to lead the firm and advocating for them to fill senior-most positions.

ATLAS participants include women who are already leaders at the firm but who, with the help of strategic sponsorship, have the potential to rise to even more senior, more visible positions. ATLAS women are diverse across various dimensions,

including multiple ethnicities and different functions and business lines. Josef Ackermann, Deutsche Bank's CEO at the time, was the ultimate sponsor of ATLAS. To initiate women into the program, he personally sent a letter inviting them to attend an opening event and dinner with him and the GEC, which provides high visibility for the group.

Participants are identified and selected via a rigorous nomination process; the nomination committee comprising senior-level women and men from across the firm reviews each nominee's career history and aspirations, leadership qualifications, and future career goals. To ensure that ATLAS women are giving back to the broader community of women at the firm, Deutsche Bank assigns ATLAS participants as informal mentors to new women managing directors.

ATLAS has had a positive impact on participating women and their sponsors. The program provides high-potential women with heightened visibility and contact with influential Deutsche Bank leaders, which, in turn, increases the women's competency and confidence. Across the entire ATLAS cohort group, 45% of women participating are now in new or expanded roles.

Citi—Women Leading Citi¹⁴

In 2009, Citi's global Women's Initiative, which had been in place since 2006, was renamed Women4Citi and expanded to include the newly designed Women Leading Citi program. Women Leading Citi is a firm-wide, targeted effort to support high-performance women participants who possess the potential to move into senior leadership at Citi. This effort fosters sponsorship relationships between high-potential women, globally, and senior "advocates," who can be women or men executives.

The 18-month program pilot was launched in November 2009 after Citi reviewed extensive research that showed how women at all levels are

less likely to have sponsors at different points in their careers. For Women Leading Citi, the firm purposely chose to target women at the managing director level—often considered one of the most critical levels of leadership in financial services—because individuals would still have opportunities to attain higher levels of management and expand profit and loss responsibility.

Program goals include exposing women participants to others in senior management; broadening senior women’s visibility; and providing career development and enhanced leadership skills.

Nationwide—Touch Point Program¹⁵

Nationwide places a strategic focus on people, which includes developing talent. In 2010 leadership introduced a sponsorship program, Touch Point, to expose the OCEO (Office of the CEO; CEO’s direct reports) to senior talent (VP level and above) across the organization.

To increase employees’ exposure throughout the organization, participants are paired with senior leaders across different business lines and functions as well as across gender, race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of difference. Pairings are made intentionally, with an eye toward improving participants’ knowledge of various roles and business units at the company and minimizing siloed talent. While each OCEO member typically sponsors two protégés, because Nationwide has just 10 executives (including two women) who report to the CEO, Touch Point is open to a limited number of participants per cycle.

Throughout the course of the program, protégés participate in a number of leadership development sessions. To put feedback and newly developed skills into practice, they are introduced to Nationwide’s CEO and board of directors, and are expected to present to the board on a professional issue or attend a business luncheon with these senior

executives. These activities provide participating women and men executives increased visibility and exposure to leadership.

Kimberly-Clark Corporation—Fostering Talent Development Through Sponsorship¹⁶

While Kimberly-Clark (K-C) does not have a formal sponsorship program, the company makes it clear to its executives that they are expected to sponsor high-potential employees. K-C hopes that its commitment to sponsorship at the top has a trickle-down effect and results in more sponsor-protégé relationships at lower levels of the organization and, subsequently, a stronger internal talent pipeline. K-C’s CEO, Thomas Falk, is committed to leadership development and knows that risk-taking is as integral to successful sponsor-protégé relationships as it is to success in the business world:

The difference between sponsorship and mentoring is who took a risk on you. At a recent leadership meeting, I asked the top 100 leaders in my company, “Who took a chance on you?” I had each of them write the name of that person on a large white board. I then challenged them to model the same behaviors so someone writes their name down in the future.

To help ensure that leaders actively sponsor talent, sponsorship is often discussed in the company’s annual leadership forums. Since 2006, K-C’s top 100 global senior leaders have participated in these forums, which focus on building capabilities, receiving feedback, and instilling company values. Topics covered in the past include talent development, shareholder return, executive compensation, and generational differences.

With input from their managers, leaders are expected to specify what they plan to do to model sponsorship and when they plan to do it.



During annual performance reviews, leaders are evaluated on whether they met their goals, and the results have implications for merit increases and promotional opportunities. In fact, in order for leaders to receive the highest overall performance rating, they must receive the highest rating on people development competencies.

Lessons Learned

Ensure You Have the Right Cohort Size

Consider the resources and time commitment a sponsorship program will need and ensure you have a size that is manageable and allows participants to benefit most from the experience.

- Real-life example: Over the course of the first cycle, Deutsche Bank discovered that the size of their initial ATLAS cohort (20 participants) prohibited the program from achieving all of its objectives. Deutsche Bank subsequently limited the number of participants per cycle to approximately 10, which has proven more effective.

Ensure Your Participants Understand the Sponsorship Program Intention and Goals

Clearly communicate the goals of the program to the people you are selecting.

- Real-life example: For ATLAS, it became evident during the first cycle that not all participants were ready for a sponsorship program, which had the potential to negatively impact those who were. As a result, the level of vetting before high-potential women are selected for participation was increased.

Educate Participants About Their Roles and Expectations

Make sure that your participants, including both sponsors and protégés, understand what is expected from them and what their roles are—and are not.

- Real-life example: For Citi, some participants experienced role ambiguity. The advocates knew that they needed to be personally invested in the individual, but they wanted more support from HR to understand what it meant to be a sponsor and what they should actively be doing for the women participants. In response, Citi is considering instituting global mobility forums run by the business and facilitated by HR to initiate talent mobility for high-potential women and men across the organization.

Prepare Participants for the Time Needed to Participate

Be clear with participants about the time commitment for participation, so that both parties will benefit from the experience.

- Real-life example: Citi underestimated the amount of work involved, in particular for those locally supporting the women as talent leads. When there were more than 10 participants in a business line, more resources needed to be allocated to ensure that the women in the program were fully supported. To achieve this, Citi is considering involving participants' managers to a greater extent in the development planning process to help identify more immediate visibility and mobility opportunities.

Next-Level Sponsorship: Action Steps for Sponsors and Protégés

Recommendations for Sponsors¹⁷

- Actively discuss the goals you share with your protégés, including what you can and can't do as a sponsor.
- Solicit and use feedback from your protégés and colleagues on how you can be a better sponsor.
- Set and maintain relationship parameters with each of your protégés to manage expectations (e.g., responsibilities, roles, goals, priorities, availability, and frequency of meetings).
- Communicate honestly and directly with your protégés and influential colleagues about the challenges, pitfalls, and risks associated with sponsorship.
- Facilitate ongoing collaboration with each protégé to develop a sponsorship approach that fits both of your styles and needs, and to deal with potential sponsor-protégé challenges (e.g., relationship mismatches, style differences, missed opportunities, and expectations).
- Take time to provide constructive and candid feedback to your protégés about challenges.
- Make it known that your role as a sponsor is different from your role as a manager or mentor.
- Proactively manage sponsorship pitfalls and risks, such as perceptions of favoritism and unrealistic performance expectations.
- Manage and mitigate potential rumors about the relationship, which may include insinuations of inappropriate sexual interest. Hold meetings in professional settings or consider meeting with two protégés at the same time.
- Ensure your protégés understand that you will not have an answer to every problem or be able to influence every opportunity, and where possible, provide them with other resources.
- Make it known and explain why you cannot create opportunities or advocate in the same way for every protégé and/or direct report.
- Solicit and use feedback about your protégés' advancement readiness from a broad range of employees and leaders, and remain open and non-defensive when hearing others' perspectives.
- Only recommend protégés for roles that match their strengths, and help prepare them for new roles by discussing project/position challenges and solution-focused strategies.
- Use performance on projects and organizational goals to recommend and match the right protégé with the right opportunities.
- Help your protégés create success strategies that prepare them for new opportunities, unexpected challenges, and pitfalls.
- Ensure that your direct reports, colleagues, and influential others know what you will and will not be accountable for with respect to your protégés' success.



Recommendations for Protégés¹⁸

- Consistently exceed performance expectations.
- Find the right people to champion you.
- Be willing to hear—and act on—feedback, especially difficult feedback about potential areas for improvement.
- Communicate honestly and directly with your sponsor about your expectations, goals, and any challenges you are facing.
- View the relationship as reciprocal—be prepared to give back and pay it forward to others.

About Catalyst

Founded in 1962, Catalyst is the leading nonprofit organization expanding opportunities for women and business. With operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, India, Australia, and Japan, and more than 800 [member](#) organizations, Catalyst is the trusted resource for research, information, and advice about women at work. Catalyst annually honors exemplary organizational initiatives that promote women's advancement with the [Catalyst Award](#).

Endnotes

1. Heather Foust-Cummings, Sarah Dinolfo, and Jennifer Kohler, *Sponsoring Women to Success* (Catalyst, 2011).
2. Catalyst, *Coaches, Mentors, and Sponsors: Understanding the Differences* (December 11, 2014).
3. Catalyst, *The Promise of Future Leadership: A Research Program on Highly Talented Employees in the Pipeline* (2009–2015).
4. Nancy M. Carter and Christine Silva, *Mentoring Necessary but Insufficient for Advancement* (Catalyst, 2010).
5. Christine Silva, Nancy M. Carter, and Anna Beninger, *Good Intentions, Imperfect Execution? Women Get Fewer of the “Hot Jobs” Needed to Advance* (Catalyst, 2012).
6. Carter and Silva.
7. Foust-Cummings et al.
8. Catalyst, *Coaches, Mentors, and Sponsors: Understanding the Differences* (December 11, 2014).
9. Foust-Cummings et al.
10. Foust-Cummings et al.
11. As research from Catalyst and others shows, women who advocate for themselves can be penalized in the workplace. Because sponsorship involves speaking up on behalf of others, it offers a solution for navigating the double bind women face. See Catalyst, *The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don’t* (2007).
12. Foust-Cummings et al.
13. Catalyst, *Practices: Deutsche Bank—Accomplished Top Leaders Advancement Strategy (ATLAS)* (2011).
14. Catalyst, *Practices: Citi—Women Leading Citi* (2011).
15. Catalyst, *Practices: Nationwide—Touch Point Program* (2012).
16. Catalyst, *Practices: Kimberly-Clark Corporation—Fostering Talent Development Through Sponsorship* (2012).
17. Catalyst, *Managers as Sponsors Toolkit Tool 5: Managing Challenges—A Sponsorship Reality* (2013).
18. Catalyst, *Fostering Sponsorship Success Among High Performers and Leaders* (2011).

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