THE GAME PLAN OF SUCCESSFUL CAREER SPONSORSHIP

HARNESSING THE TALENT OF ASPIRING MANAGERS AND SENIOR LEADERS

JOVINA ANG

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my husband, children and Phil.

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Preface

Despite implementing multiple mentoring programs, Women and Leadership conferences, networking events and many other initiatives in my roles as the lead for Diversity and Inclusion at Microsoft and Women-in-Business Group, the progress of women up the corporate ladder remained slow. I wondered whether there could be another answer to solving the problem of too few women leaders.

I became intrigued by the topic of career sponsorship several years ago. The more I read about sponsorship, the more I came to appreciate the importance of sponsorship for career success. It also made me realise that a significant portion of my corporate success was due to sponsorship from senior leaders who not only nurtured my growth, but also opened many opportunities in my career.

Even though there existed practitioner-oriented articles on sponsorship then, there was a lack of empirical evidence on this important topic – which led me to pursue doctoral research. I wanted to contribute to the knowledge of sponsorship, as I believed then and still do believe that it is one of the keys to solving the problem of too few senior women leaders at the top of the corporate ladder.

As the world of work becomes more 'boundaryless' and more contingent, in a work environment where frequent career changes and contractual work are the norm, sponsorship will be critical to traverse the boundaries of organisations to secure the top and coveted jobs.

This book is primarily based on my doctoral dissertation. In this book, I cover in detail the phenomenon of the sponsor relationship and its impact on career success. Unlike previous accounts of sponsorship, my account of sponsorship combines both the perspectives of the sponsee (the person being sponsored) and the sponsor.

The chapters of this book have been carefully laid out to answer the questions of the why, what and how of sponsorship. Sponsorship is a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship – both the sponsor and sponsee can benefit from this relationship. I also highlight that sponsorship is not an all bright and rosy relationship. There are circumstances that drive the sponsor relationship to turn sour – that is, the dark side of sponsorship exists – which is why it is prudent for sponsors and sponsees to have strategies to mitigate the risks that are inherent in the sponsor relationship.

In this book, I also offer the game plan of successful sponsorship for the various stakeholders of sponsorship, specifically the sponsee, sponsor and organisation, and I show how these stakeholders can harness sponsorship for their individual and collective success. I conclude this book by elaborating on two case

studies – Deutsche Bank's ATLAS (Accomplished Top Leaders Advancement Strategy) programme and Canada's The Protégé Project.

The chapters are organised as follows:

Chapter 1: The Case for Sponsorship
Chapter 2: The Antecedents of Sponsorship
Chapter 3: Phases of Sponsor Relationship
Chapter 4: Reciprocal Nature of the Sponsor Relationship
Chapter 5: Outcomes from the Sponsor Relationship
Chapter 6: The Importance of a Home Support System
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Chapter 15: Sponsorship and its Application to the Future of Work
Chapter 16: Sponsorship Case Studies

Thank you for reading my book. If you have any suggestions or would like to offer your thoughts on this important topic, please feel free to write to me at jang@communicatio.com.sg.

Chapter 1

The Case for Sponsorship

Forget a mentor. Find a sponsor.

This is one piece of advice that career strategist Sylvia Ann Hewlett has been giving to women across the world (Hewlett, 2013). Women have been trailing men in career advancement because it was found that women, in general, have access to mentors rather than to sponsors. In contrast, men, in general, have greater access to sponsors – senior leaders with power and influence who are willing to advocate for you – which is why men still get more promotions than women (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010).

Despite the focus from governments and organisations driving advancements in education, health and employment for women for over 30 years (Tuminez, Duell, & Majid, 2012), there still exists a gender imbalance whether you look at labour participation rates or representation of women at the top of the corporate ladder. If we continue at this rate, it is estimated that it would take 217 years to achieve gender parity.[1]

Education has often been thought of as the gender parity equaliser. There are more educated women today compared to a generation ago. In some countries, there are more tertiary educated women than men, for example, in the United States[2] and Singapore[3]. However, education does not seem to have much of an effect on gender parity as women still trail men at the top of the corporate ladder. In the United States, only 6.4 percent of CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies are women.[4] Even though the percentage of female CEOs is higher in Singapore, the number is still small as women represent only 15 percent of CEOs of the publicly listed companies.[5]

Women tend to drop off the corporate ladder or experience career stagnation around the mid-level stage, around the time when they would like to start a family. The 'drop off' figures are astonishingly high. According to Tuminez, Duell and Majid (2012), these figures can be as high as 70 percent in Japan, 53 percent in China, 49 percent in Hong Kong and 46 percent in Singapore at the mid-management level. McKinsey (2011) reported even higher attrition figures at the mid-management level. In a pan-Asia study, figures of 94 percent in South Korea, 91 percent in India and 89 percent in Japan and Malaysia were reported. These figures show that many women hold themselves back and under-invest in their careers at the mid-management level – the level that coincides with the stage of

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their lives to address their maternal instincts and desires. As such, many women find their career stalling from this level onwards.[6]

Theories abound as to why women do not make it to the top. Ibarra and Obodaru (2009) called women's inability to formulate a vision or lack the 'vision thing' as one prohibiting barrier. Others cited a long list of barriers including a lack of family-friendly policies, the old boys' club, unconscious gender bias, inherent culture and values, work-life balance, workplace politics, a lack of sponsorship and social capital.

Women tend not to 'lean in'. Sheryl Sandberg (2013), Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, coined this business motto to encourage women to press ahead, to project confidence and to 'sit at the table' so that they can be seen and heard – which are the necessary steps to move up in the business world. Perhaps a lack of the lean in attitude is one reason why a third of high potential women are ambivalent about getting ahead in their careers (Francesco & Mahtani, 2011).

Women are also mired in the 'sticky floor'. The sticky floor can be viewed as the opposite of the glass ceiling. The sticky floor syndrome comes from a mind-set of self-doubt and self-deprecating. In general, compared to men, women tend to doubt their capability more (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003). As such, they undervalue their self-worth. Because of this mind-set, women are left rooted to the floor, and they modify their ambitions for they are afraid to move ahead and reach new heights in their careers.

The proverbial glass ceiling is another barrier that women face. The glass ceiling is defined as the 'invisible, culturally embedded assumptions and beliefs about the skills and competencies of women' that prevent women from moving ahead (Elacqua, Beehr, Hansen, & Webster, 2009; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2007; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). The glass ceiling is so dense that even to this day, very few women have been able to shatter the glass ceiling and make it to the very top of organisations.

In analysing these glass ceiling 'shatterers', there's one thing that is clear. These women have sponsors who have been able to make a huge difference to their careers. These sponsors have been seen to give them a career break, to open doors to opportunities or to advocate for them.

Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, is no exception. Since graduating with an MBA from Harvard Business School, Larry Summers, her former Economics professor helped her to secure her first high-profile role at the World Bank and subsequently, at the Clinton Administration.[7] This career head-start helped to solidify the foundation of her career, from which, she was able to build on to soar quickly on the ranks at Google and Facebook.

Closer to home in Singapore, Madam Halimah Yacob's story of success and ascend to the highest public role in Singapore as the country's first female president was largely attributed to the support and advocacy she received from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.[8] To help Madam Halimah with her candidacy, Prime Minister Lee went public on why she is the most suitable candidate. He also cleared the roadblocks including putting in place policies to support her appointment.

As for myself, I know sponsorship has benefited me in more ways than one. Sponsorship has not only opened doors for me in my corporate career, but also helped me to secure jobs in the portfolio career I have today. Having experienced sponsorship first-hand, as well as completed a doctoral dissertation on this important topic, I am convinced that sponsorship is the solution to solving this persistent gender problem of too few senior women leaders – a problem that has been 'plaguing' both the private and public sectors in Singapore and across the world for decades.

If sponsorship is leveraged well, my research showed that sponsorship is effective in driving upward career trajectory by at least one to two levels on the organisational hierarchy – suggesting that sponsorship can drive more impact compared to the combined initiatives of flexible work arrangements and other career enhancing programs such as mentoring, women leadership programs and networking. To this end, I'd like to call for a focus on sponsorship now rather than later so that collectively, we can accelerate the quest to achieving greater gender parity and solve this issue of too few senior women leaders.

As sponsorship is still a relatively new phenomenon (we were not even talking about sponsorship until a few years ago), my intent in writing this book is to share insights on sponsorship so that more people, especially women, can benefit from it. Given that sponsorship is still in the nascent stage, it is not surprising to find that it is still not widely embraced and practised, as only slightly more than 50 percent of global senior leaders have sponsors (Ang & Reb, 2017). There are also many others who have not heard about the construct of sponsorship in the career context.

As work becomes more boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) with people changing jobs more often across multiple organisations, and short-term based work becomes the norm rather than the exception, sponsorship will matter even more. Other than possessing the required competencies and desired aptitude and attitude, individuals will need sponsorship to help them be noticed and traverse the boundaries of multiple organisations to secure jobs.

Given that sponsorship matters so much for career success or for securing work, what is it exactly? What do sponsors do? How are sponsors different from mentors and coaches? These were some of the questions that I used to frame my doctoral research.

1.1 Overview of My Research Methodology

In order to study sponsorship in detail, I employed the methods of (1) an autoethnography, (2) an inductive qualitative case research study and (3) an online study to uncover insights about this important relationship. The three studies that I conducted were varied and complementary to one another while providing different perspectives to this important construct.

Autoethnography is a self-reflective and a self-reflexive study that is grounded on personal experiences. Even though autoethnography is a study of oneself,

through the process of thinking and reflection, this method of study is capable of yielding new insights because it is believed that what we learn may not necessary be the same as what we experience (Wall, 2008). As I wrote my autoethnography, I constantly reminded myself about how I could make my sponsorship experience relevant to aspiring managers and leaders, especially women, so that others may leverage what I've learned and experienced.

The purpose of conducting a case study research was to observe, understand and learn about the phenomenon of sponsorship in a real-life context. Despite a relatively new research methodology, the case study methodology is a rigorous and robust methodology for examining a contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 1992, 2014). The case study methodology can be descriptive, exploratory or explanatory and can draw insights from multiple sources. The case study research I conducted was anchored on mentorship literature and practitioner-oriented articles because I wanted to use the propositions developed from these to signpost my inductive qualitative research. There were 19 sponsors and 16 sponsees in my case study research.

I also conducted an online study to obtain quantitative measures. This online study was administered using Qualtrics survey tool and was targeted at senior leaders – leaders who are at least at the director level on the organisational hierarchy because the extent of responsibility increases significantly from this level onwards. There were 100 participants in this study. For more information about my research methodology, please go to Appendix 1.

1.2 A Coach, a Mentor and a Sponsor

Before going further, let me define the terms – coach, mentor and sponsor. It is without a doubt that people often and still conflate the terms – sponsor and mentor, and on occasions, coach. Some people even assume that the roles of the sponsor, mentor and coach are the same.

> The three words – coach, mentor and sponsor, always come together for me. It's syntax. I would probably use them synonymously.

One reason why this misperception exists is that these three roles drive toward one common goal, that is, to enhance the development of an individual. Furthermore, as my research showed, the role of the sponsor builds on the roles of the coach and mentor.

> In my definition or what I've experienced, I feel like to be a sponsor, you're like a mentor plus almost. A central part of that sponsor relationship is also to be able to be really candid, honest and have safe conversations where you can really level with one another. So to me, it's almost like, you need to serve as a mentor, plus the sponsorship piece where you personally go out and back that person.

Even the initial scholars of mentorship conflated the terms mentor and sponsor and used these terms interchangeably in a period of more than 30

years (Friday, Friday, & Green, 2004). Part of this misperception can be attributed to the traditional definition of the mentor. The term mentor is not a new one. In fact, the word mentor can be traced back to Homer's *Odyssey*, a story that dates back to Ancient Greece (Heubeck, West, & Hainsworth, 1990). In this story, a guardian named Mentor was assigned as the advisor and teacher to Odyssey's son Telemachus to help him grow and develop as a person and a leader.

In her seminal work on mentorship, Kram (1983) – one of the gurus of mentorship, defined mentors as senior and experienced individuals who are committed to support and advance their mentees' careers. She also included sponsorship as one of the career functions of mentorship.

Because mentorship and sponsorship have been shown to drive non-mutually exclusive development relationships – mentorship for enhancing competence on the job and providing psychosocial support, and sponsorship for career advancement, Friday et al. (2004) argued that sponsorship and mentorship should be viewed as two different and distinct constructs.

There are also other distinct differences among these three roles of coach, mentor and sponsor.

1.2.1 Coach

So what does a coach do? My research showed that a coach is someone who helps with a specific task, topic, skill or function. Coaching is a helping relationship. It is a relationship that helps individuals to achieve a set of goals or to improve performance. A coach can also help individuals to master new skills or to acquire new knowledge. As communicated by Stephen, one of my research participants, the role of a coach is akin to a parent teaching a child how to ride a bike:

> The coach is there to help you to underpin your learning. He or she has been tasked to help you to be proficient in a specific skill to achieve an objective. A coach is like a parent teaching a child how to ride a bike.

In general, organisations engage and hire coaches for their high potential employees or executives to help them develop a specific competency or learn new behaviours so that their coaches can help them to get to the next level of leadership. While organisations may have internal coaches in the Human Resources department, they bring in these external coaches so that learning can be broadened and strengthened for these valued employees.

It is widely known that most hired coaches are psychologically trained. To this end, it is not surprising that Kilburg (1996) found that most coaches use a set of behavioural techniques and methods to achieve the coaching goals.

Coaches go through a rigorous training process to obtain their coaching certification. As an important component of their training, coaches are required to clock coaching hours. There also exist coaches who do not have coaching certification. Instead they have extensive corporate experience.

And a coach is typically a paid role. In contrast, mentors and sponsors are typically non-paid roles. While a coach 'helps', a mentor 'gives' and a sponsor 'invests' (Hewlett, 2013).

1.2.2 Mentor

Mentors are there to give advice (Hewlett, 2013). They give you advice because they like you and they want to help you.

> A mentor is a neutral kind of person who is there to help you in any kind of way – he or she is there to listen, to observe and to play back and to paraphrase what you are going through in your life and work. A mentor is almost like a mirror to help you deal with whatever you are going through.

Mentors typically give two types of advice: (1) career advice and (2) psychosocial advice to enhance their mentees' development (Kram, 1983). They may act as a sounding board. They may also lend a listening ear – to listen to your problems, as well as offer advice to help you solve them.

Mentors can come from all levels of the organisational hierarchy. They may comprise of junior employees who possess a particular skill or knowledge that you want to learn, for example, social media skills. These mentors are known as reverse mentors (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012). Your peers may serve as your mentors (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Despite being at the same level of seniority, your peer mentors can offer you good advice especially when they have lived through an experience that you're going through. Peer mentors make great sounding boards. As mentioned earlier, traditionally, mentors are individuals who are more senior and more experienced. The advantage of these senior mentors is that they have past experiences to draw upon when giving guidance, encouragement and support to enhance your learning and development.

Given that mentors can sit on all the levels of the organisational hierarchy, they may or may not have the power or the political clout to drive career decisions that are necessary to influence your upward career mobility.

1.2.3 Sponsor

Rather than 'give', sponsors 'invest'. Sponsors are senior leaders who are committed to your career success. To further elaborate, sponsors first invest the time, effort and resources to prepare you for the top roles. When you are ready for the next big role, they often go 'out on a limb' to advocate and champion for you. Because sponsors are senior leaders with power and influence, they are able to leverage their political clout to open doors and drive decisions in your favour. They also have a voice at the decision-making tables to influence decisions pertaining to roles, opportunities or even pay raises.

> A sponsor is someone who is willing to teach you the ropes of success, as well as teach you on how to be versatile. And of course, position you for a better job.

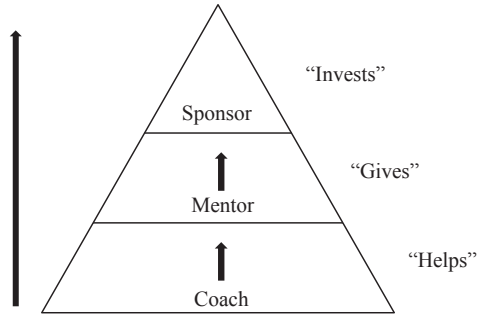

Fig. 1.1. Hierarchy of Roles – Coach, Mentor and Sponsor.
Source: Ang (2018, p. 40).

To prevent making a 'wrong' senior appointment, organisations typically appoint candidates with backing from sponsors. Without sponsorship, it is unlikely that individuals will be successful in securing the senior roles regardless of their track record, competence or leadership potential.

Having discussed the different roles of the coach, mentor and sponsor, I'd like to extend Hewlett's (2013) definition to use the words – 'help', 'give' and 'invest' to highlight the distinct differences among the three roles. Said in a different way, a coach helps you to develop a specific skill. A mentor gives you advice on how to deal with a particular issue. And a sponsor invests in you to help you succeed in your career.

With this in mind, I'd like to construct a hierarchy of roles to show how these roles stack up. In this hierarchy of roles, I'd place the coach at the lowest level of the hierarchy, followed by the mentor. At the top of this hierarchy of roles, I'd place the sponsor. This hierarchy of roles shows that the higher-order roles do more than the lower-order roles. Also, this hierarchy of roles suggests that a sponsor's role can combine the roles of the coach and mentor. In other words, a sponsor can be a coach plus a mentor and more (Fig. 1.1).

> I see a sponsor in its formal definition, is the one who culminates it all. A sponsor would sit at the highest level of the hierarchy of roles. And a sponsor is someone who stands up publicly for the individual in whom they believe, and thus, would push forward with the individual to secure the next big role.

1.3 Definition of Sponsorship

If a sponsor is an individual who invests in your career, then what sponsorship is – a committed relationship between a senior and influential leader (sponsor) and a younger and less experienced employee (sponsee) that is focused on driving career progression for the sponsee. It is a dyadic relationship and is 'a kind of relationship – in which the sponsor goes beyond giving feedback and advice, and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for the sponsee (Ibarra

et al., 2010, p. 82). Sponsorship also involves careful planning and developing a strategy to advance the sponsee's career objectives. And it requires the sponsor to leverage his or her networks and channels to seize opportunities for the sponsee.[9]

Your sponsor can 'turbo charge' your career because he or she is influential. When your sponsor talks about you – especially about your value, capability and leadership potential, he or she is promoting and giving you visibility with the other leaders of the organisation. As such, your sponsor can add weight to your candidacy while signalling that you are a 'safe bet' to consider for the role. Your sponsor can give you a head start by opening new opportunities in either your employing organisation or in a different organisation (Reskin, 1979). Your sponsor can also go 'out on a limb' to fight for your promotion (Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999). To this end, your sponsor can do much more than what normal career progression can do.

1.4 What Mentors Do

While it's clear we need sponsors to advance on the organisational hierarchy, we also need mentors despite recognising that their roles are limited.

According to mentorship literature, there are three specific functions that mentors do. It is important to recognise that these mentorship functions are not all-or-none functions. Depending on the mentor's capability and seniority, any given mentor may provide all or some of these functions. Given that every mentor relationship is unique, we can expect variances in the way these functions are provided.

The first function that mentors provide is career support. Often, this function is provided in the form of giving career advice. The more senior the mentor is, the more career advice he or she is able to provide. Additionally, senior mentors can give challenging assignments (Kram, 1983) to enhance their mentees' development.

The second function that mentors provide is psychosocial support. Psychosocial support encompasses friendship. It also encompasses giving emotional support. Your mentor can provide a safe platform for you to discuss all things personal and confidential including work and non-work issues (Noe, 1988). To this end, practitioners of mentorship recommend that you select mentors who are not in your direct chain of command to safeguard what you say from leaking upwards on the organisational hierarchy.

When Kram (1983) first defined this function, she found four specific sub-functions of psychosocial support including:

(1) Helping the mentee to develop a sense of professional identity
(2) Providing counselling
(3) Giving friendship and social support
(4) Role modelling

Even though role modelling was initially identified as a sub-function of psychosocial support, other mentorship scholars including Scandura (1992) argued