

Sponsorship: The Art of Advancing Others

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BY DEANNE M. KOLL

Next on the agenda at a seminar I was attending: “sponsorship.” I instinctively rolled my eyes. Before hearing the speaker, I had equated sponsorship and mentorship as one and the same. (And mentorship – like work-life balance – is a topic that I’ve heard and read far too much about, without any realistic takeaways.)

I was wrong. The speaker discussed that sponsorship – *unlike* mentorship – is when someone in power uses their position and capital to advance someone else. The idea is

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that the person in power “sponsors” the other person, by boosting the other person’s

advancement in work, networks, committees, firms, boards, and so on. It’s the idea that someone who has influence will use that influence for someone else, not only for themselves.

What an interesting concept, I thought. The speaker said that women, generally, are over-mentored and under-sponsored. Meaning, women are typically paired with or find other people with whom they feel comfortable discussing work issues but don’t find “sponsorship” in those relationships. So, the women may be more *comfortable* at a job, an event, a volunteer opportunity, or a committee, but those women don’t get the *advancements* as a result of that relationship with a mentor.

The speaker suggested that some barriers to women’s advancement are the following: 1) their feedback tends to focus on their personality, not their competence; 2) they experience the “motherhood penalty” or the “part-time penalty”; and 3) there is an implicit societal bias that a leader must be a male. A result of these barriers, the speaker argued, is that

women need *more* sponsorship to bridge the leadership gap.

This caused me to consider the many sponsorship opportunities that I have received over my legal career. Senior partners in my law firm have consistently used their influence to springboard my career forward with institutional clients. And I have wonderful lawyer friends who regularly present my name when there’s an opportunity for which they know I would be great. I had never really thought of what that assistance was called; I’ve always just been grateful that people have helped me rise in this profession.

That got me thinking: Should *I* be the one sponsoring *others* now? That’s not to suggest that I’m influential and powerful. But I’m a lot further along than I was 17 years ago, fresh out of law school. Why have I not been more deliberate about trying to sponsor other women? After all the sponsorship that I’ve received, how could I not be paying this forward? How self-centered am I? (Please, don’t ask my family.)

After listening to the speaker, I vowed to do better. And so, I ask the same of you: Have you received sponsorship in your career? And, if so, what are you doing to pay that forward? **WL**



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