

GENDER

The Real Benefit of Finding a Sponsor

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett

JANUARY 26, 2011

For decades, women have been knocking on the door to the C-suite but getting little or no response. They finally learned the magic password.

More than 200 women and men braved wind and snow recently to attend the launch of “The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling,” a new study by the Center for Work-Life Policy. Welcomed by American Express CEO Kenneth Chenault in Amex’s New York headquarters high above the Hudson, representatives of corporate giants from Intel, Deloitte, Morgan Stanley, and GE, as well as influential organizations like the UN and the CIA, explored why, despite solid gains in middle and senior management representation, women hold just 3% of Fortune 500 CEO seats – and how they can change that.

What’s been holding women back, the study found, isn’t a male conspiracy but rather a surprising absence of advocacy from men and women in positions of power. Women who are qualified to lead simply don’t have the powerful backing necessary to inspire, propel, and protect themselves on their journey through upper management. Women lack, in a word, *sponsorship*.

What exactly is a sponsor? How do sponsors differ from mentors? Clarifying the definitions was an eye-opener for many who, until now, lacked the vocabulary to articulate the issue. “We have never had a consistent language” to describe the phenomenon, observed Ed Gadsden, Chief Diversity Officer at Pfizer. “Not having that language hampered our ability to formulate effective actions and programs.”

“The Sponsor Effect” defines a sponsor as someone who uses chips on his or her protégé’s behalf and advocates for his or her next promotion as well as doing at least two of the following: expanding the perception of what the protégé can do; making connections to senior leaders; promoting his or her visibility; opening up career opportunities; offering advice on appearance and executive presence; making connections outside the company; and giving advice. Mentors proffer friendly advice. Sponsors pull you up to the next level.

Women have more than enough mentors but are only half as likely as their male peers to have a sponsor. Consequently, they miss out on the measurable impact of the sponsor effect:

- Without a sponsor behind them, 43% of men and 36% of women will ask their manager for a stretch assignment; with sponsor support, the numbers rise, respectively, to 56% and 44%.
- The majority of unsponsored men (67%) and women (70%) resist confronting their boss about a raise; with a sponsor in their corner, nearly half of men and 38% of women summon the courage to negotiate.
- A sponsor confers a statistical career benefit of anything from 22 to 30%, depending on what’s being requested (assignment or pay raise) and who’s asking (men or women).

Why do women fail to either access sponsorship or to make better use of it? Nods of agreement accompanied the revelation that the majority of ambitious women underestimate the pivotal role sponsorship plays in their advancement. “When you get to

the level where decisions are made about your career that are not just up to an individual manager, feedback from other leaders becomes crucial,” noted Rosalind Hudnell, Chief Diversity Officer for Intel. “Having a sponsor who can provide that endorsement is critical.”

More important, the study pointed out, even women who do grasp the importance of relationship capital fail to cultivate it effectively. Many feel that getting ahead based on “who you know” is an inherently unfair – even “dirty” – tactic, a sentiment reinforced by the toxic assumption that sponsor relationships between powerful men and their female protégées must involve sexual favors. Even as they’re passed over for a plum assignment, pay raise, or promotion, too many qualified women persist in believing that hard work alone will merit them the rewards and recognition they deserve.

The study provided what Barbara Adachi, National Managing Director for Deloitte’s Human Capital practice, calls “the missing link” between analytics and on-the-ground action – not just for individuals, but for corporations who want to make sure their talented women get the sponsorship they need to succeed.

“Demography is destiny,” proclaimed Chenault, explaining why he personally backed Amex’s Women in the Pipeline and at the Top, a program that teaches highly qualified women how to earn sponsorship and connects them with senior leaders. A more engaged workforce is what gives a company its competitive edge, he noted, and with women representing more than 60% of the company’s worldwide workforce, it’s imperative to find this talent-rich population the backers who will help it fulfill its potential.

“We want to win in the marketplace, with the right people in the right way,” Chenault said. “Sponsorship is one of the tools to do this.”



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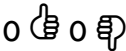
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