



White Paper

Advocacy vs. Mentoring

The relationships nurtured at work are a crucial element in career success. They provide advice, contacts, opportunities, recognition and the all-important recommendations that can catapult a career into high gear.

More significantly, the ability to cultivate and leverage work associations is increasingly agreed to be a core leadership competency. Successful leaders “work under the assumption that nothing important gets done alone,” writes emotional intelligence expert Daniel Goleman in *Primal Leadership*. “As the tasks of leadership become more complex and collaborative, relationship skills become increasingly pivotal.”

In parsing these relationships, however, it becomes clear that not all career propellants have equal power. While most people are familiar with mentoring, there is an even more important relationship called sponsorship, or advocacy. Many people often conflate the roles and impact of mentors and advocates. The fact is, while both are absolutely necessary to career success, they are distinctly different—and so is their ability to significantly change the course of a career.

Mentor vs. Advocate

Almost every organization recognizes the importance of mentors in leadership development. A recent article in *Harvard Business Review* notes that 59 percent of companies surveyed for a 2010 World Economic Forum report on corporate practices for gender diversity in 20 companies say they offer formal mentoring programs.¹

In classic forms of mentoring, a more experienced leader acts as a role model and close advisor to a junior protégé, imparting his/her knowledge and professional expertise. Done well, mentoring is dynamic, personal—and effective. According to “The Sponsor Effect,” a new report from the Center for Work-Life Policy (CWLP), people who are mentored garner more promotions, higher salaries, more career satisfaction and even report being less stressed than those who lack such guidance.²

But even when the mentoring relationship works as it should, it can at best offer back-room support, not front-and-center championing. Furthermore, with the proliferation of these programs—from mentoring circles to peer mentoring and virtual mentoring—a kind of fatigue ensues. “The intensity of the mentoring relationship fades,” says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, CWLP

¹Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carter, and Christine Sylva, “Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 2010.

²Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Kerrie Peraino, Laura Sherbin and Karen Sumberg, “The Sponsor Effect,” *Harvard Business Review Research Report*, forthcoming January 2011.

founder. “What started out as a strategic investment initiative for long-term growth devolves into speed-dating tactics for acute crises.”

Advocates do a lot of what mentors do: They, too, are experienced senior leaders who take a personal interest in actively shepherding, coaching and promoting a protégé’s career. They give advice. They offer guidance on how to improve one’s presentation of self. They enlarge the protégé’s perception of what he/she can do. They network on their behalf. But they do much more.

“The Sponsor Effect” offers a robust, multi-dimensional definition:³

A sponsor is someone who, at a minimum:

- Uses chips on my behalf
- Advocates for my next promotion

In addition, a sponsor comes through on at least *two* of the following fronts:

- Expands my perception of what I can do
- Makes connections to senior leaders
- Promotes my visibility
- Connects me to career opportunities
- Advises me on my appearance
- Makes connections outside my company
- Gives career advice

One hallmark of advocacy is its inherently public nature. Advocates stick their neck out. While a lot of mentoring can be done behind the scenes, sponsors put their name next to your performance and make their support highly visible.

Marilyn Nagel, Cisco’s chief diversity officer, sees the difference in terms of time horizon. “A mentor can help you do a better job in your role or get you over a sticky situation,” she says. “An advocate is really about your future.”

In addition, she notes, the driving force in a mentorship lies with the mentee, whereas in sponsorship, it is the sponsor who directs and fuels the relationship. “The energy of the relationship goes from pull to push. The advocate looks for opportunities to leverage the talent’s skills and abilities in a larger capacity, to open doors for the talent and to introduce opportunities for exposure, to demonstrate to a different or higher-level audience what you can bring to the company.”

The ultimate difference is that an advocate “has the juice,” notes Hewlett. That is, they’re in a position to make *you* visible to leaders within the company, and to top people outside as well. They attend those roundtable discussions that can make or break your career. Their authority allows them to speak to your strengths, make a case for your advancement, and be heard in your absence. Where a mentor might help you envision your next position, an advocate will open the door for you. They connect you to career opportunities. And they don’t stop with one promotion:

³ Ibid.

They'll see you to the threshold of power, protecting, preparing and pushing their charges all the way to the top. No mentor has *that* kind of juice.

In short, says Hewlett, "Mentors give you time. Sponsors get you the next promotion."

The effects of having an advocate are noticeable, according to research cited in "The Sponsor Effect":

- **Advocates facilitate stretch assignments.** With an advocate in their corner, 56 percent of men and 44 percent of women were likely to ask their manager for a stretch assignment, compared to 43 percent of men and 36 percent of women on their own.
- **Advocates impact pay.** 49 percent of sponsored men and 38 percent of sponsored women are likely to ask their manager for a raise, compared to 37 percent of men and 30 percent of women without sponsors.
- **Advocates create career traction.** Among employees with advocates, 23 percent more men and 19 percent more women are satisfied with their rate of advancement than their unsupported colleagues.
- **Advocates open doors,** boosting prospects for advancement 13 percent for men and 11 percent for women.

A Catalyst survey describes a similar impact. Among survey participants who had advocates in 2008, 72 percent of the men and 65 percent of the women had received one or more promotions by 2010.⁴

Advocates Level the Playing Field for Everyone

In her 2004 book, *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives*, psychiatrist Anna Fels makes the case that ambition requires two critical components to flower: mastery of a skill and recognition of that mastery.⁵ "Doing a thing well can be a reward in and of itself," she points out. "But the pursuit of mastery over an extended period of time requires a specific context: An evaluating, encouraging audience must be present for skills to develop."⁶

Interestingly, Fels' argument applies across a full spectrum of under-represented employee groups. Data gathered by a variety of research sources proves that by giving often-overlooked groups, such as ethnic minorities and LGBTs, more recognition than they're comfortable asking for, advocacy can make an enormous difference in invigorating their ambition and driving their engagement.

In ground-breaking research on mentoring minorities, Harvard Business School professor David A. Thomas found that a two-track system favoring whites over minorities still prevails at major U.S. corporations—with predictably pernicious results. High-potential minorities, he writes, "became demotivated—especially when they saw their white colleagues receive plum assignments and promotions—and de-skilled. As a result, their performance fell to a level that matched their modest rewards."⁷

⁴ "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women."

⁵ Anna Fels, *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

⁶ Anna Fels, "Do Women Lack Ambition?," *Harvard Business Review*, April 2004.

⁷ David A. Brown, "Race Matters: The Truth about Mentoring Minorities," *Harvard Business Review*, April 2001.

But some minorities—Thomas’ study comprised African-American, Asian- and Hispanic-American executives—prevailed. Why? “Even though the minority executives were not on an obvious fast track, influential mentors were investing in them as if they were which helped prevent them from either ratcheting down their performance or simply leaving the organization.”⁸

Thomas concludes, “The people of color who advance the furthest all share one characteristic—a strong network of mentors and corporate sponsors who nurture their professional development.”⁹

The Center for Work-Life Policy came to a similar conclusion in its study of high-potential Latinas. When asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how their company could most effectively help them succeed in their careers, their top suggestions were: provide access to senior leaders (9.2); provide leadership coaching for high-potential Latinas (9.1); and assign more mentors to Latinas (8.8). The employers also recognized the value of these actions, giving high ratings to “provide leadership coaching for high-potential Latinas” (9.2) and “provide access to senior leaders” (8.6).¹⁰

Advocates also make a significant difference for the LGBT population. Recent data from the Center for Work-Life Policy found that 67 percent of sponsored LGBTs are likely to ask their manager for a raise compared to 25 percent of their unsponsored colleagues. And an astonishing 92 percent of LGBTs with an advocate are satisfied with their rate of advancement compared to just 41 percent of LGBTs without a sponsor.¹¹

In short, advocacy has the potential to amplify *everyone’s* career.

Strategic Matchmaking

What does it take to build a network of powerful advocates?

Too many talented people are remarkably obtuse about associating themselves with an advocate. They trust that serendipity will pair them with the right sponsor at the right time, they limit themselves to a single sponsor or they don’t aim high enough in their sponsor relationships.

“Your network should be the level you want to get to,” says Nagel. “If you want to be executive vice president, have a network of executive vice presidents. Business people promote the careers of the people they know. When you have leadership review discussions and no one knows you, you have only your boss to advocate for you. When you have five people advocating for you, you have a much better chance.”

An increasing number of companies agree that developing these powerful relationships is too important to leave up to chance. Companies like American Express, Cisco, Deloitte, Intel and Morgan Stanley all have recently introduced formal programs for strategic matchmaking.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Center for Work-Life Policy, “*Sin Fronteras: Celebrating and Capitalizing on the Strengths of Latina Executives*,” 2007.

¹¹ Center for Work-Life Policy, 2010.

The Inclusive Advocacy Program

Cisco's *Inclusive Advocacy Program* (IAP) is the most far-reaching and the most robust of the offerings, and, as it completes its second full year, has a proven track record of success. Launched in November 2008 under the aegis of the Global Inclusion and Diversity team, its goal was to open doors, create new networks and develop a diverse talent pipeline across the enterprise at a very senior level. The results have been so strong that the pilot has evolved into a full-fledged program.

The original program targeted 30 of the company's highest-potential diverse talent; it has since slimmed down to 26, each paired with an "advocate" in a different function and at the VP or SVP level. The talent/advocate pairs are divided into four cohorts, whose diverse make-up reflects the larger IAP and supports the program's larger vision of building networks across geographies, generations, cultures and business functions.

Although there are fewer pairs, they are more diverse than ever: The talent comes from six different functions in every theater of operations; their advocate partners are located in Australia, Canada, France, Singapore, the U.K. and the U.S. Meanwhile, the smaller numbers encourage more open dialogue and deeper relationships within the cohorts, as well as with the other IAP participants.

The time line of the program has expanded from nine months to one year, with required monthly meetings among talent/advocate pairs and periodic get-togethers for the cohorts and entire group. But program leaders Randall Lane and Stacè Millender say that many pairs connect on their own even more frequently, either traveling to each other's country or taking advantage of Cisco's TelePresence and WebEx technology. The I&D team provides a plethora of tools to encourage robust conversation and enable the pairs to get to know each other, envision possibilities for working together, and establish goals and agreements.

The fundamental goals remain the same. Foremost is to expand the advocates' network of new sources of knowledge capital and the talents' network of influential contacts. Equally important, though, is the development of the talent candidates' global leadership qualities, increased exposure throughout the company, and, ultimately, career enrichment and advancement, either in the form of cross-functional movement, new assignments, more touch points and/or promotion.

Robust Results

When the program was launched, the expectation was that it would take 18 months to produce any measurable result. Instead, within a year—and despite 2009's tough economy—one of the participants received a promotion and another earned a new geographic posting. More than 60 percent of the talent participants agreed that "because of IAP, I have achieved tangible progress toward meeting my career advancement goals." A similar number agreed that "my advocate actively exposed me to a greater network and new circles across Cisco." One woman said, "I feel this program gave me the exposure I needed to get promoted."

The results continue to exceed the original expectations, often in unexpected ways.

- **Benefits for Cisco:** IAP not only creates connections between dissimilar people but opens channels of communication. "The buzz on Cisco is that people grow up in their silos," explains Lane. "We've all heard of people saying, 'I want to hire someone I'm

most comfortable with.’ We’ve created levels of comfort that didn’t exist before—and provide value in the process.”

The program has increased the flow of ideas and directly affected innovation thanks to opportunities for cross-functional knowledge sharing that didn’t exist before. For example, one talent pointed out to her advocate that her customer services function served more of a purpose than most people in an engineering- and sales-focused organization gave it credit for. “We’re only being utilized for *ABC*, but we could do *EFG*, and here’s how it could help not just your group but every function in the company,” she pointed out. The results of such partnerships shave time off processes and break down biases among silos.

- **Benefits for the talent:** Among the goals of IAP is to offer talent an opportunity to contribute their own unique characteristics and to enhance their visibility. For the customer services manager, the benefits of her advocate relationship have raised her job profile far more than she could have imagined. “People have started to think about her group and her in a different way,” says Millender. “This opens doors to help her do her job better.”

Equally important, being paired with an advocate in a different function gives talent the tools to breach the walls of functional silos and bridge geographical moats. Forging these connections, says Millender, “makes people more open to seeing transferable skills. And when she wants to push the envelope, it will be a catalyst to jobs outside her function.”

Not surprisingly, this sort of experience produces another bonus: “She feels more valued personally and professionally,” Millender notes.

- **Benefits for the advocates:** While many advocates brought extensive existing networks to the program, participating in IAP demonstrated that their networks were often limited to their own functional silos—while at the same time, offering a solution. “Now advocates talk about expanding their networks around company initiatives,” says Lane. “They can leverage their partnerships to get work done outside of their silos.”

The program’s creators had hoped that participation would spur advocates to new ways of thinking about work, as well as broadening their approach to people from different cultures, functions and background. In fact, advocates praise the program for making them realize that they had inadvertently distanced themselves from the front lines and for providing opportunities for a fresh perspective. “Often when they’re creating strategy, the news comes from other executives,” says Lane. “It’s great to be paired with people at the director level, whose perspective on market adjacencies and even the direction of the company may be different. They carry that voice back to executive discussions.”

Increased exposure to diverse talent as a result of participating in the program has led to one of the most surprising benefits: a feeling of renewed or enhanced engagement on the part of advocates. One advocate is a general counsel from a company Cisco had recently acquired. “He saw himself at the tail end of his career,” Millender recalls. Through his talent partner, though, he was introduced to people he would never have met, leading to participation on boards and councils he would not have had access to. “Now he has an

invigorated sense of where he is in his career and how he can help others,” says Millender. “He has completely changed his tune and is a lot more involved.”

As the program enters its third year, its alumni have created a network of their own. The shared trust and experience in turn engenders more trust and a willingness to take on new experiences to add to their resume and repertoire of skills. “Prior to participating in IAP,” Millender notes, “some people said, ‘I never would have considered an international assignment. But now that I have an advocate in Singapore or Australia, if I go there, I’ll know someone will be my champion.’”

The connections and opportunities seeded through the program also speak directly to the issue of employee engagement, always a crucial issue in tight economic times. Studies of why top performers love their jobs have shown that promotion and compensation are rarely among the top motivators.¹² Instead, what keeps these workplace dynamos humming at peak capacity is a combination of stimulating and challenging work, high-quality colleagues, and recognition of their abilities. IAP offers all of those ingredients and more, both for talent and advocates. “And the more engaged they are, the more committed and loyal they are to the company,” notes Lane.

“There’s really nothing like this program out there,” says Marilyn Nagel. “Thanks to IAP, each advocate and talent gains a network of 1,326 potential new relationships, enabling them to connect with people around the world in ways they never would have before.”

Conclusion

Albert Einstein said, “The problems we face today cannot be solved by the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”

As they compete in a multi-faceted global marketplace, smart companies have come to realize that the traditional models of leadership development no longer suffice. Talent must be drawn from increasingly diverse pools and nurtured in new ways if organizations hope to gain and maintain a competitive edge.

¹² Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *Top Talent: Keeping Performance Up When Business Is Down* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009).