

# THE VALUE OF SPONSORSHIP

Accelerating the advancement of women in the workplace.

BY KATE BENSEN • ROBERT POGATETZ PAINTING

Although the number of women has surpassed men in many professions, progress into the upper ranks of management remains slow. In The Chicago Network's annual Census Report for 2011, women represented 14.9 percent of executive officers in 50 of Chicago's largest publicly reporting companies, and these figures are mirrored nationally.

Meaningful change only comes when a diverse workforce is a priority for an organization and that priority is communicated from the most senior levels of management. At organizations with CEOs who "get it" (and there are many), this recognition results in companywide talent development and mentoring initiatives. The most progressive organizations recognize accelerating the advancement of women to positions of increasing responsibility, and ultimately the ranks of senior management, means making one of the most powerful elements of success – a sponsor – part of the broader corporate ethos.

Sponsors are often confused with mentors, and the distinction is vital. Mentors are often, but not always, employees of the same company; they assist employees in understanding the cultural by-ways of their firm and often provide emotional support and career advice. A sponsor is someone, in the same organization, in a position to influence advancement by making sure an employee is considered. This happens almost instinctively in the case of men helping men, but to help narrow the gap between men and women in senior ranks, companies must erase the disparity between men and women who are sponsored.

According to *The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling*, a study on sponsorship published in the Harvard Business Review in 2010, 13 percent of women versus 19 percent of men at large companies have sponsors. The authors are blunt: "Women who are qualified to lead simply don't have the powerful backing necessary to inspire, propel and protect them through the perilous straits of upper management. Women lack, in a word, *sponsorship*."

A common refrain is: women receive too much mentoring, too little sponsoring. The result is too many women are under-prepared and less visible when the opportunity for promotion arises. Kelly Grier, office managing partner at Ernst & Young, LLP (E&Y) and member of The Chicago Network says, "Sponsorship is at the top of the list to increase diversity. It is the most potent tactical aspect."

Leading companies understand there is a compelling business reason to make sponsorship integral to diversity management. Sponsorship programs at E&Y have been in place for two decades. For the past 10 years, "at the center" of the firm's Inclusiveness Steering Committee strategy, E&Y identifies the key factors to advancement and tracks the number of women who advance, the number who advance to manager

and the percentages of women to men.

The role of a sponsor carries responsibilities and rewards. A sponsor must have power, influence and credibility. A sponsor also "needs to know the value proposition of the employee and everything about her," says Andrea S. Kramer, partner at McDermott, Will & Emery, who's also a founding member of the firm's Diversity Committee and member of The Chicago Network. Ms. Kramer, who works with one or two young lawyers (both men and women) every year, reminds us the sponsor must be clear: sponsoring, unlike mentoring, is "specific to advancement."

Sponsorship can last for years as you help navigate an employee through a full range of emotional, cultural and job-related challenges. It can also be a bit risky. The sponsor may be working with an employee in another region or department, with different reporting responsibilities. "A good sponsor truly believes this is the right thing to do, and it is not just politically correct," says Cheryl K. Beebe, executive vice president and chief financial officer of Ingredion. "As a sponsor, you're putting your name on the line and taking an active role in seeing the employee is assigned to a position," explains Ms. Beebe, also a member of The Chicago Network. "You sometimes need to act like a parent and conduct very pointed conversations. And, if the sponsored employee fails, you need to be clear why this happened."

Women can be sponsored by women or men. But, this can be tricky. Why? A relationship between (most typically) an older, more powerful man and a younger woman raises the specter of impropriety. The authors of *The Sponsor Effect* found "the majority of senior men (64 percent) at the level of vice president and above are reluctant to have a one-on-one meeting with junior women, and half of junior women, likewise, avoid seeking out such contact." While one hopes these types of stereotypes fade over time, companies must set the cultural tone so the sponsorship value proposition does not appear to be risky when the employee being sponsored is a woman.

The qualified employee cannot wait for lightning to strike. The employee must be active and, like the sponsor, purposeful. In *Profession Advancement and Gender Stereotypes: The 'Rules' for Better Gender Communications*, Ms. Kramer writes, "as women, we must learn to promote ourselves, even if this means stepping out of our comfort zones. Without question, this means communicating more like men: being clear, self-confident, forthright and proud of our accomplishments."

Sponsorship programs are not the only answer to ensuring diversity. But, as the battle for talent – and competitive advantage – continues, companies that understand the value of effective sponsorship can be positioned to move ahead. ■

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