

# THE WOMAN UP PROJECT

## Making the Most of the Mentor/Mentee Relationship

By Rachel Bates

I have been incredibly fortunate throughout my career to have developed meaningful relationships with attorneys and other professionals who have contributed to my success. Many of these individuals served as mentors — and some also acted as sponsors. A sponsor is a more senior professional who is invested in a protégé's career advancement and advocates on her or his behalf. While mentors can help you navigate the daily challenges that you may encounter, a sponsor directly helps you advance. Developing a relationship with a sponsor can make the difference between thriving and stagnating. Often a mentor relationship with a senior member of your team will grow into a successful sponsor relationship.

In my experience, most successful professionals want to help people on their teams succeed. As I have become more senior, I have found mentoring younger attorneys to be very rewarding. These relationships have given me perspective, improved my leadership skills, and taught me valuable lessons. Thus, while it is crucial for young professionals to have mentors and sponsors to succeed, it is also important for senior professionals to cultivate these relationships. When mentees, mentors, and sponsors focus on common goals, they will enjoy mutually beneficial relationships that can lead to a more meaningful and rewarding work environment. The following tips can be useful in fostering a productive mentor/mentee relationship:

### Mentees: It Starts with You

- **Seek out various mentors.** It is unlikely that one person will be able to provide all of the training, feedback, opportunities, and advice needed to guide your professional development. Choose different mentors to strengthen different skills sets. Be thoughtful about seeking out mentors who can become sponsors and provide you not only with training and advice but also with tangible opportunities for advancement. The most positive mentor/mentee relationships often develop organically through interaction at work. Show your supervisors that you are willing to go the “extra mile” to encourage them to invest additional time in your development.
- **Take ownership of the relationship and your career.** Be thoughtful about your career goals, both in the short and long terms. As you begin any mentor/mentee relationship, identify objectives and milestones or outcomes you would like to achieve. Share these with your mentor and brainstorm steps to help you achieve these goals. Be open to suggestions from a mentor about different ways to attain your objectives. Your sponsor can help put those steps into action by providing you with the right opportunities either directly or through other people.
- **Be persistent and be available.** When you identify someone at the top of her or his field, that person will likely have limited time. Do not be discouraged if your mentor or sponsor needs to reschedule. Instead, be flexible and offer a variety of times and ways to connect that accommodate both of your schedules. Check in regularly with updates on your milestones and action items and discuss new challenges or recent successes. Take advantage of all interactions with your mentor or sponsor, including work assignments, as a way to grow professionally. Ask questions about their style, their decision-making process, as well as industry insights.

- **Be open to feedback and take risks.** Open yourself up to constructive criticism and feedback—as well as differing points of view—from your mentor or sponsor. Accept that you may hold unconscious bias or lack knowledge on a topic and recognize that a mentor or sponsor's advice may push you outside of your comfort zone. Use your mentor or sponsor as a resource for identifying these stretch opportunities or projects and take them. Do not let the fear of failure hold you back.

- **Turn your mentor into a sponsor.** When the fit is right, a senior mentor can become an invaluable sponsor. Ask your mentor to help you advance your visibility and to showcase your skills. Look for openings where your mentor can introduce you to key internal people in your organization and in their external network. When you prove your ability and dedication proactively through your actions, mentors gladly become sponsors.

### Mentors: Go Beyond

- **Be proactive.** Take the initiative to start a mentor/mentee relationship with a member of your team or organization. Provide insight and practical suggestions on skills that can help your mentee develop in her or his career. Become a sponsor, not just a mentor, by actively promoting your mentee's talents and strengths within your organization and professional circle. Provide opportunities for her or him to be visible internally and externally.
- **Provide real feedback and strategies to improve and grow.** Tailor your advice to your mentee to provide concrete, and where possible, actionable opportunities for improvement and growth. Help your mentee map out goals and determine steps and milestones on the way to achieving them.
- **Don't just teach ... promote.** When you discern your mentee's strengths, shine a light on them. Give the credit to your mentee when she or he provides a solution to a problem or an innovative idea. Actively broadcast the successes of your mentee internally and externally. Provide your mentee opportunities to take on more responsibility or to lead a team or project.
- **Learn from your mentee.** The most successful among us continue to learn and grow throughout our careers. Be open to understanding different needs, motivations, and new ways to approach challenges. Listening to and learning from your mentee will enhance your own leadership.



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