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## **Best Practices for Women Seeking Sponsorship in Corporations**

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**Best Practices for Women Seeking Sponsorship in Corporations**

By

Kimberly Hayman

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership**

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**St. Paul, Minnesota**

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**Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership**

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**Abstract**

Women are underrepresented in corporate leadership, and many sources recommend sponsorship as an effective strategy to increase the percentage of women in leadership. A sponsor uses his or her influence and advocates on behalf of an individual protégé's career advancement. This thesis examines sponsorship through the lens of social capital theory and identifies best practices for women seeking sponsorship for career advancement in corporate leadership. Through interviews with eight women corporate leaders and a review of the published literature, I identified best practices for women in corporations to source, select, and secure effective sponsor(s) to advance in leadership roles.

## **Preface**

The topic of sponsorship interests me personally, as well as academically. I have worked over twenty years in for-profit corporations and aspire to advance in further leadership roles. I had been a people-leader for many years, however I found myself seemingly blocked from further leadership advancement. I switched organizations and took an individual contributor role to expand my skills and experience. In the last few years, I have been looking for an avenue back into leadership, and that path has not been clear.

During the Masters of Arts in Organizational Leadership program at St. Catherine University, I happened upon the topic of sponsorship. For one of my classes, prior to this thesis, I researched sponsorship and why it is an effective strategy for increasing the number of women in leadership. Even with that knowledge, I was still left with practical questions about how to go about finding and gaining a sponsor to help me move into a leadership role.

Researching this topic has “connected the dots” for me and helped me understand how to pursue sponsorship in my own career. I am pleased that the results of this research paper fill gaps in the existing research literature. I am most excited to share the recommended best practices with others and help more women leverage sponsorship to advance in their careers and further close the gender gap in corporate leadership.

There is an old adage: “it’s not what you know, but who you know.” The idea being that personal connections will help get you ahead more than knowledge and qualifications. It’s a familiar storyline in popular movies, television, or books where a competent person gets passed over for someone less capable but who is closer with higher-ups. Such is the case in American corporations where who you know is essential for climbing the corporate ladder and moving up in leadership. Personal connections are often more important than knowledge or skills.

Ethnologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her seminal book *Men and Women of the Corporations* (1977), describes corporations as large, complex systems where informal social networks flourish and power comes from social connections. She found that personal allegiances and aligning with the right people were important in order to get ahead.

One way these personal allegiances and social networks lead to career advancement is through sponsorship (Coleman, 1990). Leaders will sponsor, or advocate, on behalf of less experienced protégés for promotion, therefore leveraging their credibility and influence to bring up new leaders. Many sources recommend sponsorship as an effective strategy to increase the percentage of women in leadership (Proudford, & Washington, 2017; Cisco, 2018; Hewlett, Sherbin, Sumberg, 2010), as women are underrepresented in corporate leadership (Desilver, 2018). If more women can secure effective sponsors, then more women will advance to higher levels of leadership.

### **Purpose Statement**

This research project pursued practical advice for women seeking sponsorship for career advancement in corporate leadership. Such as: how does a woman go about getting a sponsor? Where should she look for sources of sponsors? What criteria should she use for selecting a sponsor? And ultimately, how does she secure the support of a person as an effective sponsor? First, I defined sponsorship and then examined existing scholarly literature for research-based advice helpful to women seeking sponsorship. I interviewed a number of women in corporate leadership to learn what sponsorship approaches have worked for them. From these life experiences and existing research literature, I formulated recommendations, or best practices, for women in corporations to source, select, and secure effective sponsor(s) to advance in leadership roles. Best practices are practices learned from actual experience that have been helpful and effective for a number of people, such as the research in this study (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). These best practices recommendations are not meant as instructions or prescriptions that will work in every situation with every person. However, these best practices intend to provide reliable guidance that women can adapt to their situation.

### **Conceptual Context**

#### **Definitions**

For this study, a *sponsor* is defined as someone who uses his or her influence and advocates on behalf another, a *protégé*, for promotion, and specifically in this study, for promotion into leadership roles in corporations (Ayyala, et al., 2019; Friday, 2004). *Sponsorship* is the act of a sponsor advocating for the protégé. The sponsor and the protégé may be in the same organization

or not, although the sponsor must have influence or be in a position of influence to be an effective sponsor. A protégé is not necessarily younger or less experienced than her sponsor (Friday, 2004).

Sponsorship may be very short term, such as a single event of the sponsor advocating for the protégé. Sponsorship may also occur over a longer time period, where the sponsor recognizes a protégé as having high potential and actively supports the career of the protégé on multiple occasions by “nominating them for leadership opportunities and introducing them to important career networks” (Ayyala et al., 2019, p.95).

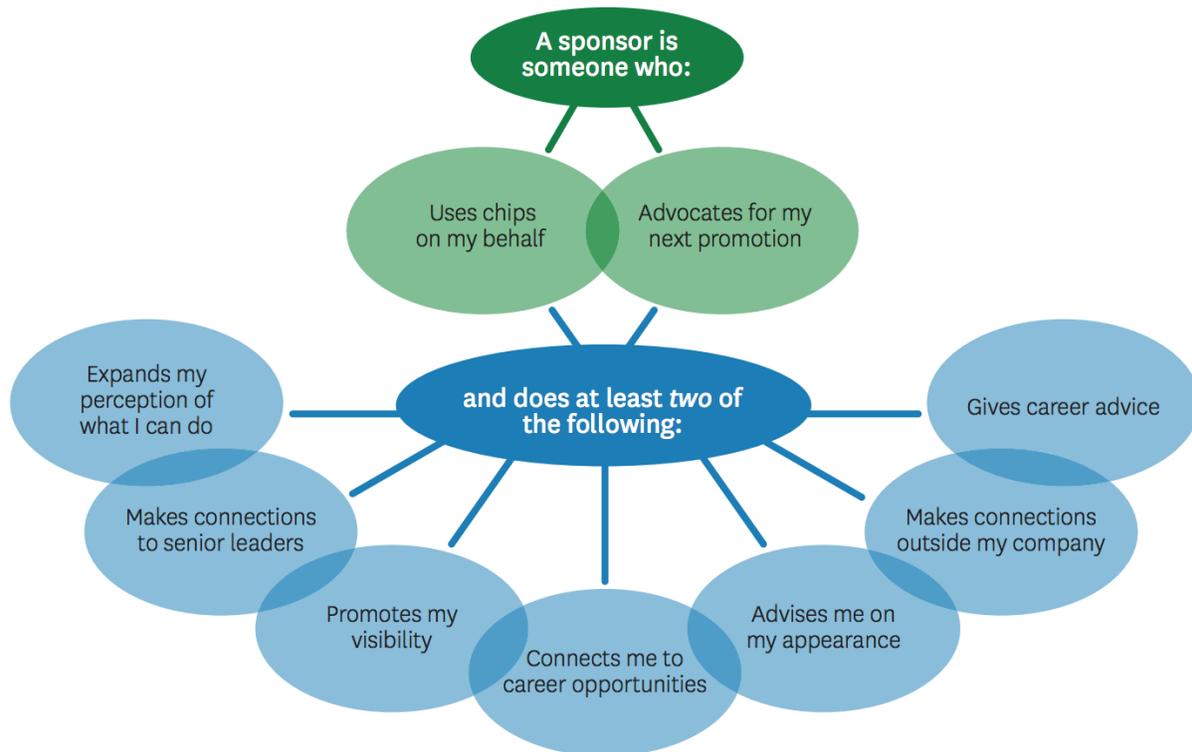
Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg further define sponsorship in more detail, as shown in Figure 1 (2010). They define a sponsor as exhibiting two essential behaviors and at least two of seven additional behaviors. By their definition, an essential part of sponsorship is advocating for a protégé’s promotion and using “chips,” or influence, on behalf of the protégé. This is similar to Ayyala et al.’s definition of sponsorship as advocacy. By chips, Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg are referring to something similar to a bargaining chip, as defined by Merriam-Webster: “something valuable that can be used for advantage in negotiation for trade” (n.d.). For instance, a sponsor may have helped another leader in prior business dealings, such as allying with them in a key internal political decision, or supporting their business initiative with resources from the sponsor’s own department, thereby the sponsor gains “chips” with that leader. Later, the sponsor trades those chips with that leader for their support of the protégé.

Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg go further to define additional specific behaviors by a sponsor: expanding the protégé’s perception of what she can do, making connections to senior

leaders, promoting visibility of the protégé, connecting the protégé to career opportunities, advising protégé on her appearance, making connections outside the protégé's company, and giving career advice to the protégé (2010). In these additional behaviors, we see elements that appear similar to coaching or mentorship, such as expanding the protégé's perception of what she can do, giving career advice, and advising the protégé on her appearance. To clarify regarding "advice on appearance," Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg are referring to leadership perception, credibility perception, and visibility, not clothing selection or physical attire. For instance, a sponsor might coach a protégé on what to say in a presentation to upper management, or how to navigate challenging political situations on a key project in ways that will add to the protégé's credibility and leadership potential in the eyes of others. Kanter notes the importance of perception and visibility for those wanting to rise in the organization: "public appearance was more important than substance" (1977, p. 180).

Figure 1 *The definition of sponsorship* (Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg, 2010, p. 56)

### The definition of sponsorship

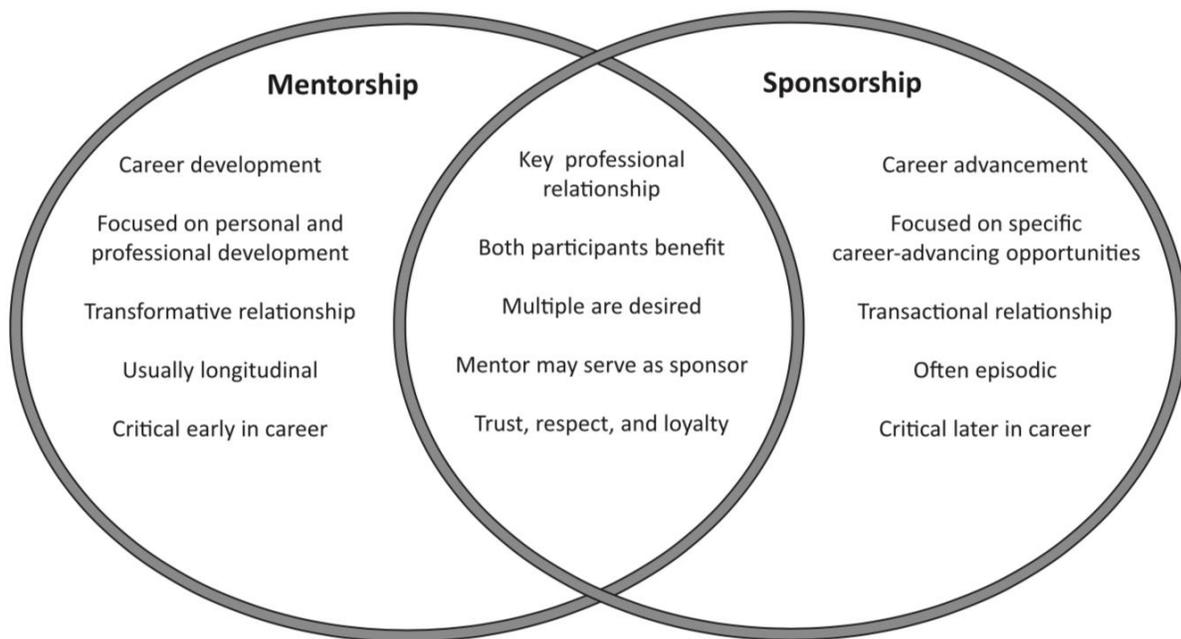


### Differences Between Sponsorship and Mentorship

Sponsorship and mentorship have distinct differences; yet they also have some overlapping characteristics. In discussing sponsorship, it is helpful to differentiate it from mentorship, which is more commonly known (Friday, 2004). A *mentor* is a teacher or advisor who provides both career and psychosocial support. Ayyala et al. describe mentorship as “highly personal and transformative,” whereas sponsorship is a “transactional relationship or strategic alliance where each part has clear goals and expectation” (2019, p. 98). Ayyala et al. further detail overlapping and distinct differences in Figure 2 below. Mentorship is distinctly focused on personal and professional development of the protégé, with transformation occurring over an

extensive period of time. Sponsorship rather is focused on specific career-advancing opportunities, and sponsorship is often episodic and transactional. In regards to overlap, both mentorship and sponsorship are key professional relationships characterized by trust, respect, and loyalty. Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg's definition of sponsorship, in Figure 1 above, also contains developmental aspects quite consistent with mentorship, such as "gives career advice," "expands my perception of what I can do" and "advises me on my appearance" (2010).

Figure 2 *Mentorship and Sponsorship* (Ayyala, et al., 2019, p.96)



Friday (2004) provides guidance as to which is appropriate for which situation. Mentorship is appropriate when a protégé needs to improve his or her competence and effectiveness on the job. Sponsorship is appropriate when a protégé seeks to advance within the organization.

Mentorship and sponsorship are not necessarily disconnected. There can be a progression from mentorship to sponsorship, where a mentor agrees to act as a sponsor for the protégé. However, the movement between mentor and sponsor is not necessarily linear; and, very frequently, a mentor and a sponsor are different people (Friday, 2004; Helms, Arfkin, and Bellar, 2016).

### **Sponsorship as Strategy to Increase Women in Leadership**

Kanter (1977) recommends corporations expand sponsorship specifically to more women and other categories of people who are in the minority of corporate leadership. In her study of corporations, she found that upward mobility is ultimately controlled by selection of the elite in power, rather than a meritocratic contest. Even in a corporation that had “a rating system that tried to make promotional decisions more open and equitable at lower levels, sponsors still made a difference” (p.182). Kanter further states that not only were sponsors important for men’s upward mobility, they were absolutely essential for women. As a minority in corporate leadership, women need even more access to power and influence upward as provided by sponsors. Kanter also recognized that sponsorship could be harder for women to acquire. Leaders tend to favor and promote people from social similar backgrounds, meaning that men in corporate leadership, who are the majority, will overlook women.

A number of leadership research articles also strongly recommend sponsorship for increasing the number of women in leadership across a variety of industries where women are underrepresented in leadership. From a study of female leaders in emergency medicine, Guptill, Reibling and Clem (2018) identified sponsorship and supportive network connections as having

a powerful impact on the trajectory of women leaders' careers in emergency medicine. In their study's conclusion, they recommend leaders be intentional about linking emerging leaders to both sponsors and mentors. The women in their study defined sponsorship, very similar to the definition provided above, as "highly placed individuals who advocated for the woman's advancement" (p.6). Additionally, they also recommend mentorship to assist in protégé leadership development, identifying stretch assignments, and influencing skill development. In a study of CPA firms, El-Ramly and Dennis (2019) recommend sponsorship programs in order to attract and retain a diverse pool of talent in the leadership pipeline. In their survey of CPA firms with formal sponsorship programs, nearly all (97%) reported an impact on the firm's ability to attract and retain talent. They go on to describe a toolkit of resources and recommendations for other firms to implement formal sponsorship programs. In their toolkit, they recommend setting up a committee to oversee the sponsorship program, to select protégés, and to evaluate matches. The toolkit also includes information that can be used to communicate to the organizations about the program, in order to set guidelines and expectations. Additionally, the kit includes protégé and sponsor questionnaires, a protégé self-assessment, and sponsor & protégé debriefing tool. From other existing research, Proudford and Washington (2017) summarize that sponsorship, not mentorship, has the potential for significant impact to the advancement of women in corporate leadership. They adopt a definition of sponsorship from Ibarra et al.; a sponsor "goes beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate" (2010, p 82). They describe that sponsorship matching in corporations can disrupt existing talent management in ways that broaden opportunities for more women. Furthermore, they conclude

that sponsorship is imperative for women who aspire to corporate leadership and call for corporations to institute processes for matching sponsors and protégés as part of talent management routines.

The effectiveness of sponsorship can be seen in the case of sponsorship programs at Cisco Systems, Inc., the worldwide Internet technology leader and public company (NASDAQ: CSCO) founded in 1984. In 2008, Cisco launched a sponsorship program called the Inclusive Advocacy Program (IAP) and has continued to expand on their programs since then (Cisco, 2018). As of 2018, they had at least two sponsorship programs, one specifically for women. “The Multiplier Effect” program asks leaders to commit to sponsoring at least one diverse candidate for career advancement and provides a guide with suggestions for finding and supporting a protégé. As of 2018, 42 percent of executive leaders and 36 percent of vice presidents within Cisco pledged to be a part of The Multiplier Effect program. The DARE program “encourages and inspires women who are just starting out in their careers—focusing on key issues like visibility, internal politics, and positive branding” (p. 53). The DARE program has elements of both mentorship, such as providing advice, and also aspects of sponsorship such as visibility and internal politics (Cisco, 2018).

The results of these programs at Cisco are dramatic. Data has shown that the DARE program increases women’s odds of promotion by 50 percent. The participants in the DARE program, in combination with the participants of Cisco’s women’s peer group named JUMP, had a combined retention rate of 94 percent. Overall, at Cisco in fiscal year 2018, “more than 60 percent of the women who were promoted to management had attended at least one of our

targeted programs, contributing to a significant 6 percent increase in women in director and manager roles” (Cisco, 2018, p. 53).

Over the course of ten years, the cumulative results of Cisco’s sponsorship programs, and other diversity and inclusion work, have made Cisco a tech industry leader in top leadership diversity. In 2018, 42 percent of Cisco’s Executive Leadership team were women, and 58 percent were diverse in terms of gender or ethnicity (Cisco, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework on Networking and Sponsorship: Social Capital Theory**

Social capital theory can guide and inform our understanding of sponsorship and the social dynamics within corporations. Nan Lin defines social capital as “investment in social relations with expected returns” (1999, p.30). Lin offers three explanations as to why social networks will enhance outcomes of actions. First, social networks facilitate the flow of information and can provide an individual with useful information. Information flow is not directly related to sponsorship, per the definitions above. However, we may assume that due to a sponsor’s position of influence in an organization, he/she may be privy to information that would be helpful to the protégé such as early knowledge of upcoming job openings or organizational restructuring plans. Second, Lin describes how social ties may exert influence on those making decisions (e.g. promotions). Exerting influence on decision-makers is a core aspect of sponsorship, where a sponsor utilizes his/her influence to advocate on behalf of a protégé for promotion. Examples of exerting influence could include using “chips,” as Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg describe, or writing an email recommending the protégé for a position, or speaking favorably about the protégé in a meeting with the decision-maker. Third, relationships to certain

individuals may tie people to further resources and provide resources beyond an individual's personal capital. In other words, if a sponsor (or mentor) can't help a protégé, he/she may know someone else who can. And additionally, this third party would be more likely to help because of the sponsor's relationship with them.

Other sources tie networking to both increasing social capital and increasing the likelihood of promotion and leadership (Smith, 2002; Carbajal, 2018). Coleman specifically uses social capital theory to link networking and sponsorship to career advancement (1990). Career networking, in which a woman expands the number of people she knows and/or increases the strength of the relationships within her network, is recommended for finding sponsors (Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016). Also, when a sponsor provides a protégé access to his/her network, he or she is boosting the protégé's social capital and likelihood of promotion.

### **Women Seeking Sponsorship: A Review of the Existing Literature**

Much of the existing research literature on sponsorship focuses on defining sponsorship (Friday, 2004), the benefits of sponsorship (Proudford and Washington, 2017), and/or how to set up a sponsorship program (El-Ramly and Dennis, 2019). There are also publications on why to be a sponsor and criteria for selecting a protégé (Huston, et al., 2019). Much less is written from the protégé's perspective. However, from existing literature, we can glean some research-based practices for women seeking sponsorship that is pertinent to the research topic. I organize the literature review in three categories: sourcing sponsors (where and how to look for a potential sponsor), criteria for selecting a sponsor, and securing effective sponsors (gaining and keeping their sponsorship).

### **Sourcing Sponsors**

Existing literature provides some insights as to how, or where, women can source sponsors. Given the overlap between mentorship and sponsorship (Ayyala, et al., 2019; Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016; Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg, 2010), mentors seem a logical best source of a potential sponsor. Mentors may become sponsors or know someone who would be an effective sponsor. Proudford & Washington (2017) advise that even if a mentor is not in a position of influence to be a sponsor himself or herself, the protégé may ask for a referral to a potential sponsor in the mentor's network. In terms of social capital theory, a protégé and mentor have social capital from their existing relationship, and per Lin's description, the social capital between the protégé and the mentor will increase the likelihood that the mentor positively responds when the protégé asks for a referral to a potential sponsor.

Many research literature sources tie networking to finding sponsors (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014; Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016). Networking can be defined as expanding one's job-related relationships (Helms, Arfken & Bellar, 2016). Coleman (1990) links networking, specifically investing in social networks at work, as increasing social capital. Because networking expands the number of people known professionally, this naturally expands opportunities to find sponsors. A number of studies noted that a single sponsor doesn't determine the career of a protégé (Guptill, Reibling, & Clem, 2018; Proudford and Washington, 2017), therefore networking and expanding the number of sponsors, and potential sponsors, is important. Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb observed that women can be reluctant to network, due to it seeming too self-promotional. They found that when women can tie

networking to a larger purpose, such as organizational goals, women were less reluctant to network (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). Also, Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen (2014) recommend “maintenance of past associations” (p. 257) as the most important type of networking.

Industry associations and professional organizations provide opportunities to network, sources for potential sponsors, and opportunities for visibility. Research has shown that presenting, chairing, or other committee work has increased the visibility of potential protégés, added to credibility, and provided a ready source of potential sponsors (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014; Hewlett, 2013). Industry associations and professional organizations provide an opportunity to expand the number of people known professionally and build relationships with potential sponsors. Investing time and energy into the social network of these organizations will increase social capital and expected returns, such as new professional contacts with potential sponsors.

Increased visibility (being seen and heard) has been shown to be critical for aspiring women leaders to gain more leadership opportunities and sponsors (Selzer, Howton, & Wallace, 2017). Ang and Reb (2017) suggest that a strong performance record can draw the notice of potential sponsors. Other research suggests that protégés should take responsibility for ensuring that people are aware of their achievements, in order to advance in their careers (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014). By increasing visibility to her achievements, a woman can build credibility as a leader and expand her exposure to more people, thereby expanding her network, increasing the likelihood of professional referrals, and expanding her number of potential sponsors.

From the literature described above, we can see that visibility, networks, and sponsorship are intrinsically connected and mutually encouraging. Increased visibility, especially a demonstration of potential, makes it easier to network and to find sponsors. In turn, a sponsor will leverage his or her network to increase the visibility of a protégé, such as putting the protégé forward for high-visibility, career-advancing opportunities (Ayyala, et al., 2019). These high-visibility opportunities are likely to further expand the protégé's network and attract additional potential sponsors (Fitzimmons, Callan and Paulsen, 2014; Kanter, 1977). Sponsorship enables a protégé to “borrow” the networks of the sponsors, and in a study, women who borrowed social networks were promoted more quickly than women who attempted to develop their own networks from scratch (Proudford and Washington, 2017). Utilizing the definition of social capital as an “investment in social relations with expected returns” (Lin, 1999), these women invested in sponsorship and saw returns in the form of promotions.

In a study of 30 male CEOs and 30 female CEOs, not only was career-related capital needed for advancement to the role of CEO, but also visibility (Fitzimmons, Callan and Paulsen, 2014). Sponsors formed a key link to providing access to both career opportunities and also expanded networks for greater visibility and self-promotion. For the female CEOs in the study, networks were found to be a key contributor to their appointment. Female CEOs were twice as likely (versus male CEOs) to have received informal referrals to their CEO appointment, whereas male CEOs were twice as likely to have been identified through an executive recruiter (Fitzimmons, Callan and Paulsen, 2014). In other words, the females who made it to CEO, made

it because they utilized the social capital of their informal networks, and the formal path of an executive recruiter was less effective for them.

### **Criteria for Selecting Effective Sponsors**

Existing literature describes some key criteria for a protégé to look for in a potential sponsor. A number of sources (Friday, 2004; Proudford, & Washington 2017; Selzer, Howton, & Wallace, 2017) indicate that above all, a sponsor must have organizational influence - social and political capital within an organization - to assist the protégé in advancing within the organization. Similarly, Ayyala, et al., (2019) describe an effective sponsor as being “career-established and well-connected” (p. 97), meaning that a sponsor has credibility and is a part of influential networks with significant social capital. Without these characteristics, a person can be supportive, such as a mentor, but not an effective sponsor.

Existing literature cautions against limiting potential sponsors based on demographic criteria such as age, gender, race, or background. According to research, a sponsor need not be older than the protégé (Friday, 2004). In order to advocate for a protégé, a sponsor does not need to have more years of experience. Unlike many mentors, a sponsor does not need more industry expertise, does not need to coach the protégé on effectively doing her work, nor instruct the protégé on the subject matter of the work. Other research literature cautions against limiting potential sponsors to only those of similar gender, race (McGinn and Milkman, 2013), background or personality to the protégé (El-Ramly and Dennis, 2019). A sponsor need not be “just like” the protégé in order to be effective. For example, research as early as Kanter (1977) identified the effectiveness of male sponsors for women protégés and cited a British study that

concluded “office uncles” were important in the careers of women because they advocated for women to be promoted.

### **Securing Sponsors**

Existing literature provides some insights into what women can do to gain a person as a sponsor and to secure future sponsorship. Ang and Reb (2017) indicate that it is suitable to obtain a sponsor by simply asking him or her. Another way to approach a potential sponsor is to ask for specific advice (Moores, et al., 2018), especially as pertains to career goals (Guptill, Reibling, and Clem, 2018; Hewlett, 2013). By asking for sponsorship, or advice, the protégé can assess the social capital that she has with the potential sponsor. Relationships with adequate social capital can become sponsorships, where the sponsor exerts influence on behalf of the protégé or provides further resources to her.

Several literature sources describe the importance of the protégé proving to be a high performer with a demonstrated track record of success, in order to gain and support the successful sponsorship (Ang and Reb, 2017; Ayyala, et al., 2019; El-Ramly and Dennis, 2019). A proven track record is important for the sponsor to see, due to the time investment and reputational risk involved in sponsoring the protégé (Ang and Reb, 2017), as well as maintaining a track record of success in order to maintain the confidence and continuing support of the sponsor. A sponsor’s reputation and credibility will be “on the line” when sponsoring a protégé, and the sponsor will want high confidence in the potential of the protégé (Ayyala, et al., 2019). Therefore, the protégé needs to demonstrate and maintain a consistent, strong track record of performance.

Several existing literature sources also emphasize the importance developing and maintaining trust between the protégé and sponsor (Ayyala, et al., 2019; El-Ramly and Dennis, 2019; Helms, Arfken & Bellar, 2016). Because the sponsor is vouching for the protégé to others in his or her network and using chips on her behalf, the sponsor takes on reputational risk in sponsorship. The sponsor's reputation is linked to the protégé, and a sponsor must be able to trust that the protégé will continue her strong track record of performance so that she enhances the sponsor's reputation and brand. Another aspect of trust covered in research literature is loyalty. Several sources also emphasize the need for the protégé to remain loyal to the sponsor (Ayyala, et al., 2019; Hewlett 2013), in order to ensure the sponsorship is secure and any future opportunities (Ayyala, et al., 2019). Loyalty builds trust and enhances social capital which is key to effective sponsorships.

### **Gaps in Literature**

Much research literature on sponsorship, such as the articles cited above, focus on prospective sponsors or sponsorship programs. Very little research approaches sponsorship from the protégé's perspective and what the protégé can do to seek sponsorship. Informal sponsorship within corporations certainly predates formal sponsorship programs, so further insight is needed on how sponsorship is initiated and a sponsor secured in order to fully address the research question and provide more practical advice to women. Social capital theory will provide a framework in which to better understand the research results related to how to secure sponsorship.

On the subject of sourcing sponsors, the existing research literature provides general guidance, such as mentors as potential sponsors, and finding sponsors through networking. However, the research literature provides little in the way of specifics, such as where potential sponsors might work in the organization in relation to the protégé.

In regards to selecting sponsors, the criteria presented in research literature are mostly specific to organizational influence. This seems straightforward and practical enough to formulate into a best practice related to the research question. Additionally, based on these criteria, we can theorize that effective sponsors will most likely have positions in the same organization where the protégé is looking for promotion, or within an organization where the protégé hopes to secure a position.

Like the topic of sourcing sponsors, the topic of securing sponsors is covered in very general ways in existing research literature. Much is written about the criteria for protégé, as needing to be consistently high performing and loyal. Additionally, many research sources talk about the importance of trust and relationship between the sponsor and protégé. However, few sources describe under what conditions sponsorship is first secured, aside from formal programs.

My research adds to the overall literature by examining how women leaders have successfully secured sponsors through their careers leading to advancement and identifying evidence-based recommendations for others.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of my research was to identify research-based best practices for women seeking sponsorship in corporations. I sought to answer the question: What are best practices for women in corporations to source, select, and secure effective sponsor(s) to advance in leadership roles in corporations?

To answer my research question, I interviewed women leaders one-on-one who work at (or formerly at) for-profit corporations, at the level of director or higher. Each of these women has had one or more sponsors. One-on-one interviews enabled me to gather in-depth personal perspectives (Creswell, 2016, p. 127) from women who have successfully progressed into leadership and learn about how sponsorship worked for them to move into leadership. I wanted to learn from actual women's experiences, in order to identify best practices common to multiple women leaders' experiences with effective sponsorship.

My research scope focused on sponsorship in for-profit corporations, as opposed to other types of organizations such as non-profit, religious, or government, in order to narrow the scope of the research suitable for my timeframe in which to conduct the research. Additionally, my interest is in for-profit organizations because women are underrepresented in corporate leadership. I preferred to ensure adequate research coverage of women's experiences in for-profit organizations, rather than a broader scope covering other types of organizations. One participant had past sponsorship experiences across her career spanning corporate, non-profit, and governmental organizations. Her experiences that she shared over all three organizational types

had much consistency with each other and with the other interviewees' experiences at corporations.

Interview questions explored how interviewees met/found sponsors, the various criteria they used to identify potential sponsors, what sponsors did to be helpful in protégés' career progression, and how the protégés contributed to making sponsorships effective. I also asked about protégés' experiences serving as a sponsor to others and what characteristics they themselves looked for in a protégé. From both perspectives – as a protégé and as a sponsor, I collected data pertinent to the research question: what women as prospective protégés can do to seek and secure effective sponsors. The one-on-one interview format enabled me to ask clarification questions to ensure I collected the data I needed. In one particular interview, when an interviewee told me about a project that she volunteered for, I asked whether it was a project in addition to her job or was a reassignment. This helped clarify that the project leader, who became her sponsor, was in the role of her direct manager. In another interview, one interviewee began with very general answers to my question about sponsorship experiences, so I asked her to pick one particular sponsor to tell me about in detail. She then recounted how she met the sponsor and other details that were pertinent data to my research question. The interviews also enabled me to ask additional open-ended questions, such as “What other advice do you have for women seeking effective sponsors?” and “Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you think is important for me to know?” These questions enabled me to glean additional information that I may not have asked. In some cases, the participants used these questions to re-emphasize and summarize things they had already said. In other cases, the interviewee branched into other

topics related to women in leadership that were not related to my research topic specifically. Either way, these questions gave the interviewee a chance to share openly, feel heard by the interviewer, and in all cases the interviews ended on a very congenial note. The complete interview protocol is listed in the Appendix.

Due to the method and time limitation, interviews were not exhaustive of all the experiences that the participants had with sponsorship. In order to gather the data needed to answer the research question, interviewees needed to describe fewer experiences in more depth rather than many experiences in brief. In cases where the participant had many stories to choose from for the short interview, I asked for one or two notable examples where the protégé successfully advanced in leadership.

### **Participant Recruitment**

I recruited participants through my existing professional network. I asked various people in my professional network to refer potential participants who would fit the research criteria: (1) women, (2) who work (or have worked) in corporations, and (3) at a level of director or higher. By asking for referrals, I was able to widen my recruitment beyond my own direct network and to pre-screen participants based on the research criteria. I recruited only one participant from my network directly, and I knew she fit the criteria of corporate experience and level. During interviews, two participants referred me to additional women who consequently participated in the study. This recruitment method is referred to as the snowball technique for recruiting participants in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2016).

Once I was in contact with a potential participant, I sent her a recruitment email that described the project, defined sponsorship, and asked for her participation if she had sponsorship experiences to share. I did have at least one case where a woman was referred to me, but then after receiving the recruitment email declined to participate because she did not feel she had sufficient sponsorship experiences. Responding positive to this question was required because sponsorship experience was the fourth and final criteria for research participants. Once the prospective participant agreed to participate and verified that she had sponsorship experiences to share, we scheduled a 45-minute time slot for the interview. In two cases, the participants had assistants who scheduled the timeslot with me. Prior to the interview, I sent an Informed Consent to the participant by email for her to sign using an e-sign service called DocuSign. All participants e-signed the Informed Consent prior to the interview.

In total, I interviewed eight (8) women leaders one-on-one during July and August 2020. During the interviews, four women identified as director level and four as vice president (VP) level within corporations currently or previously. Interviews were held over the phone and lasted at least 30 minutes and no more than 45 minutes. In several cases, the interviewee had many sponsorship experiences. However, I ensured interviews lasted no more than 45 minutes for research consistency and out of respect for the time limit agreed upon with the participant.

No incentive was offered or given to the participants, beyond contributing to the research body of knowledge regarding women in leadership. To all participants, I offered an Executive Summary of my research project findings at the conclusion of my project, and all requested a copy.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using an app named Rev Call Recorder and their transcription services. I then analyzed and coded the transcripts for data pertinent to the research topic. In every interview, the interviewee described what sponsors did to assist in her career, but this data did not contribute to the research topic. This information was helpful to me to screen that the experiences were indeed sponsorship – as opposed to mentorship, professional development coaching or other similar activity that did not fit my definition of sponsorship. However, only the data around the research topic was highlighted for analysis. I then transferred the highlighted data into one of three matrix tables by category: sourcing, securing, or securing sponsors. Each matrix was organized with a column for each interview participant, and rows by sub-categories. I then grouped data into themes. I counted how many participants mentioned a specific theme in one of their sponsorship experiences.

The more interviewees who mentioned a particular theme, the more emphasis I gave that theme as a compelling and an important finding for the study. Because participants often recounted more than one sponsorship experience – either as a protégé and/or as a sponsor themselves – I noted frequency by the number of participants rather than the number of sponsorship experiences. For instance, many sponsorship experiences, as shared by the participants, started with a protégé asking for help from the potential sponsor. I counted that seven (7) of the eight (8) participants described at least one sponsorship experience that started this way. In interviews where the participant recounted multiple occurrences of this, I did not count multiple occurrences. It would not be suitable to analyze theme frequency based on the

number of sponsorship experiences because the short interview format did not allow for comprehensive collection of experiences from the participants or quantitative analysis. Instead, these short interviews were intended to be informative and to identify themes.

### **Key Themes and Findings**

#### **Key Themes**

From the sponsorship experiences of the interviewees and from the advice they shared for other women seeking sponsorship, several strategies and approaches to effective sponsorship emerged, which I will describe further in the findings below. First, I will describe key themes that emerged and then findings related to sourcing, selecting and securing sponsors.

Aside from content specific to the research question, one pattern emerged from the interviews. Of the eight women leaders, the four women who held vice president (VP) roles had many more sponsorship experiences to draw from than the four women who held director roles. Of the eight interviewees, I would categorize six as highly proactive in developing new sponsors and maintaining existing sponsor relationships. The other two, both directors, had sponsorship experiences initiated by the sponsor, their direct manager in both cases. One interpretation of this pattern could be that women learned how to secure sponsorship better while in VP roles and/or that sponsors helped them progress to the VP level. This difference between VP and director interviewees could be accounted for by factors other than role, such as years of experience or position, which I did not capture or track. Two of the VPs worked a large part of their careers in human resources, which might make them more familiar with sponsorship because sponsorship is related to talent management. Also, more years of experience might also provide more

sponsorship experiences. Additionally, VP and director level role responsibilities and skill level can vary drastically from corporation to corporation. Therefore, a director level at one corporation could have a similar responsibilities and skill set to a VP at another corporation. Although the data is not comprehensive enough for a conclusive interpretation, it is notable that women at the VP level had more sponsors than those at the director level and that sponsorship is an increasingly important topic as women advance higher into leadership.

### **Sponsors Initiated Sponsorship.**

Most of the interviewees described sponsorship experiences, especially early in their careers, where sponsors initiated the sponsorship rather than the protégé choosing the sponsor. In some cases the women interviewees described that the start of the sponsorship was unknown to them at the time. They didn't realize what the sponsor was doing was sponsorship, and/or they didn't have the vocabulary to recognize it as such. This is not to say women protégés have no role in sourcing, selecting, and securing a sponsor. In fact, several of the interviewees were very proactive and described experiences of purposefully getting to know potential sponsors, as a precursor to the sponsor advocating for them. One interviewee makes a point of getting to know executives in her organization, such as having three-minute conversations at company events, or inviting them to coffee. Another interviewee regularly takes on stretch assignments that involve other parts of the business and utilizes these assignments to source and secure additional sponsors.

**Informal Sponsorship.**

Another key theme was that all the interviewees described sponsorship as happening informally and not part of any corporate program. On their own, the sponsor and protégé naturally established the sponsorship without corporate directive and without any formal structure or framework. Two of the interviewees worked in human relations (HR) departments and described their formal job responsibilities as including mentoring and sponsoring of employees. However, both those interviewees also described sponsorship experiences significant to their own careers that were informally established. Additionally, two other interviewees further shared that formal, corporate-organized sponsorship matching programs had not worked for them, and that they both had had more effective sponsorship informally. One interviewee explained that informal sponsorship worked better for her because sponsors she met through her stretch assignment got to know her work: “We got to work together, and it evolved into a sponsorship relationship because they were able to see the work that I had done and basically understand where my skills lay...And it was also a relationship of trust, because they had actually seen me work ... for me at least, it had to be something that was in context, where they saw me do good work and I was able to establish a relationship with them through that.”

**Establishing Trust.**

All interviewees described sponsorship as occurring after establishing a trusting, business relationship. One interviewee described establishing “business friendships” with perspective sponsors. Other interviewees talked about the need for rapport, synergy, or the feel of a “match” between the sponsor and protégé. Another described that a future sponsor and she had

constructive conflict often when they first met that nurtured trust between them. To all of these interviewees, it was necessary to establish a trusting, business relationship with the prospective sponsors prior to sponsorship.

Further findings are organized by the categories of: sourcing sponsors, selecting sponsors, securing sponsors. Securing sponsors is further divided into: characteristics sponsors look for in potential protégés, protégés' goal and brand, maintaining good relationships with sponsors, and initiating sponsorship. These four sub-categories all contribute towards initially securing a person's sponsorship and maintaining that person as an effective sponsor.

### **Sourcing Sponsors**

#### **First Hand Knowledge of the Protégé's Work.**

Interviewees provided valuable insight into where a woman might source potential sponsors. Interviewees emphasized that it was important for potential sponsors to know the protégé's skills and quality of work, and for the sponsors and protégé to have a trusting relationship. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the interviewees described sponsorship experiences with people with whom they worked close enough with, and for long enough time, to gain both first hand knowledge of each other's work and to build a trusting relationship.

#### **Within the Same Corporation.**

Nearly all the sponsorship experiences described by the interviewees were of sponsors and protégés who worked in the same corporation. More than half of the interviewees described being sponsored by a direct manager or someone in the chain of command above them. Many described being sponsored by someone whom they had supported in the organization, an internal

client of sorts. In a couple of experiences, the sponsor was someone the woman had previously worked with at another organization.

### **Sourcing Strategies.**

Interviewees provided several recommendations to find potential sponsors. Three interviewees specifically recommended volunteering for stretch assignments or additional cross-functional projects within the organization. For them, stretch assignments had widened their network and enabled them to work with people in other parts of the organization, people with similar interests, and/or leaders at higher levels in the organization. For these three interviewees, stretch assignments were the source of sponsors who became key to their careers. One interviewee described: “while I was working [on this stretch assignment], I got in touch with, or I got to work with not only senior leadership within my sales organization, but also senior leadership within recruiting, within HR, within other parts of our organization....that just built up my network... and eventually a couple of them became sponsors for me.”

One interviewee was very proactive in networking and finding potential sponsors. She made a point of getting to know who the senior leaders were, watched organizational announcements and also met future sponsors through affinity group events internal to the organization. She advised: “be intentional about the relationships. I'd never miss an opportunity to have coffee or to have lunch or happy hour with someone if I've been invited...It's never going to hurt you to continue to build those partnerships, relationships.” She was active within the community and invited sponsors to community events she hosted or to be a guest speaker. Her

example shows that protégés can be very proactive in networking and finding sponsors beyond people with whom they work.

### **Selecting Sponsors**

Several interviewees described that sponsors need to have credibility within the organization. Most sponsors recounted by the interviewees were within the organization. In order to advocate for the protégé, the sponsor would need to have credibility with others in the organization.

All interviewees described sponsorship in context of a trusting relationship. Some interviewees mentioned that sponsors were people they admired. Some mentioned that they needed to feel comfortable with the sponsor or have rapport. Another mentioned a need for a “match,” in terms of interests, goals, or enthusiasm for sponsorship.

A couple of the interviewees advised having both male and female sponsors. In organizations where the leadership is mostly male, an interviewee advised having male sponsor(s) due to men having “more voices” in the organization. In organizations where the leadership is mostly male, men hold greater influence as they constitute a greater percentage of the “voices” than women. Limiting sponsorship to only women sponsors limits the influence and advocacy available to protégés in such organizations. By seeking both male and female sponsors, protégés expand opportunities for advocacy.

### **Securing Sponsors**

Interviewees did not talk about how protégés might secure sponsors per se. However, their responses suggest that there is much a potential protégé can do towards securing a sponsor.

The interviews identified how women can prepare to be a protégé, how they can nurture relationships in preparation for sponsorship, and tips for initiating sponsorship. Interviewees described what they look for in a potential protégé, the importance of knowing what a potential protégé has to offer, and the importance of relationship building with potential sponsors. From the interviewees' experiences, not only are these three aspects foundational for securing a person as a sponsor, but also for keeping a person's support as a sponsor.

Based on the interviewees' experiences, it may be helpful to reframe the following findings as securing sponsorship as advocacy activity, rather than securing a sponsor as a person in a role. All interviewees described establishing long-term business relationships with their sponsors prior to sponsorship. Therefore, securing sponsorship is better characterized as long-term relationship building with potential sponsors followed by episodic sponsorship advocacy, rather than a single step to secure a sponsor in a role.

#### **Long-Term Trusting Business Relationships.**

Interviewees strongly emphasized from both their advice and their personal experiences that sponsorship occurred in the context of a long-term trusting business relationship. The majority of sponsorship experiences shared by the interviewees, and especially those with the most career impact, occurred after the protégé and sponsor had known each other for a long duration: months, if not years. In several cases, the sponsor advocated for the protégé on multiple occasions over the course of several years. Additionally, the interviewees did describe ways that they initiated sponsorships, or gained sponsorship advocacy, from people with whom they had already built a trusting business relationship.

### **Characteristics for Potential Protégés**

Most of the interviewees had sponsored others and also described what they themselves look for in protégés. From this we can identify practices for preparing for sponsorship and avoiding things that would discourage a prospective sponsor. Interviewees described that they look for potential protégés who have a proven track record of delivering results, curiosity for new things or willingness to learn, potential/skills/knowledge to share, drive/passion/ambition to take on more, and are responsive to coaching.

One interview described what she looked for in a protégé: “I look for people that I believe, I truly believe are going to do good things and provide good results to the business. Typically, they are high performing, typically they are career ambitious. They are open-minded, want to learn and have this constant drive for something more.” Another interviewee described that credibility was important due to the risk she takes on with sponsorship: “I’m looking for their commitment. Do they have the desire, the passion, or they all talk, or are they really about business? It’s all about relationships and credibility. ...There’s a lot of high stakes potentially, too... I’m extending my reputation, my credibility to you. You have the opportunity to probably do damage to my reputation and credibility.” By advocating for a protégé, a sponsor extends his/her reputation to that protégé. Interviewees described how their protégé’s performance reflected on them as sponsors. Therefore, the sponsor wants to ensure that a potential protégé is high performing and adds to the sponsor’s credibility and reputation.

### **Protégés’ Goals and Brand**

Several interviewees talk about the need for protégés to understand themselves and their goals, as preparation for effective sponsorship. One interviewee described it well when she talked about creating a personal brand: “Who are you? What are the top 3 things that you want people to feel or think when they walk away from you? What do you want to have in consistency with your brand? When you actively seek out sponsorship, you’ve gotten all the track record and some credibility. You’ve got focus, you know who you are, you know the value that you provide and then be opportunistic. Find out where there are gaps that you can fill in.”

#### **Looked to Contribute.**

Interviewees described that when protégés know what they have to offer - skills and knowledge and an understanding of their goals - they can better look for stretch assignments or other opportunities to make an impact in the business, as well as what to ask for from a sponsor. One interviewee emphasized that she looks for ways to contribute, rather than expecting to receive, and by doing so widens her network and gains sponsorship support: “I believe in making deposits, helping others rather than thinking about what can you do for me... Don’t go in there with your hand out. You have to show the commitment. You have to give something to get something later on...make deposits instead of withdrawals... people remember those things.” Whether it be a stretch assignment, or other opportunity, contributing to the business adds to a woman’s credibility, builds relationships with others in the organization, and better positions her as a suitable protégé to potential sponsors.

#### **Maintaining Good Relationships with Sponsors**

In addition to establishing a good relationship with a potential sponsor, the interviewees also described things they did to maintain good relationships with their sponsors and help make the sponsorships effective.

### **Kept Sponsors Informed.**

While being sponsored, several interviewees described how they took their sponsors' advice and kept their sponsor informed. One interview said: "if there were certain things that he recommended I do that we talked about, then I would send a follow up to be able to say, 'Hey, Bill, I wanted to let you know, I did this, this and this,' or, 'Here's the update,' or 'I have an interview here. Here's what's happening.' ....I feel like the responsibility is really on me to make sure [he] stays informed. And I think he really appreciated it."

### **Sponsorship as Mutually Beneficial.**

A few interviewees described sponsorship as a mutually beneficial experience. One interviewee talked about how she supported her sponsor by attending a community event he was hosting. Another interviewee recounted a time where a sponsor invited her to speak to his team on her topic of expertise. Yet another interviewee described an opportunity where she offered her insights on the business to a new leader, who later became her sponsor. Interviewees bolstered their sponsorship relationships by supporting their sponsors, thus making the relationship more mutually beneficial.

### **Initiating Sponsorship**

**Mentorship Morphed into Sponsorship.**

A common scenario described amongst interviewees was that sponsorship started with advice, coaching, and development opportunities, and then later morphed into sponsorship where the sponsor advocated on behalf of the protégé. In many cases, the sponsor initiated sponsorship by giving advice and coaching to the prospective protégé.

**Interviewees Initiated Sponsorship.**

The interviewees described a number of ways that they initiated sponsorship and secured advocacy by a sponsor. Nearly all of the interviewees (7 of 8) told of experiences where they approached a prospective sponsor for advice, help, or directly asked for sponsorship, and subsequently gained the person's sponsorship. Five interviewees described experiences where they simply shared their goals with prospective sponsors which then initiated the sponsorship. In at least four of those examples, the sponsor immediately followed with offering help and/or advice towards those goals.

The interviewees also told of the vulnerability that it takes to share one's goals or to ask for help, hence the importance of building a trusting business relationship. One interviewee described a potential sponsor as "someone that you want to be able to feel comfortable divulging your career ambitions to." And another described a long term sponsorship as effective because "my being comfortable with him enough to be vulnerable and to share things that I wasn't comfortable sharing with others, like about job searches and what I was looking for and challenges that I wanted." The interviewees described that sharing one's goals and asking for help required significant trust to be established between the prospective sponsors and protégé.

They felt they needed a degree of trust and comfort with the person in order to share their ambitions.

## **Discussion**

The research findings are quite consistent with the existing literature and also provide important additional insight in regards to the research questions to help women source, select, and secure sponsors.

### **Long-Term Relationship as Predecessor of Sponsorship**

The interviewees described sponsorship experiences that were consistent with the sponsorship definitions by Ayyala, et al. (2019), Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg (2010), and Friday (2004) as presented above although with some important distinctions. Ayyala et al. (2019) described sponsorship as transactional and often episodic, whereas mentorship was usually longitudinal. In the experiences of my interviewees, the sponsorship did occur episodically; however, the relationship with the sponsor was definitely not episodic. The relationships between protégé and sponsor were lengthy and often spanned years of working together, in which trust was built and credibility gained. From the interviewees, we see that a longer-term relationship to build social capital is an essential predecessor to the episodic sponsorship. Although the interviewees' experiences and literature definitions are consistent, the literature on its own may be impractical or incomplete advice to women seeking sponsorship, without the context of the necessary social capital required for sponsorship.

### **Sponsorship Often Starts with Mentorship**

Additionally, the interviewees' experiences provided more nuance about the arc of the sponsor-protégé relationship and the differentiation between sponsorship and mentorship. Although several authors draw distinctions between mentorship and sponsorship, the

interviewees told of experiences where a sponsor often started as a mentor. Their descriptions of getting to know their future sponsors looked very much like mentorship with advice, coaching, and development opportunities. These fit some aspects of Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg's (2010) definition of sponsorship: advises protégé on their appearance, connecting the protégé to career opportunities, and gives career advice to the protégé. These are also consistent with Ayyala et al.'s (2019) definition of mentorship. Later, the interviewees' sponsors took up other aspects of sponsorship: expanding the protégé's perception of what she can do, making connections to senior leaders, promoting visibility of the protégé, and advocating for a protégé's promotion. My research suggests that mentors, who also have enough credibility and position in the same organization, are perhaps best positioned to be sponsors. Examining this in the framework of social capital, the protégé and mentor already have the prerequisite relationship and social capital – trust and credibility – required for sponsorship.

Existing literature sources almost entirely fail to mention under what conditions sponsorship can be first secured, aside from a formal program. From the interviewees' experiences, relationship building, in a more mentor-like fashion, is often a predecessor for sponsorship. Literature is consistent with the interviewees' experiences as to the importance of trust and relationship between the sponsor and protégé. Therefore, a woman seeking sponsorship could first look to build "business friendships," as one participant called it, and then once they have built credibility and trust with the person, enough social capital, look to gain that person's sponsorship.

### **Protégé Initiates Sponsorship**

In addition to relationships being a predecessor to sponsorship, my research identified some ways sponsorship was initiated and how protégés secured advocacy from the sponsor. Two main ways that sponsorship was initiated by the protégé: by sharing career goals and/or asking for help. It is always the sponsor's prerogative whether to act as a sponsor. However, my research provided several examples of effective sponsorship, in some cases pivotal to the women's career, which began in this way. In terms of social capital theory, asking for help tests the level of social capital in the relationship. If there is sufficient social capital between the protégé and prospective sponsor, the protégé can reasonably expect to gain sponsorship, as it is one of the three expected returns Lin (1999) identifies from social capital: information, exerting influence (sponsorship), or further resources. Understanding how these informal sponsorships can be initiated fills a gap in the literature and gives us valuable insight into how women can secure sponsorship in an informal setting and not need to depend on a corporate-organized, formal sponsorship program.

### **Goals and Personal Brand**

The interviewees' recommendation to identify personal brand and goals, as a prerequisite to sponsorship, is not often brought up in literature. Hewlett (2013) talks about something similar in her chapter titled "Embrace Your Dream and Do a Diagnostic" where she encourages the reader to dream where she wants to go and identify her goals. My research suggests a clearer connection between sponsorship and the importance of understanding goals and brand in two ways. First, as Hewlett also implies, the protégés will know what they want from the sponsors. For instance, sponsorship for a promotion within a group would be much different from

sponsorship towards transferring to a different division. Therefore, it's important for the protégé to know her goals. Secondly, several interviewees noted that by knowing one's brand, one better knows what one brings to the organization and how one uniquely adds value. On the surface, this would better position the protégé to advocate for herself. In addition, the interviewees described this as essential preparation for taking on, or proposing one's own, stretch assignments.

### **Stretch Assignments**

Several of the interviewees described stretch assignments as expanding their network and bringing them into contact with future sponsors. Three of the interviewees described how they looked for ways to use their skills to fill gaps and add value in the corporation, and they subsequently created their own stretch assignments to show value and add to their visibility. These interviewees found these stretch assignments as highly effective to find and secure sponsors. Stretch assignments build social capital both wide and deep. For those working on the assignment together, strong business relationships with "deep" social capital can be formed with first-hand knowledge of each other's skills. Stretch assignments often provide an opportunity to contact new people in others in parts of the corporation, thus widening the protégé's network and social capital in the organization.

For the most part, this aspect of knowing how one adds value to the organization seems missing from much of the literature about sponsorship. One source, Hewlett (2013), addresses something similar in her chapter on "Develop and Deploy Your Currency" where she describes at least two stories of protégés whose efforts to differentiate themselves led to unique contributions and winning sponsors. Kanter (1977) does talk about the advantage of taking on

innovative activities that benefit the business, although she doesn't include the personal reflective aspect – taking time to identify one's brand and skills - that seems a suitable predecessor before taking action. Several research sources (Ayyala, et al., 2019; Fitzimmons, Callan and Paulsen, 2014) make reference to the benefits of high-visibility opportunities benefiting protégés, although these sources are not referring to stretch assignments proposed by the protégé.

In addition to gaining sponsors, Kanter (1977) identified innovation activities, similarly defined by the interviewees' as stretch assignments, as increasing employees' power within an organization and increasing their perception as a leader by others in the organization. To have this effect, Kanter specifically identifies that the activity must be extraordinary, visible, and relevant. She defines extraordinary as innovative and/or with some risk. "The first to volunteer for extra work exhibits leadership" (Kanter, 1977, p. 177). Greater visibility increases the exposure to a greater number of people and potential sponsors, as well as increases social capital. Kanter also saw these dynamics at play for job assignments too. Jobs with high promotion rates were those that provided the employee exposure, visibility, and connections. Hence, high profile, cross functional stretch assignments have the prospect of boosting a woman's career and increasing her social capital in a number of mutually beneficial ways: connections to prospective sponsors, visibility of her skills and work results, which in turn widens her network and opportunity to meet further prospective sponsors.

### **Mutual Benefits of Sponsorship**

A minor yet still significant theme regards the mutual nature of sponsorship as benefiting both the sponsor and the protégé. The sponsor helps the protégé's career, and the protégé supports the sponsor. Several of the interviewees brought this up in the context of building and maintaining a relationship with a sponsor. Aside from general relationship building, stretch assignments are one example that interviewees brought up where a protégé supports prospective sponsors, such as solving a problem or filling a gap that the sponsor has in the organization. The mutual nature of sponsorship is not much discussed in literature, other than to emphasize that the protégé should be high-performing and loyal to the sponsor. Hewlett (2013) has a chapter titled "Understand That It's Not All About You" where she describes the importance of a protégé being reliable, high performing, and loyal, as well as taking initiative to help without being asked. This is similar to what one interviewee described as "making deposits, helping others rather than thinking about what can you do for me." Kanter provides insight into how protégés support sponsors: "powerful people need ...more junior people loyal to them [for the]...successful implementation of plans and policies" (1977, p.186). In these ways, we can see that sponsorship is mutually beneficial. Not only does a sponsor help a protégé move up in an organization, but also a protégé can help her sponsor achieve his or her business goals.

### **Sponsorship as an Activity, Rather than a Role**

Based on the research and literature, evidence-based recommendations direct women to put more emphasis on seeking sponsorship as advocacy, rather than finding a person to take on a title or role of sponsor. Per the definition in literature, sponsorship is specific to career-advancing opportunities and thus is a situational activity, rather than a static role. The interviewees'

sponsorship experiences were best characterized as long-relationship building followed by episodic sponsorship advocacy, rather than a single step to secure a sponsor in a role. By putting the emphasis on sponsorship as an activity, we put more attention on the conditions that facilitate it, as well as sidestep the need to clarify a distinction between mentor and sponsor as roles.

Building credibility, trust, and social capital in business relationships are foundational precursors to sponsorship. In so many cases, the interviewees in this research found sponsorship from people who were already their mentors, because those conditions of credibility trust, and social capital already existed between mentor and protégé. The mentors only need sufficient organizational influence to be effective sponsors. Also, by considering sponsorship as an activity, rather than a role, we can provide practical advice for women seeking sponsorship as advocacy, such as expanding her network, increasing her visibility, demonstrating her skills to others, and asking for assistance towards her goals.

Based on this research, women can do much to seek sponsorship. A woman can also prepare for sponsorship by identifying her goals, establishing her brand in the organization as a high performer and valued contributor. As a precursor to sponsorship, a woman needs to establish credibility, trust, and social capital with potential sponsors who have influence in the same organization. The potential sponsor must be familiar with her skills and work. One strategy to do this is by taking on stretch assignments. Women can further build relationships with potential sponsors by asking for help and advice. After establishing sufficient trust and social capital with a potential sponsor, a woman can ask for sponsorship either directly or by asking for assistance towards her career goals. A potential sponsor always has the prerogative whether to

help, however, women can do much to establish relationships with potential sponsors and seek sponsorship.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Recommended Best Practices for Women Seeking Sponsorship in Corporations**

- **Best practice: Be proactive, purposefully invest in relationships, build trust and business friendships with people who have influence and credibility in the organization as a precursor for sponsorship.**

Women need multiple sponsors and relationships take time to develop. Therefore, always be expanding the number of potential sponsors through networking. In order for networking to be helpful for gaining sponsorship, enough social capital must be built in the relationship.

- **Best practice: Identify your career goals, as well as skills, brand, and value-add to the organization.**

Because sponsorship is situational, it is important for a protégé to identify her goals, as well as her skills, brand, and value add to the organization. Knowing her goals will guide whom she approaches for sponsorship, because the potential sponsor will need the influence necessary to help her reach her goals. Knowing her brand – her skills and value add – will help with self-promotion to prospective sponsors, identifying potential stretch assignments, and ways she can assist prospective sponsors.

- **Best practice: Take opportunities to gain more visibility, demonstrate your skills to others, and gain credibility.**

Potential sponsors must see the protégé as high-performing and adding value to the organization, so as to build credibility, trust and social capital. Specific recommendations for networking to find sponsors include: stretch assignments, participating at industry associations and professional organizations, and anything that enables you to work with others in your organization or heightens the visibility of your skills and achievements in your organization.

- **Best practice: Look for sponsorship within your organization, with people who are familiar with your skills and work, such as your direct manager, those above you in the organization, or those you have supported (e.g. internal clients)**

Sufficient social capital is a prerequisite to sponsorship. A protégé must have built enough trust and credibility (known performance track record) with the potential sponsor. The potential sponsor needs to have seen the protégé's work first hand.

- **Best practice: If an existing mentor has organizational influence, ask the mentor for sponsorship.**

Protégés typically have the social capital with existing mentors. However, not all mentors have organizational influence for effective sponsorship.

- **Best practice: Once you have a credible track record established with a potential sponsor and built trust with that person, share your career goal(s), and ask for**

**advice or assistance towards your goal(s). As seems appropriate, ask for his or her support and sponsorship.**

Once a relationship is established with a potential sponsor, a protégé can initiate sponsorship by sharing her goals, asking for help, or specifically asking for sponsorship. Asking for help can be either a specific request (e.g. introduce me to a hiring manager), or general advice (e.g. who to talk to about a specific role). Asking for advice is also a good way to test out the level of social capital with the potential sponsor.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper adds to the research literature and identifies best practices for women to proactively secure sponsorship in corporations outside of formal sponsorship programs. These best practices are practically-focused for women in corporations to apply to their careers. For instance, these best practices could be shared with women's affinity groups which can be found in many corporations.

This research paper highlights the need for social capital to be built – credibility and trust established - between the prospective sponsor and protégé, before sponsorship will likely occur. Based on the research, the paper identifies an informal and natural progression in relationships to sponsorship from “business friendships,” to mentorship, to sponsorship. Unlike much existing literature, this paper provides advice for protégés to initiate sponsorship with prospective sponsors.

Additional research would be beneficial on brand management, stretch assignments, and the mutual benefits of sponsorship for both protégés and sponsors. These topics were significant enough to contribute to this research, however more detail would be helpful to advise women how to best manage their brand, as well as how to secure stretch assignments that would be both beneficial to their careers and securing sponsorship. Additional research on the mutual benefits of sponsorship may provide further insight to the formation of sponsorship relationships and the impact of sponsorship on protégés, sponsors, and corporations.

Based on this research, I now have a slightly different interpretation of the adage “it’s not what you know, but who you know.” Sponsorship by influential people is essential for moving up in corporation. Yet, this research has shown that there is also much value in “what you know.” What a woman knows is key to helping her secure the sponsorship of influential people. In summary, what a woman knows as a highly competent professional is necessary for gaining credibility, building social capital, and securing the sponsorship of influential people essential to moving up in a corporation.

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## **Appendix: Interview Protocol**

### **Introduction**

Hello, my name is Kim Hayman. Thank you for being willing to participate in this session for my research study.

The purpose of my study is to identify best practices for women to find and gain sponsors to help advance in their careers in leadership. For the study, I define a sponsor as someone who uses their influence and advocates on behalf a protégé for promotion. Some companies have found sponsorship as effective strategy to promote greater percentages of women into leadership.

Our interview today will last approximately 45-minutes. This interview will be recorded and transcribed for use in my research project only. Your name and employer will be kept confidential. You are also free to end the interview at any time for any reason.

Any questions before we begin?

(Start recording now)

### **Interview Content Questions**

In your earlier emails, you indicated that you have had one or more sponsors. Tell me about the sponsors that you have had across your career

(source) How did you meet/find this person?

(manager? networking? professional/Industry org? existing mentor?)

(select) How did you identify this person as a potential sponsor? What criteria did you use?

(above you in the org? organizational influence? demographics: gender, race, age?)

(secure) How did you gain her/his sponsorship?

(asked for sponsorship? told sponsor of goals/drive/objectives? asked advice?)

What did the sponsor do?

What specifically did your sponsor do to make the sponsorship successful?

What did you do to make the sponsorship effective?

(work hard? high performer? visible success? trust/respect/loyal to sponsor?)

Have you ever been referred to a job?

Have you sponsored someone?

If so, what did you look for in terms of attributes or qualities of that person? (select)

How was the sponsorship established? (source/secure)

What made that sponsorship effective/successful? (secure)

What advice do you have for women seeking effective sponsors?

Is there anything that I haven't asked about regarding women's sponsorship that you think is important for me to know?

### **Closing**

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I so appreciate your participation in my research project. If I have any additional follow-up questions, may I contact you later?

Would you be interested in the results of the research? If so, I could provide you an Executive Summary of my findings, later this year.