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Why career sponsorship matters for advancing women

Introduction

Despite the focus from governments and organisations driving advancements in education, health and employment for women for over 30 years [Tuminez, Duell, & Majid 2012], a gender imbalance still exists whether you look at labour participation rates or representation of women at the top of the corporate ladder. If we continue at this rate, it is estimated that it would take 217 years to achieve gender parity¹.

Education has often been thought of as the gender parity equaliser. There are more educated women today compared to a generation ago. In some countries, there are more tertiary educated women than men, for example, in the United States², Poland³ and Singapore⁴. However, education does not seem to have much of an effect on gender parity as women still trail men at the top of the corporate ladder. In the United States, only 6.4% of CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies are women⁵. In Poland, the number is 6.3% in terms of female CEOs of the publicly listed companies⁶. Even though the percentage of female CEOs is higher in Singapore, the number is still small as women only represent 15% of CEOs of the publicly listed companies⁷.

Women have been trailing men in career advancement because it was found that women in general, have access to mentors rather than to sponsors. In contrast, men in general, have greater access to sponsors – senior leaders with power and influence who are willing to advocate for them – which is why men still get more promotions than women [Ibarra, Carter, Silva 2010].

Furthermore, women tend to drop off the corporate ladder or experience career stagnation around

the mid-to-senior management level. The drop off rates in Asia are very high – 70% in Japan, 53% in China, 49% in Hong Kong and 46% in Singapore [Tuminez et. al., 2012]. Even though the drop off rate in Poland is moderate from an average of 45% in the overall labour force to 36%⁸ at this level on the organisational hierarchy, these figures suggest that many women tend to hold themselves back or under-invest in their careers when they face a conflict between the “career clock” and the “mother’s clock”.

There are many theories that highlight the barriers that prevent women from rising to the top of the organisational hierarchy. Ibarra and Obodaru [2009] called out women’s inability to formulate a vision or lack the “vision thing” as one key barrier hindering their progress. Others cited barriers such as the lack of family-friendly policies, the old boys’ club, unconscious gender bias, stereotypes and cultural values, work-life balance and the lack of career sponsorship. The “sticky floor” syndrome was also called out. The sticky floor syndrome comes from a mindset of self-doubt and self-deprecating as women tend to doubt their capability more than men [Ehrlinger & Dunning 2003].

The proverbial glass ceiling is another barrier preventing women from getting ahead. The glass ceiling is so dense that even to this day, very few women have been able to shatter it. In analysing the glass ceiling “shatterers”, there’s one thing that is clear. These women have sponsors who have been able to make a huge difference to their careers. The sponsors have been seen to give a career break – to open doors to opportunities or to advocate for them. Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook and a board member of several publicly list-

ed companies, is one of the prominent glass ceiling shatterers. Since graduating with an MBA from Harvard Business School, Larry Summers, her former Economics professor, helped her to secure her first high profile role at the World Bank, and subsequently, at the Clinton Administration⁹. This career head start helped to solidify the foundation of her career, from which, she was able to build on to rise quickly on the ranks at Google and Facebook.

Sponsorship is the solution to solving this persistent gender problem of too few senior women leaders – a problem that has been “plaguing” both the private and public sectors in Poland, Singapore and the vast majority of countries across the world for decades. My research, which comprised of an autoethnography, a case study research and an online study showed that sponsorship is effective in driving an upward career trajectory by at least one to two levels on the organisational hierarchy.

As career sponsorship is still a relatively new phenomenon, the goal of this paper is to define and give an overview of sponsorship so that more people, especially women, can benefit from it.

Research methodology

In order to study sponsorship in details, I used the methods of (1) autoethnography, (2) inductive qualitative case study research and (3) online study to uncover insights about this important relationship.

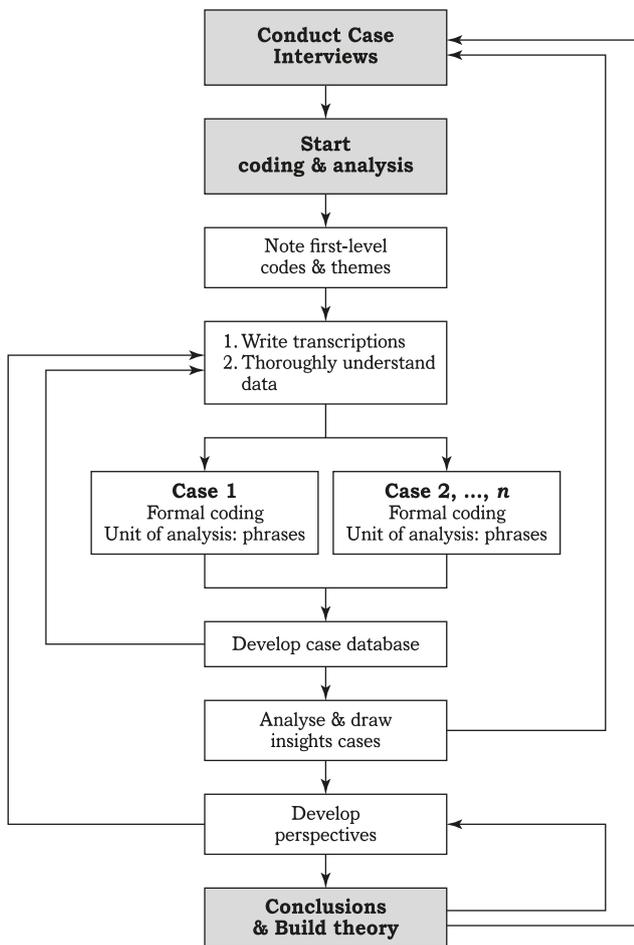
Autoethnography is a form of personal reflexive research that comes with deep insights and critical thinking, resulting from an experiential journey that takes the readers through the lens of the writer. Autoethnography is a research method that allows the researcher to “enact the worlds we study” [Denzin 2006, p. 422], and it is a research method that accounts for how the inner personal world interacts with the outer societal world. It is a research method that is predicated on the process of thinking, reflection and reflexivity. Because of this, unique viewpoints could emerge otherwise not available from the positivist approach to research [Wall 2008]. My autoethnography encompassed both my experiences as a sponsee and a sponsor, and it covered my sponsorship experiences at Telstra Corporation, Motorola, Microsoft and Dell. Each of these sponsorship experiences occurred over multiple years from as short as two years to more than four years.

I also conducted a case study research because I wanted to examine a phenomenon in the real-life context [Yin 1981]. This research provided different perspectives on sponsorship while giving a robust comparative logic for developing and replicating insights [Eisenhardt 1989]. Data was collected from a theoretical sample of 19 sponsors and 16 sponsees (people who are sponsored) working in multinationals and the public sector across the world. All of the sponsors in the study had at least 20 years of corporate experience. They included the C-Suite, partners, general managers, vice presidents, and directors. The sponsee sample comprised of people who had been sponsored or those who had been recommended by their respective sponsors. The sponsees were younger (from ages 27 to 52) than the sponsors (from ages 43 to 69). The sample also included a good representation of both genders in the group of sponsors (11 males, 8 females) and sponsees (7 males, 9 females).

I adopted a semi-structured interview process because I wanted my interviewees to freely tell me about their sponsorship experiences. I read the interview transcriptions multiple times before attempting to code using a hybrid-coding framework consisting of a priori specifications of the case study framework, and the themes that emerged from the case interviews. The unit of analysis that I employed was phrases because phrases in any language form the basis of knowledge, and provide richer insights into the phenomenon studied. It is also a form of “in vivo” coding to capture the exact words, narratives, quotes and metaphors used by people. Initially, I used Microsoft Excel to code before adopting Atlas TI when the data became too complex to code manually.

As part of the reiterative and overlapping process of coding, analysing and theory building, I commenced my first detailed analysis and completed a draft write-up following the tenth interview, repeating the cycle after the eighteenth interview, twenty-fourth interview, and finally, after the thirty-fifth interview (see Figure 1). This process of going back and forth of coding, analysing and writing was essential in ensuring that the salient points were coded and captured in the analysis, and the key concepts and ideas were strengthened in the analysis [Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2014].

I also conducted an online study to obtain quantitative measures. This online study was administered using Qualtrics survey tool, and was targeted at senior leaders who were at least at the director level

Figure 1. Coding and analysis process in a flow chart

Source: author's own work.

on the organisational hierarchy because the extent of responsibility increases significantly from this level onwards. There were 100 participants in this study.

Coach, mentor and sponsor

Before going further, let me show how people define the terms: coach, mentor and sponsor. It is without a doubt that people often and still conflate the terms sponsor and mentor, and on occasions, coach. Some people even assume that the roles of the sponsor, mentor and coach are the same.

“The three words – coach, mentor and sponsor, always come together for me. It’s syntax. I would probably use them synonymously”¹⁰.

One reason why this misperception exists is that these three roles can enhance the development of an individual. As my research showed, the role of the sponsor builds on the roles of the coach and mentor.

“In my definition or what I’ve experienced, I feel like to be a sponsor, you’re like a mentor plus almost. A central part of that sponsor relationship is also to be able to be really candid, honest and have safe conversations where you can really level with one another. So to me, it’s almost like, you need to serve as a mentor, plus the sponsorship piece where you personally go out and back that person”.

The initial scholars of mentorship conflated the terms mentor and sponsor, and used these terms interchangeably in a period of more than 30 years [Friday, Friday & Green 2004]. Kram [1983], one of the gurus of mentorship initially defined mentors as senior and experienced individuals who are committed to support and advance their mentees’ careers. She found that mentors provide two functions to their mentees – career functions and psychosocial functions. In her work, she also defined sponsorship as one of the career functions of mentorship. Given that mentorship has been shown to enhance competence on the job, and provide psychosocial support and sponsorship for career advancement, Friday, Friday & Green [2004] argued that sponsorship and mentorship should be treated as two different and distinct constructs. There are also other distinctive differences among these three roles of coach, mentor and sponsor.

Coach. My research showed that a coach is someone who helps with a specific task, topic, skill or function. Coaching is a helping relationship. It is a relationship that helps individuals to achieve a set of goals or to improve performance. A coach can also help individuals to master new skills or to acquire new knowledge. As communicated by Stefan, one of my research participants, the role of a coach is akin to a parent teaching a child how to ride a bike:

“The coach is there to help you to underpin your learning. He or she has been tasked to help you to be proficient in a specific skill to achieve a shared objective. A coach is like a parent teaching a child how to ride a bike”.

Coaches go through a rigorous training process to obtain their coaching certification. There are many coaches who do not have coaching certification. Instead, they have extensive corporate experience. A coach is typically a paid role. In contrast, mentors and sponsors are typically non-paid roles.

Mentors are there to give advice [Hewlett 2013].

“A mentor is a neutral kind of person who is there to help you in any kind of way – he or she is there to listen, to observe and to play back and to paraphrase what you are going through in your life and work. A mentor is almost like a mirror to help you deal with whatever you are going through”.

Mentors typically give two types of advice: career advice and psychosocial advice to enhance their mentees’ development [Kram 1983]. They may act as a sounding board. They may also lend a listening ear – to listen to the problems, as well as offer advice to help solve them.

Mentors can come from all levels of the organisational hierarchy. They may comprise of junior employees who possess a particular skill or knowledge that a mentee wants to learn, for example, social media skills. These mentors are known as reverse mentors [Marcinkus, Murphy 2012]. Your peers may serve as your mentors [Kram, Isabella 1985]. And of course, mentors can be individuals who are more senior and more experienced [Kram 1983].

Given that mentors can sit on all the levels of the organisational hierarchy, they may or may not have the power or the political clout to drive career decisions that are necessary to influence your upward career mobility.

Sponsor. Rather than “give”, sponsors “invest” [Hewlett 2013]. Sponsors are senior leaders who are committed to somebody’s career success. To further elaborate, sponsors first invest the time, effort and resources to prepare the sponsee for the top roles. When she or he is ready for the next big role, sponsors often go “out on a limb” to advocate and champion for the sponsee. Because sponsors are senior leaders with power and influence, they are able to leverage their political clout to open doors and drive decisions in the sponsee’s favour. They also have a voice at the decision-making tables to influence decisions pertaining to roles, opportunities or even pay raises.

“A sponsor is someone who is willing to teach you the ropes of success, as well as teach you on how to be versatile. And of course, position you for a better job”.

To prevent making a “wrong” senior appointment, organisations typically appoint candidates with backing from sponsors. Without sponsorship, it

is unlikely that individuals will be successful in securing the senior roles regardless of their track record, competence or leadership potential.

The table below shows the key differences between a mentor and a sponsor.

Table 1. Differences between mentors and sponsors

Mentor	Sponsor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can sit at any level of the hierarchy • Provide emotional support, feedback on how to improve and other advice • Serve as role models • Strive to increase protégés’* sense of competence and self-worth • Focus on proteges’ personal and professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be senior managers with influence • Give protégés exposure to other executives who may help their careers • Make sure their people are considered for promising opportunities and challenging assignments • Protect their protégés from negative publicity or damaging contact with senior executives • Fight to get their people promoted

* “Protégé” is a generic term for mentee/sponsee.

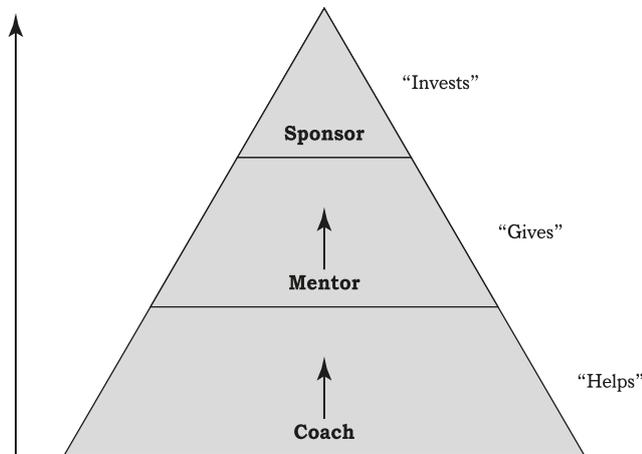
Source: Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. [2010], *Why men still get more promotions than women*. “Harvard Business Review”, Vol. 88(9): 85.

Having discussed the different roles of the coach, mentor and sponsor, I’d like to extend Hewlett’s [2013] definition to use the words: “help”, “give” and “invest” to highlight the distinctive differences among the three roles comprising a coach, a mentor and a sponsor. A coach can help you to develop a specific skill. A mentor can give you advice on how to deal with a particular issue. And a sponsor typically invests in your development for your career success.

With this in mind, a hierarchy of roles consisting of a coach, a mentor and a sponsor was constructed (see Figure 2). This hierarchy of roles shows that the higher order roles do more than the lower order roles, and it also shows that a sponsor’s role can combine the roles of a coach and a mentor. In other words, a sponsor can be a coach plus mentor and more.

“I see a sponsor in its formal definition is the one who culminates it all. A sponsor would sit at the highest level of the hierarchy of roles. And a sponsor is someone who stands up publicly for the individual in whom they believe, and thus, would push forward with the individual to secure the next big role.”

Figure 2. Hierarchy of roles – coach, mentor and sponsor



Source: author's own work (extension of Hewlett's [2013] definitions).

Definition of sponsorship

If a sponsor is an individual who invests in your career, then sponsorship is a committed relationship between a senior and influential leader (sponsor) and a younger and less experienced employee (sponsee) that is focused on driving career progression for the sponsee. It is a dyadic relationship and is “a kind of relationship – in which the sponsor goes beyond giving feedback and advice, and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for the sponsee” [Ibarra et al. 2010, p. 82]. To this end, a sponsor can “turbo charge” your career because he or she is influential. When your sponsor talks about you – especially about your value, capability and leadership potential, he or she is promoting and giving you visibility with the other leaders of the organisation. As such, the sponsor can add weight to your candidacy and signal that you are a “safe bet” for the senior role. The sponsor can give you a head start by opening new opportunities in either your employing organisation or in a different organisation [Reskin 1979]. The sponsor can also go “out on a limb” to fight for your promotion [Wayne et al. 1999]. This suggests that a sponsor can do much more than what normal career progression can do.

What mentors and sponsors do

According to mentorship literature, there are three specific functions that mentors do. These mentorship functions are not all or none functions. Depending on the mentor's capability and seniority,

any given mentor may provide all or some of these functions.

The first function that mentors provide is career support. Often, this function is provided in the form of giving career advice. The more senior the mentor is, the more career advice he or she is able to provide. Additionally, senior mentors can give challenging assignments [Kram 1983] to enhance their mentees' development.

The second function that mentors provide is psychosocial support. Psychosocial support also encompasses friendship and giving emotional support. Your mentor can provide a safe platform for you to discuss all things personal and confidential including work and non-work issues [Noe 1988]. When Kram [1983] first defined this function, she found four specific sub-functions of psychosocial support including:

- Helping the mentee to develop a sense of professional identity.
- Providing counselling.
- Giving friendship and social support.
- Role modelling.

Even though role modelling was initially identified as a sub-function of psychosocial support, today, it is considered a separate function of mentorship [Scandura 1992]. Role modelling also includes the imparting of values and attitudes, and demonstrating leadership behaviours. And role modelling can occur when the mentor gives critical and constructive feedback to the mentee.

There is another function of the mentor. In my research, I found that the mentor can help the mentee to self-reflect. The importance of self-reflection should not be undermined as the act of self-reflection can lead to self-awareness, which is the foundation of self-leadership.

My research showed that sponsors can do much more for sponsees. Because sponsors are committed to their sponsees' success, they are able to make a lot more impact on their careers.

“The sponsor sponsors you into something. It's an active relationship with an outcome”.

“Sponsorship takes place when you take an interest. There is a commitment to the individual”.

Sponsors can provide up to 14 different behaviours to help sponsees advance in their careers. Similar to mentorship functions, these sponsorship behaviours are not all or none behaviours. Depending on the phase of the sponsor relationship, needs

of the sponsee or sponsor, different behaviours will be exhibited. These 14 behaviours can be categorised into professional development behaviours on one hand, and personal development behaviours on the other hand (see Table 2). Given the main role of sponsors, which is to drive career progression for you, it is not surprising to see more professional development behaviours (11 behaviours) than personal development behaviours (3 behaviours). To this end, sponsors rather than mentors are able to drive more impact for an individual's career. Thus, it is clear that sponsorship has currency value, especially for career advancement and progress.

Table 2. Sponsor behaviours

Professional development behaviours	Personal development behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide visibility and exposure • Provide advocacy • Ensure candidacy for roles • Nurture and teach • Provide stretch assignments • Give actionable career advice • Access to senior leader networks • Build political acumen • Provide protection • Fight for promotion • Access to external networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop confidence • Provide image advice • Give personal advice

Source: author's own work.

The currency of sponsorship

Securing senior roles requires sponsorship. Even if an individual is competent or meets all the criteria for the senior role, it's unlikely that he/she would be successful if he/she is not known, seen or heard.

“If you have the right sponsor, you move faster.
It's as simple as that”.

Having a sponsor helps to elevate the individual's brand from being “a face in the crowd” to “the face in the crowd”.

“All quarterbacks look the same.
It is without a doubt you need to do and perform well as a quarterback. But that is not enough.
You need sponsors. Like a quarterback, you need other people to take a risk on you and help you stand out from the rest”.

Another way to understand the currency of sponsorship is to adopt DeFillippi and Arthur's [1994] career competency-based framework. According to it, there are three competencies that are critical for career success. These competencies are the “know-why”, “know-how” and “know-whom” competencies. Individuals need all three competencies to succeed in their careers.

The know-why competencies refer to the individual's sense of identity and proactiveness to develop and seek opportunities for career advancement. The know-how competencies refer to the individual's capability, knowledge and skills that are necessary to perform in a role. These competencies help the individuals to perform and lead, thus, is a source of competitive advantage for not only the individual, but also the organisation [Pfeffer 1998]. The know-whom competencies come from social relations, and are dependent on the individual's access to the senior leader networks.

In adopting the career competency framework for sponsorship, it is evident that sponsors can help to cultivate seven know-how competencies and seven know-whom competencies (see Table 3). These enhanced competencies support why those with sponsors are more successful in accelerating their career than those without sponsors. It also explains why women with sponsors are twice more likely to reach the C-Suite compared to those without sponsors or more precisely, 61% compared to 32%¹¹.

Table 3. Competencies acquired from sponsorship

Know-how competencies	Know-whom competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nurture and teach • Provide stretch assignments • Give actionable career advice • Build political acumen • Develop confidence • Provide image advice • Provide personal advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide visibility and exposure • Provide advocacy • Ensure candidacy for roles • Access to senior leader networks • Provide protection • Fight for promotion • Access to external networks

Source: author's own work.

My study of 100 global senior leaders confirmed the importance of sponsorship for career progression. Even though 60% of these leaders told me that sponsorship helped them to move up by one to two levels, there are some leaders who told me that their sponsors helped them to progress by at least three levels on the organisational hierarchy [Ang, Reb

2017]. This shows that sponsorship matters for career progression. As such, I believe that sponsorship is the solution to solving the issue of too few women leaders, as well as gender parity across the world. Thus, women should not ignore career sponsorship as an important strategy for career progression.

Having seen how some women have been able to leverage career sponsorship for their career progression, organisations too have jumped on the sponsorship bandwagon. Examples of successful sponsorship programs include Deutsche Bank's ATLAS (Accomplished Top Leaders Advancement Strategies) Program and Canada's The Protégé Project. Since joining the ATLAS program, a large majority of these ATLAS participants are now in new or more senior roles¹². The Protégé Project in Canada has also shown to help a few Canadian women to shatter the glass ceiling even though originally, The Protégé Project was centred on helping Canadian women build senior leader networks at the country level. These two programs show that career sponsorship matters for the progression of women.

Concluding remarks

If we are serious to have more women leaders across the world, we need to focus on career sponsorship now rather than later. Sponsorship programs not only can give women a platform to develop themselves and progress on the organisational hierarchy, but also give the organisations to play a key role in solving this perennial problem of too few women leaders.

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² N. Feeney, Women are now more likely to have college degree than men, "Times", October 7, 2015; <http://time.com/4064665/women-college-degree/>

³ ICEF Monitor, Women increasingly outpacing men's higher education participation in many world markets, October 22, 2014; <http://monitor.icef.com/2014/10/women-increasingly-outpacing-mens-higher-education-participation-many-world-markets/>

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⁸ Enhancing women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship and business leadership in OECD countries. http://www.oecd.org/gender/Enhancing%20Women%20Economic%20Empowerment_Fin_1_Oct_2014.pdf

⁹ M. Bergelson, How Sheryl Sandberg's mentor helped launch her career, "Everwise", February 5, 2015; <https://www.geteverwise.com/mentoring/how-sheryl-sandbergs-mentor-helped-launch-her-career/>.

¹⁰ All the quotes are from the author's own research.

¹¹ C. Titleman, Sponsorship is an important key to unlocking women's career potential, "The Globe and Mail", March 8, 2018; <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/management/sponsorship-is-an-important-key-to-unlocking-womens-career-potential/article38204533/>.

¹² Catalyst Sponsorship Guide 2015, http://www.mddsz.gov.si/fileadmin/mddsz.gov.si/pageuploads/dokumentni__pdf/enake_moznosti/VKljuciVseSponsorshipGuide.pdf.

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