Using Mentorship and Sponsorship to Develop Women Leaders
The first post in a five-part blog series on women in leadership

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How did you get your career where it is today? Have others helped along the way? Have you played a part in someone else’s promotion or advancement? Mentoring and sponsorship are two important ways to develop yourself and your career and also provide support and advancement to others in your organization. While a mentor helps you to navigate your career and provide guidance, a sponsor is a senior leader who uses influence to advocate so you can obtain high-visibility projects, promotions or jobs. Does your company offer a formal mentoring or sponsorship program for women managers and leaders?

A recent Skillsoft survey reports that only 16% of female professionals have access to either a formal mentorship or sponsorship. It is particularly important for women to make connections with mentors and sponsors given the current gender imbalance in leadership.

Women tend to shortchange the importance of sponsorship and making connections in the workplace. “Almost 80 percent (of women) reported that hard work and long hours — not connections — were responsible for their advancement.”1 Ilene H. Lang, President & CEO of Catalyst states that “Good sponsors can supercharge a woman’s career by providing her with access to essential networks, bringing her achievements to the attention of senior-level executives, and recommending her for key assignments.”2

So how do you find a mentor or sponsor? Building support and career development culture within organizations will take time, yet it is imperative that organizations make a concerted effort to create a culture that fosters active mentorship and sponsorship. Start a dialogue with co-workers and ask if they may be interested in pairing with a mentor or sponsor. Consider the role of HR and how those team members may be able to build mentoring and sponsorship goals into metrics for success within your organization.

Ensure that mentorship and sponsorship programs are viewed as a method of building bench strength by HR executives who must recognize the importance of meeting organizational goals and building a pipeline.

Earn the right to be sponsored. Do you deserve it? Is it a right that is given to you?

• Ask yourself – What are my goals? How can a mentor assist me in meeting these goals? What skills do I need to learn or improve? What professional networks are important?
• Take the initiative. Introduce yourself by phone or email.

1  Forget Mentors – Sponsors can help you soar at work CNN, 2011.
2  Ibid
• Take ownership to set up a meeting and suggest potential topics. Agree on confidentiality. Determine frequency of phone or face-to-face meetings – consider regular monthly or quarterly meetings.

• Document and communicate your professional goals and work together to develop progress measures and a timeline for success. Write or type them down so it becomes real.3

Investing in mentoring creates a strong basis for your professional growth and being active in the process is a good starting point.

3 2015-2016 Guidelines for Mentors booklet Boston Children's Hospital, 2015.