

SPONSORS ARE THE NEW MENTORS, ESPECIALLY FOR WOMEN

FOR WOMEN TO MOVE UP THE RANKS IN
LAW FIRMS, MENTORING ISN'T ENOUGH

Ida O. Abbott

Women have been told for years that having a mentor is critical for career success, and today many can readily find mentors or be matched with one in a program. But as their careers progress, they watch, puzzled and frustrated, as their male peers move up the ladder faster and higher. These women work just as hard, perform just as well, and are just as capable and driven as those men—often more so. They follow their mentors' advice and pursue the same career strategies as men, but to no avail.



What's going on?

For women to move up the ranks in law firms, mentoring isn't enough. They need sponsoring within the firm, too.

Let's Look at the Typical Scenario in Law Firms

Like women lawyers, men have mentors, too, but their mentors are doing more than providing career advice, guidance and emotional support—and it leaves gaps between the genders' advancement, like this:

While women are going to business development classes and learning to network with other women, men are being invited to business pitches, client meetings, and golf games with clients and influential businessmen.

While women are spending time planning events for the firm's women's initiative, men are being given high-visibility work projects.

While men who have yet to bring in any business are being promoted based on presumed potential, women with the same track record are kept in place because they are presumed to be less effective or less committed.

Men Enjoy These and Other Advantages Because Their Mentors Act as Sponsors

That is, they view the men as protégés, prepare them to be future leaders, and vigorously advocate for them to get important promotions, clients, and leadership roles.

Research shows that more men than women get promoted—not because of any inherent differences in ability between the sexes, but because far more men enjoy the sponsorship of powerful partners who help propel their careers upward.

It's Sponsorship That Gets the Job Done

Most sponsors are also men because sponsors need to have power—and in law firms, the people with power (equity partners, top leaders, and rainmakers) are overwhelmingly men. While some of these men sponsor women, most men sponsor other men.

The same research shows that when women have senior-level sponsors, they get promoted at the same rate as men. But since twice as many men have sponsors, men continue to rise steadily to the top leadership slots. Women seem unable to crack the 15 percent equity-partner ceiling, even though they have been entering law firms on a par with men for two decades.

Why Don't More Men Sponsor Women?

Sponsorship involves a close and often intense working relationship between sponsor and protégé. Sponsors become personally and actively invested in a protégé's upward mobility, using their political capital and staking their reputations on the protégé's success. They want to ensure their protégés have both star power and staying power.

Many men who could sponsor women avoid or overlook them in favor of men. Men favor having male protégés in part because they find it more natural, familiar, and comfortable to advance other men.

Some of these sponsors unconsciously harbor gender biases that make them perceive women to be less ambitious, less reliable and a higher risk than men. For instance, they may assume women who have children are less committed to and focused on their careers, and therefore less worthy of

sponsorship. Or because women do not broadcast their achievements or career aspirations the way men do, sponsors might not realize that high-performing women have the same or even greater ambitions than men.

Some think opposite-sex sponsorship is too complicated or risky. It raises issues they don't have to worry about when they sponsor other men, such as sexual attraction, office gossip, and jealous wives. They may feel at ease working closely with another man and giving him tough feedback, but with a woman protégé, they have to be on guard about what they say, how they act and what they do.

But such perceptions and worries are not legitimate excuses for giving sponsorship advantages that push men ahead and hold women back.

So what's to be done?

It's Time to Confront These Concerns

Men in law firms must confront these concerns and push them aside. Sponsorship can no longer be a boys club. Men must step up to the plate. As partners and leaders, men have accepted the responsibility to develop, retain, and advance all the best talent—but they are ignoring and losing the female half of that talent pool. When tens of thousands of women enter practice but it's overwhelmingly men who make it to the top, the deficiency is not in the women but in the system—a system created and led by men.

Men who cannot make more women leaders are failing their firms and letting down the people they are entrusted to lead.

This is not just a matter of equitable treatment for women. It directly impacts the economics and viability of the firm. There is abundant evidence that organizations with higher percentages of women leaders outperform their competitors with quantifiably superior financial results.

Moreover, clients expect greater gender diversity on their teams. They appreciate that the traits, skills, and competencies associated with women leaders (e.g., collaboration, empathy, openness) are now essential to operating successfully in an ever more social, interdependent, and transparent world.

Smart law firm leaders also appreciate the benefits of having larger numbers of women participating widely in firm leadership. Those who want their firms to be in the forefront of advancing women must groom them for those roles. To do this, they must become sponsors for women, not just mentors.

Ida Abbott, a consultant, author, and speaker who specializes in developing lawyers' careers, advising law firms about retirement processes and working with senior lawyers as a retirement mentor

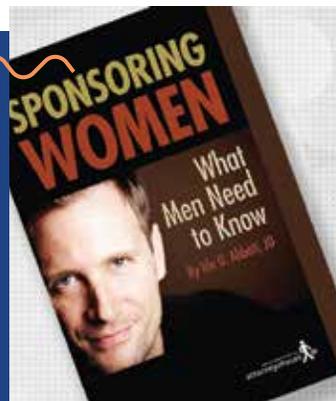
and coach. For her contributions to the legal profession, she has been elected a Fellow of both the American Bar Foundation and the College of Law Practice Management. Her most recent book is "The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring, 2nd Edition" (NALP, 2018). She is also the author of "Sponsoring Women: What Men Need to Know" (Attorney at Work). Learn more about her services at IdaAbbott.com.

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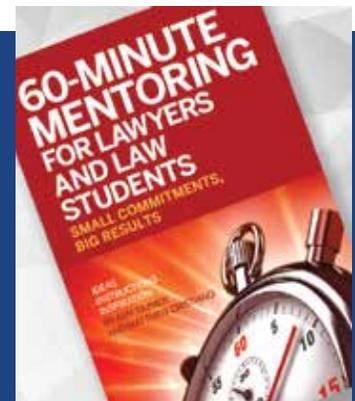
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Sponsoring Women
By Ida Abbott

Moving women into the executive suite is not just a job for women. If you (or a man you know) need help understanding how and why men can sponsor high-performing women into leadership roles while avoiding the potential pitfalls, Ida Abbott's best-selling book shows the way.



60-Minute Mentoring for Lawyers and Law Students
By Amy Timmer and Matthew Cristiano

A perfect resource for both the mentee and mentor, this how-to book explains how 60-minute (episodic) mentoring works — and how it benefits law students, young lawyers, bar associations, and the legal profession.