



How a Sponsor Can Help Your Career

Go beyond a mentor and look internally for an advocate to help you move up.

by Dawn Wotapka

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Early in her accounting career, Kristen Rampe, CPA, noticed a colleague looking out for her. She was invited to work on special projects, speak at industry conferences, and participate in numerous opportunities.

Though she didn't know what it was called at the time, the colleague was her "sponsor"—someone who advocates on a promising employee's behalf. Now, she realizes how key having a sponsor was to her early career. "It taught me just how important this is, how much value it adds to your career progression," said Rampe, who is now a consultant to the accounting profession.

Rampe and other CPAs we spoke to for this article say sponsorship is essential for career advancement in a field where many people have several managers, and self-promotion isn't stressed. "Lots of CPAs aren't good at touting their own greatness," Rampe pointed out. "Many are quietly doing great work in the background."

Sponsorship is different from mentorship. Mentors, who can be from outside an employer, usually act as sounding boards and offer guidance and advice. Sponsors, on the other hand, are usually from the same workplace and are more actively involved than mentors in helping you reach goals—be they partnership, practicing in a different group, or having a higher profile. Sponsors have influence and sufficient respect in the organization to help others land desirable assignments, promotions, raises, and bonuses.

"You go to a mentor and ask them for advice," said David Almonte, CPA, CGMA, an audit manager with Grant Thornton LLP who still maintains a connection with the sponsor from his first job. "A sponsor, on the other hand, they act, they deliver. When you tell your sponsor what you want in life, they will help you actively pursue it."

For employers, sponsors inform internal leadership about the strong work performance and potential of future leaders. A sponsorship program can also help identify and nurture a workplace with more diversity in gender, race, and sexual orientation, according to the [2016 Accounting MOVE Project Report](#), an annual survey of financial and accounting firms. "The business case for sponsorship is synonymous with the business case for succession. Partners must replace themselves in order to expand their practices, to launch new lines of business and to retire," the report states.

If you think your career can benefit from a sponsor, here are some things to consider.

- **Start early.** Seek out positions where sponsorships are part of the formal culture. If you're already employed, check with your human resources department.
- **Look around.** If your employer doesn't have a formal program, you can ask internally about starting one and find someone willing to sponsor you. Make sure the person is well-respected, connected, and willing to advocate on your behalf. This method, known as the organic model, often yields long-term relationships and friendships, according to the MOVE report. Be careful not to rush or force the relationship, and look for someone you admire, have something in common with, and whose career you'd like to emulate, Almonte said. Don't overlook your mentors. Almonte said his first sponsorship grew out of a "mentorship-type relationship."
- **Show passion.** Make sure you show enthusiasm for the field and demonstrate leadership qualities. "I look for people who are very passionate about the profession and very passionate about what they want to accomplish," said Michael Silvio, director of tax services at Hall & Company CPAs, who helped the last person he sponsored become partner. "They need to be decisive, they need to be energetic."

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- **Listen well.** Sponsors may provide feedback to help guide your career. A good sponsor will help you play up your strengths while gently pushing you in areas in which you need improvement. Avoid someone “who is going to just tell you everything is ‘OK’,” Almonte said.
- **Give back.** Being sponsored isn’t a one-sided relationship. You have to deliver stellar work that makes your sponsor shine. “You’ve got to hold up your end of the bargain by doing a great job,” Rampe said. Also, see if you can help your sponsor with introductions in your professional network or by helping him or her brush up on a skill you’re more familiar with, Almonte advised.
- **Try again.** Sponsorship is like dating, and the first relationship may not work. A pairing may also run its course, leaving you wanting or needing a new sponsor. But keep at it: A good sponsor will help you take your career to a higher level, and eventually you’ll be the one doing the sponsoring.

If you have a sponsor, tell us about your experience on [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#)!

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