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Getting to the C-Suite: How Sponsorship Can Propel Your Career in Ways that Mentorship Can’t

By Nadia Alfadel Coloma

“Sponsorship and mentorship are often used interchangeably, but they are two different things,” says Stephanie Smith (DBA ‘19), vice president and chief human resources officer at DePaul. Making the distinction between the two is a big part of Smith’s recently completed dissertation, which examines racial and gender differences in the executive sponsorship of black women.

Smith is a recent graduate of the Doctorate in Business Administration program at DePaul’s Kellstadt Graduate School of Business. She managed human resources organizations for big corporations, including Kraft Foods, before joining DePaul’s executive leadership in 2012.

“Sponsorship as a vehicle for career advancement resonates with me because it made a big difference in my own professional journey, especially as a first-generation corporate professional,” she says. “Over the course of my career, I’ve been fortunate to have people take an interest in my growth, [people] who have helped identify and provide opportunities for me to move forward.”

People tend to seek out mentorship when they want a professional relationship that provides career guidance and development. A mentor is a valuable resource but, according to Smith, can only take you so far, particularly if your goal is to sit at the executive table or get to the role of CEO.

According to research, 95 percent of all white males who are in CEO positions said that there was someone who helped them get there. “Those are sponsors, not mentors, who are lifting them up,” says Smith.

Mentors provide coaching and counseling around a certain issue or career choice. They offer psychosocial support, helping you navigate through organizations or difficult situations, but they can fly under the radar. No one may know you have a mentor. Sponsors, on the other hand, provide strictly career-oriented support that helps open doors to top positions. “They are the people who sit in the rooms where key decisions are made, especially decisions around succession planning,” explains Smith.

“They possess the influence, leadership and reputation that allow them to advocate for others. That’s the key difference between mentors and sponsors.”

Conducting a study on sponsors and their proteges, Smith set out to investigate why black women are not represented in the CEO landscape of Fortune 500 companies. “With so much emphasis that companies place on diversity and inclusion initiatives, I find it problematic that the 5% of women CEOs today are all white,” she says. “That’s a weak number for women in general, but it’s bleak for black women in particular. I wanted to find out how and why sponsorship is playing out differently for them.”

One theory Smith explores in her research is the similarity-attraction paradigm, which posits that people tend to be drawn to people who are similar to themselves. “I found that a number of black women out there do have sponsors to help get them to the top positions, in addition to the education, experience and intellect. But the missing piece had to do with similarity-attraction. White males are still primarily in charge, so part of the issue is that there aren’t enough people of other backgrounds or races with whom to confer on who gets into those executive board rooms.”

Based on these findings, Smith has some advice to share with sponsors: “I think you have a duty to develop a diverse talent pipeline and break the similarity-attraction paradigm. It’s important to see beyond just white males as the prototypical CEO or senior executive. Other people can succeed in those roles, too.”
SMITH HAS THESE THREE TIPS TO SHARE FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN BEING SPONSORED:

1. **DO EXCELLENT WORK.**
   
   It may sound simplistic, but the best way to gain a corporate sponsor is to perform with excellence. Sponsors tend to take someone under their wing because they see a person’s potential, so how you get noticed is through your work. Particularly once they become senior, sponsors want to leave a legacy by developing a talent pipeline for their organization, so they are on the lookout for people who shine.

2. **ASSUME WORK THAT INCREASES YOUR VISIBILITY.**
   
   Of course, you can’t get noticed unless your work is visible, so it’s important to take on responsibilities and projects that will put you in front of the key players in an organization, even if it means going outside of your job’s main duties. You can volunteer to lead a task force or take on a challenging assignment. The quickest way to get noticed, however, is to have a job that is responsible for decisions that contribute to whether an organization/brand fails or succeeds, such as jobs that are responsible for profit and loss. You can ascend to high positions in just about any field, but if the CEO role is your goal, you definitely need experience in profit and loss.

3. **SEEK ACCESS TO SENIOR LEADERSHIP.**
   
   The best kind of sponsor-protege relationships happen organically. It’s something that can’t be forced. But to start, you need to be comfortable with introducing yourself to senior leaders when the opportunities present themselves. Whether at networking events or company meetings, don’t be afraid to approach them. Start a conversation and put yourself on their radar. This ability to advocate for yourself, to use political skill to influence people, is key to navigating and leveraging powerful relationships within an organization.