



A guide to being an effective sponsor



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About this guide to effective sponsorship

Congratulations on taking the first step towards becoming a sponsor of diverse talent!

Whether you've entered into sponsoring diverse talent as part of a workplace DEI programme, or are doing so of your own volition, we're looking forward to supporting you on your sponsorship journey.

We made this guide because we know that cross-cultural sponsorship is an important part of boosting the visibility and career progression of Black and ethnically diverse employees within organisations, but that often, establishing and sustaining a productive, effective and ultimately career enhancing sponsor-sponsee relationship can be a challenging endeavour.

Understanding the cultural nuances at play, and being able to confidently navigate these, is critical to the success of diverse talent sponsorship. Having clear guidelines for setting goals and giving feedback, coupled with access to support materials and educational resources, can mean the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful sponsorship.



In this guide you will find information about what sponsorship is - and what it isn't - alongside tips for how to keep your sponsor-sponsee relationship on track. We've also included advice on how to navigate the imbalances in privilege and access present in this type of relationship, as well as suggestions for how to ensure your sponsorship is inclusive and culturally conscious.

About UpSkill Digital

UpSkill Digital provides tailored, scalable learning programmes for global workforces, which both help businesses create and promote inclusive, equitable workplaces where all employees are valued, and equip employees with the future skills they need to succeed in our increasingly digitised world.

With less than 5% of leadership roles held by Black and ethnically diverse employees*, our mission is to help organisations move the needle on representation at senior levels. We believe cross-cultural sponsorship is one of several powerful tools to help drive change.

"It's not always easy for an ethnically diverse employee to find a sponsor who will take them under their wing, speak up for them, and advocate for their promotion. The key to accelerated progression and breaking glass ceilings is to have a strong sponsor. At UpSkill Digital we're committed to supporting our forward-thinking clients and partners to champion diversity at the highest levels of the organisation by advancing high performing, diverse talent into senior positions."

Gori Yahaya, Founder and CEO



Sponsorship as a powerful tool to drive change

Sponsorship schemes can be a powerful tool to drive Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives beyond policies, towards real change in terms of progression and visibility across all levels of seniority within your business.

But, even the most well-intentioned cross-cultural sponsorship schemes can fall flat when not coupled with clearly defined structure, well-communicated goals, and reliable support mechanisms.

“31% of Black employees desire a sponsor compared to 12% of white employees.”

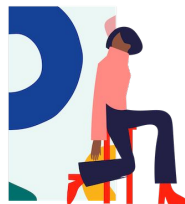
*Race at Work Black Voices Report, 2020**

Equally, failing to equip both parties - whether from majority or marginalised groups - with the tools and education they need to interact consciously and effectively, could mean that the relationship is derailed by the same challenges and barriers that created an unequal workplace culture in the first place.

In this guide, we share tips and approaches for sponsors that can help ensure their sponsorship becomes the powerful catalyst for change it has the potential to be.

*<https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/race-at-work-black-voices-report/>

Identifying sponsees



Once you have decided you are ready to commit to becoming a sponsor for diverse talent, the next step is to select a potential sponsee.

It's important to be cognisant of the potential biases that could impact this decision, and take steps to mitigate them, remembering that acknowledging the presence of bias is often the first step to ensuring it doesn't encroach on how you navigate a relationship or situation.

Affinity bias

Also known as the 'like me' bias - this is the unconscious tendency to gravitate towards those who you code as 'like me'.

Conformity bias

This impacts what we consider 'proper behaviour' which is almost always based on majority culture.

Halo/ horns bias

Viewing someone as either all good or all bad based on one positive or negative behaviour, trait or accomplishment.

Performance bias

Assumptions about performance based on characteristics such as race or gender; we tend to overestimate the performance of members of majority groups and underestimate that of members of marginalised groups.

Navigating bias in the selection process

Awareness is important, but ultimately meaningless if not coupled with action. Below are some suggestions of things to be mindful of when countering possible bias in your selection of promising talent to sponsor.

- **Update your definition of “leadership material”**
Especially when it comes to evaluating qualities such as gravitas, ability to influence, and being well-connected. Ask how these are being measured and push back if these are defined based on majority culture or privilege.
- **Consider the role of bias in processes such as performance reviews and selection for progression**
Lack of representation at the top doesn't happen in a vacuum, so you'll likely need to look beyond normalised markers of high-performance.
- **Gather a holistic view of someone's abilities**
Based both on objective performance metrics and subjective reviews gained from those who work above, below and around potential sponsees.
- **Equip yourself with the ability to speak up**
As a leader, it's essential that you are able to speak out if you feel a process is biased. If you're unsure how to do this, invest in your own development as an inclusive leader.

Understand how ‘like me’ bias shows up

Affinity or ‘like me’ bias is something that all human beings are susceptible to - not just members of majority groups.

In fact, being able to navigate the impact of affinity bias in both sponsors and sponsees is critical for sponsorship success.

Consider that when someone identifies another person as ‘like me’, they're more likely to value, trust and understand what that person is saying to them; the reverse is also true.

This means that protégés in a cross-cultural sponsorship relationship, who will have likely coded their sponsor - intentionally or not - as ‘not like me’, may feel a sense of disconnection or dissonance with what their sponsor is saying or recommending to them. Research shows that people acquire leadership skills not only by observing and emulating how others do it, but also by asking themselves whether that approach would work for them too. ‘Like me’ bias adds complexity to what that internal response might be, and this can be destabilising to the sponsorship dynamic*.

It's important to understand that this - the ‘like me’ bias dilemma - could play a part in your relationship with a potential sponsee, and that you take steps to mitigate its impact.

*Hermينيا Ibarra and Nana Von Bernuth, "[Want more Diverse Leadership, Sponsor Junior Talent](#)" Harvard Business Review (October 2020)

Managing the 'like me' bias dilemma

Do

- Recognise that this dilemma exists
- Work together on stretch goals and career progression milestones, instead of focusing on behaviours
- Allow your authority to be challenged - acknowledge that this provides a growth opportunity for you as an inclusive leader
- Continue to focus on advocating for sponsees and boosting their visibility at more senior levels

Don't

- Make assumptions about what your sponsee may or may not be experiencing
- Take it personally - sponsees can both respect and understand your authority, achievements and seniority without wanting to adopt your leadership style
- Think you need to reinforce or re-state your experience and attributes

Of course, this list isn't exhaustive, and you may find that there are other, effective things you can do to engage effectively and inclusively with your sponsee.

*Herminia Ibarra and Nana Von Bernuth, "[Want more Diverse Leadership, Sponsor Junior Talent](#)"
Harvard Business Review (October 2020)



“My sponsor opened my eyes to a world of opportunities and encouraged me to believe in myself, push boundaries and pursue my ambitions”

*Jane Musyoki, Director, EY**

<https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/can-organisations-support-better-progression-bame-employees/>



Sponsorship vs mentorship

We often see businesses conflate the concepts of sponsorship and mentorship, and those blurred lines lead to confusion at both ends of the sponsor/ sponsee relationship.

The result? Misaligned expectations, diminished perceived effectiveness of the relationship, decreased commitment to the program, and, eventually, frustration, mistrust and the potential for damaged reputations on both sides.

“Sponsorship is a kind of helping relationship in which senior, powerful people use their personal clout to talk up, advocate for and place a more junior person in a key role. While a mentor is someone who has knowledge and will share it with you, a sponsor is a person who has power and will use it for you.”

*Harvard Business Review**

What’s more, research shows that confusion about - as well as lack of access to - sponsorship schemes disproportionately impacts people from marginalised groups*. So, if your program is linked to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, then being incredibly distinct about what your initiative is - and what it isn’t - is paramount.

*Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carter, and Christine Silva, [“Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women,”](#) Harvard Business Review (September 2010)

**Herminia Ibarra and Nana Von Bernuth, [“Want more Diverse Leadership, Sponsor Junior Talent”](#) Harvard Business Review (October 2020)

This checklist is a helpful tool for ensuring that you are best placed to sponsor individuals within your organisation, as well as ensuring your sponsorship is staying on track.

	Mentor	Sponsor
Are more senior than their protégé	✓	✓
Has sufficient seniority that they can influence decisions about their protégé’s career trajectory		✓
Provides advice and guidance around professional development and career next steps	✓	✓
Advocates for their protégé’s promotion and involvement in opportunities		✓
Provides exposure and networking opportunities with other senior executives or leaders		✓
Gives advice, feedback and emotional support	✓	✓
Is focused on bolstering their protégé’s sense of value and self-worth	✓	
Is focused on enhancing their protégé’s level of visibility and access to opportunities		✓

Tips for an effective sponsorship

Use the tips below to ensure your sponsorship is culturally conscious and ultimately, effective.

Set clear goals for you and your sponsee

What your goals are, and those of your protégé, will vary depending on sector and function, but setting individual goals is essential for ensuring your sponsorship is valuable and effective.

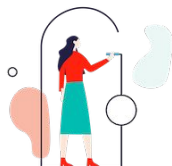
Eg. Increased visibility on a senior level, exposure to networking opportunities, promotion after X number of months, sponsorship for board level roles, introductions to new functions and levels of the business, shadowing.



Top tip

The SMART framework can help ensure goals turn into tangible outcomes:

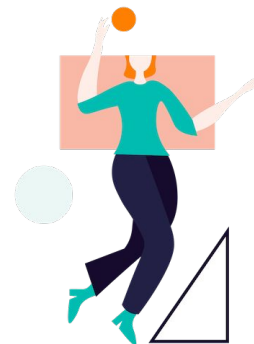
Specific
Measurable
Attainable
Relevant
Time-bound



Commit to educating yourself

Ensure you're interacting and communicating in a culturally conscious way by committing to educating yourself about the issues faced by your sponsee. A strong commitment to this work will mean you communicate consciously, both within and outside of your sessions. Given the criteria of effective sponsorship, this is essential - how will you open doors if you don't know how to talk about your sponsee when they're not in the room?

Eg. Find resources such as podcasts, books and articles that centre under-represented groups and voices. Dedicate time to digesting these resources - it's worth seeing if your People team can support on this.



Top tip

Not sure where to start? Ask your People Team or HR Department for support with learning resources. Do not make this the responsibility of your sponsee - it's not up to them to educate you about DEI.

Become an effective ally

Challenge biases you may notice others making about your sponsee, and intervene on their behalf.

Eg. Question and challenge descriptions of your protégé which are culturally loaded such as 'too aggressive' or 'not leadership material!'



Make meaningful introductions

Actively seek out relevant opportunities that will help increase your sponsee's visibility and mobility within the business. These should be aligned with their goals.

Be proactive in your approach and communicate what you're doing on a regular basis; this will reassure your sponsee that you are committed and accountable.

It's also important to recognise your privilege in this context, especially when it comes to opening doors your sponsee might not otherwise have been able to.

Eg. Invite your sponsee to cross-departmental meetings, external meetings, industry events, advisory boards you may sit on. Ask them if there are any types of event they feel would be most beneficial for them to attend.



Top tip

Once you've made the connection, support your sponsee's next steps. Remember that these may be new waters for them, and often ones laden with biases and inequities, so what comes as second nature to you may require additional guidance for them.

We recommend this approach:

- **Introduce** your sponsee briefly, then allow them to introduce themselves
- **Explain** why you've brought them along, so it's clear to all parties what their role is, and that you're invested in their presence and contribution
- **Include** them in the conversation at regular intervals
- **Provide** guidance post-meeting/ event on who your sponsee might want to connect with further
- **Facilitate** that connection wherever possible - a quick intro email goes a long way



Create safe feedback mechanisms

Make sure it's clear from the off how both you and your sponsee can flag what is and isn't working. Encouraging your sponsee to critique your approach may feel uncomfortable at first, but is an effective way of empowering them to express and own their opinions authentically and effectively - a critical skill for future leaders.

This is a two-way street, however, so make sure you create feedback loops that work both ways so you can flag if you feel your protégé is not investing enough time or energy into their sponsorship.

Be clear on where you're best placed to help... and where you're not

Often we see assigned sponsorship programmes fail to deliver true impact because of misaligned expectations. Be open about the topics you are willing to discuss, and those you aren't. Sharing the areas where you're best placed to offer opportunities, as opposed to others, is a great way to ensure this doesn't happen.

Top tip

If there are key areas where your assigned sponsee is looking for advancement that aren't in your area of expertise, connect them with a peer or colleague who might be better able to add value.



How UpSkill Digital can help you

At UpSkill Digital we empower businesses to build diverse and inclusive workplaces where everyone can thrive, by ensuring they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed.

We offer a range of training solutions from virtual instructor-led training sessions, to accredited online courses; from AR/VR experiences, to in-person classroom workshops; from downloadable learning assets, to international sponsorship and mentoring initiatives.

Our approach is active and experiential, enabling your team to fail fast and develop skills at pace. We offer training across a variety of topics from Managing diverse teams and Inclusive leadership, to Digital Marketing Strategies and Data Visualisation, and much more.

To find out more:



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