



# The Sponsor Advantage

*Mentors and role models can help guide you. But to rise into the C-suite, you might need a sponsor.*

BY KIMBERLY OLSON

AS KELLY WATSON WENT about her job at professional services giant KPMG, she had no inkling that, behind closed doors, senior leaders were debating whether she had the chops to take over as office managing partner of the company's New Jersey practice.

As a rigorous discussion ensued, Watson was being championed by outgoing office managing partner Tom Duffy, who was departing to take a position in KPMG's metro New York market. Duffy had worked closely with Watson, and he was

impressed with her. But he had a bit of persuading to do.

"The New Jersey practice is a very significant market for our firm," Duffy says. "When you hand over the car keys to a practice like this, you're giving a great deal of responsibility to somebody, and Kelly was young. So the initial pushback was, is it her time yet? Is she ready? Kelly had lots of fans who were supportive of her, but there were a couple people who thought we should have a 45- or 50-year-old person who had been

around the block. We debated that, and my perspective was that Kelly was incredibly talented. She had the enthusiasm, the drive, the personality, and great client relationships. I said, 'There's no reason to wait here. What she doesn't have in experience she makes up for in these other attributes.' And I was willing to use whatever political capital I had to see that she got the job. Every time another candidate was put up, I said, 'Terrific, but I've worked with Kelly for three years, and I know what she can do. She's the right person for this job.' And I stayed with it."

That fortitude paid off, with Watson ultimately being offered the position. It was a job that even Watson herself—because she was so focused on her current job as a partner overseeing the firm's advisory offerings in New Jersey—hadn't really taken the time to consider.

"To be honest, my first reaction—which, of course, we counsel women not to have—was 'Really? Do you think I could do the job?'" she remembers. "And Tom said, 'Do you think I'd be asking you if I didn't think you could do the job?' And having given it all of 20 seconds of thought, I said, 'Yeah, I think I can do the job.'"

Watson took over as the national financial crisis was reaching its peak in early 2009. Yet under her leadership, KPMG's New Jersey practice has become one of the fastest-growing of the firm's 21 major markets. "She has prospered in her role," Duffy says. "She made this group in New Jersey a cohesive team, and they've been very successful in the marketplace. I look back on it and I know that [advocating for her] is one of the best things I've done."

## TAKE THE LEAD

### The Power of Sponsorship

Kelly Watson says that, in the years leading up to her promotion, she learned

## The Shining Protégé

If you have C-suite aspirations, sponsorship is crucial. But how do you find the right sponsor? And what steps can you take to develop that relationship?

Expert Sylvia Ann Hewlett offers the following advice.

### Find your Match

Look about two levels up in your organization to find a sponsor. While 42 percent of women prefer a sponsor who values diversity, is supercollaborative, and is a woman, keep in mind that very few people in top positions meet all of those requirements. Instead, focus on connecting with someone who has influence in your organization and whom you respect.

### Be an Ambassador

Sponsorship is a two-way street. Always speak highly of your sponsor to others.

### Deliver Like Crazy

Always come through on projects. Find out what your sponsor most urgently needs to get done over the next month and do it for him or her.

### Reveal Your Special Strengths

Figure out what special talents you have in your back pocket that make you a unique contributor. If you see a gap in your organization—whether the team is low on technology skills or knowledge of the Asian market—and you can fill it, jump in.

some overlap, but there are these heavy-lifting pieces that are special to sponsorship. Sponsors are willing to take a bet on you and to reach out and advocate for that next stretch opportunity or that next promotion. That means that they need to be more senior than you are and have a line of sight on your work.”

A sponsor is also in your corner when you want to take risks. “Quite frankly, in our very competitive world, it’s impossible to do anything outstanding without taking a few risks,” Hewlett says. “It’s often thought that women are risk-averse. We find that’s not true. They’re merely not suicidal. And without a sponsor—a senior person supporting you, giving you a second chance if you fall flat on your face—you probably will not take any risks. And therefore, in some ways you will fail to shine.”

Also, while mentoring relationships tend to be passive, with the mentee simply taking notes and saying thank you, sponsorships are reciprocal. “The protégé has to invest very proactively in the relationship,” Hewlett says. “Because there’s skin in the game—there’s real risk in this relationship—this is something that you have to earn. You have to win it.”

### Breaking into the Clubhouse

Sponsorship is nothing new. “This is how power is transferred, and it’s been happening in the old boys’ club for decades,” Hewlett says.

To a great degree, sponsorship continues to operate primarily within that same club. And that isn’t always intentional. Even in 2013, corporate senior leadership is overwhelming white and male, and those white men—like all of us—tend to forge relationships with employees with whom they have a natural connection.

“For people who are grooming the next generation of leaders, the default position is that you pick someone like you,” Hewlett says. “That is a person who is easy to rely on because you trip over them at the golf club every Saturday, or you went to the same school, or you play squash together.”

much from Duffy, who was then acting primarily as a mentor. “What he did for me, which many partners I had worked for over the years had not, was take me out to meet clients,” she says. “He also taught me that you don’t always have to be liked, but you have to be respected. And I saw how patient he was in letting a process unfold. He understood the organization’s capacity to accept change, and he pushed just far enough. I have a lot of passion and can get ahead of myself, so he taught me to take a deep breath.”

But when Duffy fought for her promotion, he blasted beyond mere mentorship. He was acting as her sponsor, and research shows that sponsorship is key to getting ahead.

“A sponsor is a much more profound advocate than a mentor,” says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founding president and CEO of the Center for Talent Innovation and author of the book *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor: The New Way to Fast-Track Your Career*, from Harvard Business Review Press. “They give advice and guidance and they introduce you to people, so there is

## Sponsors are willing to take a bet on you and to advocate for that next stretch opportunity.

As a result, many women and people of color who aspire to leadership positions find themselves navigating their careers without an advocate. They might work hard and smart, but without having someone in the C-suite to sing their praises in those closed-door meetings, they're much less likely to get the sexy projects and important promotions.

Many who do have a sponsor can feel the benefits. A study by the Center for Talent Innovation titled *Vaulting the Color Bar: How Sponsorship Levers Multicultural Professionals into Leadership* found that 53 percent of African Americans who have a sponsor are satisfied with their rate of advancement, compared with just 35 percent of those who don't have someone of influence going to bat for them. And 55 percent of sponsored Asian American employees are happy with how they're advancing, compared with just 30 percent of their nonsponsored counterparts.

"If we want to get more women and people of color into positions of power, they have to learn how to access these relationships," Hewlett says. "And we need to make sponsorship more accessible for all the new kids on the block."

### Diverse Leadership is Good Business

Some of the most successful organizations are striving to diversify their pool of protégés—whom they view as future leaders—for practical business reasons. "If you're leading a global company and 70 percent of your revenues are coming from female consumers or 80 percent of your revenues are coming from Asia, you're not going to do a great job if all of your leaders are 55-year-old white men," Hewlett says.

So companies like AT&T, Credit Suisse, Genentech, Intel, and Morgan Stanley are creating paths to sponsorship for promising employees, particularly those who have historically been overlooked.

A few years ago, Deloitte's then CEO, Barry Salzberg, asked the firm's partners, principals, and directors to find at least one woman to sponsor—and more than 600 pledged to do just that. To support them, Deloitte provided senior leaders and their protégés with a career development template and other planning tools.

American Express—where only 18 percent of executives are women—takes a different tack. Rather than playing matchmaker, the company has opted to let sponsor-protégé relationships develop naturally. But its Pathways to Sponsorship program offers women information about sponsorship, coaching, and personal branding.



**According to a study published in the *Harvard Business Review*, women underestimate the role that sponsorship plays in their advancement. And those who do understand its importance fail to properly nurture the relationship, mainly out of a belief that they should get ahead on their own rather than using connections.**

At KPMG, where bright, talented employees like Kelly Watson are making their way up the ranks, sponsorship has become integral. "I am pretty passionate at this point about the importance of having a culture around sponsorship, not just mentorship," says John Veihmeyer, Chairman and CEO of KPMG, who works closely with the firm's Women's Advisory Board. "If we're going to be the best professional services firm in the world, we've got to have the best talent. We are not going to have the best talent if we have not created an environment where every single one of our people—I don't care what gender you are, or what race you are, or any other personal characteristic you might have—doesn't believe that they can have a tremendous career at KPMG. All of us who've been around for a while understand the importance of bringing diverse teams together to help our clients solve their most challenging needs."

Veihmeyer knows firsthand how important sponsorship can be. "I had sponsors put me forward for opportunities that otherwise wouldn't have happened," he says. "That clearly helped accelerate my career. We've been more intentional, in the last few years, in transforming the firm from a diversity standpoint. I've asked every member of my management committee and my board to have at least two high-potential diverse individuals that they will not just mentor, but sponsor. We now have four women partners on our board of directors, compared to three or four years ago, when it was just one. I'm really proud of the progress we've made, but I'm also really impatient."

With senior leaders like Tom Duffy who are willing to step up, however, change is happening. As Duffy says, "When there are people you truly believe have great talent, you have to be willing to go out there and put yourself on the line to give them that opportunity that they so rightfully deserve." **DW**

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