

Beyond Mentors: The Need for Champions

In my book, *Women on Top: The Woman's Guide to Leadership and Power in Law Firms* (Thomson Reuters 2010), I explain that ambitious women need a special kind of mentor who serves as a *champion* or *sponsor*. This kind of mentor is a strong advocate who has power and influence to make that advocacy produce positive career results for you. Champions endorse your qualifications and take risks on your behalf, arguing that you should move up to a higher compensation tier or urging their partners that you are ready for equity partnership or a significant leadership position. They alert you to opportunities and appoint you to key posts. Sometimes they call in favors, put pressure on colleagues, or put their reputation and credibility on the line for you.

The importance of mentors for career advancement is well established, but the particular value of champions is starting to receive more attention. One recent study that found that women and men had equal numbers of mentors, but far fewer women had sponsors and as a result, women received fewer career benefits than men.¹ The study concluded that without a strong champion, women often miss out on promotions, leadership positions, and higher compensation. Champions may not guarantee success, but they make it easier and improve your odds of receiving a coveted leadership appointment, a fatter paycheck or a new client.

So how does someone find a champion? By being the kind of lawyer who is seen as worthy of a champion's efforts. People become your champions over time as they come to know the quality of your work, your work ethic, and your capacity for leadership. To support someone for partnership or for a key role in the firm or with a client, champions must believe that you are fully committed to them, the firm and its clients; that you add some particular and special value; that you are able and willing to step up; and that you will not let them down. If they take risks on your behalf, they want to feel confident the outcome will be a good one for them as well as for you.

Here are 5 key points that make it more likely that people will choose to become your champions:

1. **Be strategic.** Know what you want and take charge of your career. Be as clear as possible in your own mind about your ambitions. What do you want your career to look like? What kind of practice do you want? What kind of leader do you want to be? What will it take for you to achieve your aspirations? The clearer your goals are (and the sooner you can see them clearly), the easier it becomes to make career choices that will take you in the right direction.

It will also be easier to identify and get to know the people who are best positioned to help you. Those people are often influential senior partners, leading rainmakers, or lawyers who hold positions of significant authority. They are people others defer to or they at least have the ears of decision makers. In particular, find out which individuals have championed women in the past. Analyze how they have done it and how successful they have been. Also consider the women they have championed and determine what it was about those women that attracted their support. This information will help you better understand the firm's culture and decision-making process, determine who might be a suitable champion for you, and decide how to make that person want to become your champion.

Keep in mind that most champions are men. In law firms today, men overwhelmingly hold the power, both as rainmakers and leaders. Male partners are more numerous and better positioned to be champions. So do not limit your search for champions to influential women.

¹ Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carver and Christine Silva, "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women," Harvard Business Review, September 2010

2. Think like a champion. Why should someone be your champion? Think about it through their eyes: There are many talented, hard-working lawyers. What distinguishes you? What do you do uniquely well that provides value to them? Why should they invest in you and take risks for you? What's in it for them?

Most successful lawyers who are in positions to champion you share certain traits and are attracted to others who display them. Among other things, they enjoy what they do and find meaning in it, feel fully engaged in their work, enjoy their clients and colleagues, and are internally driven to perform at the highest levels. If you share these traits too, then your passion and positive energy will make you feel and look confident. You will be more likely to be perceived by potential champions as someone worthy of their investment.

3. Connect. Building networks that connect you with others in the firm is critical. People who work with you are the primary source of your social capital, i.e., the relationships you can call upon to get things done. They are also a rich source of mentors and champions. As people get to know you, your talents and strengths, they see how good you are and why they should support your career.

Most champions are people with whom you have worked in some capacity and who benefit in some way from your effort. These individuals come to rely on you or see you as having certain talents or experience that works to their advantage. They might be rainmakers who depend on you to manage their clients, committee chairs who trust your judgment and rely on your advice, or client team leaders who admire and need your expertise.

They also get to know your personality, behavior and character, and find you likable and trustworthy. That is why being sociable and developing personal relationships in the office is so important. It allows you to find common interests and shared values with people who can help you. The more they come to see you as a protégé in the classical meaning of the term – someone whose career they can influence and take credit for – the more they will be interested in doing what they can to help you succeed.

Many women do not want to spend time “hanging out,” or engaging in small talk. They consider that time unproductive and would prefer to be working or at home. But casual interactions over lunch, coffee or a drink, inside or outside the office, are the source of many critical relationships. That is how people get to know you more fully as a person. The time spent in building relationships with colleagues who are now or may someday be in positions to help you should be viewed not as a waste of time but as an investment in your future.

4. Raise your hand. Knowing people and having an internal network is not enough. Potential champions need to see you in action in a leadership role where you perform brilliantly and produce great results. Demonstrate your value. Develop a reputation for doing something – something that influential people consider important – extremely well. Go above and beyond basic expectations; doing what you are told is not enough, even if you do it very well. Take initiative, volunteer for projects, offer to help even when it's not your project, and grab opportunities that come your way. If you are not offered opportunities, create your own. If you see a need or a problem, take charge and solve it. You must be visible to those in the power structure, even if it is risky and takes time. Leadership requires a willingness to take smart risks and devotion of time beyond what you bill.

One caution, however: Be strategic about the responsibilities you take on. Do not spread yourself too thin. Focus instead on a few things you enjoy and can do well that will get you noticed and help move you toward your goals.

5. *Speak up.* Champions need to know that you want their support and what you want it for. Do not assume others know that you want to be a partner or a practice group leader, that you deserve a bonus, or that you are the firm's top expert in a critical area of law. They may not notice your accomplishments at all or they may make assumptions about you that are entirely incorrect. If you want more responsibilities and new challenges, let them know and be as specific as you can. They have many important things on their minds and many other lawyers want their support; if you want their help, you have to tell them what you need and want, and show them why you are the person they should sponsor.

For many women, these actions may not feel natural or comfortable. But they are necessary, and the key is to find a way that brings you out of your comfort zone without making you feel or appear inauthentic. Try observing how others do it and experimenting with different approaches in low-risk situations; pairing up with a friend or colleague to practice; or engaging a mentor or coach to help you come up with an approach that suits you.

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