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# Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women

by Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carter, and  
Christine Silva

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# Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women

## Idea in Brief

Although women are mentored, they're not being promoted. A Catalyst study of more than 4,000 high potentials shows that more women than men have mentors—yet women are *less* likely to advance in their careers. That's because they're not actively sponsored the way the men are.

Sponsors go beyond giving feedback and advice; they advocate for their mentees and help them gain visibility in the company. They fight to get their protégés to the next level.

Organizations such as Deutsche Bank, Unilever, Sodexo, and IBM Europe have established sponsorship programs to facilitate the promotion of high-potential women. Programs that get results clarify and communicate goals, match sponsors and mentees on the basis of those goals, coordinate corporate and regional efforts, train sponsors, and hold sponsors accountable.

*Your high-potential females need more than just well-meaning mentors.*

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# Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women

by Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carter, and Christine Silva

Nathalie (all names in this article are disguised), a senior marketing manager at a multinational consumer goods company and a contender for chairman in her country, was advised by her boss to raise her profile locally. An excellent intracompany network wouldn't be enough to land her the new role, he told her; she must also become active in events and associations in her region. Recently matched with a high-level mentor through a company-wide program, she had barely completed the lengthy prework assigned for that when she received an invitation to an exclusive executive-training program for high potentials—for which she was asked to fill out more self-assessments and career-planning documents. "I'd been here for 12 years, and nothing happened," observes Nathalie. "Now I am being mentored to death."

Amy, a midlevel sales manager for the same firm, struggles with a similar problem: "My mentor's idea of a development plan is how many external and internal meetings I can get exposure to, what presentations I can go to and

deliver, and what meetings I can travel to," she says. "I just hate these things that add work. I hate to say it, but I am so busy. I have three kids. On top of that, what my current boss really wants me to do is to focus on 'break-through thinking,' and I agree. I am going to be in a wheelchair by the time I get to be vice president, because they are going to drill me into the ground with all these extra-credit projects."

With turnover sky-high in the company's fast-growing Chinese market, Julie, a much-valued finance manager with growth potential, has likewise undergone intensive mentoring—and she worries that she may be getting caught betwixt and between. When she was nominated for a high-potential program, her boss complained that the corporate team was interfering with the mentoring operation he was already running in the region. Julie also took part in a less formal scheme pairing junior and senior finance leaders. "I'd prefer to be involved in the corporate program because it is more high-profile," says Julie, "but it all adds up

to a lot of mentoring.”

Nathalie, Amy, and Julie are not atypical. As companies continue to see their pipelines leak at mid-to-senior levels even though they’ve invested considerable time and resources in mentors and developmental opportunities, they are actively searching for ways to retain their best female talent. In a 2010 World Economic Forum report on corporate practices for gender diversity in 20 countries, 59% of the companies surveyed say they offer internally led mentoring and networking programs, and 28% say they have women-specific programs. But does all this effort translate into actual promotions and appointments for both sexes?

The numbers suggest not. A 2008 Catalyst survey of more than 4,000 full-time-employed men and women—high potentials who graduated from top MBA programs worldwide from 1996 to 2007—shows that the women are paid \$4,600 less in their first post-MBA jobs, occupy lower-level management positions, and have significantly less career satisfaction than their male counterparts with the same education. That’s also the case when we take into account factors such as their industry, prior work experience, aspirations, and whether they have children. (For more findings, see Nancy M. Carter and Christine Silva, “Women in Management: Delusions of Progress,” HBR March 2010.) Yet among that same group, more women than men report having mentors. If the women are being mentored so thoroughly, why aren’t they moving into higher management positions?

To better understand what is going on, we conducted in-depth interviews with 40 high-potential men and women (including Nathalie, Amy, and Julie) who were selected by their large multinational company to participate in its high-level mentoring program. We asked about the hurdles they’ve faced as they’ve moved into more-senior roles, as well as what kinds of help and support they’ve received for their transitions. We also analyzed the 2008 survey to uncover any differences in how men and women are mentored and in the effects of their mentoring on advancement. Last, we compared those data with the results of a 2010 survey of the same population, in which we asked participants to report on promotions and lateral moves since 2008.

All mentoring is not created equal, we discovered. There is a special kind of relationship—called sponsorship—in which the mentor goes

beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior executives to advocate for the mentee. Our interviews and surveys alike suggest that high-potential women are overmentored and undersponsored relative to their male peers—and that they are not advancing in their organizations. Furthermore, without sponsorship, women not only are less likely than men to be appointed to top roles but may also be more reluctant to go for them.

### Why Mentoring Fails Women

Although more women than men in the 2008 Catalyst survey report having mentors, the women’s mentors have less organizational clout. We find this to be true even after controlling for the fact that women start in lower-level positions post-MBA. That’s a real disadvantage, the study shows, because the more senior the mentor, the faster the mentee’s career advancement. Despite all the effort that has gone into developing the women since 2008, the follow-up survey in 2010 reveals that the men have received 15% more promotions. The two groups have had similar numbers of lateral moves (same-level job assignments in different functions, designed to give high potentials exposure to various parts of the business). But men were receiving promotions after the lateral moves; for the women, the moves were offered in lieu of advancement.

Of course, the ultimate test of the power of mentoring would be to show that its presence during the 2008 survey is a statistically significant predictor of promotion by the time of the 2010 survey. That’s true for the men but not for the women. Though women may be getting support and guidance, mentoring relationships aren’t leading to nearly as many promotions for them as for men.

The survey findings are echoed in our interviews: Men and women alike say they get valuable career advice from their mentors, but it’s mostly men who describe being sponsored. Many women explain how mentoring relationships have helped them understand themselves, their preferred styles of operating, and ways they might need to change as they move up the leadership pipeline. By contrast, men tell stories about how their bosses and informal mentors have helped them plan their moves and take charge in new roles, in addition to endorsing their authority publicly. As one male mentee re-

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## Are women as likely as men to get mentoring? Yes.

They're actually more so: In the 2008 Catalyst survey, **83%** of women and **76%** of men say they've had at least one mentor at some point in their careers. Indeed, **21%** of women say they've had four or more mentors, compared with **15%** of men.

## Does mentoring provide the same career benefits to men and women? No.

Among survey participants who had active mentoring relationships in 2008, fully **72%** of the men had received one or more promotions by 2010, compared with **65%** of the women.

## Do men and women have the same kinds of mentors? No.

In 2008, **78%** of men were actively mentored by a CEO or another senior executive, compared with **69%** of women.

More women than men had junior-level mentors: **7%** of women were mentored by a nonmanager or a first-level manager, compared with **4%** of men.

Though both groups had more male than female mentors on balance, **36%** of women had female mentors, whereas only **11%** of men did.

counts, in a typical comment:

"My boss said, 'You are ready for a general management job. You can do it. Now we need to find you a job: What are the tricks we need to figure out? You have to talk to this person and to that one and that one.' They are all executive committee members. My boss was a network type of a person.... Before he left, he put me in touch with the head of supply chain, which is how I managed to get this job."

Not only do the women report few examples of this kind of endorsement; they also share numerous stories about how they've had to fight with their mentors to be viewed as ready for the next role.

Paradoxically, just when women are most likely to need sponsorship—as they shoot for the highest-level jobs—they may be least likely to get it. Women are still perceived as "risky" appointments for such roles by often male-dominated committees. In a study of top-performing CEOs, for instance, the women were nearly twice as likely as the men to have been hired from outside the company (see Morten T. Hansen, Herminia Ibarra, and Urs Peyer, "The Best-Performing CEOs in the World," HBR January–February 2010). That finding suggests that women are less likely to emerge as winners in their firms' own CEO tournaments.

### Sponsorship That Works

Impatient with the speed at which women are reaching the top levels, many leading-edge companies we work with are converging on a new set of strategies to ensure that high-potential women are sponsored for the most-senior posts. Those principles can make all the difference between a sponsorship program that gets results and one that simply looks great on paper.

**Clarify and communicate the intent of the program.** It's hard to do a good job of both mentoring and sponsoring within the same program. Often the best mentors—those who provide caring and altruistic advice and counseling—are not the highfliers who have the influence to pull people up through the system. Employees expecting one form of support can be very disappointed when they get the other. And companies hoping to do A can find themselves with a program that instead does B. To prevent such problems, they need to clearly define what they're trying to accomplish.

At Deutsche Bank, for example, internal re-

search revealed that female managing directors who left the firm to work for competitors were not doing so to improve their work/life balance. Rather, they'd been offered bigger jobs externally, ones they weren't considered for internally. Deutsche Bank responded by creating a sponsorship program aimed at assigning more women to critical posts. It paired mentees with executive committee members to increase the female talent pool's exposure to the committee and ensure that the women had influential advocates for promotion. Now, one-third of the participants are in larger roles than they were in a year ago, and another third are deemed ready by senior management and HR to take on broader responsibilities.

**Select and match sponsors and high-potential women in light of program goals.** When the objective of a program is career advancement for high potentials, mentors and sponsors are typically selected on the basis of position power. When the goal is personal development, matches are made to increase the likelihood of frequent contact and good chemistry.

Unilever has established a program with the explicit objective of promoting more high-potential women to the firm's most-senior levels. The two key criteria for selecting the sponsors, all members of Unilever's senior ranks, are experience in areas where the high potentials have developmental gaps, and presence at the table when the appointment decisions get made. Given the company's international scope and matrix organization, this means that many of the women do not live and work in the same location as their sponsors. So some don't spend much face-to-face time with sponsors, but they do have advocates at promotion time.

**Coordinate efforts and involve direct supervisors.** Centrally run mentoring programs that sidestep direct bosses can inadvertently communicate that diversity is an HR problem that requires no effort from the front lines.

Coordination of corporate and local efforts is especially important when it comes to senior-level participants in whom companies invest significantly. Effective sponsorship does not stand alone but is one facet of a comprehensive program that includes performance evaluation, training and development, and succession planning—all of which add up to more than the sum of the parts. The Deutsche Bank

## Do men and women get their mentors in the same way? Yes.

Most men and women—67% of the groups combined—found their mentors on their own, relying on personal networks. Just 18% of women and 16% of men formed their mentoring relationships with the help of formal programs.

## Does having formal versus informal mentoring make any difference in terms of promotions? Yes.

Women who had found mentors through formal programs had received more promotions by 2010 than women who had found mentors on their own (by a ratio of almost three to two).

Among all participants who had found mentors on their own, the men received more promotions than the women (again, by a ratio of almost three to two).

For more on how companies are providing sponsorship, go to [www.catalyst.org/publication/413/mentoring-sponsorship](http://www.catalyst.org/publication/413/mentoring-sponsorship).

sponsorship program for female managing directors, for instance, is one piece of a highly tailored initiative that also involves leadership evaluations, external coaches, and leadership workshops.

**Train sponsors on the complexities of gender and leadership.** Good sponsorship requires a set of skills and sensibilities that most companies' star executives do not necessarily possess. When you layer on top some of the complexities of sponsor relationships between senior men and junior women, you easily have a recipe for misunderstanding. The strategies and tactics that helped the men progress in their careers may not be appealing or even feasible for the women.

A classic case is the challenge of developing a credible leadership style in a context where most of the successful role models are male. One of the women in our research describes the problem like this: "My mentor advised me that I should pay more attention to my strategic influencing skills...but often he suggests I do things that totally contradict my personality." The behavioral styles that are most valued in traditionally masculine cultures—and most used as indicators of "potential"—are often unappealing or unnatural for high-potential women, whose sense of authenticity can feel violated by the tacit leadership requirements.

A further complexity is the famed "double bind" examined in Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli's book *Through the Labyrinth* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2007) and in the 2007 Catalyst research report "The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership." Here's the problem, in short: The assertive, authoritative, dominant behaviors that people associate with leadership are frequently deemed less attractive in women. Male mentors who have never faced this dilemma themselves may be hard-pressed to provide useful advice. As one of our interview participants describes, even well-intended mentors have trouble helping women navigate the fine line between being "not aggressive enough" or "lacking in presence" and being "too aggressive" or "too controlling." She explains the challenge of dealing with conflicting expectations from two different bosses:

"My old boss told me, 'If you want to move up, you have to change your style. You are too brutal, too demanding, too tough, too clear,

and not participative enough.' My new boss is different: He drives performance, values speed. Now I am told, 'You have to be more demanding.' I was really working on being more indirect, but now I will try to combine the best of both."

Male sponsors can be taught to recognize such gender-related dilemmas. Women in Sodexo's reciprocal-mentoring program, for example, have been promoted at higher rates than other high potential women at the company, in part because the senior male mentors serve as career sponsors and (thanks to the upward mentoring) learn to manage their unconscious biases.

**Hold sponsors accountable.** To fully reap the benefits of sponsorship, companies must hold sponsors accountable. At IBM Europe, a sponsorship program designed for senior women below the executive level aims to promote selected participants within one year. Sponsors, all vice presidents or general managers, are charged with making sure that participants are indeed ready within a year. So they work hard to raise the women's profiles, talk up the candidates to decision makers, and find the high potentials internal projects that will fill in their skills gaps and make them promotable. Failure to obtain a promotion is viewed as a failure of the sponsor, not of the candidate.

Although our data show that formal programs can be quite effective in getting women promoted, a potential pitfall is their fixed duration. Sponsors typically declare victory and move on after their high potentials advance—just when they need help to successfully take charge in their new roles. We know of no programs designed to shore up participants past promotion and through the "first 100 days" in the new position. With that extra bit of attention, sponsors could help deliver not just promotions but strong transitions.

Although the women we interviewed all come from the same company, the trends there mirror those at many other firms we've worked with and observed. And the survey responses, gathered from men and women at hundreds of firms, also provide strong evidence for gender difference in mentoring outcomes.

More sponsoring may lead to more and faster promotions for women, but it is not a magic bullet: There is still much to do to close

## Mentors and Sponsors: How They Differ

Companies need to make a sharper distinction between mentoring and sponsorship. Mentors offer “psychosocial” support for personal and professional development, plus career help that includes advice and coaching, as Boston University’s Kathy Kram explains in her pioneering research. Only sponsors actively advocate for advancement.

“Classical mentoring” (ideal but rare) combines psychosocial and career support. Usually, though, workers get one or the other—or if they get both, it’s from different sources.

Analysis of hundreds of studies shows that people derive more satisfaction from mentoring but need sponsorship. Without sponsorship, a person is likely to be overlooked for promotion, regardless of his or her competence and performance—particularly at mid-career and beyond, when competition for promotions increases.

### Mentors

- Can sit at any level in the hierarchy
- Provide emotional support, feedback on how to improve, and other advice
- Serve as role models
- Help mentees learn to navigate corporate politics
- Strive to increase mentees’ sense of competence and self-worth
- Focus on mentees’ personal and professional development

### Sponsors

- Must be senior managers with influence
- Give protégés exposure to other executives who may help their careers
- Make sure their people are considered for promising opportunities and challenging assignments
- Protect their protégés from negative publicity or damaging contact with senior executives
- Fight to get their people promoted

the gap between men’s and women’s advancement. Some improvements—such as supportive bosses and inclusive cultures—are a lot harder to mandate than formal mentoring programs but essential if those programs are to have their intended effects. Clearly, however, the critical first step is to stop overmentoring

and start accountable sponsoring for both sexes.

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