

Ida O. Abbott, Management Solutions, Issue 36, Spring 2013

Many law firms are thinking about starting sponsorship programs to help retain and advance women. Their recognition of the importance of sponsorship for women's career advancement is welcome as is their desire to support women by ensuring they receive adequate sponsorship. But many of these firms may not appreciate the challenges and traps that formal sponsorship programs can pose. Here are some questions to consider if your firm is contemplating a sponsorship program.

1. **What is your objective in starting a sponsorship program?** You must be very clear about what the program proposes to accomplish and why the firm is determined to achieve that objective. You must be able to show how the program fits into the firm's strategic plan and will advance a specific strategic objective. In order to get participants' buy-in, there must be no doubt about the importance of the program as a means to achieve a critical firm goal. Even more than in a mentoring program, having clear objectives at the outset will enable you to monitor progress and measure success.
2. **Do you have a thriving mentorship program?** Sponsorship has several unique elements, but it can be viewed as a high-level function of mentorship. (Some refer to sponsorship as "mentorship on steroids.") If mentoring programs have been successful in your firm, you have a good institutional foundation for a sponsorship program. But if your efforts to promote mentoring in your firm have been unsuccessful, you can expect an even more difficult time trying to institute a sponsorship program. Sponsorship places greater expectations on both parties than mentorship and involves more action, trust and risk; sponsorship focuses primarily on advancement, not on advice, guidance and information; and sponsorship requires a track record of high performance and proven potential that make the sponsor see the protégée as worthy of sponsorship.
3. **What will sponsorship program participants do?** Sponsorship program participants must fully understand and commit to sponsorship program objectives and what will be expected of them in the program. Sponsorship requires more active engagement by sponsors than most mentorship programs ask of mentors. So it is important to be as precise as possible about expected actions and achievements.
4. **How will you determine and select the lawyers to be sponsored?** Sponsorship targets a more narrowly defined group of lawyers than does mentoring: high-performing lawyers who have demonstrated their ability, drive and commitment to success. This group can be further narrowed by targeting high performing women and/or minority lawyers, as most current and contemplated law firm sponsorship programs do. And because an established record of performance and achievement is essential, the group can be further limited by including only lawyers who have reached a certain seniority or competency level, e.g., senior associates, counsel, non-equity partners, and/or junior equity partners. In order to identify the lawyers to be sponsored in your program, you must have specific objective criteria for qualification and for selection. You can review performance appraisals, work experience, involvement in specific firm or community activities, client relationships, and other designated factors over a period of years. You can invite potential participants to submit applications explaining why they want to participate, and/or ask partners to nominate lawyers for sponsorship.
5. **Who will be the sponsors?** If your program is truly intended to help senior women associates become partners and junior women partners become rainmakers and leaders, then the pool of potential sponsors will be small. Sponsors need to be willing to act as advocates and promoters and to expend political capital on behalf of the protégée. In addition, sponsors must have enough clout to provide real benefits to the protégée. The more influential the sponsor, the greater the career benefits that may accrue to the protégée. Most influential partners already act as sponsors for a few associates and/or partners they perceive as making vital and valuable contributions to their practice or as having great potential to do so. They are very circumspect about the lawyers they sponsor because they have limited political capital and time, so they invest where they anticipate a significant payoff: the associate who will become a partner or the junior

partner who will help manage the sponsor's clients, bring new clients to the practice, or become a firm leader and powerful ally. You will need to persuade potential sponsors that the protégée is worthy of their effort and that sponsoring that protégée will not interfere with their sponsorship of lawyers they would otherwise select.

6. **How will you make your matches?** Because the nature of the sponsor-protégée relationship is intense and risky, and requires trust and active engagement, it works better when it starts naturally. A straight match between people who do not know each other well, or have not worked together before, is very challenging. It is better to start with lawyers who already have an existing relationship of trust, admiration and respect and to build on that foundation, educating the sponsor about how he or she can best serve in that role, and educating the junior lawyer about how to be an effective and worthy protégée. You can pair up individuals who do not work together or have a pre-existing relationship by matching a protégées' career advancement needs and a sponsors' ability to address them. However, it will require extra effort for the paired individuals to carry out the obligations of a sponsor-protégée relationship, and program coordinators will need to provide greater involvement, support and oversight.

An alternative, less programmatic approach is to have partners become more intentional about sponsoring women. Raise their self-awareness, ascertain what they already do as sponsors and determine the extent to which they sponsor women. If they do not sponsor women as readily as they do men, find out why not and help them learn how to include women as well as men as protégées. Ask them to identify specific women they will sponsor and designate certain actions they will undertake. Hold them to their commitment, and monitor and support their efforts.

7. **How will you help men overcome any reluctance to sponsoring women?** For many reasons, men, who are most of your potential sponsors, sponsor men far more frequently than they sponsor women. They may have past experience with a woman lawyer who disappointed them by leaving; they may hold unconscious biases that make them doubt women's long-term commitment or visualize leaders as men; they may overlook women because they automatically select men, whom they know better or hang out with; they may feel less comfortable with women than men or worry that having a close relationship with a woman lawyer may be misperceived. Helping men recognize and address these kinds of issues can increase their readiness to sponsor women. And as they become less wary and more intentional about including women, they will begin to see and choose more women candidates to sponsor.
8. **How will the sponsorship program interrelate with other firm initiatives?** Sponsorship can easily tie into diversity and inclusion efforts, women's initiatives, leadership development, succession planning, and other development activities and programs. Include representatives of those programs and initiatives in the planning process and try to find ways to make them reinforce each other.
9. **What support and oversight will sponsorship program coordinators provide?** If you are the program coordinator, here are questions to consider:
- a. What kind of training, group activities, and program events will you offer? Will you provide continuing support for the participants from an internal or external consultant? Will you use this program to create bonds among all program participants? Will you have social events for all sponsors and/or protégées?
 - b. What will be done to further the lessons learned during training programs or group events? Will you provide broader access to movers and shakers inside and outside the firm beyond what is offered by each sponsor?
 - c. Will you provide a great deal of detailed oversight, with members of the Diversity and Inclusion or Professional Development teams scheduling and monitoring activities closely? Or will you leave the planning and implementation of a career advancement plan up to the sponsor and protégée?
 - d. How will you determine if any sponsor-protégée pairs are not working well? What will you do about them?
 - e. How large is your budget? Who will be responsible for the operation of the program and what kind of staff will be needed?

10. **How will you support sponsorship beyond the program?** For a sponsorship program to have a meaningful impact, the firm's institutional processes and cultural norms must support sponsorship beyond the program. Sponsorship is an important factor, but by itself is not enough to propel women forward. If the firm's decision-making processes as to partner elevation, compensation, business development opportunities, leadership selection or client transitions are not made transparent and objective, and if they continue to favor men, then the benefits of sponsorship programs will be muted at best. Many women pull away from firms and from leadership because they believe those processes are unfair and unfriendly to women. If the firm is really committed to women's advancement, it must examine and reshape the way lawyers are expected to work, the behaviors and activities it rewards, and the way it decides who will succeed and how.

Ida Abbott helps employers develop, manage and retain legal talent. She also serves as a mentor and coach to high achieving individuals seeking professional success. As a lawyer and consultant to the legal profession, Ida has been a leader in efforts to advance women in the legal profession for more than three decades. She is author of many books and resources, including Women on Top: The Woman's Guide to Leadership and Power in Law Firms (Thomson Reuters, 2010). Her newsletter, Management Solutions, contains this article and others on related topics, and is available at www.IdaAbbott.com.