

Chapter 1: What is sponsorship and how is it different to mentorship?

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This is the first of five chapters in the sponsorship toolkit. This chapter and accompanying video will look at:

- what sponsorship is
- how sponsorship is different to mentorship
- whether sponsorship is appropriate for your agency.

Video embed:

[Sponsorship Guidance Toolkit: Kathrina Lo, Public Service Commissioner - Chapter 1](#)

What is sponsorship?

A simple way of describing the difference between a mentor and sponsor is that:

“A sponsor opens the door to opportunities for others while a mentor equips an individual to open the door themselves”.

- Gallup '[Mentors and Sponsors Make the Difference](#)'

Many people from diverse backgrounds are not in a position to open these doors themselves because of structural and systemic barriers. This could include:

- First Nations people
- Culturally, racially or ethnically diverse people
- Women and gender diverse people
- People with a disability
- People with intersectional identities.

While mentors are useful in offering advice and support, mentorship may not be sufficient to lead to tangible outcomes such as career progression or development. In contrast, a sponsor has the power and influence to access the door and open it. Sponsors can therefore be transformative for the career trajectory of people from diverse backgrounds.

Note: Sponsors must be aware of and appropriately manage any conflicts which may arise in a recruitment process. For example, sponsors may need to recuse themselves from a recruitment panel if their sponsee is interviewing.

A sponsor is



- a leader who holds positional power and influence across the organisation, a particular discipline, or area
- a person who holds personal power alongside the courage to use their voice to advocate for another person, including advocating publicly if they need to.

A mentor is



- someone who can share knowledge and provide advice to develop or nurture someone else. This could be a team member, a subject matter expert or a leader
- a person who shares lessons learnt from their own career journey to help another person, often using a role modelling approach.

Sponsorship



- is using one's personal and positional power to support and elevate another person who does not have access to this.
- prepares sponsors to act as allies and advocates. Allyship and advocacy recognise that systemic inequity exists, disadvantaging particular groups of people. Advocates and allies act to address bias

and barriers that impact career progression

- prepares sponsees to build and articulate clear career goals. It also engages sponsors to support these goals to be realised with measurable outcomes. Sponsors engage in public advocacy of their sponsee through 'brand by association'
- is an action-based transformative partnership creating interpersonal and institutional change.

Mentorship



- is often general advice and support, where the mentor has no public stake in the mentee and no obligation to advocate for their advancement
- can be structured or unstructured. There may be no formal matching process. Often the relationship relies on the mentor's goodwill to the mentee to create tangible results
- generally does not have formal measurement of outcomes. Frequently the best outcome from mentorship is improved relationships, access to more targeted networks and improved career clarity
- is growing the self-leadership of the mentee.

A sponsee is



- a person who requires the allyship and advocacy of a sponsor to open doors and create pathways to accelerate their career journey. This includes access to a sponsor's professional networks and capital.

A mentee is



- a person who receives relationship building, exposure and generalised support from a mentor.

Questions to understand if sponsorship is appropriate as an intervention:

- Is diverse talent underutilised and/or underrepresented in your organisation, in particular at the leadership level? Is the intervention necessary from an organisational or institutional lens?
- Are the potential sponsees in your agency seeking a transformation in their career journeys?
- Is there another intervention which will better support increasing representation? Is sponsorship the most appropriate initiative given the maturity of your organisation?
- Are leaders motivated and willing to be sponsors? Do they have the required capacity and time? Do they have enough understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion to learn to be sponsors?

- Are leaders willing to have their sponsorship actions measured? Note that the success of sponsorship is highly dependent on the sponsor's capability to be an ally and advocate for their sponsee and enact change.

Case study: The impact of sponsorship – Wagma's story

Wagma is a woman from a CALD background. She has a strong record of delivering high quality work and supporting her team. Wagma feels she is at a plateau in her career, and has been in the same role for the last 10 years. Her goal is to obtain a senior leadership role in the next 12-18 months.

Wagma had a previous experience with mentoring. Her mentor managed a small team in a different area within the department. Her mentor provided support through:

- Meeting for coffee and providing ad hoc advice
- Working on Wagma's resume and interview skills
- Discussing life aspirations and dreams

Mentorship was helpful for Wagma to understand her goals. However, the conversations often focussed on day-to-day concerns and confidence building, rather than tactical action.

Wagma was given an opportunity to be part of a sponsorship program and was paired with Rob, a senior leader in her organisation. Rob was impressed with Wagma's professional accomplishments and different way of thinking and working.

Rob worked with Wagma to raise visibility of her achievements and amplify her brand. Rob did this by:

- Introducing Wagma to contacts who were senior leaders, meeting with these contacts first to talk to them about Wagma and the value she brings to her work
- Following up with these contacts after Wagma's meetings, to check in and continue to advocate for Wagma
- Providing Wagma with shadowing opportunities, to get her in the room with other senior leaders and understand expectations at a senior leadership level

After 9 months, Wagma successfully attained an acting opportunity in a new area, which one of Rob's contacts shared with her. Wagma has also developed a strong professional network including other senior leaders, and sees her achievements recognised in her organisation. Rob continues to support and advocate for Wagma, helping to execute her career plan.

Further resources on sponsorship

Don't Just Mentor Women and People of Color. Sponsor Them

Harvard Business Review, Chow, R. (2021)



Mentors and Sponsors Make the Difference



Gallup, Den Houter, K and Maese, E (2023)

A Guide to Mentors, Sponsors, and Coaches



Harvard Business Review, Alpaio, K. (2024)
