



On Sponsorship

by Jimmie McMillian, 2011 Fellow

Mentorship and sponsorship are not the same thing. A mentor provides guidance and instruction. A sponsor is an advocate for your career and takes affirmative steps on your behalf to advance your career. It is a more active role and involves more benefits for the young attorney and more personal risk for the elder sponsor. It is certainly more difficult to identify a sponsor than find a mentor.

How to Be Sponsor Ready

- **Great sponsors have successfully sponsored other attorneys in the past.** Be wary of the person that claims to want to be your sponsor but has never sponsored anyone else in the past.
- **Have a career plan and set goals.** A sponsor can help you activate your plan and accomplish your goals, but they are the co-pilot and you are the pilot. You need to know your preferred direction.
- **Find someone that you absolutely trust.** You will need to be completely honest, candid, and open for the sponsorship relationship to work. Sponsors risk their own personal and professional reputation advocating on your behalf and therefore, they should never be blindsided regarding you or your actions.
- **Guard your confidential communications with your sponsor.** Sponsors will often share things with you in confidence and trust that you will not share them with others. If you break the bond of silence, then you undermine the sponsor's ability to provide you with the behind-the-scenes information that you need to succeed.
- **Be prepared to work.** A great sponsor will have tasks for you to perform so that they can advocate on your behalf. You have to effectively run the play that the sponsor provides to you.
- **Frequently ask for criticism and provide evidence of correction when possible.** Great sponsors tell you what you can do better. They do not just provide encouragement; they provide suggestions for improvement so that they can better advocate for you behind closed doors.

- **Thank your sponsor and find ways to recognize them.** Awards, introductions, networking opportunities, and recognitions in speeches are all ways to acknowledge your sponsor's role in your success.

Advantages of Sponsorship for Diverse, Young Attorneys

- **A great sponsor can block and tackle for you throughout your entire career.** They will fight battles for you that you did not know existed. They will speak for you when you are not in the room. They will move obstacles for you. They will take the career risk so that you do not have to.
- **If someone sponsors you, then you enjoy the benefit of their support and reputation.** They will provide access to opportunities that you previously would have been unaware of or denied without their help.

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