

Sponsorship: A Proven Strategy for Promoting Career Advancement and Diversity in Radiology

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Abstract

Sponsorship is a proven effective strategy to smash glass ceilings in business and academic medicine. The purpose of this article is to highlight the differences among sponsorship, mentoring, and coaching and to describe the value of sponsorship, challenges of implementation, and specific actions to support sponsorship in academic radiology. Sponsorship can be an effective strategy to smash radiology's glass ceiling and promote diversity.

Key Words: Sponsorship, mentorship, diversity, leadership, career advancement, academic radiology

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INTRODUCTION

Academic radiologists generally spend years striving for career success and have a strong desire to be recognized and rewarded for their hard work and talent [1]. However, in academic medicine, achievements alone do not guarantee promotion or appointment to high-profile leadership positions [1-3]. Many authors in both business and academic medicine have used the phrase “glass ceiling” to describe the presence of invisible barriers, such as unconscious bias, male-dominated leadership, and structural barriers, that hinder individuals from achieving professional advancement [1,4,5]. In academic radiology, individuals may be hindered from achieving promotion in faculty rank or higher leadership roles within a radiology department, health system, or national radiology society.

The phrase “glass ceiling” has most often been used to describe barriers to women's career advancement, but men of underrepresented ethnicities or other underrepresented minority groups may also experience a glass-

ceiling effect. Failure of talented individuals from these groups to advance in their careers can lead to a lack of diversity in leadership positions [6].

Experience from both business and academic medicine suggests that sponsorship, the act of highly influential leaders' advocating for talented individuals, is critical for breaking through the glass ceiling and enabling career advancement of individuals from lower-level to high-level leadership roles [1-4,6]. The purpose of this article is to distinguish among sponsorship, mentoring, and coaching and to describe the value of sponsorship, challenges of implementation, and specific actions to support sponsorship in academic radiology. We also discuss sponsorship as a proven strategy to smash radiology's glass ceiling and promote diversity.

SPONSORSHIP VERSUS MENTORSHIP VERSUS COACHING

Several definitions of sponsorship exist. In Latin, the word *sponsor* or *spondee* means “to pledge” [2]. In business, sponsorship is defined as support from an individual in a highly influential leadership position. A sponsor serves to advocate for, protect the interests of, and fight for the career advancement of a protégé [1,7]. In academic medicine, a protégé is defined as an individual with leadership potential who is currently unknown or unrecognized by highly ranked leaders

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[3,7]. This description overlaps the traditional definition of protégé as “one who is protected or trained or whose career is furthered by a person of experience, prominence, or influence” [8]. Sponsorship is different from mentorship. A mentor helps a mentee achieve both personal and early career development by serving as an adviser, providing support, and sharing knowledge [1,2,5,9-11]. In contrast, a sponsor publicly advocates for a protégé and actively seeks out opportunities for a protégé’s career advancement [1-3,6,7,10]. Because sponsorship serves to enhance the visibility and credibility of talented individuals to highly influential leaders [2], a sponsor must be knowledgeable about an organization, the organization’s structure, and the opportunities available in the organization to successfully advance talented protégés in their careers [2,12]. Mentoring can be performed by individuals of any professional rank as opposed to sponsors, who generally must be in high leadership positions to be effective [2,11,13]. Occasionally, highly ranked, well-connected mentors can serve as sponsors [6]. Although mentorship has been shown to be especially valuable for career development earlier in an academic radiologist’s career [13], sponsorship can serve a critical role in the middle to late years of the career, helping a radiologist advance into high-impact local and/or national leadership positions [6].

Sponsorship and mentorship should not be confused with coaching, which is usually a short-term, “task-oriented process” that strictly focuses on job-performance training and development [3,9,13,14]. Kathy Hopinkah Hannan [15] summarized these three unique career-building roles best: “A coach tells you what to do, a mentor will listen to you and speak with you, but a sponsor will talk about you.” To be most effective, sponsorship should never stand alone but rather should be used as an extension of mentoring and coaching [6,11,12].

Sponsorship must be earned. Not all unrecognized academic radiology faculty members are qualified to be sponsored [1,3]. A junior academic radiologist must prove to be a suitable protégé by displaying excellent leadership qualities, including but not limited to high ambition, excellent performance ratings, proven success in navigating an institution’s culture, effective communication skills, and outstanding work experience [1]. Sponsorship is not a guarantee of promotion to a high leadership position; thus sponsors do not promise higher profile positions to protégés or appoint protégés to such positions [1,3].

Leaders should be aware that for sponsorship to be successful, a comprehensive support structure must be in place that involves mentoring, training and development (ie, coaching), performance evaluation, succession planning, and other similar measures [11].

VALUE OF SPONSORSHIP IN ACADEMIC RADIOLOGY

Benefits for Sponsors and Protégés

In business literature, many benefits of sponsorship have been well documented for both sponsors and protégés [1]. Sponsorship has proved to produce positive career advancement outcomes for both male and female protégés, including improved job satisfaction, higher likelihood of being promoted, increased salary, and inclusion on stretch assignments [1]. Without sponsorship, a radiologist may feel hesitant about pursuing high-risk, career-advancing opportunities or applying for promotion and may be reluctant to display some important leadership qualities, such as self-advocacy [2].

An academic radiologist who proves to be an effective sponsor may be perceived by others as having exceptional ability to discover unrecognized talent [2,3]. Being a sponsor and especially hearing about opportunities and challenges from the protégé’s perspective may also give one useful insight regarding the infrastructure of a radiology department or greater health system [3].

Additionally, both the sponsor and the protégé gain personal and professional satisfaction from the protégé’s success [1]. Other potential psychosocial benefits of sponsorship for both sponsors and protégés may include wellness advantages, such as improved overall well-being and decreased burnout; however, further research is needed to measure such outcomes.

Benefits for Departments and Institutions

Sponsorship has also been shown to be valuable for academic medicine departments and institutions. Departments that recognize and reward talent through sponsorship witness improved personal job satisfaction and higher job retention rates [2,16]. The creation of a stable and satisfying work environment can lead to a long-term accumulation of internal talent and resources that leaders can effectively use for leadership development, during periods of transition, and when preparing for leadership succession [7]. Less turnover in a department also results in spending less time and

money on recruiting and retraining, which in turn is cost effective for the institution as a whole [2,16].

Sponsorship has also been shown to help both individuals and departments access resources and networking opportunities beyond the parent institution [1,2,7]. For instance, sponsors can help radiologists become more active on national society committees or editorial boards [6]. These activities not only strengthen an individual's personal curriculum vitae but also provide important national recognition of the parent institution and create network connections beyond the institution.

Thus, departments should seriously consider implementing sponsorship programs to more fully leverage the range of potential talent available in the field of radiology, on both local and national levels, and to tap into talent of potential future leaders that may otherwise lie dormant [7]. Leadership should also be aware of the positive synergistic and self-perpetuating effects that occur when sponsorship is present. The more that diversely talented radiologists individually succeed in a department, the more successful the department and institution is as a whole, which ultimately attracts more talented job-seeking radiologists to join these highly desirable radiology practices [1]. Sponsorship results in a win-win for all.

Positive Impact on Diversity

Although proven to be valuable, sponsorship of some talented individuals in academic radiology may still be lacking. The ACR workforce initiative found that among individuals who were part-time or full-time practicing radiologists, only 10% of women held leadership positions (chair, board member, etc.), compared with 17% of men [17]. Formal mentorship programs for women have seemed to only marginally help women land high-profile jobs [3]. The lack of formal sponsorship of women has been suggested to be a reason for this gender discrepancy in high-profile positions in both business and academic medicine [1-5,7,11,12].

Many authors suggest that women pursue career advancement opportunities differently than men, which may explain the lack of sponsorship during a woman's professional career [1,6] and why a perception exists that women are overmentored and undersponsored [11]. Men may tend to make more informal network connections and be more self-promoting, whereas women may feel more hesitant to advance into a new role or negotiate a fair salary [1,3,5,7]. Women may also be wary of

displaying a self-promoting attitude for fear that they may be penalized for being "overly" ambitious or confident [1,6,18]. Published studies also suggest other gender differences that may serve as barriers to women's career advancement, such as differences in work and life priorities [1,3,5], the presence of gender bias in the workplace [18], or the limited availability of effective female sponsors in leadership positions [1].

Progressive companies and health centers have realized the need for sponsorship to promote talented women and thus have created more transparent, equitable systems that use formal sponsorship-focused career development programs to help women not only succeed but rise to the top [1]. Two examples of successful sponsorship programs in academic medicine include the Society of General Internal Medicine's career advising program and MD Anderson Cancer Center's Leaders' Sponsorship program [2,3,7]. Some reported positive quantitative and qualitative outcomes for female protégés participating in formal sponsorship programs include increased likelihood of promotion, decreased time to promotion, expansion of career-advancing opportunities, and increased confidence in professional self-advocacy [1,2,7].

The potential value of sponsorship for men of underrepresented ethnicities and members of other minority groups must also be considered. Academic medicine programs are beginning to realize the need to expand formal sponsorship programs to include other talented, unrecognized individuals in addition to women [19]. Although further research is needed to understand the fundamental differences that both drive and hinder the career advancement of members of these groups, sponsorship likely has potential benefits for these subpopulations of radiologists as well.

CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING A SPONSORSHIP STRATEGY IN ACADEMIC RADIOLOGY

Insufficient Time

The greatest barrier to implementing and sustaining effective sponsorship is insufficient time [2]. Finding individuals to serve as sponsors and matching sponsors with protégés can be time consuming. For example, one internal medicine career advising program reports that its robust process of matching sponsors to protégés through curriculum vitae review and questionnaires has proved effective but time consuming [2]. Time also

needs to be allocated for initial planning and implementation of a formal sponsorship program and for monitoring the program's efficacy [2]. Sponsors and protégés must be willing to dedicate time to sponsorship-related activities and to fostering sponsor-protégé relationships for a professional sponsorship relationship to be effective [2]. The provision of protected nonclinical time is also essential for sponsorship to be successful, which can be difficult to grant given radiologists' existing clinical and nonclinical responsibilities.

Risk to Sponsor's Reputation

Sponsors assume significant personal risk when advocating for protégés. A sponsor is ultimately putting his or her reputation on the line when making a public commitment to promote a protégé to highly influential decision makers [1,5]. The protégé could underperform or lose motivation [6], which would reflect poorly on the sponsor.

Pressure on Protégé and Risk to Protégé's Reputation

Sponsorship by an individual in a highly ranked leadership position pressures the protégé to succeed and may make the protégé feel uncomfortable saying "no" to opportunities made available through sponsorship. Some talented radiologists may feel hesitant to accept sponsorship for fear of being perceived as an extension of the sponsor instead of an independently successful physician [6]. Formal sponsorship programs also tend to have a fixed duration to the sponsor-protégé relationship, with the sponsor no longer actively involved during the protégé's transition period into a new leadership role [11]. This abrupt loss of advocacy or interaction from a sponsor during a heightened time of uncertainty could potentially leave a protégé feeling overwhelmed or discouraged.

Limited Availability of Sponsors

Academic radiology departments and institutions may not have many individuals in high leadership positions who are willing to serve or can effectively serve as sponsors, particularly in a smaller health system setting. Also, because the majority of leadership positions in medicine still tend to be occupied by white men, the pool of potential sponsors lacks diversity with respect to both gender and ethnicity [1].

Paucity of Published Data on Sponsorship

We are unaware of any published studies that specifically examined the presence or effectiveness of sponsorship in academic radiology. In academic medicine in general, a very small number of formal sponsorship programs exist [2,3,7]. Many published studies in business and academic medicine that assessed formal sponsorship's positive impact on career advancement focused on a subset of individuals, primarily women, and/or evaluated outcomes from a single business or academic health center [5-7,11,12]. Also, published qualitative outcomes regarding the effectiveness of sponsorship may be biased because many programs obtained survey responses from individuals who personally benefited from sponsorship (ie, sponsor or protégé). The perspective of individuals who have not personally benefited from sponsorship has yet to be studied [6].

SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO SUPPORT SPONSORSHIP IN ACADEMIC RADIOLOGY

Academic radiology departments can overcome the challenges of implementing and sustaining a successful sponsorship program by carefully outlining the structure and expectations of the program at the onset. Thoughtful planning can save time up front and minimize frustration later.

Departments may choose to add sponsorship objectives into broader, preexisting leadership development programs or launch separate sponsorship-focused programs. Both types of sponsorship programs have shown to be effective in business and medicine [1,2,7]. Departments should develop a brief but effective sponsor-protégé matching process, set clear expectations and participation goals for sponsors and protégés, create sound methods for monitoring a program's efficacy, and educate faculty members on the concept of sponsorship and how to integrate this professional relationship into the workplace [2].

Sponsorship does not require face-to-face contact or direct communication to be successful [11]; a sponsor can advocate for the protégé in his or her absence [1]. Therefore, academic radiology departments of all sizes and geographic locations can effectively use preexisting resources and established network connections on both local and national levels to implement and sustain successful sponsorship. Although Gottlieb and Travis [2] encouraged academic medicine departments to pursue sponsorship of internal faculty members in efforts to save unnecessary time and money on external

recruitment, academic radiology departments, particularly those with fewer resources or limited access to a group of diverse sponsors, may wish to broaden network connections to include sponsor-protégé pairings across the institution, across the region, and through national societies.

Finally, academic radiology departments may wish to use national preestablished faculty development programs in conjunction with internal sponsorship efforts, such as those offered through the Association of University Radiologists and the RSNA or through the ARRS's Clinician Educator Development Program [20] in efforts to provide an array of opportunities for talented radiologists to excel.

CALL TO ACTION

Effective sponsorship inherently promotes diversity in leadership. Diversity in leadership in turn promotes the introduction of fresh ideas and perspectives, which can drive academic radiology departments, institutions, and national societies to accept and implement innovative problem-solving strategies [3] and optimize both clinical and academic performance [2].

Ultimately, academic radiology departments should strive to create more formal and diverse career development models that include sponsorship of women and other underrepresented minorities, not only to enhance radiologist performance but also to increase diversity in radiology leadership [2,7,18]. The same principles of sponsorship could be applied to promote the career advancement of other underrepresented individuals in academic radiology, including qualified, talented individuals who are perhaps more naturally soft spoken and reserved [6].

Academic radiology departments may also want to seek out formal training of sponsors to raise awareness about the detrimental effects of gender bias in workplace culture in an attempt to bridge “gender gaps” in leadership, promote equality and diversity, and avoid misunderstandings or frustrations that can arise from being insensitive to such gender differences or workplace bias [11,12,18].

The time is now for academic radiology departments and institutions to actively pursue sponsorship as a strategy to help smash radiology's glass ceiling of career advancement and to promote diversity in leadership. Sponsorship will not only strengthen the current state of academic radiology departments but also help ensure

talented and diverse leaders in academic radiology for generations to come.

TAKE-HOME POINTS

- In contrast to a coach or mentor, a sponsor publicly advocates for and seeks opportunities for a protégé's career advancement.
- Sponsorship in academic radiology has value not only for the sponsor and the protégé but also for the academic radiology department and institution.
- Challenges to implementing sponsorship in academic radiology departments include inefficient time, reputation risk to the sponsor and the protégé, limited availability of sponsors, and a paucity of published outcomes.
- Radiology departments can successfully implement sponsorship by developing a sponsor-protégé matching process, setting clear expectations and participation goals for sponsors and protégés, creating sound methods for monitoring a program's efficacy, and educating faculty members on the concept of sponsorship.

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