

Level 20 Senior Lead Partners Discussion Overview: Sponsorship

Key Themes, Insights & Actions

This document summarises Level 20's Senior Lead Partner roundtable discussion on **sponsorship and career progression** held in February 2026, with a particular focus on the role sponsorship can play in improving progression for women in the industry.

While **mentoring continues to play an important role in supporting development and retention**, the discussion focused on the **gap that exists around sponsorship**, and how leaders can address it through conscious leadership behaviours and organisational culture.

Carina Derrick from The Behavioural Design Lab led the session, sharing her research, providing practical advice to leaders and responding to questions.

Mentoring vs. Sponsorship - Clarifying the Distinction

Mentoring and sponsorship are often used interchangeably but serve distinct purposes:

MENTORING



- Advice and guidance
- A sounding board
- Support for professional development

SPONSORSHIP



- Advocacy and action
- Creating visibility and opportunities
- Using influence and political capital on behalf of protege

Many mentees believe they are seeking mentoring when what they actually need is sponsorship...

...but research and experience shows that women tend to receive more mentoring but less sponsorship, which can slow career progression...

...and whilst mentoring remains an important mechanism through which women can be supported to stay and develop within the industry, **progression often depends on sponsorship.**

Actions for Leaders

- 1 Be explicit when offering or seeking sponsorship so expectations are clear
- 2 Regularly ask: should this mentoring relationship now evolve into sponsorship?
- 3 Ensure women and underrepresented groups have access to sponsorship, not only mentoring

Why Sponsorship Matters for Career Progression

Sponsorship acts as a career accelerator, particularly for individuals from underrepresented groups

Sponsors provide:

- Visibility with senior leaders
- Strategic career advice
- Introductions and network access
- Advocacy during promotion or talent discussions
- 'Air cover': defending a protégé's reputation or performance if needed

Sponsors benefit from:

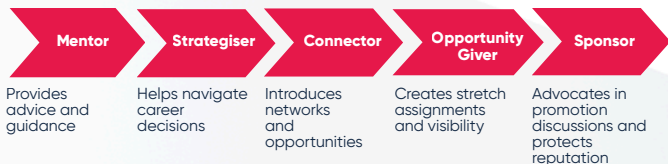
- Increased impact
- Development of future talent pipelines
- Greater insight into how the organisation operates
- Exposure to diverse perspectives and thinking

Actions for Leaders

- 1 Identify high-potential individuals who would benefit from sponsorship
- 2 Provide stretch opportunities and visible assignments
- 3 Reflect on the value gained from sponsoring diverse thinkers and performers

The Sponsorship Spectrum

Sponsorship rarely begins immediately. Relationships typically evolve along a continuum of support:



Evidence suggests that men more frequently receive later-stage sponsorship behaviours, while women too often only receive earlier-stage support.

Actions for Leaders

- 1 Map where each of your key relationships sits on the spectrum
- 2 Intentionally move promising talent along the continuum
- 3 Monitor who benefits from sponsorship and address any imbalances

Challenges with Sponsorship

Challenges with informal sponsorship

- The 'mini-me' effect: leaders often sponsor individuals similar to themselves
- Risk of perceived favouritism in organisations with egalitarian cultures
- Unequal access can reinforce existing leadership demographics

Challenges with formal programmes

- Leaders may resist being assigned protégés they do not know
- Sponsorship relies on trust, credibility and performance evidence
- Targeted programmes may face DEI backlash or scepticism

Actions for Leaders

- 1 Be aware of unconscious bias when selecting protégés
- 2 Intentionally sponsor across difference
- 3 Ensure sponsorship decisions are grounded in performance and potential
- 4 Model transparency and fairness in sponsorship behaviours

Building and Managing a Sponsorship Pipeline

Effective leaders treat sponsorship as a deliberate leadership portfolio, not an ad-hoc activity. Potential protégés should be evaluated based on:

Performance

Potential

Motivation

Values alignment

- Authenticity and trust remain critical to successful sponsorship relationships
- Evidence suggests that sponsoring across differences often produces the strongest leadership and organisational benefits

Actions for Leaders

- 1 Identify who you have mentored
- 2 Map how you leverage connections
- 3 Acknowledge who you provide opportunities to
- 4 Determine who you actively sponsor

Also consider:

- Expanding diversity within your pipeline
- Offering early opportunities to observe performance
- Deepening relationships as trust and evidence develop



Themes from questions and in-depth discussion

The Role of Senior Leaders

Sponsorship should be viewed as a core leadership behaviour, not an optional extra.

Senior leaders have a unique ability to shape organisational norms around sponsorship.

Small acts can have significant impact:

- Introducing talented individuals to senior stakeholders
- Providing visibility in key meetings
- Publicly recognising achievements
- Recommending individuals for stretch assignments

Actions for Leaders:

1. Talk openly about sponsorship within your organisation
2. Advocate for equitable access to opportunities
3. Challenge situations where informal sponsorship reinforces inequality
4. Support organisational initiatives that build sponsorship capability

Concerns about Favouritism or Misinterpretation

Sponsorship must be grounded in performance and professional credibility.

Clarity on criteria reduces favouritism concerns. Cross-gender sponsorship should not be avoided due to fear of misinterpretation.

Actions for Leaders:

1. Anchor sponsorship discussions around performance and outcomes
2. Normalise sponsorship so it becomes a visible and accepted leadership practice
3. Model professional, transparent cross-gender sponsorship relationships
4. Involve HR or use professional settings if concerns arise

Embedding Sponsorship in Organisational Culture

The long-term goal is cultural change, not a one-off programme.

Mentoring, leadership and networking initiatives can act as feeders into sponsorship.

When sponsorship behaviours become embedded across leadership teams:

- Access to opportunities becomes more equitable
- Progression barriers reduce
- Retention improves, particularly for mid-career women

Actions for Leaders:

1. Champion sponsorship within your firm
2. Share personal experiences of sponsorship to demystify the process
3. Encourage colleagues to identify and develop their own sponsorship pipelines
4. Use mentoring and leadership initiatives as pathways into sponsorship

Closing Reflection

- Improving gender representation and progression in the industry requires **both mentoring and sponsorship**
- Mentoring supports development and retention. Sponsorship drives **visibility, opportunity and advancement**
- Senior leaders have the influence to ensure sponsorship is **intentional, equitable and embedded**, helping to unlock talent across the industry

If you have any questions about the session, please contact sponsor@level20.org