

Singapore Management University Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of
Business

Lee Kong Chian School of Business

1-2019

Career sponsorship: An effective way for developing women leaders

Jovina ANG

Singapore Management University, jovina.ang.2012@phdgm.smu.edu.sg

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6074-9_5

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lkcsb_research

Part of the [Human Resources Management Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Citation

ANG, Jovina. Career sponsorship: An effective way for developing women leaders. (2019). *Leading for high performance in Asia: Contemporary research and evidence-based practices*. 89-105. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lkcsb_research/6244

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email libIR@smu.edu.sg.

Career Sponsorship: An Effective Way for Developing Women Leaders

Jovina Ang

Abstract Other than an effective career progression strategy, this research, which comprised of an autoethnography and an in-depth qualitative case study research showed that career sponsorship could be an effective strategy for developing women leaders. In the sponsor relationship, sponsors invest considerable time, effort and resources in developing sponsees, thus, preparing them for the top jobs. In addition to developing the skills on the leadership strataplex, career sponsorship has been shown to be an enabler for developing confidence, which is one of the necessary ingredients for developing executive presence. Career sponsorship also fills the gap and addresses the shortcomings that arise from traditional and women leadership development programs.

Keywords Women · Leadership · Leadership development · Career sponsorship · Sponsor

5.1 Introduction

The representation of women at the higher levels of management remains low despite concerted focus from governments and companies driving advancements in education, health and employment for women in the past 30 years (Tuminez, Duell, & Majid, 2012). Globally, women represent 33% of senior managers and 20% of C-suite executives (Thomas et al., 2017). If we were to continue at this rate of progression, it is estimated by the World Economic Forum that it will take 217 years to achieve gender parity in terms of wage equality, seniority and labour force participation in the workplace.¹ Unless there is a pipeline of qualified women, the road to achieving

¹World Economic Forum. (2018). Closing the Gender Gap. <https://www.weforum.org/projects/closing-the-gender-gap-gender-parity-task-forces>.

J. Ang (✉)

Organizational Behavior and Human Resources, Singapore Management University, Singapore, Singapore

e-mail: jang@communicatio.com.sg

gender parity and having greater female representation in senior leadership will be a very long and arduous one—which is why there needs to be a renewed focus and an alternative way for how organizations develop women leaders.

It is without a doubt that leadership development programs are a critical component for changing gender parity and the female representation equation. Leadership development programs typically aim to build the skills, knowledge and capability for senior leadership. Some programs even go one step further—to inculcate a mind-set shift and build a leadership identity (Ibarra, Snook, & Guillen Ramo, 2010b) for emerging leaders to rise to the top.

Despite recognizing how leadership development programs could accelerate their learning, many women hold themselves back from participating in these programs. They hold themselves back for several reasons. One of these is time constraint because in general, women have a lot more personal and family commitments when compared to men. Women also need to prove themselves more in their roles (Edison Stevenson & Orr, 2017) and attending a leadership development program would present as another tax on their time. These are some of the reasons why women need a lot more encouragement to participate in career and leadership development programs (Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994).

Huge amounts of money are invested annually in leadership programs. It has been reported that US companies invest upwards of \$14 billion annually.² In spite of this, it has been concluded that many leadership programs fail because of two reasons. One, most leadership development programs focus on building current competencies. While focusing on competencies increases the leadership capability of the individual for solving existing business problems, it might not be enough for these future leaders to navigate the constantly changing work environment that is characterized as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). Two, many leadership programs are stand-alone programs, hence, are not integrated into the work itself. Even though most leadership programs are anchored on research or are designed to simulate work e.g., computer simulations or project based, behavioral change might not be sustained as the lessons learned in the classroom are not translated to the workplace as typically there's no follow up or personal commitment to change.

As constant and disruptive change is becoming the norm in the work environment, Fernandez-Araoz, Roscoe, and Aramaki (2017) argued for an alternative approach to leadership development—that is, to focus on developing leadership potential. Unlike focusing on competencies, focusing on leadership potential not only addresses the skills, competencies and capabilities for leaders to solve current problems but also, future problems—which is why leadership potential development is a necessary step towards building the necessary leadership capability for driving future growth of organizations. In this VUCA world of work, it is likely that future leaders would be faced with a myriad of challenges ranging from innovating new business models to motivating a diverse, global and extended workforce comprising employees, partners, contractors and even 'machines'.

²Loew, L. & O'Leonard, K. (2012). Leadership Development Factbook 2012: Benchmarks and Trends in U.S. Leadership Development, Bersin by Deloitte, July 2012.

There is another advantage why focusing on leadership potential matters. When individuals exercise their leadership potential, they not only continue to develop their leadership capability, they are able to continually learn to acquire new tools, skills and knowledge that are necessary for driving continued growth for their organizations. Interestingly, studies have shown that men tend to be evaluated based on leadership potential whereas women tend to be evaluated based on experience and past performance for promotions (Carter & Silva, 2011).

It is also recognized that leadership programs need to address the development of a leadership identity and a leadership mindset. In general, women need more help in developing their leadership identities and leadership mindsets. This is because women tend to engage in 'protective' self-preservation. Hence, women are less likely to stretch themselves and position themselves as leaders for the fear of disapproval from others (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016). In so doing, women create an internal barrier that hinders them from taking on the big bold leadership roles to move upward on the corporate hierarchy. The concept of developing a leadership identity and a leadership mindset has led some scholars to put forward a case for women-only leadership programs. Women-only leadership development programs can create a safe and secure platform for women to discuss issues faced only by women in the workplace and learn and share from each other and female role models. In other words, these programs provide a platform for women to step outside their comfort zones and stretch themselves to fully immerse themselves in their learning and development. Thus, these programs can help women to build a leadership identity and a leadership mindset (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). While there are advantages of these women-only programs, there are also disadvantages. Many organizations shun away from women-only development programs due to the political inappropriateness for differentiating women from men. In promoting such programs, essentially, these organizations are positively discriminating against men as inadvertently, these organizations are giving women preferential treatment for training and leadership development. Also, some women avoid these programs for fear of being stigmatized by their male colleagues.

5.2 Career Sponsorship as a Leadership Development Strategy?

There are many elements that make up a successful leadership development program. Leadership development programs especially those that are designed to develop women leaders need to incorporate elements of developing leadership potential, a leadership identity, and a leadership mindset. Given that many leadership development programs do not fulfill all of these criteria, I wanted to investigate whether career sponsorship could be put forward as an alternative leadership development strategy.

Career sponsorship is still a relatively new construct. We were not even talking about sponsorship until a few years ago. That said, the construct of career sponsorship has been gaining prominence in the corporate world. Many organizations including Deutsche Bank,³ Women in Communications and Technology⁴ have introduced career sponsorship programs because it has been shown an effective strategy for advancing women to senior and executive leadership (Hewlett, 2013; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010a).

What is career sponsorship? Career sponsorship is defined as a dyadic relationship between a senior and more experienced leader (sponsor) and a junior and less experienced employee (sponsee) (Hewlett, 2013; Ibarra et al., 2010a, b) that is focused on accelerating the career progression for the sponsee. Career sponsorship is an effective career progression strategy because there is a senior champion who believes in the sponsee's leadership potential and who is willing to advocate for the sponsee's career advancement whether this is access to stretch assignments, new roles, or promotions. It has also been shown that career sponsorship can accelerate the careers of both men and women (Ibarra et al., 2010a, b). It also explains why women with sponsors are twice more likely to reach the C-Suite compared to those without sponsors or more precisely, 61% compared to 32%.⁵ My study of 100 global senior leaders also confirmed the effectiveness of sponsorship of progressing on the organizational hierarchy by an average of 1–2 levels (Ang & Reb, 2017).

Other than helping their sponsees progress, sponsors invest a lot of time focusing on one-on-one coaching and providing guidance for women to overcome their career barriers (Foust-Cummings, Dinolfo, & Kohler, 2011). Sponsors also spend considerable time nurturing and teaching their sponsees (those who are being sponsored) to be leaders (Ang, 2019) before positioning them for the senior roles.

5.3 Research Methodology

The research methodology to examine whether career sponsorship could be an effective leadership development strategy is anchored on two studies—an autoethnography (Study 1) and an in-depth case study research (Study 2).

³Deutsche Bank. (2015). The Women Global Leaders programme: the story of a successful partnership between INSEAD and Deutsche Bank, June 25. <https://www.db.com/cr/en/concrete-the-women-global-leaders-programme-the-story-of-a-successful-partnership.htm>.

⁴Women in Communications and Technology. (2018). The Protégé Project. <https://www.wct-ct.com/en/programs/prot%C3%A9g%C3%A9-project>.

⁵Titleman Colla, N. (2018). Sponsorship is an important key to unlocking women's career potential. The Globe and Mail, March 8. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/management/sponsorship-is-an-important-key-to-unlocking-womens-career-potential/article38204533/>.

5.3.1 *Autoethnography*

Autoethnography is not a traditional research method that is used in Organizational Behavior. However, this research method is starting to gain prominence in the disciplines of Anthropology, Communication, Education and Sociology as scholars start to recognize the value of learning and uncovering insights from personal experiences. It is a form of personal reflexive research that comes with deep insights and critical thinking. It involves taking the readers through an experiential journey from the lens of the writer. Autoethnography is a research method that allows the researcher to “enact the worlds we study” (Denzin, 2006, p. 422). It provides a bridge for how the inner personal world could interact with the outer societal world. Unique insights and perspectives could emerge otherwise not available from the positivist approach to research (Wall, 2008) because the process of thinking, reflection and reflexivity could yield new insights that could not be observed or recorded. In the process of thinking, reflection and reflexivity, the researcher could systematically analyze personal experience to understand the cultural phenomenon. As such the researcher could reflect upon the new insights that are different from what is learned or experienced (Wall, 2008). A well-written autoethnography demonstrates “struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense making” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). It also requires the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. It is a research method that is described as “methodology of the heart, a form that listens to the heart” (Denzin, 2006, p. 423). Some researchers use storytelling or multi-way conversations to let “people to feel the story in their guts, not just know the ‘facts’ in their heads.” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 435).

Like any qualitative research, conducting an autoethnography requires the separation of the researcher and the subject (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2005). This separation enables the researcher to “objectively” observe and describe the phenomenon, view the interactions between the subject and the phenomenon while giving him or her a systematic approach to analyze the subject’s immersion in the phenomenon. Thinking and reflection help with the theorizing process because they bring together inputs, processes and outputs (Moon, 2001), as well as help researchers to synthesize, analyze, and articulate a picture of interlinked and integrated ideas.

It certainly was not easy for me to write my autoethnography because as a researcher, my intent of writing was to connect my personal experience with theory. So, at the back of my mind, I constantly reminded myself of the validity and reliability of my autoethnography. While I relied primarily on memories of my lived experience as I do not have archival notes or journal entries going back over a period of more than 20 years, I am certain that these memories are accurate even though I cannot corroborate them with written data. As Wall (2006) says, “an individual is best situated to describe his or her own experience more accurately than anyone else” (p. 3). I used these data to identify recurring themes, important anomalies or one-time occurrences. To add validity to my autoethnography, I triangulated the data by checking the data with my previous sponsors.

5.3.2 Case Study Research

I also conducted a case study research because I wanted to examine a phenomenon in the real-life context (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1981, 2014). The case study method of inquiry is a form of constructing theories-in-use, a method that was first developed by Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring (1982). As a research method, case study allows the researcher to examine a phenomenon in the real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are unclear (Yin, 1981).

I adopted a theoretical and purposeful sampling approach; leveraging my professional network in Singapore, Asia and globally to recruit interviewees for the study. The goals of this approach were to ensure accurate representation of empirical evidence in the data collected, and to sharpen external validity of my findings. While there is no ideal number of cases, according to Eisenhardt (1989), the examination of four to ten cases should be sufficient to generalize the findings for a typical case study research. In this study, I examined 29 cases, of which there was a sample size of 35; 19 sponsors and 16 sponsees. All of the sponsors in the study had at least 20 years of corporate experience. They included the C-Suite, partners, general managers, vice presidents, and directors. The sponsee sample comprised of people who had been sponsored. The sponsees were younger (from ages 27 to 52) than the sponsors (from ages 43 to 69). There was a good representation of both genders in the sponsor (11 males, 8 females) and sponsee (7 males, 9 females) samples. I personally interviewed all my participants.

An important feature of case study research is the frequent overlap of data analysis and data collection (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). Bearing this mind, I pursued the following steps in coding and analyzing my data. As a first step, I compiled and categorized my handwritten notes into themes and topics that caught my attention either during or just after the interviews. Before I started the “formal” coding process, I read and reread the transcriptions multiple times, and highlighted key themes from each interview. I then proceeded to code the data using a hybrid coding framework consisting of the questions that I wanted to answer, and codes and themes that had caught my attention. In so doing, I was able to search for patterns, insights, and emerging concepts from my data.

The coding scheme was constructed based on carefully selected words, synonyms, and phrases that the interviewees used to describe and characterize the codes. I also spent a lot of time “juxtaposing” data from two or more cases. The process of conducting within and cross-case analyzes gave me multiple vantage points to strengthen my analysis through the process of triangulation, while at the same time, minimized information processing biases which could arise from analyzing data from a limited perspective (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973).

Instead of using singular words, the unit of analysis that I employed was phrases because phrases in any language form the basis of knowledge, and provide richer insights to the phenomenon studied. It is also a form of “in vivo” coding to capture the exact words, narratives, quotes, and metaphors that my interviewees used to describe a phenomenon. With quotes, I could “show” rather than “tell” the raw data (Pratt,

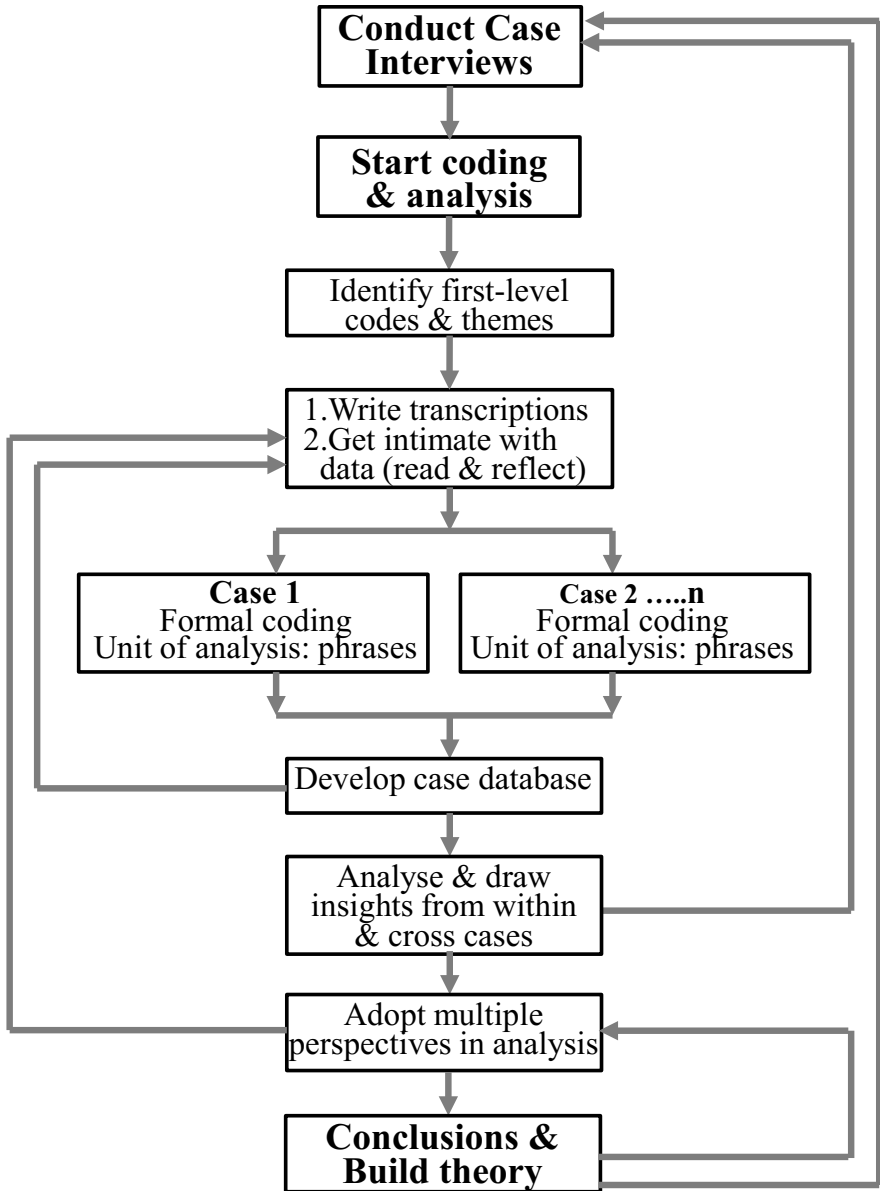


Fig. 1 The analysis process used for theory building

2008; Tracy, 2010). I started the coding process manually using Microsoft Excel, before I migrated the whole process to Atlas TI qualitative research software,⁶ when it became too complex to handle.

As part of the reiterative and overlapping process of coding and analyzing, I commenced my first detailed analysis and completed a draft write-up following the tenth interview, repeating the cycle after the eighteenth interview, twenty-fourth interview, and finally, after the thirty-fifth interview. This process of going back and forth of coding, analyzing and writing was essential in ensuring that the salient points were coded and captured in the analysis, and the key concepts and ideas were strengthened in the analysis (Davidson & di Gregorio, 2011; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014) (Fig. 1).

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Results from the Autoethnography

In writing my autoethnography, I found that throughout my experience as a sponsee, my sponsors played two critical roles in my development. My sponsors not only gave me a critical break at every career juncture by giving me visible stretch assignments, they also spent considerable time developing me as a leader, a general manager, and a person. My sponsors invested a lot of their time and effort in my leadership development. In paying it forward for other people, when I became a sponsor, I saw myself reciprocating similar leadership developmental behaviors for my sponsee.

I had a “ball” working for my sponsor. Not only was he a great boss and a sponsor in helping me get things done around Telstra, such as dealing with multiple stakeholders and leaders; he spent a lot of time coaching and showing me the ropes of success. He took time every week to teach me the basics of telephony engineering and operations, international relations, marketing and P&L (profit and loss) management. In other words, my sponsor taught me the basics of running a successful and complex billion-dollar telephony business.

As shown above, in addition to giving me a stretch assignment managing a A\$1 billion business at Telstra, my sponsor spent a lot of time coaching me on how to manage the business. Failure was not an option as this business was the third largest revenue stream of the company. My sponsor also helped me to develop my leadership capability including developing the necessary relational skills that are required to deal and communicate with the senior leaders of the organization. Giving me such a huge stretch assignment helped me to develop my leadership identity and a leadership mindset for my future roles. Being relatively young at that time (I was in my twenties), my sponsor showed me that with the right attitude and a leadership mindset, I was able to reach my leadership potential.

⁶Go to <http://atlasti.com/> to obtain an overview of this qualitative analysis and research software.

Other than my first sponsor at Telstra, I also have many other sponsors including a sponsor who was my boss at Motorola. Like my previous sponsor, this sponsor also helped me to develop as a successful and effective leader.

My working under her supervision gave me a lot of clarity on how to progress up the corporate ladder. She taught me essential leadership skills and gave me an accelerated course in general management, particularly, how to run a successful business by bringing together diverse teams and functions while motivating and bringing the best out of people. Additionally, she taught me the fundamental communication skills, the power of focus, and the significance of having a voice, especially to ask and negotiate for what I want. My sponsor clearly helped me grow as an effective leader, a competent general manager and a person. One important technical skill that she imparted to me was the use of scenario planning to assess the business and create new opportunities by challenging conventional ways of thinking. This led to the creation of new business opportunities in new market segments, such as the use of two-way radio as a productivity and customer service tool on the factory floor, restaurants and other new industries.

The leadership development I gained in my sponsor relationships gave me a robust foundation on how to be a leader. The leadership competencies did not include only the foundational technical skills. There were many leadership skills and competencies I learned from my sponsors. Some of the other important leadership lessons I learned included stakeholder management, team motivation, and strategic skills and visioning. I also learned how to inspire people and manage a virtual and cross-border team.

My autoethnography showed that sponsors can play a key role in helping their sponsees develop skills on the leadership strataplex—skills that comprise of cognitive, interpersonal, business acumen and strategic skills (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). I would not have been able to get to where I was on the corporate ladder if not for my sponsors who took time in investing in my leadership development. This autoethnography gave me the realization that even though the leadership development was specific to my roles at that time, the competencies that I acquired gave me a head start for my other roles. Having access to experienced leaders, I was also able to accelerate my development as a leader. To this end, it can be argued that sponsorship can be seen as a dedicated form of leadership development program for the sponsee.

5.4.2 Results from the Case Study Research

The results from the case study research showed that a sponsor is capable of exhibiting 14 different behaviors (see Appendix 1 for the complete list of sponsor behaviors) to help their sponsee develop themselves and advance their careers.

Out of these different behaviors, there are five specific behaviors that are related to leadership development. These behaviors include: nurture and teach, stretch assignments, building political acumen, building confidence, and providing image advice. The results also showed that building confidence is a developmental behavior that was most commonly called out for the women sponsees in the sample (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 List of development behaviors exhibited by the sponsor (Ang, 2019)

Sponsor behavior	Evidence from data	Skills
<i>Professional developmental behaviors</i>		
1. Nurture and teach	It usually is about how to deal with issues that would basically shorten the time that people would take to learn about specific things. It can be how to learn something or how to do something or how to behave in a different way or how to act behavior. Different people, different things	Business acumen
	You have to learn how to deal with people. You would probably spend half the time managing people rather than managing events	Interpersonal
 It's being very thorough in the way of execution and being strategic	Strategic skills
	Frank said to me; "I am going to guide you all the way. I will work with you." He was very honest with me. He gave me regular feedback. And we did a lot of projects together	Cognitive skills, Business acumen and Strategic skills
2. Provide stretch assignments	So I had to challenge him on it, and it took him awhile to start bringing the results, examples or ideas that met my criteria, at least, for success and defining longer term strategy for the organization	Cognitive skills, Business acumen and Strategic skills
3. Build political acumen	I respected the most; in terms of his sheer intellectual ability, his ability to understand the politics and not get embedded in it. I appreciated a lot about him, and I've always tried to do this for myself	Business acumen and Relational skills
<i>Personal developmental behaviors</i>		
4. Build confidence	Mostly instilling that belief in myself; the self-confidence about the potential of perceived challenges. 'You are going to be successful. You are going to do this. You have the capability. You will be successful in whatever you want to do'	Executive presence
5. Provide image advice	I gave her feedback down to the level of her dressing because if you want to be successful, image is important. The way you speak, the way you write, and the way you carry yourself. To me, these are all important, right? I come to work in a full suit. Not everybody likes to get this kind of feedback	Executive presence

The first behavior, 'nurture and teach', is the all-encompassing professional development behavior that helps the sponsee to acquire the four critical skills on the leadership strataplex as defined by Mumford et al. (2007)—the cognitive, interpersonal, business acumen, and strategic skills. Cognitive skills are the foundation of all leadership skills. They are comprised of basic cognitive capacities including synthesizing, processing, and analysis of information. Inter- personal skills include social skills that are necessary for connecting, interacting, and influencing other people.

These skills help to enhance the emotional intelligence of the sponsee. Business acumen includes skills that are necessary for managing a business or an organization. Strategic skills are highly conceptual. They include big picture skills to drive the organization forward and achieve continuous growth. When sponsors nurture and teach their sponsees, they are essentially imparting their experiences and lessons to their sponsees. They can nurture and teach by providing an immersive training experience such as coaching their sponsees on how to run the business or solve a problem. In so doing, they not only provide a structured professional development process, but also a learning process that is relevant and customized to the needs of the organization and sponsee.

The second behavior that the sponsor provides is 'provide stretch assignments'. It is a behavior that accelerates the learning of the sponsee. Stretch assignments serve two objectives: (1) they are opportunities for the sponsee to learn and enhance their capability, and (2) they can potentially increase the visibility of the sponsee because stretch assignments typically involve important assignments to solve strategic business problems. Because sponsees learn by doing, this learning experience is immersive. Immersive learning experience is more effective than classroom learning because it combines a learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and doing (Kolb, 2014).

Building political acumen is a critical skill for any leader operating in an organization because politics is a part and parcel of organizational life, and is essentially about power bases, power sources, power shifts and power dynamics (Pfeffer & Drummond, 2010). The degree of organizational politics varies from one organization to another and politics typically intensifies at the senior levels of the organization. Political skills such as the art or science of persuasion, selling ideas, influence, and building coalitions are needed to get things done in the organization. Recognizing this, sponsors also provide this development behavior to their sponsees.

Other than these professional behaviors, sponsors help their sponsees in developing on the personal front. The first personal development behavior is developing confidence. In my study, I found that a lack of confidence was more pronounced in women compared to men. Kay and Shipman (2014) also confirmed this finding. As success correlates closely with confidence as it does with competence, a lack of confidence becomes a barrier to success. A lack of confidence can lead women to underestimate their capabilities, thus, hindering women from taking an active role in putting themselves forward for career advancement. A lack of confidence can diminish the executive presence of a leader. Executive presence is more than acting like a leader. It is how a leader is perceived as competent, reliable and capable and it accounts for 26% of the promotion criteria (Hewlett, Leader-Chivée, Sherbin, Gordon, & Dieudonne, 2012).

Having the right image adds to a leader's executive presence. It is one of the three pillars of executive presence; the others are gravitas and communication (Hewlett et al., 2012). My study showed that this is another development behavior provided by the sponsor.

5.5 Discussion

As shown in the results above, career sponsorship can be a robust and effective way for developing leaders. It can also be argued that sponsorship is a customized leadership development program that is flexible and is aligned to the needs of the organization and sponsee. The learning that is gained in this relationship is experiential and is work-based, and is centered on solving business problems. To this end, the development that the sponsor provides to the sponsee meets the needs of the business in a timely manner, and is flexible to address the strategic needs of the organization (Seibert, Hall, & Kram, 1995).

While the leadership development that is gained from the sponsor relationship can benefit both men and women, women can gain more from this type of development because women in general, lack some of these skills on the leadership strataplex because many of them pursue functional roles rather than P&L roles (Silva & Ibarra, 2012). Having the full spectrum of skills on the leadership strataplex—skills that include cognitive, interpersonal, business and strategic skills (Mumford et al., 2007) are needed for successful leadership. While cognitive and interpersonal skills are needed at every organizational hierarchy—the other skills that are business acumen and strategic skills, are skills that leaders need to manage a business. Said in another way, a leader needs to possess the ‘what’, ‘why’, and ‘how’ aspects of leadership. The ‘what’ aspects of leadership include having technical and business acumen, the ‘why’—strategic acumen, and the ‘how’—which encompasses cognitive ability, interpersonal acumen, and executive presence. Sponsorship provides a dedicated approach for aspiring women leaders otherwise not available through traditional leadership training programs as these programs tend to focus on the ‘what’ and not on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of leadership.

Additionally, the sponsor is able to enhance the leadership potential of the sponsee by immersing the sponsee in stretch assignments. Stretch assignments are necessary because they stretch the employees beyond their current knowledge or skills as this learning and development comes with thinking and doing. Using the analogy of an acorn seed, the acorn seed is able to develop its potential as a tree with nourishment—water, sunlight and soil. Similarly, stretch assignments help sponsees developmentally beyond what they think that they are capable of. It is another way for how women can reach their potential without having to attend a formal development course.

There’s another advantage that comes from learning from the sponsor—that is, learning about political acumen. In general, compared to men, women are not as proficient in navigating politics. Women are judged more harshly than men when they are seen as participating in office politics, which is why many women say they dislike office politics even though they want to assert themselves at work (Heath, 2017). Given that all organizations are political, acquiring political acumen is critical for success, and is a part of getting ahead as to get things done whether this is getting buy-in or influencing other people to support an idea etc. Acquiring political skills

is not something that is easily learned in a classroom setting. By participating in sponsorship, women can learn these skills first hand from their sponsors.

Given that career sponsorship is available to men and women, putting sponsorship forward as a leadership development program will not invite the ‘negative perceptions’ that women-only leadership development programs garner. There is also no political inappropriateness for women in engaging in this type of development. This is another reason for why career sponsorship can be an effective leadership development strategy for organizations to consider.

Another benefit from career sponsorship is—sponsors are able to work closely with sponsees, especially the female sponsees to develop their unique leadership identities. Leadership identity is paramount for career success because without an internal sense of purpose, it would be difficult for people to see themselves as leaders and for others to see themselves as leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013). The development of a leadership identity can lead to the cultivation of a leadership mindset. A leadership mindset is needed in this VUCA environment as leaders need to constantly learn and unlearn how they lead and solve problems. Sponsorship provides the cultivation of a leadership mindset as sponsees are exposed to problems to be solved through the stretch assignments that sponsors provide.

The absence of a leadership identity (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013) can also be attributed to a lack of confidence. Confidence matters as much as competence. If an individual is competent but lacks confidence, the competence of the individual would be under-estimated. By participating in career sponsorship, women can gain confidence through imitation and personal learning from her sponsor. In so doing, the female sponsee would be likely to develop her executive presence (Hewlett, 2013); to develop an ability to look, talk, and project leadership, while at the same time, develop a sense of leadership identity.

In a one-on-one sponsorship arrangement, sponsees get to learn first-hand on how to handle important business decisions. In a way, the sponsors become the ‘de facto’ role models for the sponsees. As there is a lack of female role models in the workplace due to the low numbers of women in higher management, sponsorship fills this gap by providing not only female role models, but also male role models. Learning from women and men role models is essential for corporate success because the top of the corporate ladder includes both genders. Another outcome from role modeling is the acquisition of executive presence (Hewlett, 2013) and learning the ability to project leadership material while speaking like a leader, as well as looking like a leader. Thus, it increases the female sponsee’s perception as a leader.

Female employees have different development needs depending on their career and life stages. They also tend to follow an indirect career trajectory due to priorities at home whether they entail caring for their children or their elderly parents. Because different sponsees have different needs and job demands depending on their work and life stages, sponsorship would be more suited to provide the customized leadership and development program that is needed for women.

5.6 Contribution to Theory

The main contribution to theory is—career sponsorship is not only a strategy for career progression, it equally can be a robust leadership development strategy that organizations can adopt for developing leaders, particularly their up and coming women leaders. Unlike women-only development programs that might invite perceptions of political inappropriateness, it can serve as an effective alternative leadership development strategy for women especially to develop the skills on the leadership strataplex, as well as confidence and executive presence. Furthermore, this type of development can help women to develop their leadership identities and a leadership mindset.

5.7 Implications to Practice

If sponsorship is to be considered as a rich and extensive leadership development program, it presents an alternate strategy for organizations to build its leadership pipeline. Sponsorship, unlike any leadership development programs, is a program that can be customized for the sponsee. It is also a program that is experiential, and focuses on learning by doing and is centered on real work lessons and solving business problems.

5.8 Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The first limitation refers to the methodology of autoethnography. Unlike the positivist approach to theory building, autoethnography is a reflexive method that is centered on ‘dwelling in’ the theory (Burawoy, 1998). Even though there is an artificial separation that exists between the researcher and the subject, there still exists an element of engagement between the researcher and subject. It is through this engagement as the ‘subjective self’ (Wall, 2006) that the researcher is able make sense of the phenomenon (Weick, 1995). Hence, it is a research method that accommodates subjectivity and emotionality, and acknowledges the influence of the researcher on the phenomenon (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). To this end, it is a methodological risk that autoethnography allows for.

Even though the case method of inquiry has been proven to be a robust and tested method for qualitative research, the limited number of cases; 29 cases, might limit broad generalizability of these findings, especially across geographies and cultures despite careful selection of cases to meet the requirements of a theoretical sample. Furthermore, the sample used in this study was biased in the sense that, it involved people in sponsorship relationships, and probably principally included people with generally a positive view on sponsorship.

5.9 Conclusion

In addition to a strategy for career advancement, sponsorship can be considered as a rich and extensive leadership development program. It presents an alternate strategy for organizations to not only build any leadership pipeline, but a female leadership pipeline. It also will help organizations to address the gender disparity at the top of the corporate ladder.

Appendix 1—List of all the Behaviors of the Sponsor

Category	Behavior of the sponsor	Count (n = 35)	Percentage (%)
Professional development	Provide advocacy	30	86
	Provide visibility and exposure	24	69
	Ensure sponsee's candidacy for roles	23	66
	Nurture and teach	23	66
	Fight for promotion	16	46
	Access to senior networks	13	37
	Provide stretch assignments	10	29
	Give career advice	10	29
	Access to external networks	7	20
	Provide protection	6	17
	Build political acumen	1	3
Personal development	Provide personal advice	3	9
	Develop confidence	2	6
	Provide image advice	1	3

Source: Own research

References

- Ang, J. (2019). *The game plan of successful career sponsorship: Harnessing the talent of aspiring managers and senior leaders*. UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Ang, J., & Reb, J. (2017). Why every manager needs a sponsor. *Asian Management Insights*, 4(1), 76–80.
- Burawoy, M. (1998). The extended case method. *Sociological Theory*, 16(1), 4–33.

- Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2011). The myth of the ideal worker: Does doing all the right things really get women ahead? *Catalyst*. http://www.catalyst.org/system/files/The_Myth_of_the_Ideal_Worker_Does_Doing_All_the_Right_Things_Really_Get_Women_Ahead.pdf.
- Davidson, J., & di Gregorio, S. (2011). Qualitative research and technology: In the midst of a revolution. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4, 627–643.
- Denzin, N. K. (2006). Analytic autoethnography, or déjà vu all over again. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 419–428.
- Edison Stevenson, J., & Orr, E. (2017, November 8). We interviewed 57 female CEOs to find out how more women can get to the top. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2017/11/we-interviewed-57-female-ceos-to-find-out-how-more-women-can-get-to-the-top>.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532–550.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 273–290.
- Ellis, C. S., & Bochner, A. P. (2006). Analyzing analytic autoethnography an autopsy. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 429–449.
- Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. M. (2011). Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women's leadership development programs. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(3), 474–493.
- Fernandez-Araoz, C., Roscoe, A., & Aramaki, K. (2017). Turning potential into success. *Harvard Business Review*, 95(6), 86–93.
- Foust-Cummings, H., Dinolfo, S., & Kohler, J. (2011). *Sponsoring women to success*. New York, NY: Catalyst.
- Heath, K. (2017, December 18). 3 simple ways for women to rethink office politics and wield more influence at work. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2017/12/3-simple-ways-for-women-to-rethink-office-politics-and-wield-more-influence-at-work>.
- Hewlett, S. A. (2013). *Forget a mentor. Find a sponsor: The new way to fast-track your career*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Hewlett, S. A., Leader-Chivée, L., Sherbin, L., Gordon, J., & Dieudonné, F. (2012). *Executive presence*. Center for Talent Innovation.
- Ibarra, H., & Petriglieri, J. (2016, March 4). *Impossible selves: Image strategies and identity threat in professional women's career transitions* (INSEAD Working Paper No. 2016/12/OBH).
- Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010a). Why men still get more promotions than women. *Harvard Business Review*, 88(9), 80–85.
- Ibarra, H., Ely, R., & Kolb, D. (2013). Women rising: The unseen barriers. *Harvard business review*, 91(9), 60–66.
- Ibarra, H., Snook, S., & Guillen Ramo, L. (2010b). Identity-based leader development. In *Handbook of leadership theory and practice* (pp. 657–678).
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1973). On the psychology of prediction. *Psychological Review*, 80(4), 237–251.
- Kay, K., & Shipman, C. (2014, May). The confidence gap. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved December 2014, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/04/the-confidence-gap/359815/>.
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT Press.
- Lofland, J., Snow, D. A., Anderson, L., & Lofland, L. H. (2005). *Analysing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Cengage Learning.
- Moon, J. (2001). *PDP Working Paper 4: Reflection in higher education learning*. Higher Education Academy. www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp.
- Mumford, T. V., Campion, M. A., & Morgeson, F. P. (2007). The leadership skills strataplex: Leadership skill requirements across organizational levels. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(2), 154–166.
- Pfeffer, J., & Drummond, D. (2010). *Power: Why some people have it—And others don't*. Harper Business.

- Pratt, M. G. (2008). Fitting oval pegs into round holes tensions in evaluating and publishing qualitative research in top-tier North American journals. *Organizational Research Methods*, 11(3), 481–509.
- Seibert, K. W., Hall, D. T., & Kram, K. E. (1995). Strengthening the weak link in strategic executive development: Integrating individual development and global business strategy. *Human Resource Management*, 34(4), 549–567.
- Silva, C., & Ibarra, H. (2012, November 14). Study: Women get fewer game-changing leadership roles. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2012/11/study-women-get-fewer-game-changing>.
- Tharenou, P., Latimer, S., & Conroy, D. (1994). How do you make it to the top? An examination of influences on women's and men's managerial advancement. *Academy of Management Journal*, 37(4), 899–931.
- Thomas, R., et. al. (2017). *Women in the workplace 2017*. McKinsey & Company, and LeanIn.org. <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.
- Tuminez, A. S., Duell, K., & Majid, H. A. (2012). *Rising to the top?: A report on women's leadership in asia*. Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.
- Wall, S. (2006). An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), Article 9. http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/wall.pdf.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), 38–53.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations* (Vol. 3). Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (1981). The case study crisis: Some answers. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 58–65.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). Sage.
- Zaltman, G., LeMasters, K., & Heffring, M. (1982). *Theory construction in Marketing: Some thoughts on thinking*. John Wiley & Sons.