

Sponsorship

Responses to a workshop hosted by the Oregon State University President's Commission on the Status of Women (PCOSW), October, 2012

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The recent presentation and workshop by [Sylvia Ann Hewlett](#) sponsored by the President's Commission on the Status of Women, reaffirmed my enthusiasm for mentoring and expanded my thinking by drawing a distinction between *mentoring* and *sponsorship*. Dr. Hewlett helped clarify the importance, the protocols, and the differences between mentor-mentee and sponsor-protégée relationships.

She elicited personal stories from the participants about their experiences as protégées; in particular, she asked about how we learned how our responsibilities as a protégée differ from the responsibilities of a mentee. I have been grateful for the outstanding “mentorship” I've received during my career, but when Dr. Hewlett phrased the question that way, I realized that many of my experiences are better described as sponsor-protégée relationships.

Mentoring receives a great deal of attention in academia. It is generally understood as a professional relationship in which a more experienced person helps a less experienced person gain skills and experience needed to be successful.

A sponsor-protégée relationship, on the other hand, is more of a two-way street. The sponsor puts his/her own reputation on the line to promote the success of the protégée. Good sponsors open doors for their protégées; good protégées express loyalty to their sponsors and promote the sponsor's “brand” through their professional network.

One of the big take-home messages for those on the “receiving” end is that you need to find and cultivate both mentors and sponsors. While a mentor may be the one you go to for problem-solving and nurturing on self-confidence, you should present your best, most powerful professional self to your sponsor. You also need to make sure that you hold up your end of the sponsor-protégée agreements!

When I was nearing the end of my PhD program, my major advisor was invited to give a seminar at a prestigious institution to prominent leaders in our field, and he invited me to accompany him, with no formal responsibilities. This proved to be one of the most important turning points of my career – my professional “debut.”

I learned by observation and example how collegial relationships are forged, by sharing new ideas and research during informal conversations. I now think of this as an “intellectual potluck.” And although it was never stated explicitly, my advisor/sponsor helped me realize that my contribution was needed both to pique the interest and curiosity of our hosts for my own sake and also to reflect well on the lab I came from and the training I’d received.

A colleague who attended Dr. Hewlett’s OSU workshop pointed out that the concept of sponsor-protégée relationships is already deeply engrained in the culture of academia. But as Dr. Hewlett said, sponsors tend to select protégées who are “like” themselves, which discourages change and diversity in the upper echelons of the field. Also, I am concerned that many early-career professionals do not understand how their roles as protégée differ from their roles as a mentee.

Several of us at the workshop started talking about broadening the culture of sponsorships here at Oregon State. If a career path to the top of one’s field generally requires sponsorship, as Dr. Hewlett maintains, more students and early-career professionals need to learn how to become protégées. And if we are sincere in our desires for greater diversity in top leadership, today’s top leaders should learn to become effective sponsors of a more diverse set of protégées.

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