



CPA firm sponsorship success toolkit

Mission of the AICPA Women's Initiatives Executive Committee

Promote and support the success of women to advance
the profession together.

#AICPAWomenLead

Disclaimer: The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the American Institute of CPAs, its divisions and its committees. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information on the subject covered. It is distributed with the understanding that the authors are not engaged in rendering legal, accounting or other professional services. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

For more information about the procedure for requesting permission to make copies of any part of this work, please email copyright@aicpa.org with your request. Otherwise, requests should be written and mailed to the Permissions Department, AICPA, 220 Leigh Farm Road, Durham, NC 27707-8110.

Contents

2 Why start a sponsorship program?

6 Mentor vs. coach vs. sponsor

8 Key considerations in building your program

14 Sponsorship program templates

Protégé questionnaire

Sponsor questionnaire

Protégé self-assessment

Sponsorship program sponsor/protégé debriefing

Why start a sponsorship program?

Sponsorship has many benefits for CPA firms, and some form of sponsorship is most likely already going on in firms. “Influential CPA firm leaders often identify promising people to recommend for opportunities and talk up at meetings or in informal settings. These people frequently go on to become owners themselves,” notes [*Organizational Strategies: Retaining & Developing Women Leaders*](#), a publication of the AICPA Women’s Initiatives Executive Committee (WIEC).

While the **advocacy or sponsorship process** occurs informally at many organizations, an ad hoc approach is hardly an effective way to identify and advance high-potential leaders. To build a solid leadership bench and **help your firm benefit from the contributions of the entire talent pool, you will need a formal sponsorship program.**

Despite the many advantages to formal sponsorship programs, only 12% of CPA firms have them, according to the [*2017 CPA Firm Gender Survey*](#), a publication of WIEC. Firms without programs could be missing out – 97% of those with formal programs thought they had an impact on attracting and retaining talent.

Among other things, sponsorship is key to creating more equitable leadership in the accounting profession. All leaders have had a sponsor or advocate at some point in their careers. In this toolkit, we walk you through the benefits and subtleties involved in building a sponsorship program at your firm.

Benefits for protégés

For individuals — or protégés, as this document will refer to those being sponsored — the benefits of a formal program include:

- **A sponsor is one thing all leaders have in common**, someone who has used their influence at one or more critical moments in their careers to allow the protégés access to the opportunities they need. The protégé may not think of them as a sponsor, and many are not even aware of their efforts.
- **Formal sponsorship programs ensure that all of your firm members — not only those who have made an informal connection with a key leader — have access to higher-level career opportunities and potential ownership.** “Sponsorship is necessary for election to ownership,” according to *Organizational Strategies*. “To be elected, a professional must be recommended. Willingness to put personal political capital and reputation on the line to further the career path of another is one of the primary differences between a sponsor and mentor.”

Unfortunately, implicit bias is often built into informal sponsorship. Without necessarily intending to do so, many people choose to mentor and sponsor people who are most like themselves, with the same backgrounds and interests, a phenomenon known as affinity bias that happens informally every day. **Firms with formal sponsorship can avoid this roadblock and create an inclusive environment that enhances morale and staff engagement.**

- **Protégés are given opportunities they may not otherwise receive.** “An employee without a sponsor is disadvantaged,” notes *Organizational Strategies*, since they are not able to engage in or have access to the right experiences at the right time. These disadvantages often affect the career speed and trajectory of an employee who lacks a sponsor.

Pave your own road to a sponsorship!

A majority of CPA firms don't have formal sponsorship programs, according to the [2017 CPA Firm Gender Survey](#), a publication of the AICPA Women's Initiatives Executive Committee. For CPAs in those firms, WIEC recommends seeking sponsors in an informal way. This can be easily accomplished by connecting with leaders in the firm, sharing your career goals and asking for advice on the best ways to gain exposure to key opportunities, expertise and/or experience within the firm. As you cultivate this relationship, your sponsor should be more and more willing to put political capital on the line.

Benefits for the firm

The benefits for the firm include:

- **Firms make an intentional effort to identify promising staff, a critical element in succession planning, and take proactive steps in promoting their advancement.** That includes ensuring they have the right type of stretch assignments and similar opportunities at the right points in their careers. "Examples of experiences that are essential to moving forward in the public accounting field include: leading important client engagements, partnering with an influential shareholder on a new niche client, inclusion in a large proposal project or participation in a visible committee," notes *Organizational Strategies*.
- **Formal programs can help firms communicate an important message to their top talent and formally engage them early in the process,** or at least before they start to opt out and leave the firm. It is a great way to engage high-potential people in a positive and impactful way, and show they are valued and important to the firm. In fact, a total of 70% of men and 68% of women with sponsors felt their careers were progressing at a satisfactory pace, compared to 57% of both men and women without sponsors, according to Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor*.

- **Formal sponsorship programs help foster an inclusive culture by ensuring** that leaders are not advocating for only people like them. It allows the firm to leverage from its entire talent pool, women and minorities included. Firms create an inclusive environment that enhances morale and staff engagement.
- **The program helps to diversify the perspectives and experiences of firm leadership.** Not only does affinity bias unintentionally exclude some people, it also robs the firm of the chance to learn from the new ideas and backgrounds that a diverse leadership pool can offer.
- **Formal sponsorship programs also help succession planning by growing team members faster.** When firms are intentional in providing all team members access to influencers, opportunities and training, team members progress faster in their career track.

Formal sponsorship programs also help succession planning by growing team members faster.

[Share this tool with all firm members to help them better understand the differences between these programs.]

Mentor vs. coach vs. sponsor

This is based on [*Share. Learn. Grow. Mentor. A How-to Guide from the AICPA Women's Initiatives Executive Committee.*](#)

Many have mentors. Some have coaches. Too few have sponsors. It's important to know the difference.

Mentor: "Talks with you"

- A mentoring relationship can exist between two people or within a group for the purpose of career development or navigating the workplace, or a particular issue.
- Often, the relationship is mutually beneficial and non-evaluative, with all parties learning in a purposeful way through sharing knowledge and experiences.

- A mentor should help you understand yourself and your feedback. A mentor helps develop the mentee's accountability.
- Mentors can be inside or outside of the mentee's organization.

Coach (performance adviser): "Talks to you"

- In a coaching relationship, the coach often helps you find your own answers or solutions. The relationship can also be instructional, and sometimes evaluative, with a particular focus, such as developing skills or training someone on a discreet task or series of tasks.
- A coach may or may not be part of the same organization as the person or group being coached.

Sponsor: “Talks about you”

- In a sponsoring relationship, the sponsor has positively evaluated the protégé and intentionally helps him/her gain visibility and get recommended for particular assignments, promotions or positions, usually in a career or opportunity-related situation. A sponsor advocates for the individual they are sponsoring in critical internal conversations that happen behind closed doors for the most part.
- A sponsor is almost always a part of the protégé’s organization, because, by definition, the sponsor uses his/her organizational influence for the protégé’s benefit.
- A sponsor spends political capital as necessary for the advancement or access to opportunities.

Further information on distinguishing among sponsors, coaches and mentors —and much more — can be found in [*Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor*](#), by Sylvia Ann Hewlett.

[This is to be used by those planning and championing the program.]

Key considerations in building your program

Questions to consider:

What levels are included?

Many sponsorship programs are designed for the senior, associate, manager and senior manager level. Should sponsorship be available at all levels? Some argue against sponsoring too early, since protégés must be experienced enough to benefit from the sponsor's influence and the visibility and experiences that sponsorship can offer them. Your firm should make its own decisions based on your people and firm needs.

Who is selected?

Sponsors — According to *Organizational Strategies*, "Sponsors offer organizational awareness, tips on political navigation and access to appropriate opportunities with a deep understanding of proper career timing."

Selection of sponsors should take into account the following:

- They should be influential leaders with great visibility in the firm and a solid network of contacts within and outside the practice. The protégé's prospects and ultimate success depend at least in part on the sponsor's clout and the ability to put it to work on the protégé's behalf.

- They should have a deep commitment to enhancing firm retention and creating an inclusive workplace in which all employees have the chance to reach their goals and potential. This commitment will help ensure the effectiveness of their efforts on the protégé's behalf.
- They can be managers or senior managers if a senior associate is a protégé.
- Consider setting specific goals for partners and other leaders to name a protégé who is different from them (to fight the affinity bias) and hold the sponsor accountable for reaching this goal.

Protégés — Selection criteria for protégés may vary but often include:

- Demonstrated ability and a commitment to excellence and continuous learning
- An interest in advancing in the firm
- Leadership or business development potential; someone who is seen as an informal leader in his or her area who appears ready to take on greater responsibility.

- A high-potential person who could face roadblocks in moving up, which might typically include women or minorities. This might also include staff who have proven they can excel but who may have a low profile in the firm due to a variety of reasons that sponsorship can address.

A high-potential person who could face roadblocks in moving up, which might typically include women or minorities.

How are matches made?

Protégés may either be assigned to sponsors by the firm or participants may express their own preferences. In either case, your firm should:

- **Create a committee to oversee the program** — This group can review applications, interview prospective protégés and evaluate matches. It can also determine if the protégé would benefit from another option — such as mentoring or internal or external coaching or training in business development or certain soft skills — rather than sponsorship.

- **Monitor whether those who may not normally receive sponsorship** — typically women and minorities — are included.
- **Make the right matches** — Sponsors and protégés may not necessarily need to have similar backgrounds or personalities, but they should have the potential to build a trusting relationship. In particular, the sponsor should have the ability and the enthusiasm needed to advocate effectively for the protégé and be committed to making a difference in advancing his or her career.

How long will matches last?

In determining the right timing, remember that your program should be goal-driven with specific identified outcomes. Both parties should agree on what success will look like. The length of the relationship should be driven by the protégé's goals and the plan developed to achieve them.

Based on the experiences at firms with successful programs, the sponsor and protégé can make a one- or two-year commitment to the program or the time frame can be indefinite until specific goals are achieved. Firms may also want to determine and share the expected regular hourly commitment for sponsor/protégé matches, including orientation and training and meetings between sponsors and protégés throughout the year. Your firm may want to begin with a pilot program to determine the optimum duration and time commitment for your program.

What are sponsor/protégé roles and responsibilities?

Sponsor responsibilities typically include:

- Developing a trusting relationship with the protégé and spending time with him or her based on the firm's time commitment guidelines for sponsors
- Learning the protégé's long- and short-term goals and discussing the best ways to reach them
- Working to ensure they have access to training or other firm or external programs that can enhance their abilities
- Identifying assignments, promotions or other opportunities that can help them reach their goals
- Regularly discussing their abilities and potential with other leaders to raise their visibility as well as recommending them for opportunities or promotion
- Actively advocating on the protégé's behalf during internal meetings when career decisions are being made

Protégé responsibilities can include:

- Identifying short- and long-term career goals and discussing them in honest conversations with the sponsor. This can include learning about possible career paths and opportunities within the firm, from the sponsor or elsewhere.
- Understanding and appreciating the sponsor's role and the investment in the protégé's career that he or she is making
- Being open to the opportunities that sponsorship may offer and working to make the most of them
- Maintaining a strong working relationship with the sponsor
- Reaching any goals set with the sponsor

Sponsorship program accountability:

Your firm, committee or other group in charge of the sponsorship program should develop guidelines to hold the sponsor accountable to help achieve the goals of his or her protégé. The sponsor's work should be included in the sponsor's performance evaluation, with discussions of some or all these considerations:

- How the sponsor advocated on behalf of the protégé within the firm
- Specific actions the sponsor took in each of the five attributes of a business leader: business development, technical skills, client relationship, team development and personal traits
- Specific actions the sponsor took to reach any specific goal or opportunity for improvement identified by the protégé
- Specific outcomes or results driven by the sponsorship relationship and their impact on the protégé's career

Your firm should hold the protégé accountable for making the most of the relationship. A protégé's performance evaluation should address whether he or she:

- Has defined the goal and desired outcome of the sponsorship relationship with his or her sponsor
- Has acted on the advice and/or recommendations of the sponsor
- Has valued the relationship and focused on specific task completion or related outcome or progress toward goals

What other steps can the firm take to design a successful program?

- Start with an orientation. Give protégés an introduction to how the program will work, explain the benefits of the program and allow them to ask questions.
- Evaluate the matching to ensure the sponsor is willing to advocate for his or her protégé and both parties have good chemistry for optimum results.
- Test the matching for unconscious bias and ensure that leaders are not advocating for people like them (affinity bias).
- Embed the success of the protégé in the sponsor's performance evaluation.

Communicating regularly to staff and partners about the program's activities and successes can keep it top of mind, reinforce its importance to the firm and inspire the entire talent pool.

How do we communicate about the program?

Written guidelines, as well as a shorter set of FAQs, are highly recommended. Firm programs may take different approaches to issues such as who is included, how selections are made, the responsibilities and roles involved, and how long the program lasts.

However, all communications should discuss how the program benefits the entire firm by enhancing employees' chances to advance and contribute to a successful, inclusive practice.

Transparency is important to demonstrate fairness. The communications should describe how applications or selections are made and include contact details for more information, as well as expectations for sponsors and protégés.

In addition, communicating regularly to staff and partners about the program's activities and successes can keep it top of mind, reinforce its importance to the firm and inspire the entire talent pool.

How do we measure success?

Before the program is launched, those in charge of the effort within your firm should determine specific goals for the program, then assess change in those areas, which may include:

- **Retention** — Has the firm done a better job of holding on to top talent since the sponsorship program began? This may include not only people in the program, but also lower-level staff who are excited about the chance to participate in the future.
- **Recruitment** — Has interest in the firm grown since the program began? Do potential recruits seem to be aware of it or excited when they hear about it?
- **A stronger pipeline** — Has the pool of potential leaders improved since the program began? “Improvement” can be defined in many ways depending on firm needs. Have short- or long-term succession options been enhanced by having more leaders ready to take over? Has the firm been able to strengthen leadership talent in a particular practice area or staff level?

Are program protégés getting bonuses for business development or other recognitions of leadership success?

- **Greater inclusion** — Has the firm done a better job of holding on to “at-risk” staff, such as women or minorities, whose long-term retention numbers have been low in the past?
- **Enhanced engagement** — Does leadership seem more attainable, which can improve staff members’ sense of belonging? Does the staff begin to see leaders who look like them and aspire to take on those roles themselves one day?

How do we maintain our progress?

In addition to tracking success measures, your firm should review the program at least annually to see what’s working and what isn’t. Use the debriefing questions for sponsors and protégés in this toolkit to gather information about any needed adjustments.

[Ask protégés to answer these questions to facilitate matching them with the best sponsor.]

Protégé questionnaire

Please answer these questions to help us understand your needs and goals and make the best sponsor match for you.

1. What are your short- and long-term professional goals? Please be as specific as possible.
2. Do you feel you are well-positioned to achieve them? If not, why not? What roadblocks might hinder, or have hindered, your advancement? If you are well-positioned, what have been the most important events or people that have set you on a promising career path, and why were they important?
3. What training, responsibilities, experiences or opportunities do you believe you need to advance in your career?
4. What type of advocate do you think would be best for you? What experience or influence should they have, and how could that experience or influence benefit your career?
5. Your sponsor will use their experience and influence to help advance your career and expand your opportunities. What makes you a great potential protégé? Why do you think a sponsor would value working on your behalf?

[Ask sponsors to answer these questions to match them with protégés. Add, delete or modify questions based on your own firm needs.]

Sponsor questionnaire

1. Are you familiar with the firm's guidelines and expectations for a sponsor's role, including:
 - Developing a relationship that will allow you to understand the protégé's experience and abilities and his or her aspirations
 - Discussing how he or she can reach identified goals
 - Identifying training, assignments, promotions and other opportunities that will enhance his or her career options
 - Talking about the protégé with other firm partners or leaders to raise his or her visibility
 - Actively advocating for him or her in meetings when career decisions are being made

Yes No
2. The firm believes sponsorship will enhance our ability to identify and groom top talent for key leadership roles, goals that will improve our inclusiveness, productivity and profitability. We estimate that sponsors will spend _____ [to be determined by each firm] hours per _____ [week/month/year] on their sponsorship role. Are you prepared to invest this time in advocating on behalf of your protégé and be held accountable for enhancing his or her progress?
3. Do you have any reservations or foresee any roadblocks that could prevent you from taking this role? Please discuss.

[Use the protégé self-assessment to get a sense of a potential protégé's strengths, developmental needs and goals.]

Protégé self-assessment

I, _____ [your name], would like to be considered for the firm's sponsorship program. My current goal is to:

- Become an owner.
- Take on another leadership role.
- Remain at or near my current level but continue to enhance my abilities and add value to the firm.

If you would like to be partner or take on a leadership role, how soon do you see that happening?

Critical partner attributes: Self-assessment

The firm has identified these critical attributes that are necessary for advancement and success in a leadership role. For each attribute, please rate yourself using the following scale. In addition, describe how you have demonstrated your ability in each area.

1. I'm not currently on track to develop this skill.
2. I'm just beginning to develop this skill.
3. I've made some progress but have more work to do.
4. I've successfully demonstrated competence in this area.
5. I've demonstrated excellence.

1. **Client management.** Rating _____

I help manage and develop the business to ensure improved profitability in the short and long term. I manage and develop personal goals in line with firm objectives.

2. **Technical knowledge/firm systems.** Rating _____

I have thorough knowledge and understanding of an area of expertise that adds value to clients on a practical level. I can analyze problems and design and implement practical solutions. I have enhanced my own knowledge and training and used initiative and creativity to add value to the firm.

3. **Client service.** Rating _____

I take responsibility for client relationships. I work proactively to establish and maintain effective relationships and continually seek ways to add value. I manage projects for quality and profitability, maintain my team's excellence and show strong client communication skills.

4. **People development and teamwork.** Rating _____

I'm active in team development, sharing knowledge and engaging in ongoing personal career growth as an active mentor. I have the support of my team.

5. **Business development.** Rating _____

I identify client needs and opportunities to sell additional services and engage in effective marketing, business development and networking activities to drive sales. I'm involved in the firm's marketing efforts and have brought in new business. I promote the firm in our community.

[Ask sponsors and protégés to answer these questions at the end of the sponsorship term to gain useful insights for any necessary program improvements.]

Sponsorship program sponsor/protégé debriefing

Thank you for your participation in the sponsorship program. Please answer these questions to help us improve the program in the future.

1. Describe what you expected from the program and whether your expectations were met.
2. What would you change about the program? Can you describe any hurdles or disappointments you faced?
3. What were the most important factors in building a successful relationship with your sponsor or protégé? How long did this process take?
4. For protégés: How has the program changed your career at our firm? Have you already achieved important career goals? Which ones? How has the program positioned you to reach other goals?

5. For protégés: Do you feel you were able to take full advantage of the program and the opportunities it offers? If not, what changes to the program would you recommend?

6. For sponsors: Were you able to advocate successfully for your protégé? If not, what stood in your way and what changes would you recommend?

7. Do you have any other suggestions for changes to the program?

8. What advice would you have for future sponsors and protégés?

Women and sponsorship

Why is a formal sponsorship program important to women's advancement within a CPA firm? First, consider the level of gender diversity within firms today. Women make up 22% of CPA firm partners, according to the *2017 CPA Firm Gender Survey* that the AICPA Women's Initiatives Executive Committee conducted. In fact, women have accounted for less than one-quarter of CPA firm partners for many years, even though equal numbers of men and women have been entering the profession for decades.

Second, it is not an easy task for women to identify a good sponsor in every day interaction. For example, a good role model will not necessarily make a good sponsor. Powerful, meaningful sponsorship hinges on the sponsor actually having political capital and being willing to use it for the benefit of its protégé.

When firms consider what roadblocks may be preventing women's advancement, they should examine their access to the kinds of hurdles that can derail a professional's advancement toward a leadership role. They can include:

Perceptual filters — Firm leaders may assume that women, especially those who are on a flexible schedule, may not be interested in ownership. This can happen when a woman has relatively low visibility and firm leaders know little about her aspirations or abilities. Unfortunately, she may have low visibility because of incorrect assumptions made about her lack of aspirations.

Low visibility — "Women often are unconsciously left out of networking lunches and internal meetings with clients and prospects," according to *Organizational Strategies*, as well as other opportunities. "There are many reasons for this behavior, including comfort levels, assumptions about men's and women's career interests, lack of awareness, education, and failure to communicate or build relationships." On top of that, both firm leaders and the women themselves may not realize how "this silent, almost invisible behavior creates an uneven playing field."

Because it can offset these problems, "advocacy/sponsorship can sometimes make the difference between movement and complete stagnation," *Organizational Strategies* concludes.

For information about obtaining permission to use this material other than for personal use, please email mary.walter@aicpa-cima.com. All other rights are hereby expressly reserved. The information provided in this publication is general and may not apply in a specific situation. Legal advice should always be sought before taking any legal action based on the information provided. Although the information provided is believed to be correct as of the publication date, be advised that this is a developing area. The Association, AICPA and CIMA cannot accept responsibility for the consequences of its use for other purposes or other contexts.

The information and any opinions expressed in this material do not represent official pronouncements of or on behalf of the AICPA, CIMA or the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants. This material is offered with the understanding that it does not constitute legal, accounting, or other professional services or advice. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

The information contained herein is provided to assist the reader in developing a general understanding of the topics discussed but no attempt has been made to cover the subjects or issues exhaustively. While every attempt to verify the timeliness and accuracy of the information herein as of the date of issuance has been made, no guarantee is or can be given regarding the applicability of the information found within to any given set of facts and circumstances.



P: 888.777.7077 | F: 800.362.5066 | W: aicpa.org/womenlead | E: womensinitiatives@aicpa.org | [#AICPAWomenLead](https://twitter.com/AICPAWomenLead)

© 2018 Association of International Certified Professional Accountants. All rights reserved. AICPA and American Institute of CPAs are trademarks of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and are registered in the United States, the European Union and other countries. The Globe Design is a trademark owned by the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants and licensed to the AICPA. 1810-3390