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MICHELLE SILVERTHORN
Founder and CEO, Inclusion Nation

Find a Role Model, Get a Mentor — But You Won't Succeed Without a Sponsor

Sponsorship is on the diversity agenda. For women and minorities in the workplace, corporate America is finally recognizing that sponsors matter for workplace success. But as a diversity speaker, I often say this — recognizing it isn't enough.

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The challenge for employees, and their employers, is to understand that many women and minority employees naturally gravitate toward role models and mentors. But sponsors are what those employees need to succeed. What's the difference?

Meet Amaya. Amaya is a midlevel employee in a large corporation. And she's ready to move up to the next level. To get there, Amaya picked three people who she thinks could help her — Grace, Jake and Dave. Let's meet them. First up is Grace, a high-level leader whom Amaya looks up to. Amaya is impressed by Grace and what she does; she's stopped by Grace's office to talk, but Grace is never there — she constantly travels. And, if Amaya's being honest, what Grace does isn't really what Amaya wants to do.

And what about Grace? She doesn't necessarily have the time to invest in Amaya, even if she wanted to. There are many Amayas who come through her door, all looking for Grace to mentor them. Not only is Grace exhausted from the emotional labor, but she also has to keep hustling herself — there are so many of them and only one of her. All the burden falls on Grace. It's a demand that we put on women — especially women of color who might be the only minority woman in an executive position within the company.

Instead, Grace can be a role model for Amaya. Role models are crucial in the workplace. When you visualize who you want to be in the workplace, the role model is the one you look up to in order to see if there is space for you to be there. Amaya can admire Grace, but she'll need to cast her net wider than Grace to find the success she needs.

Next, meet Jake. Jake's a few years ahead of Amaya, working up the ladder himself. He and Amaya work well together. He's been in her shoes, so he gives her advice on what to do, where to go, what senior leaders to work with; he provides great feedback on her work, and introduces her to the right people who give her interesting assignments.

Jake has all the qualities of a great mentor. Mentors give because they like you — you remind them of them or they want to see you succeed. They advise you on where you go, what you need to do. Mentors will empathize with you. They will figure out what you want. They will teach you the unwritten rules of your workplace. They will help you navigate the organization. They will help you connect to the workplace, to bring you in, to make you feel less isolated.

But they're missing two things. First, they're not invested in you. If you falter, they'll give you advice on how to pick yourself up. But mentors have no skin in the game. Your failure — while disappointing — doesn't reflect badly on them. And second, mentors don't have the clout — and clout matters in a sponsoring relationship. Sponsors use their clout to advocate for and defend you. Mentors, on the other hand, are solely focused on your professional development. Their goal is to get you to that point where you are going to be sponsored. That's where someone else needs to step up — that's where a sponsor comes in.

FIND SUPPORT WITH A SPONSOR

This is Dave. Dave is a senior executive. He has access to the rooms that Amaya wants to be in. And crucially, Dave understands the challenges with building an inclusive workforce. Dave is willing to do that hard work, to step outside his comfort zone, and make the changes that he knows need to happen.

Dave is a sponsor. Why?

First, Dave has clout. He has a powerful voice at the table. And what he will do as a sponsor is use that voice to

champion Amaya and convince others that she deserves to get those stretch assignments, to meet those high-profile clients, and to be in the space her performance has shown she should be in.

Second, Dave believes in Amaya. He believes in what she can achieve. Because he believes in her, he is willing to put his own reputation on the line to support her. And if and when she stumbles, she knows that Dave will have her back.

Third, Dave invests in Amaya — not because he's a philanthropist, but because he expects return. Sponsorship is transactional. Dave wants to know what Amaya can give him for his own professional goals. What new skills is she bringing to the table that Dave doesn't have? Maybe Amaya has insight into a new product line that Dave doesn't understand. Maybe Amaya knows about a certain customer base that Dave does not. Maybe Amaya has a skill that Dave never acquired. Maybe Dave is seeking to increase his reputational capital in the company, or expand his internal network of support. Whatever it is, both Dave and Amaya have to identify it and work toward delivering it. Investment requires return. Sponsorship requires that, too.

So, look up to a role model. Get a mentor. But make sure you find a sponsor. Make sure you find someone invested in your success. That's how you enter the C-suite and stay there for good. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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