

How to find sponsors who'll accelerate your career

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for All Women

The
Women
at Work
Collection

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Meeting agenda

approx 90 mins

Member updates

15 mins

Watch video

8 mins

Icebreaker

10 mins

Activities

- Activity 1: Increase your odds of having effective sponsors
- Activity 2: Overcome affinity bias

25 mins

25 mins

One Action

3 mins

For Circles with only 60 mins, here are suggestions to shorten this agenda:

- Encourage members to watch the video in advance
- Spend 15 mins on activity 1 and activity 2

Getting started

Member updates

2 mins or less per member

15-20 mins depending on group size

Go around your Circle and share personal updates. As a general rule, personal updates should be brief and focus on big changes and important decisions in your life. (It's OK not to have one every month!) If you have a One Action update, share that with your Circle.

Watch video

8 mins

Icebreaker

10 mins

Take a few minutes to think about the following questions. Then, go around the room and share your answers (1 minute each).

- Has sponsorship helped you in your career? If so, how?



“My organization created a director of DEI position. Long story short, I was appointed to the role. My manager lobbied for me at the highest levels. Her advocacy helped transform my vision into a reality. We developed our relationship over time, and she came to believe that I had a vision and talents and aspirations that were in alignment with hers.”

Kathryn Edwards, Ph.D., retired director, city government and tech industry, California, USA (she/her)

Activity 1: Increase your odds of having effective sponsors

25 mins

You're less likely than colleagues who are men to be part of an old boys' network, so you need to find other ways to be visible to potential sponsors. To make the best use of your time, reach out to people you know who are already potential sponsors. This could include any senior leader you've worked and got along well with, someone who is already a mentor, or someone who has already advocated for you.

If you don't know many (or any) potential sponsors, consider going to more events specifically to find sponsors, including networking events and conferences, and make the most of events you attend during the normal course of business. Choose events strategically based on who else will be there.

Write it down (10 minutes): Make three lists.

1. Potential sponsors, including current mentors and people who have already advocated for you
2. Events where you can network, noting any senior leaders you plan to talk to at these events
3. Your existing sponsors

These three lists capture your pool of potential sponsors.

In pairs: Review your lists and brainstorm contexts where you can meet new sponsors.

Discuss as a group (15 minutes): Share stories about how you've met potential sponsors in the past. Has anyone in the group met a sponsor through a networking event? Or converted a mentor into a sponsor?

Activity 2: Overcome affinity bias

25 mins

Read aloud: Men tend to be naturally drawn to advocate for other men due to affinity bias, meaning that they perceive other men as similar and familiar.¹ This creates a problem for us when it comes to finding sponsors, since in most organizations, senior leaders (i.e., potential sponsors) are still mostly men.

As women, we need to think strategically to make affinity bias work in our favor. This ultimately involves building authentic relationships with our sponsors. But it starts by showing potential sponsors, including men at senior levels, that we share interests and experiences with them and are able to support their professional goals.

Whenever you're meeting a potential sponsor, research them in advance so you can start conversation topics about mutual interests—or better still, so you can share useful information or offer your professional help.

Write it down (5 minutes): Annotate your three lists from Activity 1 with any ideas you have for connecting with the people named on the lists. These notes can include types of help you can offer them, ways to show an informed interest in their work, or conversation starters that speak to mutual goals and interests.

Discuss as a group (20 minutes):

1. How have you connected with potential sponsors in the past? Have you offered help, strategically made your accomplishments visible to them, or connected over shared interests?
2. Talk through ways you can overcome affinity bias and gain sponsorship from senior leaders who don't share your identity, including men.

“I’ve found advocates by asking for something I want that will help both me and the company. For instance, when we’re working on a presentation, I’ll ask if I can deliver the bulk of it. The worst thing they can say is ‘no.’”

Sarah Lands Ramrup, senior lead, consumer goods industry, Missouri, USA (she/her)



One Action

3 mins

This week, take a few minutes to commit to either:

- reaching out to a potential sponsor to offer help as an initial step in fostering the relationship or
- reaching out to a current sponsor to renew the relationship or make a specific request to help you in your career

“I still remember when I came to the U.S., looking for that first opportunity. I was looking for someone to give me a chance. I found this woman who had just launched her coaching firm. I approached her and I said, ‘Just give me a chance. I want to help.’ And she believed in me. She gave me that chance.”

Laura Espriu, director of HR, digital media company, Lean In Network Leader, Washington, USA (she/her/ella)



Congratulations on a great meeting!

Endnotes

¹ Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook, “[Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks](#),” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 415–44; Lauren A. Rivera, “[Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms](#),” *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 6 (2012): 999–1022.

