

# SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMS AS A TALENT INVESTMENT



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Volumes of articles, and even books, have been written about sponsorship programs and how critical they are to the success of women and diverse lawyers in corporations and law firms. For the uninitiated, sponsorship programs are formal efforts by organizations to improve the retention and advancement of traditionally underrepresented groups within that organization. Promising, high-potential employees, or “protégés,” are matched with “sponsors”—leaders who have influence and reach within an organization. Sponsors play a critical role in the advancement of protégés and use their insights and connections to fill experiential gaps and open doors to opportunities. Sponsors are an organization’s respected masterminds who are capable of being queen- and king-makers. Research shows that in law firms, diverse lawyers (especially lawyers of color) are less likely to have a sponsor.

## SPONSORSHIP IS NOT MENTORSHIP

While “sponsorship” and “mentorship” are often used interchangeably, each has several key attributes that distinguish them from the other. Sponsors serve as champions for an individual, typically behind the closed doors of an organization’s most coveted boardrooms or offices. Sponsors take co-ownership of protégés’ career development and are willing to go out on a limb to advance the careers of their protégés. They show diverse employees that the organization believes in their potential and is invested in their success. More importantly, they provide access to leadership that is necessary for advancement. In contrast, mentors typically focus on developing skills or performance for an individual’s current role.

## ATTRIBUTES OF PROTÉGÉS

Protégés demonstrate intellectual curiosity, have a passion to succeed, and actively seek opportunities to network. They solicit and are open to incorporating feedback—recognizing the effort and risk sponsors take in promoting their development—and are willing to be the “captains of their careers.” Protégés must be able to: leverage their sponsors’ coaching abilities and build relationships; initiate contact with their sponsors; establish regular check-ins to provide progress updates; and serve as a resource or sounding board to provide useful perspectives for their sponsors.

## INVEST

After researching best practices from other successful sponsorship programs, Ballard Spahr’s Diversity Council and professional development professionals collaborated to develop INVEST, the firm’s first sponsorship program. This article will share the framework for INVEST and lessons learned from its pilot launch.

## THE FRAMEWORK

### Objective

A law firm must first determine the target audience and objectives for its sponsorship program. This can be a difficult and controversial discussion. Some law firms and corporations choose to target women or professionals of color only, while others open it up to everyone in the organization. Some choose those who are already on a high-potential or leadership track, and others are more deliberate in selecting employees who may not be readily seen or noticed by management. A law firm must follow the path

that makes the most sense given its existing programs and individual culture.

In forming our objective and target audience, Ballard acknowledged the historical underrepresentation of diverse voices in the legal profession, both generally and specifically at the partnership level. We decided that our sponsorship program would focus on providing career development opportunities that would position diverse lawyers to grow and develop within the firm. INVEST would be part of our firm-wide commitment to the successful integration and professional development of all lawyers and support our goals of recruiting, retaining, and advancing diverse talent. We encouraged those who have overcome one or more substantial obstacles in pursuing a legal career; come from a disadvantaged background; and/or are part of a diverse community that is underrepresented in the Am Law 200 (gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, veteran status, etc.) to apply.

### **Tenure**

We realized quickly that not everyone is ready for a sponsor or even needs one. Eligible associates should: have a good initial handle on the practice of law, exhibit mastery in at least some of the basic technical aspects of their practice, and be in excellent standing at the firm.

For Ballard, this meant finding the sweet spot in terms of tenure. We decided that fourth- to sixth-year associates were our target group. At least two years as an associate at the firm was also deemed an important consideration.

### **Selecting Protégés and Sponsors**

Law firms need to decide whether to select associates or have a process by which associates apply for consideration. The same must be determined for partners who intend to serve as sponsors. Keep in mind that associates must be clear about what the sponsorship program is and what is expected of them. If they are looking for guidance and advice that a mentor can provide, then the sponsorship program is not right for them. Partners also must

be willing to put themselves out on a limb for an associate; they are signing up to be accountable and responsible for someone else's success.

Ballard decided on an application process whereby we asked associates to describe how they personally met the firm's objective for INVEST and their goals for the sponsorship program. We realized that we could not effectively choose sponsors until we chose the protégés and then determined which partners could fulfill the goals of each protégé.

### **Matching**

This is a critical element to a successful sponsorship program—the match has to be right. A firm should decide whether protégés and sponsors should be matched by practice area, office, and demographic-based affinity. Cross-practice area matching may seem counterintuitive, but it has proven to be effective in most of our matches. When we asked our protégés and sponsors about the cross-practice match, most found it helpful to work outside their traditional practice group and gain a broader opportunity for exposure. When possible, an office match is most effective, but national practices may not require an office match. Finally, we should not ignore studies that show that those who hold the most power, most influence, and greatest access make the best sponsors. I will leave it to the reader to determine which demographic profile(s) meet these criteria.

### **Accountability and Measurements of Success**

Keeping the protégés and sponsors on task and focusing on goals in the midst of a busy practice can be daunting. Sponsorship programs should include accountability metrics and ongoing measurements of success. At Ballard Spahr, we assigned each protégé and sponsor pair an accountability partner who conducted individual and joint check-ins and provided guidance as needed.

Objective measurements include the retention rate of protégés, the number of protégés promoted to higher positions, and exposure to learning opportunities with partners and clients. Subjective measures

include career growth, increased career satisfaction, and cultivation of a positive affinity with the firm. Potential benefits for sponsors include development of diverse talent, increased career satisfaction gained by providing opportunities to make a difference in terms of diversity and inclusion, and demonstrating leadership skills and behaviors.

We believe benefits to the firm include the opportunity to develop a firm-wide culture of sponsorship, as this demonstrates the firm's commitment to engagement, development, and retention of diverse talent.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Ballard Spahr is halfway through our INVEST pilot program, and we already have learned some important lessons that will help determine how we will improve our next iteration of the program. It is important to clearly define the difference between sponsors and mentors when accepting applications or choosing protégés and sponsors. Some associates will be better suited for a mentoring program versus a sponsorship program, and associates must understand that their stated goals must be matched for sponsorship. It is important that sponsors attend pre-orientation to ensure they understand their role in the sponsorship relationship and are prepared to accept accountability for the success of the protégé.

Making a successful protégé–sponsor match means ensuring that the applications are detailed enough to fully understand the goals of the protégé. Matches should be based primarily on a partner's ability to meet the needs of and open doors for the associate.

INVEST is evolving at Ballard Spahr, and we are refining and improving the program regularly. This includes adding elements related to pairs working to solve firm management challenges, engaging clients as part of our sponsorship program, and investing in our talent and retention efforts to shape the future of our firm. 🌱