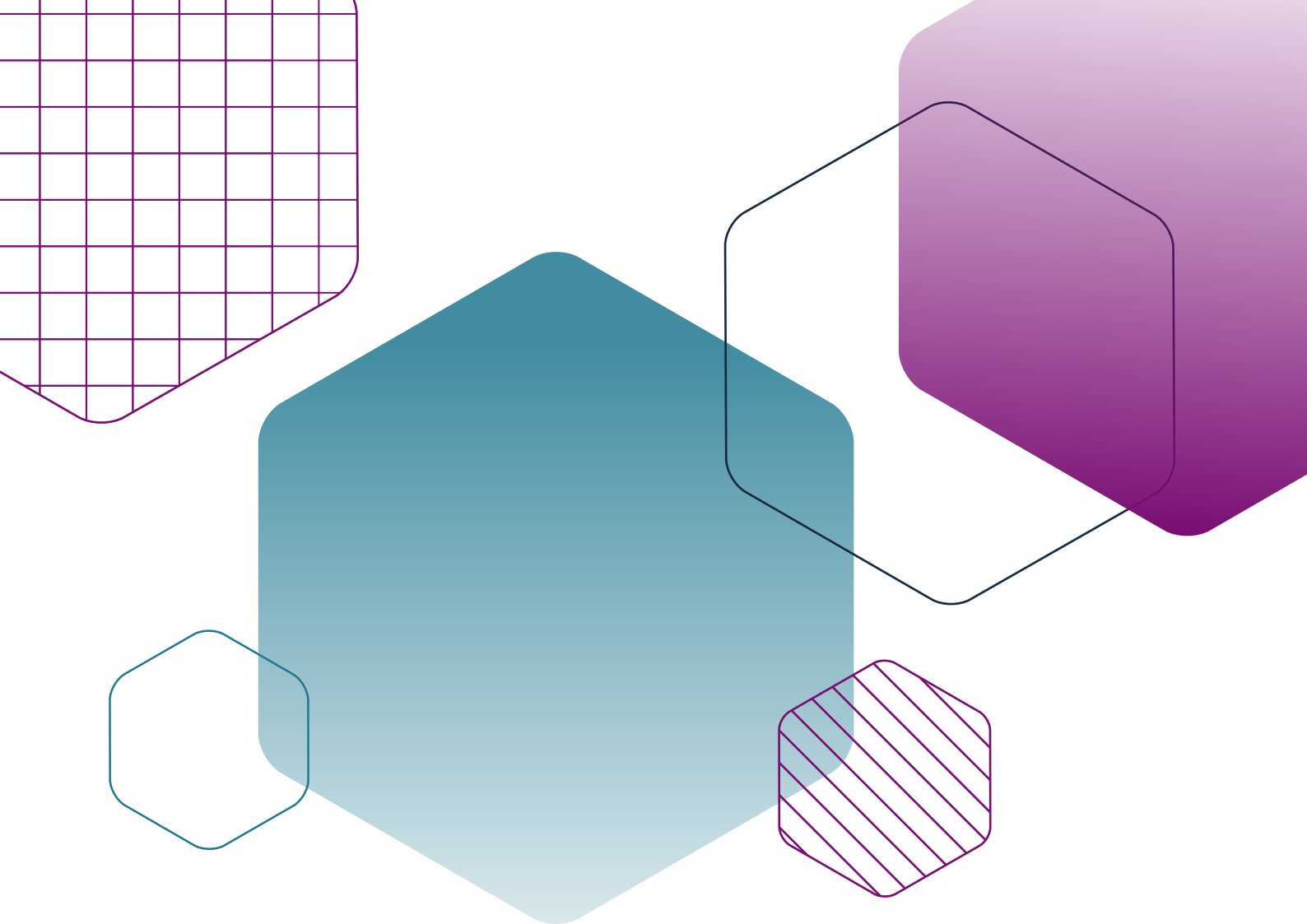




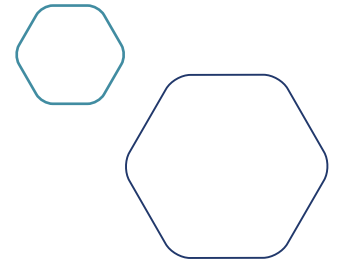
Making Sponsorship Work: Strengthening Executive Progression

Professor Elena Doldor and Dr Madeleine Wyatt

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Foreword



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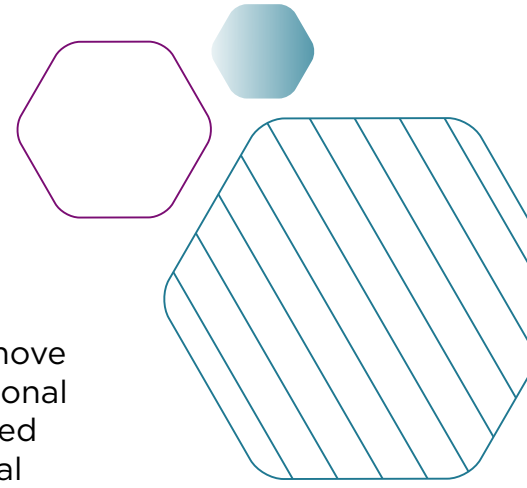
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Sponsorship has long been recognised as a key driver for promotion and advancement, yet the mechanics of sponsorship and access to effective sponsorship relationships can be uneven, particularly for underrepresented groups in senior leadership, such as women and ethnic minorities.

The FTSE Women Leaders Review's data-led approach has allowed for an evidence-based understanding of women's positions across the top of UK businesses, and through a combination of transparency and shared best practice, has been instrumental in improving gender balance on boards and in leadership. The Review's annual report data reveals that considerable progress has been achieved in women's representation on FTSE 350 boards, moving from 9.5% women on boards in 2011 to 43% today. However, there is still more to do to improve women's representation in leadership roles, where women currently hold 36% of positions. More specifically, women hold just 15% of FTSE 350 executive director roles, and representation remains particularly low among chairs (17%), CEOs (8%) and finance directors (21%). These figures suggest that improving gender balance in senior leadership requires more than a focus on numerical representation and formal processes alone. It requires a deeper understanding of how leadership progression actually works in practice.

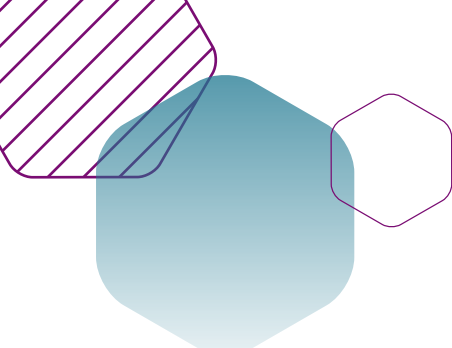
This report examines how leadership promotions work in practice, and the role sponsorship plays in shaping who progresses. It sheds light on the often-hidden dynamics through which opportunities and advocacy are distributed in organisations. When sponsorship is working effectively, it plays a critical role in accelerating development, building confidence and ensuring individuals are recognised for the right opportunities. Effective and trusted sponsorship arrangements benefit both the sponsors and those being sponsored, helping to drive leadership outcomes while strengthening organisational leadership capability. The challenge for organisations is to consistently and equitably apply it across the business.



The research points to the opportunity for organisations to move from informal, ad hoc sponsorship to something more intentional and consistent. By making sponsorship more visible, structured and supported, businesses can help ensure that high-potential talent is recognised and championed in a way that is both fairer and more effective. This can have the effect of strengthening leadership pipelines and improving decision-making at the very top of organisations. The report offers practical insights on how businesses can make advancement processes clearer, more inclusive and teachable, by increasing transparency around promotion dynamics, professionalising sponsorship capability and improving sponsorship quality.

Sharing best practice and learnings is a key element of enabling businesses to achieve fairer outcomes and access the full breadth of talent and capabilities, particularly in leadership. The insights presented here challenge business to think more deliberately about how opportunities and advocacy are distributed across leadership pipelines.

A huge thank you to Professor Elena Doldor of Queen Mary University of London and Dr Madeleine Wyatt of King's College London for sharing their research insights into sponsorship dynamics and realities. Equipped with these valuable insights, business can build executive leadership pipelines that are more transparent, inclusive and effective.



Executive Summary

This report examines how leadership promotions work in practice and the role sponsorship plays in shaping who progresses. Drawing on research into senior leadership promotions in a global consulting firm, including 91 interviews with senior leaders, human resources (HR), talent, diversity and inclusion (D&I) professionals and promotion candidates, we found that **leadership progression is shaped by two competing promotion scripts**: a formal script focused on codified criteria, performance and process consistency; a political script shaped by reputation, informal judgement, influence, visibility and sponsorship. While both scripts are important, the political script often carries greater weight at senior levels while remaining less visible and harder to decode.

Sponsorship emerged as the critical mechanism through which individuals learned the promotion scripts and how advancement worked in practice.

Sponsors are supposed to do more than mentor; they should create opportunities, provide candid strategic feedback, advocate behind closed doors, build visibility, broker access to influential networks and stretch opportunities. However, we found that **sponsorship relationships vary significantly in quality and effectiveness.**

Despite significant progress in FTSE 350 board representation, executive leadership pipelines below board level remain uneven and poorly understood. Women and ethnic minority professionals continue to experience slower progression into senior leadership roles, often describing promotion processes as opaque, inconsistent and difficult to navigate.

We identify four sponsorship archetypes – assigned, resistant, shallow, reciprocal – that shape how individuals understand and navigate advancement. Reciprocal sponsorship relationships, characterised by mutual trust, shared investment, active advocacy, candid feedback and political support, were associated with the strongest ability to navigate both formal and political promotion scripts. They also had the highest promotion rates for protégés. Yet only a quarter of the sponsorship relationships fell into this category. Our findings suggest that **the unwritten rules of sponsorship – what effective sponsorship looks like and how these relationships develop – remain insufficiently clear to many would-be protégés who are seeking leadership promotion and, at times, to sponsors themselves.**

Our findings also show that **gender- and ethnicity-related barriers affect the development of sponsorship relationships, not only in accessing sponsors but in building the mutual trust, active advocacy and political support associated with reciprocal sponsorship.** Behaviours that aid the development of these relationships – such as ambition, visibility, self-promotion, confidence and authenticity – may be less accessible or carry greater relational and reputational risks for underrepresented talent.

Building more effective and equitable sponsorship requires coordinated action across multiple organisational actors. We, therefore, make practical recommendations for four groups with the greatest influence over sponsorship and advancement outcomes.

We recommend that **CEOs and executive committees:**

- align formal and political promotion scripts more transparently;
- treat sponsorship as a strategic leadership responsibility; and
- reward inclusive sponsorship behaviours.

We recommend that **HR, talent and D&I teams:**

- move beyond sponsor matching and formal programmes alone;
- build sponsorship capability across the organisation; and
- focus on sponsorship quality, advocacy and progression outcomes rather than participation metrics.

We recommend that **sponsors:**

- teach protégés the unwritten rules of promotions and foster political skill;
- provide candid, strategic feedback;
- actively advocate for protégés in promotion and talent discussions;
- create meaningful stretch opportunities;
- sponsor more inclusively across difference; and
- be frank when sponsorship isn't working.

We recommend that **protégés:**

- engage with both formal and political promotion dynamics;
- balance delivery with visibility;
- intentionally build reciprocal sponsorship relationships; and
- proactively seek strategic feedback on how they are perceived and what may be limiting progression.

Ultimately, organisations cannot remove politics from executive promotion or fully formalise sponsorship, which inherently depends on discretionary judgement, personal relationships and willingness to invest political capital to support someone's leadership progression. However, **organisations can make advancement processes more principled, inclusive and teachable by increasing transparency around promotion dynamics, professionalising sponsorship capability and improving sponsorship quality.**

The Leadership Challenge: Executive Progression Gaps

Progress on FTSE 350 boards has been substantial in recent years, with transformational change achieved:



At the leadership level (executive committee members and direct reports), progress continues to be made.

With 36% women in leadership, the FTSE 350 still falls short of the 40% target for women in leadership.

Despite sustained investment in formal promotion processes and diversity commitments, women and ethnic minority professionals continue to experience slower progression into senior leadership roles.

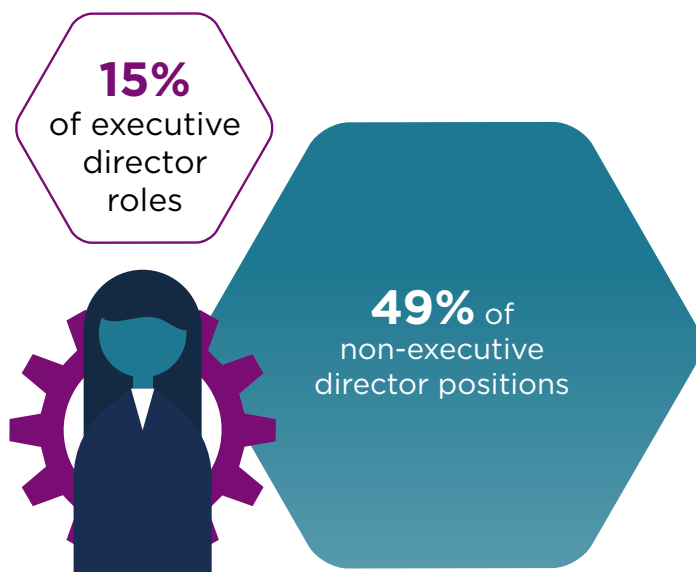
Many high potential leaders – particularly underrepresented talent – describe senior promotion decisions as opaque, inconsistent and difficult to navigate. While organisations often articulate formal criteria for advancement, employees frequently experience uncertainty about what drives progression in practice and how leadership potential is assessed at the most senior levels.

At the same time, sponsorship has increasingly been heralded as a key mechanism for strengthening leadership pipelines and improving diversity outcomes. Yet, women and ethnic minorities are frequently over-mentored and under-sponsored.

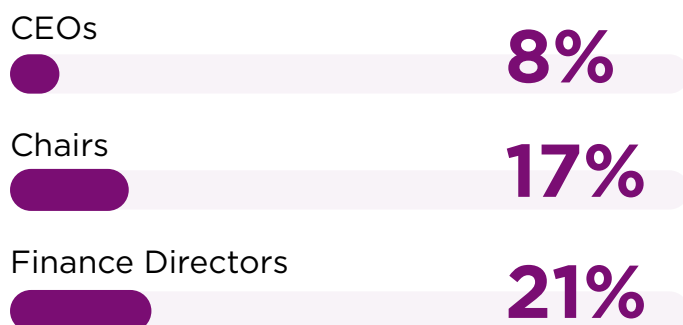
As FTSE organisations seek to improve diversity in their leadership pipelines, this raises two critical questions:

- How do leadership promotion decisions actually work in practice?
- What role does sponsorship play in shaping who progresses?

Women hold:



Across key leadership roles (CEO, chair and finance directors) **women** account for:



This highlights how much progress is still needed at the executive level.

Our Study

Our recently published study¹ examined senior leadership promotions in a global Big Four firm. Initial analysis of quantitative **HR data covering 4,174 consultants** identified persistent promotion disparities affecting women and ethnic minority talent. To understand how these disparities arise, we examined how promotions to partner operate in practice.

We conducted **91 in-depth interviews** with key promotion stakeholders across three groups:



Partner-level senior leaders involved in evaluating and advocating for promotion candidates – including partners acting as sponsors



HR, talent and D&I professionals responsible for designing and overseeing promotion processes



Director-level promotion candidates from underrepresented backgrounds in terms of gender and ethnicity, seeking senior-level progression to partner – including protégés within sponsorship relationships

We also analysed **12 formal promotion documents** (HR guidelines, talent initiatives, internal webpages).

This multi-perspective research design captures both those who shape promotion decisions to top leadership roles and those who are subject to them. Crucially, we used **matched interviews between senior sponsors and their protégés** to allow direct comparison between how sponsorship relationships are perceived by each party, providing **rare insight into where sponsorship expectations align or diverge**.

Our analysis focused on promotion scripts (what it takes to get promoted according to different stakeholders), how these are enacted in practice and what role sponsors played. This approach provides unique visibility into:

- How promotion systems are formally designed versus how decisions are made;
- How sponsorship relationships function in practice to shape progression outcomes; and
- Why formal D&I initiatives do not always translate into equitable promotion outcomes.

To preserve confidentiality, interviewees have been given pseudonyms. For confidentiality reasons, we also use a collective label for ethnic minority participants. We recognise that experiences differ across ethnic groups and intersecting identities. The use of a collective label should not be taken to imply a uniform experience among leaders of different ethnic minority backgrounds.

While this study was conducted within a Big Four professional services firm, many of the sponsorship and promotion dynamics identified align closely with broader research on executive progression across corporate environments, including our prior work with FTSE organisations. These findings are, therefore, not sector-specific conclusions, but insights into promotion processes likely to resonate across many FTSE 350 contexts.

¹Doldor, E., Wyatt, M. & Atewologun, D. (2026) '[Polyphonic Career Scripting: Political and Relational Dynamics in the Construction of Promotion Norms](#)', *Academy of Management Journal*.

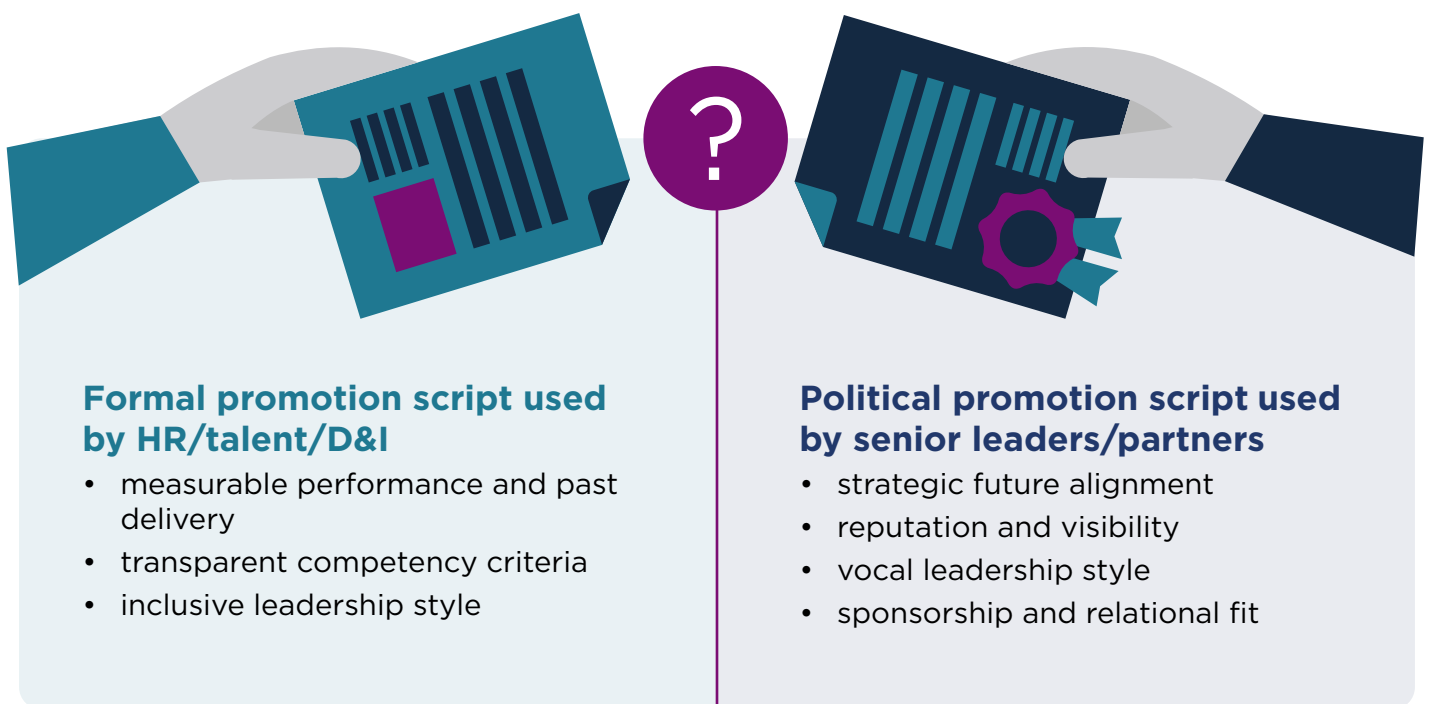
We are grateful to Dr Doyin Atewologun (Delta Leadership & Inclusion Consulting) for her contribution to the original research.

How Promotions Really Work

Promotion scripts are the criteria and assumptions about what ‘good leadership’ or ‘promotion readiness’ look like – what counts as merit. We found two competing scripts (Figure 1) driving advancement, each reflecting partially different definitions of merit despite some commonalities:

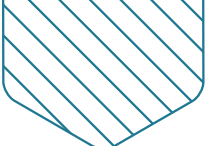
- a **formal script** (typically articulated by HR) that codified what good looks like and provided process discipline; and
- a **political script** (used by senior leaders) that built on the formal script selectively but went beyond it and relied on relationship-based judgements, contextual discretion and influence beyond formal promotion criteria.

Figure 1 – Competing promotion scripts: two ideas of merit



Both promotion scripts matter, but the political script was often decisive at the top. While the formal script is transparent, the political script is learned through proximity to power and sponsorship, creating unequal access to advancement. The result is a **performance-politics gap**: high performers or high-potential individuals can still fail to progress if they lack visibility into the unwritten rules, while less capable individuals with strong sponsorship can progress more readily.

Thus, promotion decisions are shaped by two competing scripts, rather than a single set of criteria. HR defines what ‘good’ looks like, senior leaders interpret these expectations through their own lenses, and individuals seeking promotion navigate between the two scripts. The outcome is not a single, stable leadership standard but a moving, negotiated target.



Without a singular definition of merit, different promotion stakeholders applied different expectations, some explicit and measurable, others implicit and relational. Candidates for senior leadership, therefore, received inconsistent signals about the behaviours and positioning required for promotion. Even highly capable leaders aspiring to senior roles often lacked clear insight into ‘what it takes’ and described senior promotions as ‘lacking transparent information’, being ‘opaque’ and ‘cloaked in mystery’. Under these conditions, **progression depends not only on leadership capability but also on the ability of aspiring leaders to interpret and respond to competing promotion scripts.**

‘There’s probably a secret list out there that says: “You need to do all these other things to make partner.” I don’t know. I’m trying to unlock that secret list.’

– Rohan
promotion candidate/protégé
ethnic minority male

What do we mean by ‘political’ in this report?

In this report, the term ‘political’ refers to the relationship-based and informal dimensions of leadership progression – including visibility, sponsorship, coalition-building and stakeholder management – rather than manipulative or self-serving manoeuvring. Leadership development practice and research consistently highlights the importance of constructive political skill to build relationships, navigate informal organisational dynamics, align agendas and mobilise support effectively and ethically.

Why Sponsorship is Critical

If leadership promotions operate through both formal and political promotion scripts, sponsorship becomes critical because it is one of the primary mechanisms through which the political script is learned, interpreted and enacted in practice.

While formal promotion criteria were generally visible, the political script – how reputations are built, influence operates and promotion support is mobilised – was far less transparent and more unevenly accessible. Sponsorship, therefore, shaped not only who received opportunities and advocacy but also who gained access to the unwritten rules of advancement.

Formal promotion scripts provided structure, codified criteria and process discipline. However, senior leaders often interpreted and enacted these scripts flexibly through informal sponsorship relationships, political judgement and discretionary advocacy. Sponsorship was, therefore, not simply layered on top of formal processes; at times, it operated in tension with them, including when sponsors flexed formal processes while advocating for protégés.

For instance, one HR professional spoke about trying to get senior leaders ‘to be consistent’ in how they assess leadership talent. In contrast, a senior partner described formal HR/talent processes as ‘bonkers, value-destroying activities in modern corporate life... a waste of time and money’ meant to create a ‘contrived security blanket’ and ‘the allure of objectivity’.

Senior partners and HR leads actively shaped promotion pipelines in ways that produced differing degrees of transparency:

‘The [promotion] list is quite subtle. You don’t necessarily know when; we’re not transparent like HR. We’re transparent that “you’re in our mind’s eye”, but we’re not transparent about the timing.’

– Dan
senior partner/sponsor, white male

‘I have [promotion candidates] all on a spreadsheet and every quarter I send that information out. Then I’m not too sure about what happens. Partners make amendments; I don’t know what their thought process is.’

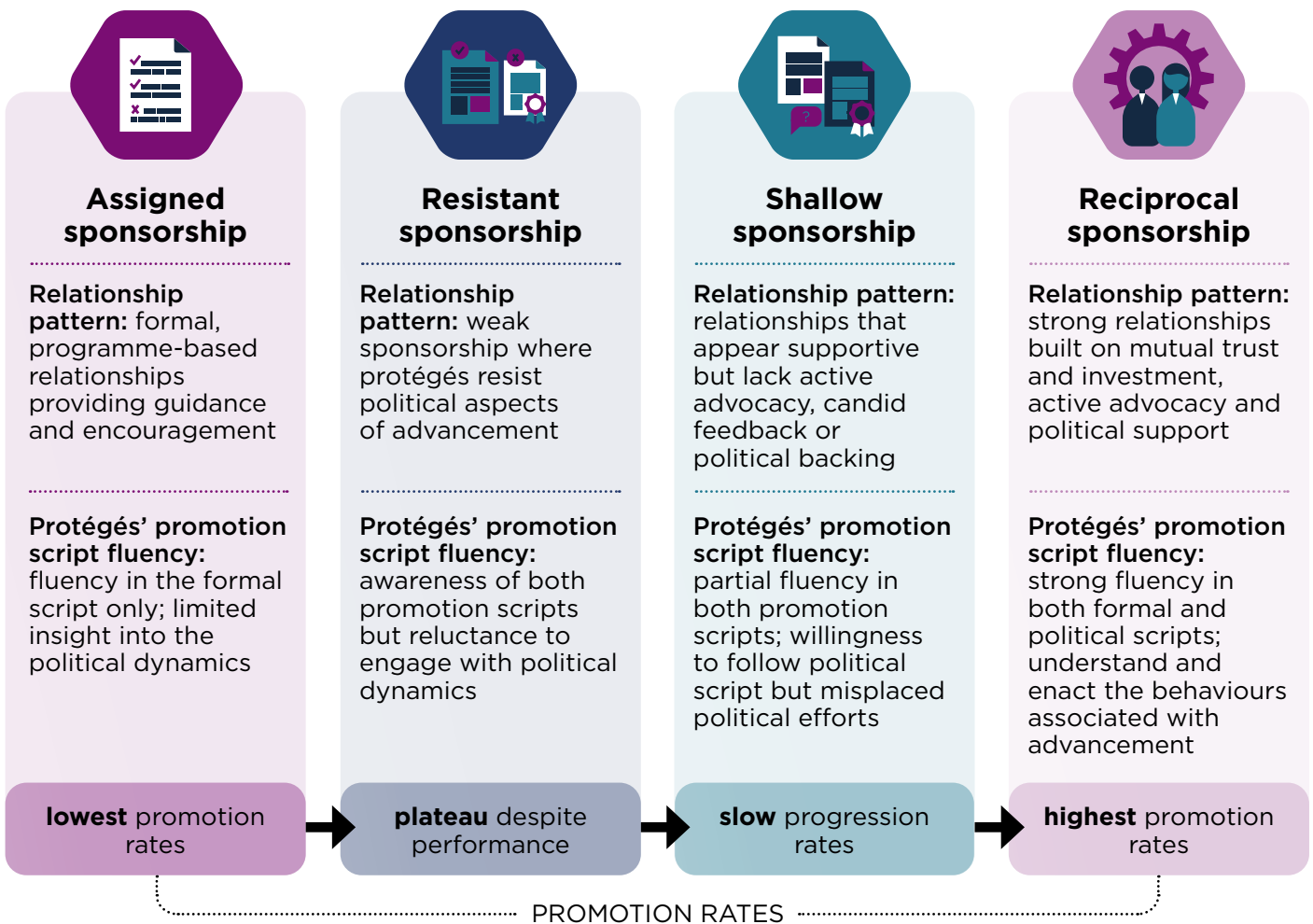
– Emily
HR professional, white female

In the push-and-pull between formal and political promotion scripts, unequal access to sponsorship produced different levels of ‘script fluency’ among those seeking promotion. While some gained deep insight into how advancement operated in practice and active support, others received only partial guidance, weak advocacy or little meaningful sponsorship support.

Sponsorship Archetypes

We identified four sponsorship archetypes (Figure 2) reflecting different ways sponsorship was enacted between sponsors and protégés. The archetypes below show how different sponsorship dynamics shaped promotion script fluency and advancement outcomes. Each archetype shaped how protégés experienced promotion, including the advice, opportunities, advocacy and exposure to the formal and political scripts shaping advancement. The archetypes also influenced protégés' ability to understand and navigate these scripts. Together, they help explain why access to sponsors alone does not guarantee advancement outcomes and why sponsorship quality matters.

Figure 2 – Sponsorship archetypes and promotion script fluency



Importantly, the findings highlight the organisational risks to leadership pipelines when effective sponsorship is weak, uneven or missing altogether.

‘I had really good sponsors up until my director promotion, who gave me space and permission to grow and stretch. Since that promotion, I didn’t feel the sponsorship. [...] I have resigned from [the firm] recently. The lack of sponsorship is the main reason I’m moving elsewhere. When I did resign, they tried to convince me to stay; they said: “You’ve been on the partner track throughout.” No one had ever said that to me. By then, I didn’t really believe them.’

– Naomi

promotion candidate/protégé, ethnic minority female

Assigned Sponsorship



Definition

Formally assigned sponsorship that creates access to senior leaders but with limited political advocacy.

Sponsorship dynamic

- Relationships often start through formal talent, leadership or D&I programmes but fail to develop depth.
- Sponsors provide guidance, encouragement and career advice – but sometimes mistake mentorship for sponsorship.
- Sponsors often lack proximity to promotion decisions or influence within the protégé's business area.
- Relationships frequently remain structured and procedural rather than personal and politically active.

'We try to ensure that everyone who is about three years away [from partnership] has a named sponsor. Does that always follow through? I'm not sure. Sponsorship happens more naturally or organically for others. Education around sponsorship needs to continue because people think it's still a bit of mentoring, and it's not. It's something much more active.'

– Jane

HR professional, white female

Promotion impact

- Builds fluency in the formal promotion script, including promotion criteria and leadership expectations.
- Provides limited access to the political script and unwritten rules of advancement.
- Protégés gain exposure to senior perspectives without meaningful advocacy, visibility or sponsorship capital.

Organisational risk

- Organisations mistake sponsor access for effective sponsorship or overestimate the impact of formal matching programmes.
- Senior leaders conflate sponsorship with mentoring.

CASE EXAMPLE:

'Where is the sponsorship?'

Fayola (promotion candidate/protégé, ethnic minority female) welcomed the opportunity to work with a sponsor through a formal diversity programme. Yet despite receiving useful advice, she lacked visible advocacy:

'I got my sponsor because of an initiative in the firm to allocate sponsors to each of the Black colleagues to help them through the process. But I feel like it's more like mentorship, because I don't see the active side... it feels like you're almost told to just figure it out.'

When promotion time came, Fayola felt 'blindsided' by the senior partners' opaque political manoeuvring, as they repeatedly reshaped and reconsidered her commercial case behind the scenes. Although initially told she was 'on track' and formally in the promotion pipeline, she was later informed there was 'no commercial case' to support her advancement, only for the decision to reverse weeks later when alternative client portfolios were suddenly proposed. Her experience illustrates how protégés in this sponsorship dynamic struggled to interpret shifting leadership priorities and informal political negotiations, leaving them uncertain about how promotion decisions were made and vulnerable to being repositioned within broader talent pipeline manoeuvring.

Resistant Sponsorship



Definition

Weak sponsorship relationships where protégés recognise the politics of promotions but resist engaging fully with them.

Sponsorship dynamic

- Sponsors provide guidance and some career support but hesitate to risk political capital or provide active advocacy.
- Sponsors often soften difficult political feedback or avoid discussing reputation and promotability directly.
- Relationships lack mutual trust or shared investment.
- Protégés become uncomfortable with self-promotion, visibility management, lobbying or influence-building.
- Inclusion is overlooked: gender and ethnicity-related career obstacles remain largely unshared between sponsors and protégés.

Promotion impact

- Develops awareness of both the formal and political promotion scripts.
- Protégés understand that visibility, sponsorship and influence matter for advancement.
- This awareness rarely translates into political engagement or behavioural adaptation.
- Script fluency remains constrained: protégés recognise the political dynamics of promotion but remain reluctant to enact them.

Organisational risk

- High-performing professionals become disillusioned with sponsorship and organisational politics, increasing disengagement and attrition risk in leadership pipelines.
- Female protégés appeared disproportionately represented in this group, suggesting that this sponsorship dynamic may contribute to female leadership attrition.

CASE EXAMPLE:

‘Losing faith’

Cheryl (promotion candidate/protégé, white female) had built strong relationships with senior partners and was widely regarded as a high performing director. However, her experience of the promotion process left her deeply disillusioned. Faced with a panel that expected her to assertively defend her achievements, Cheryl recalls feeling ‘confused’ and ‘very upset’:

‘I have been the highest performing person in the peer group for almost my entire career, 14 years. But in the promotion panel, I did horribly. It came down to being able to talk about my work and my contribution in a self-promotional way, which to me was completely uncomfortable. I hate it. [...] They said: “On paper you’re a 5 out of 5, but on the interview, we couldn’t give you a 1.”’

The experience left her questioning whether she wanted promotion at all. Noting that she hadn’t received coaching before the panel because her sponsors assumed she would ‘coast through’, Cheryl’s sponsorship support intensified only after the ‘crash and burn’ panel. She was given coaching and the opportunity to present a second time but had already come to view the political demands of advancement as fundamentally inconsistent with her values. When eventually offered the promotion, she turned it down. Peter, her sponsor (white male) said:

‘She’s one of our very high-performing directors on partner track, so, by definition, she has been identified as being very strong. But she’s decided that the process itself is such that she doesn’t want to go through it... she’s withdrawn.’

Unbeknown to her sponsor, Cheryl was considering leaving the firm altogether at the time of our interview.

Shallow Sponsorship



Definition

Sponsorship that appears supportive on the surface but lacks meaningful advocacy and consistent political backing.

Sponsorship dynamic

- Sponsors provide encouragement, advice and occasional opportunities.
- Protégés are willing to engage with the political script and believe they have stronger sponsorship than actually exists.
- Sponsors avoid risking reputation or political capital on behalf of protégés.
- Relationships often involve filtered feedback, weak advocacy or politically ineffective visibility opportunities.
- Inclusion is overlooked: gender and ethnicity-related career obstacles remain largely unshared between sponsors and protégés.
- In some cases, relationships become extractive, benefiting the sponsor more than the protégé.

Promotion impact

- Develops partial fluency in both the formal and political promotion scripts.
- Protégés recognise that advancement depends on visibility, relationships and influence as well as performance.
- However, exposure to the political script remains fragmented and inconsistent.
- Protégés may increase visibility without building the influential advocacy needed for progression.

Organisational risk

- Organisations may create the appearance of sponsorship without delivering its substantive benefits, leading to confusion, stalled progression and misplaced political effort.
- Ethnic minority male protégés were disproportionately represented in this group, suggesting that this sponsorship dynamic may contribute to ethnic minority leadership attrition.

CASE EXAMPLE:

‘Merrily he networks wrong’

Marcus (promotion candidate/protégé, ethnic minority male) invested heavily in speaking engagements, media exposure and firm initiatives, believing these activities would broaden his networks to strengthen his promotion prospects:

‘My external network started growing and I started inviting partners to come with me to events. People just start seeing you in a different light. You are speaking at conferences, you are mentioned in the newspaper, HR [is] calling to ask if you can speak at this event. It’s like you are the poster boy.’

Yet his sponsor, Ravi (partner/sponsor, ethnic minority male), recognised that Marcus lacked the ‘groundswell’ of support among the partners in his own service line, most likely to influence promotion decisions:

‘He has one or two partners that he has formed connections with, people like [Jane] who is big on D&I and I’ve got the impression he thought that was sufficient. He’s got one person in this entire process. You need to get to know partners in your own group. He just wasn’t doing the networking.’

Rather than correcting these assumptions or facilitating access to more influential networks, Ravi left Marcus to continue pursuing a strategy that generated visibility but little internal advocacy. Marcus remained unaware that he was building profile without building the coalition needed for promotion.

CASE EXAMPLE:

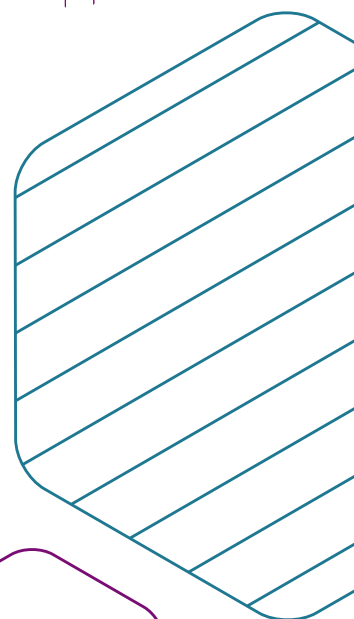
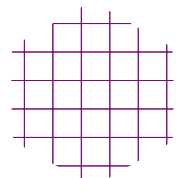
‘A different kind of bond’

Tunde (promotion candidate/protégé, ethnic minority male) described his relationship with his sponsor, Simon (partner/sponsor, white male), as more than a professional connection. Having worked together for years, Tunde believed they had built ‘a different kind of bond’. However, Simon openly acknowledged using Tunde’s strong performance to support the promotion of another protégé, Connor, saying: ‘It suited Connor to get credit for the sales... That’s been helpful to him getting promoted.’ While Connor’s profile grew, Tunde became unknowingly viewed as someone who supported opportunities rather than created them.

As Simon pointed out:

‘Tunde is still not seen as the person who sells and creates new revenue. He is seen more as the person coming in and assisting already sold pieces of work... It’s damaging.’

Ironically, the relationship Tunde believed would advance his career ended up strengthening somebody else’s.



Reciprocal Sponsorship

Definition

Strong sponsorship relationships characterised by mutual trust, shared investment, active advocacy, candid feedback and political support for upwards progression.



Sponsorship dynamic

- Sponsors actively create opportunities, advocate for protégés and use political capital to support advancement.
- Protégés recognise sponsorship as a reciprocal relationship and contribute to shared strategic goals.
- Relationships are built on mutual trust, affinity, candid feedback, reciprocity and mutual accountability.
- Sponsors are willing to risk credibility and influence, while protégés work to justify and protect that investment.
- Sponsors are inclusive: gender and ethnicity-related career obstacles are openly understood and actively navigated together.
- Emotional bonds are strong, especially in male protégé-sponsor relationships.

‘I think you only advocate for a person if you’ve got some sort of symbiotic link. Usually that’ll be because their success is quite interrelated with your success. That’s not selfish – it’s human nature that you will advocate for the people whose careers are most interrelated with yours.’

– Rebecca
promotion candidate/protégé,
white female

Promotion impact

- Develops protégés’ fluency in both the formal and political promotion script.
- Protégés learn how promotion decisions operate in practice and develop constructive political skill to navigate them, including influence-building and reputation management.
- Sponsors actively shape opportunities, talent discussions and promotion outcomes through advocacy and informal influence.
- Protégés gain access to influential networks, strategic opportunities and candid political insight.

‘The last six years of my career I absolutely owe it all to James, completely and utterly. He helped me accelerate my development in a way that is unimaginable quite frankly.’

– Nick
promotion candidate/protégé,
ethnic minority male

Organisational risk

- Access to reciprocal sponsorship is highly effective for those who have it, but it is often uneven, concentrating advancement opportunities among those already closest to influential networks and senior advocates.
- Stronger emotional bonds observed between male protégés and their male sponsors suggest that this relationship building mechanism is less readily accessible to women in the pipeline.

CASE EXAMPLE:

‘Taking hits’

Both Arjun (promotion candidate/protégé, ethnic minority male) and his sponsor, Tim (partner/sponsor, white male), described a sponsorship relationship built on reciprocity. Arjun did not simply benefit from Tim’s advocacy, he also accepted commercial and financial ‘hits’ that protected Tim’s interests and reinforced Tim’s willingness to continue backing him, as Arjun said:

‘I know how to toe the party line. It’s making sure I don’t erode his political capital while making sure I build my kudos and my political capital with him and then he helps me later.’

Tim contrasted this with other sponsorship relationships, arguing that Arjun understood the unwritten expectations of sponsorship:

‘You try and sponsor some people, and they don’t always take the benefits of it. I know if I put Arjun into a stretch opportunity, he will absolutely make the most of it and he’ll be really grateful. He does his end of the bargain well.’

Such arrangements depend on a high degree of trust, with both parties believing that sacrifices would ultimately be recognised and reciprocated.

CASE EXAMPLE:

‘Backchannels and second chances’

Both Anne (promotion candidate/protégé, ethnic minority female) and her sponsor, Louis (partner/sponsor, white male), described sponsorship as extending beyond advice and coaching, based on deep trust and mutual benefit. After Anne was removed from the formal promotion process, Louis challenged the decision and used his influence to secure a further opportunity for her case to be considered. As Anne described:

‘I escalated it to Louis, who escalated it to everyone – and then I got a special slot to do my [promotion] interview. He was really the instrumental person to put me through, to get me a separate slot when I was already out of the process.’

Louis also built Anne’s credentials and advocated informally with panel members before her interview:

‘I went and spoke to her panel in advance. I explained the nuts and bolts of her commercial case and why I rated her so highly. The sponsorship comes in two ways. One is sitting down with her and preparing her. The other is using my personal reputation to ease the path for her.’

For Anne, this experience revealed how sponsors can actively intervene through informal channels to shape opportunities and outcomes.

How Diversity Impacts Sponsorship

These sponsorship dynamics also have important implications for underrepresented leadership talent. Gender- and ethnicity-related barriers shaped the formation of sponsorship relationships. The challenge was not simply in accessing sponsors, but in building the ingredients of reciprocal sponsorship relationships across difference: mutual trust, shared investment, active advocacy, candid feedback and political support.

We outline key inclusion-related dynamics that sponsors and protégés need to navigate to build reciprocal sponsorship across difference. Across the four sponsorship archetypes, these dynamics were addressed most effectively in reciprocal sponsorship relationships - while in the other archetypes they were often overlooked or only indirectly acknowledged.



Accessing Sponsors

Underrepresented talent is more likely to access sponsors through formal leadership or diversity programmes. But formal access does not automatically create the mutual trust, shared investment, active advocacy, candid feedback and political support that define reciprocal sponsorship relationships.

Informal sponsorship often begins when sponsors identify leadership potential in prospective protégés. Yet participants suggested that potential is not always recognised, interpreted or articulated in the same way for underrepresented talent.

‘There is no automatic sponsorship. If I see something in you and I want you to be successful, I’m going to help you.’

– Deepa
senior partner/sponsor,
ethnic minority female

‘It is harder to articulate the value that someone who is atypical brings.’

– Cindy
promotion candidate/protégé,
white female

As a result, underrepresented professionals risk gaining access to sponsors without necessarily gaining access to the deeper advocacy, political capital and opportunity creation associated with effective sponsorship.

‘I very much experienced this – not in a way that’s malicious or anything like that – but it does feel like there’s a boys’ club a lot of the time. It feels daunting to build relationships in this environment. The higher you go, the more alpha personalities you encounter. [...] That’s not to say that having a similar background is going to be the only determining factor; but you know, if I’m someone from a different background, how easy will it be for me to establish some of this [sponsorship] stuff?’

– Sonia
promotion candidate/protégé,
ethnic minority female



Building Trust Across Difference

Reciprocal sponsorship relationships developed through mutual trust and shared investment over time. These relationships deepened through repeated interaction, shared work, interpersonal chemistry and candid dialogue.

However, building these dynamics across difference often required more intentional relational work. In cross-gender and cross-ethnicity sponsorship relationships, both sponsors and protégés sometimes navigated concerns around perception, comfort, legitimacy or relational closeness.

Similarity and affinity accelerated trust-building, particularly where sponsors and protégés shared backgrounds, experiences or communication styles. These relationships enabled more personalised and emotionally invested forms of sponsorship. For example, a senior male sponsor from an ethnic minority background described how shared faith and mutual trust fostered a developmental space that enabled honest reflection, support and performance growth:

‘I spent a lot of time with him, sitting down with him, helping to understand what is in the feedback I’m hearing [about him], how he rationalises it and helping to develop a priority list. So, he’s gone from someone I was concerned about to being the highest performing person in my team. [...] I prayed with him... I guess the way in which we worked that through together has been different because we share a common faith.’

– Tolu

senior partner/sponsor,
ethnic minority male

Behaviours associated with reciprocal sponsorship – such as authenticity, vulnerability, confidence, ambition and self-promotion – were also not interpreted equally across gender and ethnic groups. Sponsors often expected **authenticity** and some **vulnerability** from would-be protégés. However, displaying these behaviours carries greater risks for underrepresented talent already navigating differential assumptions around credibility and competence.

‘A really sophisticated leader will open themselves up, critique how they are, in a very confident way – warts and all.’

– David

senior leader/sponsor, white male

‘There are certain behaviours that are very elite depending on your culture, that you need a little bit more help with. One of the more profound moments was when this partner actually asked me “What do you need help with?” That question caught me completely off guard. [...] Because you get so obsessed with proving your independence and competence and strength – you don’t really take a step back and say, OK, what are my vulnerabilities and where do I need help? There’s very little cultural awareness in the process, and, therefore, the advice that you get is sometimes not as effective.’

– Sanjay

promotion candidate/protégé,
ethnic minority male

Women and ethnic minority professionals frequently described **managing impressions** carefully to avoid being **perceived as aggressive, emotional or overly ambitious**. In some sponsorship relationships, sponsors themselves reinforced gendered expectations around leadership and acceptable forms of ambition. Referring to Anita, his ethnic minority female protégé, Gerry commented:

‘What Anita needs to be careful of is that she still maintains some of the skills that are more female in nature... being able to read people and have empathy – she just needs to be careful that she doesn’t lose those, in the rush to progress her career.’

– Gerry
senior partner/sponsor, white male

These dynamics could constrain openness and trust within sponsorship relationships, making it harder for some protégés to access the shared investment, candid feedback and active advocacy associated with reciprocal sponsorship.



Unequal Political Risks for Protégés

Female and ethnic minority protégés in our study described navigating additional identity-related risks when engaging in the political behaviours associated with advancement. Behaviours linked to leadership potential and senior progression – including visibility, self-promotion, assertiveness, ambition and influence-building – were not always interpreted neutrally. For instance, ethnic minority men in shallow sponsorship dynamics were sometimes perceived by their sponsors as overly ambitious or self-promoting when attempting to increase visibility or advocate for themselves, as illustrated by the matched protégé and sponsor accounts below:

‘I forced myself onto the [promotion] shortlist because of my numbers: I’m delivering better than equity partners at the moment. I was on the list until 10 days before the panel. [...] I then found out from another partner: “Oh by the way, you’re not on the list.” In reality, I got swapped out for someone else.’

– Dev
promotion candidate/protégé,
ethnic minority male

‘Dev’s biggest challenge is that he’s a bit impatient. You just got a promotion and you always want to get the next promotion. It’s a good energy to have, but it can rub people the wrong way.’

– Simon
senior partner/sponsor, white male

Women often described a catch-22 scenario in which the visibility, vocal leadership style, confidence and assertiveness associated with senior leadership potential could also be interpreted as aggressive or confrontational. While partners’ political script prescribed a ‘vocal leadership’ style, these behaviours were often judged differently when displayed by women. Speaking about her ethnic minority female protégé, Emma said:

‘In terms of her personal style and directness, she just, on occasion, needs to bottle that a bit... Just take a deep breath. [...] She’s ruffled a few feathers.’

– Emma
senior partner/sponsor,
white female

Many underrepresented professionals, therefore, approached sponsorship and organisational politics cautiously – particularly women in resistant sponsorship dynamics. While they recognised that sponsorship, networking and visibility mattered for advancement, some worried that success achieved through political influence might undermine perceptions of legitimacy or merit. Others hesitated to engage in networking or self-advocacy because of cultural norms, personal values or a belief that hard work should speak for itself rather than be actively promoted.

‘I hate to stereotype, but women and BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] people are generally very task-oriented: put your head down, work hard, get by on your technical ability. Less self-advocating, less confident, less reaching for opportunities.’

– Rachel

promotion candidate/protégé, white female

Sponsorship relationships can become more effective when **sponsors address protégés’ political reluctance** directly and create the psychological safety needed for **candid conversations about biased assumptions**, visibility, credibility and advancement.



Uneven Inclusiveness Among Sponsors

Sponsors differed significantly in their ability to recognise and navigate the gender- and ethnicity-related barriers shaping protégés’ advancement experiences. In some reciprocal sponsorship relationships, there was a high degree of trust, candour and explicit discussion about race, gender, credibility, visibility and organisational politics. For instance, Edward, a white male sponsor remarked that Maya, his ethnic minority female protégé, ‘is better than she thinks she is’, while also demonstrating a clear awareness of the gendered and cultural barriers shaping her discomfort with the kind of self-promotion expected in promotion processes:

‘There is a very high proportion of people who sell themselves well and talk about their achievements very, very well – your extroverts or your loud people. And then there’s a very small proportion of quiet introverts – people who are more like me.’

– Maya

promotion candidate/protégé,
ethnic minority female

‘My experience seems to suggest that there is a certain type of normally white male who will talk about themselves in a way that’s different than both females and people from a minority group... Compared to somebody from [Maya’s Southeast Asian country of origin] where culturally it’s not acceptable to talk yourself up. I do think our structures are such that there are lots of people who culturally really struggle with what we are asking them to do, in order to make partner.’

– Edward

senior partner/sponsor, white male

In other relationships, however, protégés wrestled with significant inclusion obstacles that were never openly discussed. Some sponsors filtered feedback, softened difficult conversations or failed to recognise how promotion norms and political expectations were experienced differently across groups.

These findings suggest that **inclusive sponsorship capability remains uneven among senior leaders**. While some sponsors intentionally adapted their sponsorship approach to help protégés navigate organisational politics across difference, others remained largely unaware of the additional risks, impression-management pressures and political constraints shaping underrepresented professionals' advancement experiences. Genuine sponsorship cannot be built without inclusion.

'Their [protégés'] experiences may be different, so you know, don't just give your great advice, but also have a discussion around what might be different for them.'

- Laura

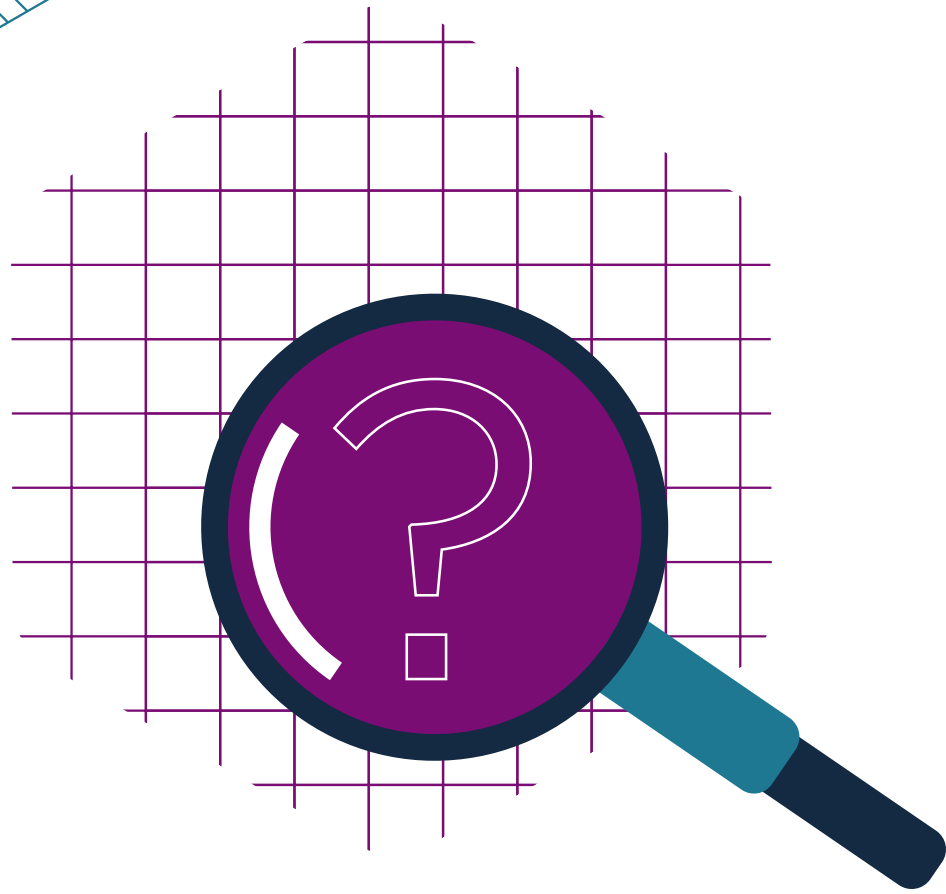
HR professional, white female

'Frankly, if you polled a bunch of partners, I'm sure they'd be pretty clueless as to what it is like to have to "fit the mould"... Because a lot of them have approached that topic as very much a checkbox exercise.'

- Amit

senior partner/sponsor,
ethnic minority male





What Needs to Change

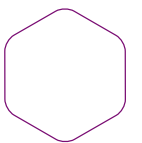
Our findings suggest that improving executive progression requires organisations to move beyond formal sponsorship programmes and pipeline metrics alone. Greater visibility into how sponsorship operates within real promotion systems – not just how it is formally designed – can help organisations strengthen leadership succession, improve inclusion and reduce hidden barriers to advancement.

The challenge is not to eliminate judgement, discretion or politics from senior promotion decisions. Senior leadership appointments will always involve contextual and relational assessments, beyond formal promotion frameworks. The challenge is, instead, to make these dynamics more transparent, principled, inclusive and teachable.

This requires organisations to professionalise sponsorship more intentionally by:

- building sponsorship capability, improving sponsorship quality;
- broadening access to influential networks and opportunities; and
- creating greater political honesty around how leadership advancement works in practice.

To address these challenges, we outline practical recommendations for four groups of actors who shape how sponsorship and executive progression operate in practice.





Recommendations for **CEOs** and **Executive Committees**

1. Align and recognise formal and political promotion scripts

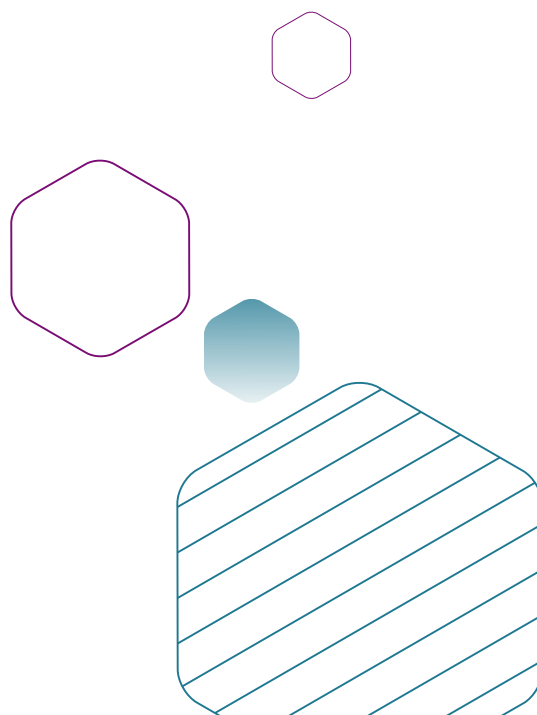
- Increase transparency and consistency between formal promotion criteria and how promotions operate in practice. Audit where informal criteria override formal ones and upgrade formal frameworks if needed.
- Be politically honest: acknowledge that promotion scripts may vary and that promotion criteria are – to some degree – interpreted subjectively.

2. Make sponsorship a strategic leadership responsibility

- Position sponsorship as a strategic leadership capability rather than an informal or optional activity.
- Develop a shared organisational language/framework for effective sponsorship to upskill would-be senior sponsors. Move beyond sponsor access to focus on sponsorship quality.
- Hold senior leaders accountable for developing diverse talent through measurable sponsorship outcomes.

3. Reward inclusive sponsorship

- Recognise leaders who actively create opportunities, visibility and advocacy for underrepresented talent by hardwiring sponsorship effectiveness into leadership performance metrics.
- Sponsor across difference. Challenge 'club culture' sponsorship patterns based on affinity, similarity or insider access. Create access to sponsors based on a robust and inclusive talent strategy to foster sponsor-protégé relationships across gender, ethnicity and other forms of difference.
- Audit access to influential networks, stretch work and senior exposure to ensure that sponsorship benefits are distributed equitably rather than concentrated among already-visible talent.





Recommendations for HR, Talent and D&I Teams

1. Move beyond formal sponsor matching

- Distinguish clearly between mentoring and sponsorship.
- Recognise that formal programmes create access to sponsors but not necessarily effective sponsorship. Sponsorship relationships must develop beyond formal prescription to generate real advocacy.
- Make sponsorship more visible and trackable and help create accountability for who is sponsoring whom and how progression is supported.

2. Professionalise sponsorship

- Build a shared sponsorship language to help would-be sponsors and protégés understand the hidden expectations of sponsorship and build effective bonds.
- Make reciprocity explicit in sponsor and protégé training and expectations.
- Equip sponsors with skills in advocacy, candid feedback, political navigation and sponsoring across difference. Support for underrepresented talent may need tailoring.
- Clarify behavioural expectations for both sponsors and protégés.

3. Focus on sponsorship quality and outcomes

- Enable and measure sponsorship quality, advocacy and progression outcomes – not just sponsor – protégé matching; monitor disparities in access to these outcomes.
- Create meaningful relationship-building opportunities for sponsors and protégés to build trust and reciprocity through shared work and repeated interaction.
- Reduce dependency on single sponsors by broadening access to influential advocates, particularly to proximal sponsors within protégés' business areas who can actively wield political capital rather than act as distant advisors.
- Foster inclusive sponsorship skills: help sponsors understand barriers faced by protégés that may differ from their own career experiences, including being overlooked for stretch opportunities, having leadership behaviours interpreted differently, or facing stereotypes about ambition, confidence or leadership potential. Equip sponsors to recognise and challenge these dynamics rather than assuming that all talented employees are competing on an equal playing field.



Recommendations for **Sponsors**

1. Provide candid political insight

- Challenge assumptions that hard work alone drives progression – teach the importance of visibility.
- Help protégés understand both the formal promotion process and the political script – the less visible factors that influence advancement, such as reputation, visibility and how contributions are understood by decision makers.
- Give honest feedback into how protégés are perceived politically and reputationally – how behaviours, achievements and contributions are being interpreted, and how they can communicate their impact effectively.

2. Advocate and create stretch opportunities

- Champion and advocate for protégés in talent discussions, promotion panels and influential networks. Challenge biased assumptions, where needed.
- Build protégés' visibility and credibility with senior stakeholders.
- Create stretch opportunities that reposition protégés from trusted operators to future leaders by placing them in commercially important, high-visibility and strategically significant work outside their comfort zone.

3. Sponsor inclusively and responsibly

- Avoid sponsorship relationships that become overly dependent or extractive.
- Reflect on affinity bias and intentionally broaden sponsorship beyond familiar networks.
- Recognise that trust and affinity can be developed rather than assumed.
- Broaden definitions of merit and potential. Challenge assumptions about what ambition, leadership presence, confidence or executive potential should look like in senior leadership spaces.
- Help protégés build reputational capital and visibility within promotion-relevant networks beyond the sponsorship relationship itself. Recognise that self-promotion, networking and influence may be expressed differently across cultures and groups.
- Encourage honest conversations about how gender and ethnicity shape access to influential networks, visibility, credibility and advancement opportunities.
- Tailor sponsorship support to recognise that women and ethnic minority professionals may experience promotion processes, sponsorship opportunities and organisational politics differently from their white male colleagues.



Recommendations for **Protégés**

1. Understand the politics of promotions

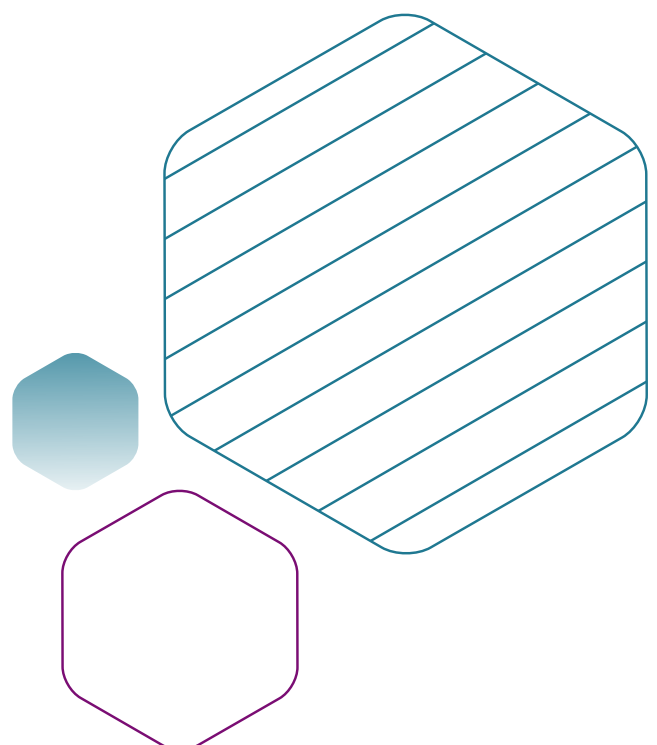
- Learn both formal promotion criteria but also how influence, reputation and visibility shape advancement decisions.
- Seek clarity on how 'senior leadership potential' or 'leadership readiness' are interpreted in practice.

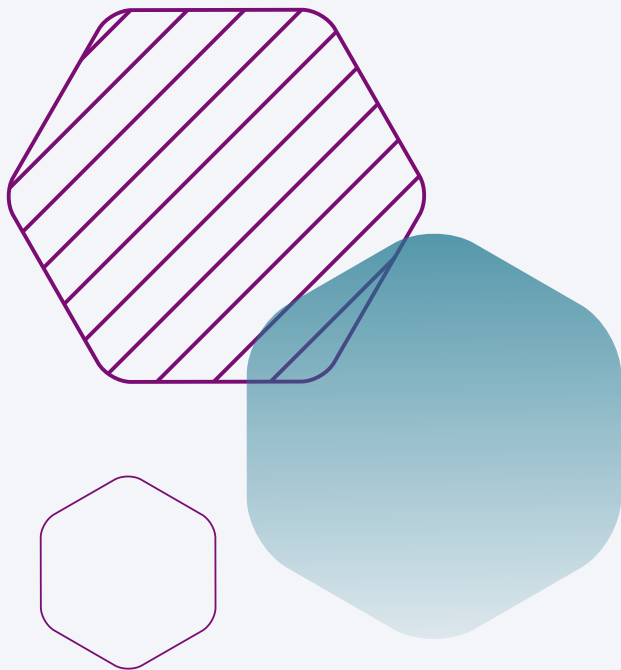
2. Balance delivery with visibility

- Recognise that performance alone does not drive promotion; reputation, visibility and advocacy matter, too. This is not about 'gaming the system', it is about ensuring that good work is recognised and understood by those making promotion decisions.
- Demonstrate leadership beyond execution and operational delivery, through strategic contribution and stakeholder influence.
- Build a network of sponsors across the organisation rather than relying on a single champion. Prioritise proximal sponsors who know your work well, can advocate credibly for your advancement, and can broker access to opportunities and decision-makers.

3. Build reciprocal sponsorship relationships

- Identify sponsors willing to advocate, create opportunities and provide candid feedback. Move beyond mentors or assigned sponsors.
- Build sponsorship relationships gradually by moving from lower- to higher-stakes asks while consistently demonstrating competence, delivering value and building trust and reciprocity with potential sponsors.
- Understand your sponsors' priorities and how you may contribute towards them.
- Seek honest feedback on how you are perceived and what may be limiting progression.





Conclusion

This report shows that executive advancement is shaped not only by formal promotion criteria but also by political and relational dynamics that remain unevenly visible across organisations. We found that leadership promotions operate through both formal and political promotion scripts, with sponsorship emerging as a critical mechanism through which individuals gain access to the unwritten rules of advancement, develop reputational capital and secure advocacy within high-stakes promotion processes.

However, not all sponsorship relationships operate equally. While some relationships remained procedural, transactional or weak, reciprocal sponsorship relationships – characterised by trust, advocacy, candid feedback and mutual strategic investment – provided protégés with deeper access to the political dynamics of advancement and stronger promotion support. Strong reciprocal sponsorship was experienced in only a quarter of the sponsorship relationships we examined. Moreover, gender- and ethnicity-related barriers affected the formation of sponsorship relationships, not only in accessing sponsors but in building the trust, advocacy and political support associated with reciprocal sponsorship.

These findings suggest that organisations cannot treat sponsorship as a simple matching exercise or formal programme.

Improving executive progression requires stronger and more inclusive sponsorship capability among senior leaders, grounded in a better understanding of how sponsorship relationships work.

In response, we provide evidence-based recommendations for CEOs and senior leadership teams, HR and talent functions, sponsors and protégés to help organisations build sponsorship relationships more intentionally, effectively and inclusively.

Ultimately, organisations cannot remove politics from executive promotions or fully formalise sponsorship relationships, which inherently depend on trust, discretionary judgement, political capital and relational investment. However, they can make both advancement processes and sponsorship more principled, transparent, inclusive and teachable.

About the Authors



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Elena works closely with organisations and policymakers to translate research into practice and advance diversity in leadership. She has advised the FTSE Women Leaders, Hampton-Alexander and Davies Reviews, and has co-authored widely cited practitioner reports that have helped shape UK policy on women on corporate boards. Other collaborations include the Government Equalities Office, the European Parliament, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and organisations including KPMG, EY, Aviva, Barclays, First City Monument Bank Nigeria, Moving Ahead and Wates. Elena is a visiting professor at Bayes Business School and Cranfield School of Management, and a member of the Academy of Management's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Division, where she previously served on the Executive Committee and chaired the Advancing Women in Leadership Award Committee.

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Through collaborations with practitioners, policymakers and political organisations, Madeleine's work supports efforts to advance D&I in organisations and public life. In the private sector, she has worked with organisations including PwC, EY, OVO Energy, Macquarie and Wates on social class inclusion, sponsorship and inclusive leadership. Her work has also informed initiatives across the public sector, including the UK Civil Service, the Ministry of Defence and NHS trusts. In the political sphere, she has worked with the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties on developing political leaders and widening access to political leadership. She has also partnered with The Female Lead on research into hybrid working and gender equality. Madeleine works with the GIWL to deliver executive education on gender inclusion and is Representative-at-Large for the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Division of the Academy of Management.

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The FTSE Women Leaders Review

A business-led, government-backed voluntary initiative supported by the Department for Business and Trade and the Office for Equality and Opportunity. It sets gender balance targets for FTSE 350 companies and the UK's 50 largest private companies, focusing on women's representation on boards and leadership teams. The Review builds on the data-led approach of the preceding Davies Review and Hampton-Alexander Review, and has set a target of 40% women on boards and in leadership. The Review encourages progress through data monitoring, best practice sharing and collaboration with a range of supporters to enable businesses to create more inclusive leadership teams and workplaces. The focus on the four key roles of chair, senior independent director, CEO and finance director has channelled efforts on those positions critical to delivering positive outcomes for everyone. The Review is overseen by an independent steering group comprising senior business leaders and subject matter experts. Along with the chair and CEO, the group supports organisations in increasing women in senior leadership positions and on their boards. The Steering Group acts as a catalyst for sustained momentum and monitoring of progress.

www.ftsewomenleaders.com

Queen Mary University of London

One of 24 leading UK universities represented by the Russell Group, ranked seventh in the UK and thirty-first in the world for quality of research. Committed to opening the doors of opportunity to anyone with the potential to succeed, Queen Mary is among the most diverse and inclusive universities in the Russell Group. Through research and education, **Queen Mary Business School** promotes social justice, sustainability and good governance in the management of private, public and voluntary organisations. Established in 2005, its **Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity (CRED)** is a leading international research centre dedicated to advancing understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion in organisations and society through rigorous, interdisciplinary research. CRED brings together scholars from sociology, psychology, organisational behaviour, economics and employment relations to examine persistent inequalities and generate evidence-based insights on diversity, inclusion and organisational change. Its work combines academic excellence with real-world impact, engaging policymakers, organisations and practitioners to advance more equitable workplaces and labour markets.

King's College London

One of the world's leading universities and a member of the Russell Group. Located in the heart of London, **King's Business School** is a triple accredited business school, ranked third in the UK and first in London for Business, Management and Marketing by the *Times* and *Sunday Times* Good University Guide 2026. Through research, education and engagement with organisations and policymakers, the School advances understanding of work, leadership, inequality and responsible business. **King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL)**, based at King's Business School and chaired by former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Australia's first and only woman prime minister, brings together research, practice and advocacy to improve women's access to leadership and challenge assumptions about what leadership looks like. Through rigorous research and close engagement with organisations, policymakers and practitioners, GIWL generates evidence and practical insights to advance fair and equal access to leadership for women from all backgrounds.