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Karen's Tip: Engage Sponsors

by Karen Catlin

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Preface

This is a free publication from a series I call "Karen's Tips." Each one is filled with practical ideas for growing your career, and clear action items for planning your next steps.

If you like what you read, please share it with someone you know. Thank you.

--Karen Catlin, karencatlin.com

Why a sponsor?

Sponsors are people who are influential in your organization or your industry. Sponsors know you well enough to advocate for you and recommend you for new opportunities. With their organizational clout, they can open doors you never knew existed. They could be the key to your career advancement.

But how exactly do you get a sponsor? You never approach someone and ask them to be your sponsor. Instead, you need to be subtle, doing things first to earn their respect and then looking for ways to engage with them.

I have some practical ideas for you to consider as you think about engaging with sponsors. I collected these from workshops and discussions I've led about sponsorship; they've helped others and I bet they'll help you.

What's in it for the sponsor?

To start, let's look at why a sponsor might be interested in helping you.

- They want to demonstrate a commitment to developing employees.
- They want to improve their reputation by associating themselves with highly talented individuals.
- They want to show they are in touch with people throughout the company.
- They might gain valuable insight from the individuals they sponsor, which they can use to be a more effective leader.

How can you earn the respect of a sponsor?

You have to earn the respect of a sponsor. I believe the building blocks for earning respect are:

- ❑ **Be a consistent high performer.** You need to do your job really well.
- ❑ **Hone your communication skills.** Your communication style forms a lasting impression. To make it excellent, take a class, ask trusted peers for feedback, or join a local Toastmasters club (toastmasters.org)
- ❑ **Develop a strong personal brand.** Be famous for something, and make sure it is relevant to your business. Not sure how to create your brand? Read anitaborg.org/news/archive/ask-jo-how-to-build-a-leadership-brand-that-your-company-values
- ❑ **Be visible.** Sponsors need to know who you are. Strive to be a known entity, to be highly visible. Look for stretch assignments that will put you in contact with leaders outside of your direct management chain.

How can you engage a sponsor?

Previous managers and mentors often make great sponsors because they know you well. Or, a sponsor could be another leader whom you respect. To engage them, **ask them to sponsor specific things**. For example, ask them to:

- ❑ **Make an introduction.** “Can you introduce me to so-and-so? I would like to get her feedback on a project that I'm working on.”
- ❑ **Advocate for you.** “I am interested in applying for a job on so-and-so's team. Can I count on you for a recommendation?”
- ❑ **Connect you to a career opportunity.** “I would like to become a <insert career goal here>. Can you let me know if you hear of openings that would be a good fit for me?”

By asking someone to open a specific door for you, you can make progress on a short-term goal while planting a seed with them that may bear fruit in the future.

How do you thank a sponsor?

Don't forget to thank your sponsor. Here are some ideas:

- ❑ **Write a thank you.** Send a simple email or hand-written note to thank them for a specific action they took to help you.
- ❑ **Keep them informed.** Periodically tell them about your progress with whatever they sponsored you for.
- ❑ **Look for ways to return the favor.** Volunteer to help with activities they are spearheading. Ask them if there is something you can do to help them.
- ❑ **Make 'em proud.** Do outstanding work so they continue to be proud of you. Refresh your personal brand to reflect new skills you learn. Help them be seen as someone who can spot rising talent.
- ❑ **Pay it forward.** Be a sponsor for other people.

Conclusion

Sponsorship can be a win-win relationship, helping both the sponsor and you. Sponsors can show they are committed to employee development, can improve their reputation by advocating for a talented person such as yourself, and may learn valuable insights from you. With a sponsor's help, you will have access to new opportunities and ways to grow your career. Don't miss out. Engage a sponsor today!

If this publication has helped you, or if you have additional thoughts about engaging and thanking sponsors, please post a short reply on my site. I'd like to hear from you!

Post your feedback here:

wp.me/P2JEO5-7i

Acknowledgments

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- [Global Tech Women](#), where I initially shared my thoughts about engaging sponsors in a guest blog post.
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Without you, I would not have been able to write this collection of tips. Thank you.

About Karen

After a successful career in the software industry, culminating as an engineering executive in a public company, Karen Catlin is now a leadership coach, advocate for technical women, and blogger about the intersection of leadership and parenting (www.karencatlin.com). Her mission is to help develop powerful women leaders in the tech industry.

Previously, Karen was a vice president at Adobe Systems, where she led a department within the office of the CTO. While there, Karen co-founded the “Adobe & Women” initiative, dedicated to attracting, retaining, and providing career development opportunities for women at Adobe. Earlier, she worked for Macromedia, GO Corporation, Hitachi Europe Limited, and Brown University, where she received her B.S. in Computer Science.

Karen and her husband, who is also in the tech industry, have two teenagers. They live in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Throughout her career, Karen always had great mentors, most of whom were men who saw women as equals. She's now “paying it forward” by helping the next generation of women reach their career goals in technology. She hopes these career tips help you.