

LEADERSHIP

Want to Be a Better Manager? Get a Protégé

by [Sylvia Ann Hewlett](#)

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Who benefits when a manager or executive sponsors someone more junior, offering guidance, advocacy, and support? If you answered, *the protégé*, you'd be only getting it half right.

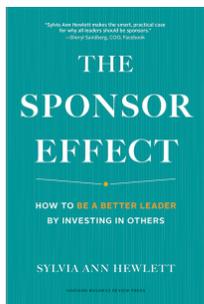
Sponsorship – a relationship in which an established or rising leader picks an outstanding junior talent and develops that person’s career – certainly does boost the protégé, who has access to the sponsor’s experience and connections. But data shows that the sponsor also gains enormous value from this relationship. According to a nationally representative survey conducted for my new book, *The Sponsor Effect: How to Be a Better Leader by Investing in Others*, senior-level managers who have a protégé are 53% more likely to report having received a promotion in the previous two years. Entry-level managers who have a protégé are 60% more likely to have received a stretch assignment.

Looking at the long term, among survey respondents, who ranged from entry-level managers to CEOs, 39% of those with a protégé deemed themselves “satisfied with their professional legacies” at this moment of their careers. Only 25% of those who didn’t have protégés said the same.

The benefits of sponsorship don’t accrue to managers and executives who merely *mentor* someone more junior. A mentor offers advice and perhaps an introduction or two; the mentee listens politely and says thank you. Sponsor and protégé, on the other hand, are both actively and publicly *working* for each other’s success. It’s that active investment from both sides that makes the relationship so mutually beneficial.

Consider Lou Aversano, Chief Client Officer, Worldwide, of Oligvy (a division of WPP) in New York. Aversano is already high up in the advertising world – but it’s a world with increasingly shaky foundations. As consumers have gone digital and mobile, and as traditional clients want alternatives to keeping firms on long-term retainers, ad agencies have had to reinvent themselves.

“You have to be willing to burn your lifeboats before someone burns them for you,” Aversano said about the industry in a conversation with me. Yet he admits that it’s often hard for veterans, who built their success the old-fashioned way, to come up with ideas to change it all up. “We see things from a certain height, and we have biases based on our legacy,” he said.



The Sponsor Effect: How to Be a Better Leader by Investing in Others

BOOK by Sylvia Ann Hewlett

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but Aversano found the talent he was looking for: a young man named Ben Levine. Levine has since helped Aversano create a new staffing structure, a new path to growth, and (for both Aversano personally and the firm) a conduit to a younger generation's ways of thinking and working.

Protégés don't have to be younger than you or a fresh face in the industry. What defines a good protégé is that they work effectively and loyally for you, and they have the ability to expand your worldview or skill set. That last part usually means someone who differs from you in gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, professional background, management style, or life experience. I've seen, for example, sponsors gain access to new markets through a protégé who understands women's healthcare priorities, Latin American cultural sensibilities, or the LGBTQ community's financial planning needs; I've also seen men and women rise to become CEOs of giant enterprises with the help of protégés who loyally extend their reach and fill their knowledge and skill gaps.

Of course, sponsorship does involve risk. Miscommunication can occur, especially when your protégés are (as they often should be) different than you. It can also be tricky not to let the relationship take up too much time – it must be your protégé who does most of the work. Then there's the risk of a protégé, in whom you've publicly invested time, responsibilities, and reputational capital, letting you down by failing to grow the bottom line, impress important stakeholders, or take work off your shoulders. Some protégés even betray their sponsor's trust, causing immense damage.

For Aversano, the answer was a protégé: a younger talent he would personally invest in and on whom he could count for performance, loyalty, and a new view of the ad world. To find that protégé, he tapped Ogilvy's Young Professionals Network. He and other senior leaders worked with its 100 members (with an average age of 27) on ideas to transform the agency – and they observed and guided these young employees closely. It took time,

But done right, the benefits of having a more junior talent who loyally works on your behalf, performing tasks for which you lack the time, skills, or inclination, are simply too great to ignore. Savvy sponsors therefore act to mitigate the risks – and maximize the benefits of a significant investment of time and their personal brand – by following seven steps:

1. **Identify.** Know what to look for in potential protégés, starting with performance and trustworthiness.
2. **Include.** Look for protégés who are different from you, whether in mindset (often from having a different domain of knowledge or belonging to a different generation) or in gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.
3. **Inspire.** Ensure your protégés align with your values, and use their ambitions to spur them forward.
4. **Instruct.** Help your protégés fill their gaps, whether in hard knowledge or soft skills.
5. **Inspect.** Continuously evaluate to confirm that your protégés are delivering both performance and trustworthiness.
6. **Instigate a deal.** When you are confident that value is being delivered, make the ask and spell out the terms of this reciprocal relationship.
7. **Invest in three ways.** Go all in with capital, clout, and cover. Endorse and advocate vigorously for your protégés and provide air cover when they need it.

Whether you're a mid-level manager looking to make your name or a senior executive looking to expand your productivity and your reach, a protégé can be the answer. When managed carefully, the relationship will help both of you rise and thrive.



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