



Structuring a Sponsorship Program That Delivers Meaningful and Measurable Results

BY SYLVIA JAMES
CHIEF DIVERSITY & INCLUSION OFFICER,
WINSTON & STRAWN LLP

Although not a silver bullet, true sponsorship of high-performing professionals from underrepresented communities is pivotal towards building the next generation of diverse leaders.

At Winston & Strawn, our Diversity and Inclusion Associate Sponsorship program is the centerpiece of our retention, advancement, and promotion efforts. Our program pairs high-performing women, racial/ethnic minority, and LGBTQ+ associates in their fifth or sixth year of practice with a senior sponsor for one year.

We launched our Diversity and Inclusion Associate Sponsorship Program in 2018 and seven members of our inaugural class of protégés are now partners at Winston. Just as important, the program has cultivated a robust pipeline of diverse, mid- and senior-level associates who are on partnership track.

I am often asked what the secret to our success is and I always say that developing and implementing a successful sponsorship requires four key components.

Involvement at the Highest Level

Winston's commitment to cultivating a culture where all talented contributors can have, and see, a path to long-term success starts at the very top of our firm. That's why every member of the firm's Executive Committee—including our Chairman and Vice Chairman—serves as a sponsor in our program. This is the foundation upon which our success has been built. In fact, each year several Executive Committee members sponsor two protégés to ensure that every associate who opts into our program has a sponsor with the highest degree of influence and connections to leverage on their behalf.

Clarity of Purpose

Each year, we start the program by reminding sponsors and educating the new class of protégés about the differences between mentorship and sponsorship. While mentorship is important, it does not deliver the high-octane career fuel of true sponsorship, which entails not merely giving advice but taking concrete actions to facilitate a protégé's professional growth and success. These steps can range from making important introductions for a protégé and advocating for them to publicly promoting them. To reinforce the key distinctions between mentoring and sponsoring, we give



Sylvia James
*Chief Diversity &
Inclusion Officer,*
Winston & Strawn LLP

every sponsor and protégé a copy of Sylvia Ann Hewlett's fabulous book, *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor*.

We also ensure that all sponsors understand that sponsorship is ultimately about supporting their protégé and their career goals, whether or not those goals include making partner at the firm. In fact, some sponsors have helped their protégés find in-house roles.

A Strong Support Structure

We set-up our protégés and sponsors for success by providing a highly curated experience that lends structure and helps everyone stay on track. We kick-off the year with a meeting filled with internal presentations, guest speakers, coaching and expectation setting. We follow-up with a mid-year meeting and close out the year with a final group meeting.

Throughout the year, we offer a series of webinars that include *The Path to Partnership*, *Creating a Business Development Plan*, *Law Firm Economics*, and *Giving and Receiving Feedback*. We also conduct regularly scheduled "Power Hours," during which three to four sponsors chat with all the protégés.

Accountability, Accountability, Accountability

Last, but certainly not least, we build in accountability. We conduct a survey at the beginning of the program, at the mid-point and at year-end. Additionally, we check in with each pair throughout the year to make sure their relationship is evolving smoothly and successfully.

Although the goal of the sponsorship program is to support the individuals and their unique goals, the program also delivers immense benefits to the firm in terms of retention. Protégés are more likely to stay at Winston even amid immense turnover in the legal industry because they've developed strong and "sticky" relationships with firm leaders and their fellow protégés. **S**