

GO SPONSOR...US: GOING BEYOND MENTORING FOR WOMEN IN PARAMEDICINE

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INTRODUCTION

Mentoring and sponsorship are essential components in the professional development of both men and women. These types of relationships often form between individuals who have common interests, or when the junior member reminds the more senior member of themselves. In paramedicine, the number of men in leadership positions usually leads to the mentorship and sponsorship of junior men. It can be the case that junior women find it difficult to find similar levels of personal and career support since there are fewer women in paramedic leadership positions. The literature demonstrates that women are over-mentored and under-sponsored.⁽¹⁾ But what exactly does that mean? Are these not the same thing?

In the context of this discussion, the language we use is important. The terms coaching, mentoring and sponsorship are often used synonymously to describe these types of relationships. In reality the three are mutually exclusive; however, a sponsor relationship can certainly encompass aspects of them all. We outline some of the elements of these relationships in Table 1.

“A coach talks to you, a mentor talks with you, a sponsor talks about you” (2)

Coaching deals with performance. It is functional and result-oriented. (3) A coach can be a person within or outside of an organization, and indeed some coaches are professional coaches, who are experts in their field. Working with a coach allows you to identify and set goals in a particular area as well as set out a plan to achieve those goals. The coach then works with you to achieve the goals. Mentoring is broader in scope and purpose than coaching, and is based on a deeper, more meaningful relationship than coaching. It is relational in nature and is usually career-oriented.⁽³⁾ Mentors are not just concerned with performance goals. They can again be within or outside your organization, and help you to navigate career choices, decisions regarding next steps, and they are important for professional development. Sponsorship is mentoring at the highest level. A sponsor is a strong advocate who has power and influence and uses that advocacy to produce positive career results for you.⁽³⁾ Sponsors publicly endorse and support you and your success, and take risks on your behalf, such as putting your name forward to lead a project, or suggesting you for a presentation or other undertakings. They may substitute their attendance at an event in favour of you. They constantly seek out new opportunities to advance your development and success, and may call in favours or put their reputation and credibility at stake to gain you an opportunity.

	Coach	Mentor	Sponsor
Main role	Coach you to achieve performance goals	Help you navigate career choices	Promote you and your abilities
Who's driving it?	Shared	Mentee	Sponsor
What happens?	Coach provides feedback on your performance outside of formal channels	Mentor gives you advice on career choices and decisions	Sponsor advocates for your advancement and champions you

Table 1. Characteristics of coaches, mentors and sponsors [informed by (2,3)]

THE VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES OF SPONSORSHIP

Paige

I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with Alan in a variety of different capacities. Initially as a student of Alan's at Fanshawe College, I was inspired by his passion for research and building research capacity within the field of paramedicine through formal education. Through Alan I had the opportunity to work on several research projects as a student which led to publications and international conference presentations. My eyes were opened to a world of possibilities and opportunities I had no idea existed in the field, and Alan also made those opportunities appear within reach with the help of other leaders in the field. As the mentorship continued, Alan and I realized it possessed characteristics of a different type of professional relationship - sponsorship. This helped formalize our goals of the relationship and set concrete objectives for career advancement in clinical, leadership, and research capacities.

Through my interest in female leadership in paramedicine I have discovered evidence in business, technology and academic medicine around implicit bias, access to mentorship/sponsoring relationships, and double bind, and how they relate to the career progression for women in these fields. Research has shown that men are much more likely to have sponsors, and those with sponsors are much more satisfied with their rate of career advancement.^(4,5) Self-evaluation, self-promotion and self-reflection all pose challenges for women seeking leadership positions (6), and sponsorship works to address these issues.

Over the past three years, Alan has leveraged his professional position to advocate for writing opportunities, speaking engagements nationally

and internationally, professional appointments and educational funding opportunities for me. He actively promotes these opportunities and successes, and promotes the visibility of women leaders in the field of paramedicine. Diversity of background, opinion, and leadership style have been shown to lead to increased organizational effectiveness and superior performance. Skill diversity within top management has been shown to help recruit, promote and retain talent.(7) Alan is a great example of what is needed as the field of paramedicine continues to evolve - men and women leveraging their connections and positions to actively advocate for the advancement of women leaders in paramedicine.

Chelsea

I first met Alan at a research conference during a networking break. Over the following weeks I reached out to him as I sought out some guidance around prehospital research. After a few conversations, Alan introduced me to the concept of sponsorship, and the experience he had with Paige. The sponsorship concept was new to me, but the notion of the rather unspoken gender gap in paramedicine certainly wasn't. In what is still primarily a male dominated profession, I knew the concept of sponsorship for women in paramedicine was important, and that was enough for me to schedule a meeting with Alan. Though our sponsorship relationship is still in early stages, I can already attest to the importance and success of it. In the space of a few months, opportunities afforded to me have multiplied. I have attended international conferences, taken on new research projects, further developed my professional network, and have been invited to several speaking engagements.

More importantly, this opportunity has allowed me to foster trust with someone in my professional network which has prompted me to engage in an open, honest, and vulnerable dialogue. It's no secret that paramedicine alone comes with its own hardships; its combination with gender bias and professional growth can lead to an overwhelming current to navigate alone. For women, taking credit can come at social and professional cost.(6) Sponsorship mitigates this barrier, and helps with self-advocacy which many women, including myself struggle with. The growth of paramedicine worldwide presents ample opportunities for progress. Having someone in your corner, who seeks out these opportunities and advocates for you within their professional network instils a sense of confidence that many of us lack. My sponsor relationship with Alan also comprises aspects of mentorship and coaching, which have helped to alleviate a lot of feelings consistent with imposter syndrome that I've been carrying since early in my career. The best gift you can give yourself is to seek out a sponsor. For any young professional, guidance is fundamental; for women in paramedicine, sponsorship is unparalleled.

Alan

My first experience with sponsoring happened as a natural evolution of a mentoring relationship I had with Paige. What started out originally as career advice and development conversations transitioned into sponsorship; a concept that was new to us both. I was interested and invested in seeing Paige succeed and develop as a clinician, researcher, and leader. It seemed natural to use my resources and network to help her to achieve this. On reflection, it was easier for me to promote Paige than it was for her to promote herself.(6) Women also have lower self-perceptions of their performance (4), and I believe a sponsor provides a form of external validation of performance that is a valuable mitigation strategy for this issue.

As a result, when Chelsea approached me last year to seek advice on research and career development opportunities, I could see clearly that what she needed was a sponsor, not a mentor. We discussed a potential sponsor relationship and what that would entail based on my experience sponsoring Paige. Once we established a sponsor relationship, we agreed upon a set of goals to achieve in the coming two years related to her professional development.

We have figured out what sponsorship means to us as we have navigated it over the past number of years. Entering into sponsorship in paramedicine is not without its challenges. It requires an honest, open dialogue and trust. Speaking about sponsorship publicly often involves fielding questions about what exactly it is, and why it is needed. No real conversation occurs on this topic in areas other than business. It is an alien concept in our field. What we need is something akin to the '*#GoSponsorHer*' initiative in the business world (8,9), whereby men in leadership roles are encouraged to publicly declare their support and become actively involved in the career development of junior women, both within and outside their organizations. Paige directed me to books and resources aimed at sponsors and those invested in women in leadership (many listed below under resources), which increased my knowledge and appreciation of the issues facing women in their careers. Public discussion of sponsorship also unfortunately involves the ability to deal with a certain level of resistance and ridicule from individuals. This requires confidence in both the relationship and the need for sponsorship. I joined a network for men who are committed to achieving workplace gender equity. Men Advocating Real Change (MARC) is an initiative of Catalyst, the leading non-profit organization expanding opportunities for women in business. As a member of this network I have been able to access resources and a network of other men for advice. Perhaps we need a similar support system for men in paramedicine who are committed to gender equity?

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Ok, so you have a sponsor. Great. Now how exactly do you measure success? We create an annual 'sponsorship plan', which outlines priorities for the following 12 months. Alan then identifies how he can leverage his network to make these happen. These items generally include professional development opportunities, research activities, publications and presentations, and funding. We measure success in two ways: objective achievement of these goals - number of publications, presentations, funding amounts (easy); and, subjective insight and reflection on personal development (not so easy). We celebrate every success, and Alan in particular shares and champions the success widely. This is fundamental to any sponsoring relationship in our opinion, and it begins to address some of the issues we have outlined surrounding self-promotion and advocacy. Sponsoring should be based on the premise of championing the woman at **every** opportunity (some refer to this as a separate championing relationship, but we consider it core to sponsorship).

We have had some great successes: first-time publications, (peer-reviewed and professional), presentations at national and international conferences, funded research studies, and international networking opportunities to name but a few. In addition, we have laid a solid foundation for future academic careers. Both Paige and Chelsea are applying to pursue graduate education, and they have diversified their knowledge in areas including patient safety, ethics, leadership, and project management.

CALL TO ACTION

We have previously called for the adoption of sponsorship in paramedicine.(10) In order to promote a culture, and a setting where both men and women feel comfortable to publicly support sponsoring, we now call for the creation of a formal Canada-wide women in paramedicine leadership network. Men in senior leadership and positions of influence within the field of paramedicine need to become actively involved (11) with this network, otherwise mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for junior women will not progress. This network, focused on the development of leadership talent, would create the following opportunities for current and future women leaders in our field:

1. Access to mentors and sponsors (both women and men) in structured mentoring relationships.

2. Networking opportunities and events for women that are targeted and high-yield.
3. Funded scholarships for women to pursue further education at postgraduate level in leadership or in women's studies.
4. Provide pathways for advancement within leadership, such as shadowing opportunities, secondments, and fellowships.
5. Provide support for sponsoring and mentoring, including a repository of resources accessible online for all members of the network.
6. Highlight sponsoring and mentoring stories and successes from across Canada.
7. Provide educational events accessible to members of the network on topics such as mentoring, gender inclusivity, presentation skills, management, leadership etc.
8. Develop women in paramedic leadership policies in conjunction with stakeholders
9. Further initiatives and activities to address barriers to women in paramedic leadership as identified by research and member input.
10. Support and networking for men who are sponsors, or committed to gender equality in paramedicine, in order to share resources, ideas and successes.

CONCLUSION

The importance of sponsorship for the development of women in paramedicine cannot be understated. While we are still figuring out what sponsorship means, there are a wealth of resources out there that can guide any potential sponsor relationship. The needs within each sponsorship are unique and require thoughtful negotiation. To date, the concept of sponsorship appears either little-known, or little-publicised in paramedicine and it is time for this to change. In order to further advance opportunities for women in paramedicine, we need to take it upon ourselves to create, nurture, and advocate for these opportunities. 

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any employer or organization.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

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