How to find sponsors who’ll accelerate your career

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for LGBTQ+ Groups
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Meeting agenda

approx 90 mins

Member updates 15 mins

Watch video 8 mins

Icebreaker 10 mins

Activities

- Activity 1: Increase your odds of having effective sponsors 25 mins
- Activity 2: Overcome affinity bias 25 mins

One Action 3 mins

For Circles with only 60 mins, here are suggestions to shorten this agenda:

- Encourage members to watch the video in advance
- Spend 15 mins on activity 1 and activity 2

The stock photography used in this guide is courtesy of Getty Images.
Getting started

Member updates

2 mins or less per member
15-20 mins depending on group size

Go around your Circle and share personal updates. As a general rule, personal updates should be brief and focus on big changes and important decisions in your life. (It’s OK not to have one every month!) If you have a One Action update, share that with your Circle.

Watch video

8 mins

Icebreaker

10 mins

Take a few minutes to think about the following questions. Then, go around the room and share your answers (1 minute each).

● Has sponsorship helped you in your career? If so, how?

“I’ve found advocates by asking for something I want that will help both me and the company. For instance, I’d ask someone to help me attend a conference where I can learn and network. Or when we’re working on a presentation, I’ll ask if I can deliver the bulk of it. Or I’ll tell them I’m thinking of my career in new ways and want some advice. People LOVE to help others. And the worst thing they can say is ‘no.’”

Sarah Lands Ramrup, senior lead, consumer goods industry, Missouri, USA (she/her)
We’re less likely than colleagues who are straight cis men to be part of an old boys’ network, so we need to find other ways to be visible to potential sponsors. We can do this by making ourselves known to more senior-level people in our networks. To make the best use of your time, reach out to people you know who are already potential sponsors. This could include any senior leader you’ve worked and got along well with, someone who is already a mentor, or someone who has already advocated for you.

If you don’t know many (or any) potential sponsors, consider going to more events specifically to find sponsors, including networking events and conferences, and make the most of events you attend during the normal course of business. Choose events strategically based on who else will be there.

**Write it down (10 minutes):** Make three lists.

1. Potential sponsors, including current mentors and people who have already advocated for you
2. Events where you can network, noting any senior leaders you plan to talk to at these events
3. Your existing sponsors

These three lists capture your pool of potential sponsors.

**In pairs:** Review your lists and brainstorm contexts where you can meet new sponsors.

**Discuss as a group (15 minutes):** Share stories about how you’ve met potential sponsors in the past. Has anyone in the group met a sponsor through a networking event? Or converted a mentor into a sponsor?
Read aloud: Due to affinity bias, straight cis men tend to be naturally drawn to advocate for other men who share their identity. ¹ This creates a problem for us when it comes to finding sponsors, since in most organizations, senior leaders (i.e., potential sponsors) are still mostly straight cis men.

We need to think strategically to make affinity bias work in our favor. This ultimately involves building authentic relationships with our sponsors. But it starts by showing potential sponsors, including men at senior levels, that we share interests and experiences with them and are able to support their professional goals.

Whenever you’re meeting a potential sponsor, research them in advance so you can start conversation topics about mutual interests—or better still, so you can share useful information or offer your professional help.

Write it down (5 minutes): Annotate your three lists from Activity 1 with any ideas you have for connecting with the people named on the lists. These notes can include types of help you can offer them, ways to show an informed interest in their work, or conversation starters that speak to mutual goals and interests.

Discuss as a group (20 minutes):

1. How have you connected with potential sponsors in the past? Have you offered help, strategically made your accomplishments visible to them, or connected over shared interests?

2. Talk through ways you can overcome affinity bias and gain sponsorship from senior leaders who don’t share your identity.
This week, take a few minutes to commit to either:

- reaching out to a potential sponsor to offer help as an initial step in fostering the relationship or
- reaching out to a current sponsor to renew the relationship or make a specific request to help you in your career

Congratulations on a great meeting!

Endnotes
