

# The corporate sponsor as hero

Advancing women into leadership roles



# Heroic sponsorship: are you strong enough



This paper was begun as a result of a dialogue between Canadian business leaders at a CEO Roundtable event sponsored by Ernst & Young Canada.

# to do it?



## Clearly, something is wrong.

The business case for women's advancement has been proven time and time again. Statistical studies show that women deliver positive, quantifiable results in leadership positions. Research by organizations such as McKinsey & Company, Goldman Sachs, Catalyst, Columbia University and Stanford University has shown the quantifiable value of having diverse leaders, including women, in senior management.

However, while women currently make up 34% of senior management, they comprise only 3% of Fortune 500 CEOs, according to *The Sponsor Effect*, a research report published by the Center for Work-Life Policy (CWLP). The obstacle to senior management, as identified in that study and other recent research, is an absence of proactive support from senior leaders. In other words, there is a dearth of sponsorship.


Most organizations, professions and communities have been historically dominated by men, and although this is changing, women often face an uphill task when they seek to advance professionally. Without active sponsorship from senior leaders – the majority of whom are male – women will not have the empowerment, exposure and experience they need for career growth.

Courage, tenacity, self-confidence, eagerness to learn from others – and more courage, sometimes to the point of putting one's career at risk. The requirements to be a successful sponsor are really the requirements of leadership. At the core, the sponsor is someone who can spot talent and is willing to do what it takes to advance women leaders. Often, it takes heroic effort.

This Ernst & Young report explores the meaning of sponsorship in today's business environment and the characteristics of those individuals who assume the role of sponsor. Senior leaders – both male and female – can take concrete steps to minimize gender disparities and help advance women into leadership positions in their organizations. Some of the leaders you'll meet in this paper are succeeding in the face of unusual cultural and social obstacles. Their methods and their examples demonstrate that sponsorship is vital to women's promotions and career opportunities.

# How do sponsors operate?





Unlike mentoring, which may often be limited to occasional meetings and coaching sessions, sponsorship is a long-term, hands-on commitment to encouraging, fighting for and creating advancement opportunities for high-potential individuals. The CWLP study notes that men are more likely than women to have sponsors – and, as a result, more promotions and career opportunities. By contrast, women do not recognize the vital role of sponsorship to their advancement and often do not know how to proactively pursue such relationships. The fact that women may not seek out such support puts greater responsibility on the prospective sponsor. Then the questions arise: What are the traits of successful sponsors? How do they operate and sustain their commitment on a day to day basis?



➤ **A sponsor is courageous.**

A sponsor puts his or her reputation on the line to advocate and often advance women for leadership positions, often in the face of significant resistance.

Noor Abid, Ernst & Young's Assurance Leader for the Middle East and North Africa, works in a region that is traditionally resistant to women's autonomy. Yet he is leading efforts to overturn customs that hinder women's progress in business. And he is getting results. Abid's initiatives range from changing policies to one-on-one sponsorship. He is attentive to the practical demands of women's lives in the region and how sponsorship can be instrumental in overcoming these barriers.

Abid is passionate about the importance of attracting women to the profession and the changes necessary to accomplish this – and passion can mean standing one's ground and battling entrenched attitudes. In Bahrain, where he is based today, bright, talented women educated in the West typically return to work for the government, which offers an attractive 8:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. schedule, with no overtime and few obstacles. "Women here face significant pressure to take care of their households, their husbands and their children," says Abid, pointing out that businesses that do not adapt to the needs of women will lose out on a critical base of talent. Beginning in FY11, Ernst & Young in the Middle East and North Africa established flexible working hours throughout the region to attract and retain women. Along the way, Abid undoubtedly felt for himself some of the pressure women are facing.

“The head of the organization must be the change leader, the evangelist. It is not an easy task to break down centuries-old biases.”

**K.V. Kamath**  
Chairman,  
Infosys Technologies, and  
former CEO, ICICI Bank (India)

Risk is not heedless. The sponsor also has the ability to balance the belief in an individual's ability with a dose of reality. As strong as the desire is to help someone advance to a better position, it's critical to step back from forcing a situation where the odds of success are long. As pointed out in a recent Catalyst study, *Sponsoring women to success*, “Sponsorship is high stakes for the Sponsor, the Protégé, and the Organization.”

➤ **A sponsor demonstrates and asks for commitment.**

Ellen Moore, President, Chubb Insurance Company of Canada, knows the benefits of sponsorship first-hand – as well as the requisite active commitment. More than two decades ago she was fortunate to have a male executive in her corner who was a fervent, involved advocate of sponsorship. “He truly believed in the business case for diversity,” she recalls. Eventually, he was given responsibility for the company-wide sponsorship program. From her early experiences onward, Moore understands the importance of sponsors investing significant time. So it's vital that the commitment be perceived as worthwhile and delivering results.

At Chubb, executives are accountable for increasing the number of women in senior ranks. The process is built into Chubb's management practices, such as “very robust” succession planning and mentoring programs that transcend borders. While there are no quotas, there are performance metrics for expected outcomes; but the expectations run in both directions. Moore has this advice for women who receive the sponsorship of a senior executive:

- ▶ Establish ground rules and protocols early
- ▶ Agree on expectations and time frame
- ▶ Meet the standard for performance

Michel Lantaigne, Chairman of the Starr Foundation, is passionate about the power of sponsorship. There is no magic to his method. Beyond insight and judgment, Lantaigne says, persistence and continuity are essential in helping women advance to senior positions. Once the individual has achieved a position of great responsibility, the sponsor must stay involved. “Follow-up is critical,” Lantaigne advises, particularly if other executives are resistant to change. “Once I identify an executive with the right combination of talent and ability, I become their advocate. I never give up.”



# Q&A

## Changing the leadership blueprint



Ripa Rashid

Overcoming barriers and taking action: ultimately, that's inclusive leadership at its best.

Ernst & Young spoke with Ripa Rashid, senior vice president at the Center for Work-Life Policy and co-author of *The Battle for Female Talent in Emerging Markets*, on what the most effective inclusiveness strategies are and how to implement them.

**Ernst & Young:** Everyone has biases; the best we can hope to do is to recognize and overcome them. What biases (conscious or not) could be hindering today's leaders as they select tomorrow's?

**Ripa Rashid:** The main biases we see are based on a monolithic blueprint of a leadership model – generally white-male-centered and clearly a gendered and culturally specific model with years of history behind it. Some of the biases are conscious and some unconscious. When leaders are putting together the roster of the next generation of leaders, these biases are integrated into things like succession planning, which is like a black box and not transparent in most organizations. The broader cultural impact of these decisions is that you don't have a diverse slate of leaders.

**EY:** In some markets, it's said that there is a dearth of managerial talent – you hear this a lot about China, for example. Might it be true also that Western companies are missing a huge talent pool because their ability to recognize top talent is culturally biased?

**Ripa Rashid:** This is a bit of a red herring. We know that 53% of the global talent pool is coming out of the Asia-Pacific region and that 83% of the global talent pool consists of women and multicultural individuals. Companies have to recognize that talent comes in all shapes and sizes. The blueprint needs to flex. We need multiple definitions of what leadership is and multiple paths to power.

**EY:** Tell us about things leaders can do to get around cultural taboos. For example, in some cultures, a male boss can't ask a female protégé out to lunch, or you can't send women into the field alone because their families will object. How should companies handle this sort of thing?

**Ripa Rashid:** It requires creativity, awareness and education. If one-on-one mentoring is hard, do it in groups. Do it virtually. Do it by email. Companies in the Middle East have done some creative mentoring on a virtual basis, using male leaders in a group setting. There is also a generational aspect to this. We've heard from Gen X and younger women that they're generally comfortable working and socializing with men.

**EY:** What are common barriers organizations face?

**Ripa Rashid:** The biggest mistake any company can make is to "fix the individual." You can mentor and train and provide executive coaching to death, but that won't work unless the system changes. So fixing the system and process is the first imperative. The second is management-level education. We may overestimate the leaders' level of knowledge of other cultures.

**EY:** What can leaders do that will start to make a difference?

**Ripa Rashid:** Identify five individuals you can reach out to in your global operations, then visit them once or twice a year and get to know them in a business-focused way. Next, charge each of them to do the same so there is a viral effect. In the longer term, make sure your performance evaluation and succession planning system are checked for biases. If you use an executive search firm, go to a firm that has a diverse slate. Go to a more global source. Hardwire some kind of inclusiveness into your performance evaluation system, and link it to pay.

# Q&A

## Building the next generation of businesses



Molly Ashby

Founded in 2000 by Chairman and CEO Molly Ashby, Solera Capital is a private equity firm committed to building the next generation of businesses and leaders. The firm draws on the perspectives of a diverse investment and operating team to identify companies positioned to benefit from major developments in the economy. Ernst & Young caught up with Ashby to discuss the role of women in tomorrow's companies.

**Ernst & Young:** You've created a firm that consists mainly of women. Can you talk about the rationale behind that?

**Molly Ashby:** At Solera, we ask big questions: what industries and segments will be important? What's new, and what will come next? Unique perspectives on those questions enable interesting, sometimes unconventional investment decisions. I worked in private equity at J.P. Morgan before starting Solera, and am a deep believer that success requires adherence to a set of almost "old-fashioned" practices that include proprietary research and hands-on business building. With the opportunity to start from scratch, I was very deliberate in thinking about how to develop a team that combines these practices with super-creative, forward-thinking ideas. The diversity of our team is also enormously enabling as we connect and engage with the next generation of entrepreneurs, and it leads us to take a different view of the workplace. We have developed a set of core values and principles that produce a virtuous cycle. We've found that our culture, mission and values tend to attract talented women and men with diverse backgrounds and points of view.

**EY:** Is there a meaningful difference between mentoring and sponsorship when it comes to change?

**Molly Ashby:** There is a big difference, and they are both very important. Mentorship is more about personal and professional support, whereas sponsorship is concrete advocacy for advancement. The emphasis on both mentorship and sponsorship is a core part of our culture, and it's not gender focused. We encourage everyone to engage in a network and support our rising stars. When you recommend a talented young professional for a board, a speaking opportunity or a stretch position, it makes a concrete impact on that person, but it really encourages those around them to reach higher as well. We also firmly believe in inclusion:

looking at people who may not have had this opportunity in the past. To make an impact, we need to encourage the next generation's success across the board – by mentoring, sponsoring, providing guidance and resources, and helping laterally.

**EY:** Do you think men are in a better position to sponsor women than women are?

**Molly Ashby:** I don't know that their position is better or worse, but men are absolutely essential to the effort to achieve a diverse workforce. Men traditionally hold greater authoritative positions in the government, non-profit and business sectors, and they have to be a big part of the conversation. In my career, I have found men to be open, constructive and supportive in building an organization's diversity. But we can't point in one direction for the solution. We all have to push ourselves to do better and to reach a new level. It is everyone's responsibility.

**EY:** What are your thoughts about preferentially selecting women vs. simply waiting to see which candidate is the strongest?

**Molly Ashby:** In our experience, when you're known for diversity and being forward-thinking, you attract a pool of candidates who value those characteristics. We have developed our team and culture over time, and it's self-reinforcing. But you cannot create something where you set up rules that promote one gender or group at the exclusion of others. We really dislike exclusion; it's wrong and dangerous. If we really want to do a better job, we can't repeat the past, in which people were excluded and alienated. When looking out at the next decade, it's important to focus on inclusion: everyone should feel welcome.



### > A sponsor can spot talent.

Women's advancement can be derailed due to a lack of flexibility on the part of the corporate culture. That culture may have unstated assumptions that it is risky to offer women stretch assignments or intensely challenging tasks because their life commitments may seem to pose conflicts. Male leaders can counter these attitudes, both by encouraging women to be ready for growth opportunities and by working creatively with the company on solutions that address some of the unique challenges women face.

For Philip Hourquebie, Ernst & Young Managing Partner for Central & Southern Europe, the sponsorship journey started in his native South Africa where he not only witnessed the women's rights movement in Africa but actively supported the agenda for women's empowerment. As Managing Partner for Africa, Hourquebie persuaded EY leaders to depart from conventional wisdom in advancing women. He cites the example of a talented female professional who was being groomed for leadership. A practice leader left unexpectedly, providing an opportunity to promote – in spite of her inexperience – the young woman to lead the practice, rather than a more seasoned, older (male) partner. With Hourquebie as her sponsor, the young woman was promoted and has steadily assumed additional leadership responsibilities. Clearly, sponsorship was a winning strategy for the woman and the business.

Molly Ashby  
Chairman and CEO,  
Solera Capital

“Mentorship is more about personal and professional support, whereas sponsorship is concrete advocacy for advancement.”

Sponsors also understand the experiences that are key stepping stones to high-profile future opportunities. Annalisa King, Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer, Best Buy Canada Ltd., was asked to leave her comfort zone earlier in her career, and the professional gain has been extraordinary. King has been recognized three times as one of Canada’s Most Powerful Women by the Women’s Executive Network, and was inducted into their hall of fame last year. Her substantial portfolio at Best Buy Canada includes strategic planning, budget/reporting, accounting and tax, and financial analysis. She also oversees information technology, legal and real estate.

It was at Maple Leaf Foods, Canada’s largest food company, where King experienced her “crescendo moment,” the pivotal point in her career. After King had served four and a half years as a vice president of finance, Maple Leaf CEO Michael McCain encouraged her to take on the role of Senior Vice President of Business Transformation. It would be a unique and varied role, well outside her familiar finance role, but clearly McCain saw something. “That experience was essential to my being prepared for my current role at Best Buy,” King says.

#### ➤ A sponsor plans.

American Banker magazine recognized Harris Bank and the efforts of President Ellen Costello, Harris Financial Group, for putting together a “top team” of women in executive leadership roles: women occupy approximately one-third of the executive positions at Harris. (Harris Financial Corp. is part of BMO Financial Group.)

Getting to that point involves a multi-faceted plan with champions at all levels, and across it all is a high-level version of sponsorship that acts on behalf of the organization to create the environment and imperative for sponsorship of specific individuals. Costello has demonstrated strong leadership to ensure that talent and performance management is an ongoing priority at Harris. Three or four times a year her executives come together for a strategic talent review. Leaders across each of the business units inventory the pipeline of talent and skills in light of current or anticipated openings among the leadership ranks.

All of this paves the way for mentoring and sponsorship to occur in various formats, from “speed mentoring” to peer-to-peer and executive-level one-on-one support. Costello herself then visibly sets the example for her direct reports. “We make sure we have a pool of diverse candidates in both race and gender at every level,” she says. It doesn’t happen by accident. It takes commitment, over time: it takes a plan.

# My view



*K.V. Kamath, Chairman of Infosys Technologies, is no stranger to equal opportunity. In his previous role as CEO of ICICI Bank, the largest private bank in India (he is currently non-executive chairman), Kamath was well-known for advancing women into leadership positions.*

At ICICI Bank, we believed the process really starts with recruitment. An organization needs to make sure that recruitment is merit-based, with no concern for gender and no typecasting of jobs. In our case, we started the process in the early 1980s and it gathered steam by 1985 or so. The process happened as a search for talent. There was no strategy or plan. Women were simply the best candidates for leadership positions.

From the first stage, namely merit-based recruitment, we needed to move to strictly merit-based evaluation, with no biases. As positions opened up in the [ICICI Bank] organization, we eschewed the tendency to say that certain jobs could be done by only one gender. So opportunities were open to all, and were filled on the basis of merit and potential. There was absolutely no preferential treatment given, nor were there quotas. Our belief is that quotas and so-called “gender-affirmative action” are not the way forward. It is culture change which is needed.

While there indeed is career planning, mentoring is subtle in our case. A potential leader, male or female, is fast-tracked, rotated, exposed to challenges, tested, and evaluated on the basis of successes and failures. Promotion is done on the basis of this evaluation.

If I were advising male business leaders today, I would go back to the first steps – merit-based recruitment and evaluation. After some introspection, companies should then decide whom to promote. The head of the organization must be the change leader, the evangelist. It is not an easy task to break down centuries-old biases. Almost everyone in the organization will have a reason to say why this will not succeed. One needs to be patient and persevere.

## ➤ Beyond sponsorship: the bigger picture

Individual relationships are at the heart of sponsorship, but organizations and governments are complementing sponsors’ efforts through support of women’s advancement in business overall.

“Countries need a very strong legislative environment to empower women,” says Leila Butt, Senior Economist at the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and author of the 2010 EIU study *Women’s economic opportunity: A new pilot index and global ranking*, a pioneering work on the subject. In Europe, some governments are imposing quotas on women’s representation on boards of directors. For example, in 2011, the French National Assembly adopted a law to impose quotas for women’s representation on boards in French publicly-listed companies and public enterprises. Similar laws have been passed in Norway and Spain, and momentum to do so is building in Germany and Belgium.



In North America, Women on Board™ connects talented, up-and-coming women with prominent board chairs and CEOs from major Canadian companies. The goal is to expand the cadre of women who are prepared to take on director roles at major public and private entities. Staying highly visible, Women on Board influences public policy by its very example.


For Sarah Raiss, who retired as Executive Vice President of Corporate Services for TransCanada in August 2011, Women on Board is a powerful force. Raiss is an outstanding example of a woman who has reached her potential – even in a male-centric sector such as energy.

Several years ago, Raiss, who had worked on boards of non-profits and a Crown corporation, was considering how she could move onto a for-profit board. She was in the first

“class” of Women on Board and credits the organization with matching her up with Bob Harding, then chair of Brookfield Asset Management. He helped her through the process of determining what for-profit boards to target and introduced her to another executive who recommended she consider Shoppers Drug Mart, Canada’s largest retail drugstore chain. Today she serves on the boards of Shoppers, the Business Development Bank of Canada and Commercial Metals Company. Raiss now works with Women on Board to identify prospective women board candidates and mentors. A powerful sponsor in her own right, Raiss’s legacy project as she left TransCanada was to put a plan in place to increase representation of women in senior management positions.

# The next step: putting sponsorship into practice





There is no one way to become a successful sponsor, and sponsorship styles vary by individual, sector and organization. There is no doubt, however, that sponsorship is powerful and essential to advance women to the ranks of leadership. More important, it can be learned. Our research confirms that great sponsors have several attributes in common. They are:

1. **Totally committed.** Successful sponsors have a firm belief in the potential of the person they sponsor. They know the risks: they may be putting their own careers on the line for the stands they take, and they know when they need to push harder.
2. **Well-connected.** To be effective, the sponsor should have strong relationships within the organization and an understanding of the people, personalities and resident skill sets. A sponsor knows the unwritten rules, what's valued in the organization, and who it's important to get to know.
3. **Persistent.** Once the sponsor determines that someone has the requisite talent, the sponsor will prevail over objections and obstacles in the interest of the individual's advancement. The sponsor will also stay in regular contact with the individual to ensure that there are no major barriers standing in the way of success.

4. **Willing to pave the way.** When introducing the individual to a new boss, client or customer, the sponsor will position the individual appropriately. Where no roads to top leaders exist, the sponsor will build them.
5. **Candid.** Honesty means telling someone both when they're doing a great job and when they've fallen short. The sponsoree may need to hear tough news about who are their supporters and their detractors, and people who create barriers may need to be confronted.

Who are the men and women who are not yet sponsors of the next generation of women leaders? Are they content to perpetuate old methods of talent management . . . or are they willing to become heroes?

**Annalisa King**  
Senior Vice President and  
Chief Financial Officer,  
Best Buy Canada Ltd.

“Make sponsorship a sustainable business practice. We want it to be integrated in everything we do. We never want to limit participation to women because we want these activities to develop as sustainable business practices for all. ”

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