

# Case study

## Sponsorship on the Diversifying Leadership programme

### Overview

Sponsorship plays a key role in the Diversifying Leadership programme and is highly valued by protégés and sponsors alike. Not to be confused with mentorship, sponsorship is a mutually beneficial arrangement, whereby a senior individual actively uses their organisational position and power to advance the career of a credible, high-potential junior individual in exchange for commitment and contributions that advance the sponsor's cause.

Historical barriers to career progression mean that high-potential BME employees struggle to get on the radar of influential senior professionals – the powerbrokers – who can open doors and advocate for them at critical junctures. This lack of sponsorship explains why women and other underrepresented groups are less likely to be assigned to the most sought after leadership roles and/or are reluctant to put themselves forward for high-risk, high-reward opportunities.

Significantly, the sponsor effect for BME employees is higher than that for women and men: minority employees are 65% more likely than their unsponsored peers to be satisfied with their career progression<sup>1</sup>. This is why a core element of the Diversifying Leadership programme is the incorporation of sponsorship process based on transparency and inclusive practice: the face-to-face element of the DL programme provides a conducive space for BME candidates to prepare for leadership; DL sponsors provide the access code to career doors previously locked.

From the University of Warwick, Gwen Van der Velden – *Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor (Student Learning Experience) and Academic Director* – describes her role as a sponsor for Dr Meleisa Ono-George, *Director of Student Experience and Associate Professor (Caribbean History)*.



### Process

When I was asked to sponsor Dr Meleisa Ono-George I was clear that I wanted Meleisa to succeed, but I wasn't equally clear on what sponsoring entailed. Advance HE provided a helpful webinar, which sorted that out quickly, so I was well prepared for a first meeting with Meleisa.

#### The first sponsoring meeting

Meleisa had already achieved much in terms of educational and curriculum enhancement with her academic department. I'd worked with her in a networking sense, but had not been able to engage much further. Our first sponsoring meeting was therefore about establishing a clear idea of what she wanted to achieve from the Diversifying Leadership programme, and for me to set out what parameters I would be working to. In my leadership role I am often asked for suggestions of colleagues who could help on a project, a committee or a working group. When I know someone has expertise and they are likely to deliver to a high standard, I'll suggest they are considered if they fit the criteria. Sometimes I'm also aware of colleagues who are outstanding but not very visible and I'll look out for opportunities to put them forward as an additional member of a group, so they become visible and we benefit from their expertise.

<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2013), "Forget a Mentor, find a Sponsor", Harvard Business Review Press

# Impact

## Opening doors to opportunity

After giving me a clear understanding and narrative of what her strengths were, Meleisa joined my mental file of people that might make a difference. I could not guarantee opportunities would arise, but they did, and Meleisa has been excellent in deciding what she could take on, and delivered every time. As it happens, Meleisa has both the expertise and political skills to influence policy, so I sought opportunities in my own networks to help make her visible nationally and by now, Meleisa really is progressing independently. Within the timescale of about a year, sponsoring has made a real difference, with benefits for Meleisa, the institution, our students and soon, policy.

## A two-way process

We had a number of meetings over coffee, and as part of this we spoke about the obstacles Meleisa and other colleagues of colour encountered. For me this meant I gained a deeper understanding of structural, social and unconscious racism.

However, as much as I had engaged on inclusion in a number of ways, I have been raised, socialised and educated in a predominantly white environment, with consequent values and assumptions. Whilst that also meant I was aware of white privilege, I sensed there was an 'unknown-unknown' and this is what Meleisa educated me on. Generous in answering my questions and eager to explore challenges together, Meleisa has taken me through a process of understanding which has been transformational.

An unexpected gain of the sponsoring process is that I am now confident to address issues within my university that are race related, and am able to bring senior colleagues along. Meleisa has also introduced me to a range of staff and students who understand what change is needed and my position allows us to work together on bringing change about.

In summary, it is fair to say we both benefitted considerably from the sponsoring opportunity, and I would warmly recommend the Diversifying Leadership programme to both candidates for the programme and their prospective sponsors.

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## About Diversifying Leadership

A key priority for Advance HE is to take a series of actions working with the sector to tackle the well documented under representation of BME leaders in UK higher education institutions; The Diversifying Leadership Programme is an important element of that work and since the programme launched in 2015 with investment from the UK HE funding bodies, we have seen the programme grow from strength to strength.

Diversifying Leadership will explore themes of power and influence, demystifying leadership, cultural identity and cultural capital, increasing your visibility and authentic leadership. It will feature leadership stories from high-profile HE leaders and includes the development of strategies for working effectively with sponsors and mentors.

The programme will:

- + Introduce you to leadership concepts and enable you to explore various elements of leadership and your role as a leader.
- + Introduce you to the concept of 'authentic leadership' and help you to identify your leadership style.
- + Enable you to explore motivation and influences.
- + Provide a safe space in which to discuss issues relating to your experiences of working in higher education.

[Find out more about the Diversifying Leadership programme](#)



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