Building your Inner Circle – Sponsors, Allies, and Mentors

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MENTOR

Helps you learn and grow

What mentors do

- Share knowledge and career advice
- Help develop skills
- Provide feedback on decisions
- Offer perspective from experience

Influence level: Usually advisory rather than promotional

Sponsor

Advocates for you and opens doors

What sponsors do

- Recommend you for promotions or opportunities
- Put your name forward in leadership discussions
- Use their influence to support you
- Connect you to powerful networks

Influence level: High - actively promotes your advancement

Ally

Supports you and stand up for fairness

What allies do

- Speak up when someone is treated unfairly
- Support underrepresented colleagues
- Amplify other's voices and ideas
- Promote a respectful and inclusive environment

Influence level: Varies depending on position

Comparison

Mentor: Teaches and advises you
Sponsor: Advocates for you and opens opportunities
Ally: Supports you and stand up for fairness

Mentors help you grow

Sponsors help you get promoted

Both are important, but **sponsors often determine career speed**.

How to build your inner circle

Be **INTENTIONAL, VISIBLE, STRATEGIC** in your relationships

NOT just networking randomly

Understand what you need from each role

Role	What you should get	Where to find them
Mentor	Advice, feedback, career navigation	Someone 2–10 years ahead of you
Sponsor	Advocacy for promotions and opportunities	Senior leader with influence
Ally	Support in meetings and everyday work	Peers and colleagues

How to find a mentor (easiest to start)

Look for someone who:

- Is **a few steps ahead** of you (not the CEO)
- Has **a career path you admire**
- Is known for **helping others**

How to approach them

Keep it simple and respectful.

What mentors like:

- Curious juniors
- Prepared questions
- Respect for their time

How to Build Allies (important in male-dominated teams)

Ways to create allies

- Help colleagues with work
- Share credit publicly
- Support their ideas in meetings
- Ask for opinions

Tip in male-dominated teams

Find allies among:

- other junior employees
- supportive senior colleagues
- people who value teamwork over hierarchy

Your **reputation spreads through allies**.

Sponsors Come Later
(But you can prepare now)

1. Deliver excellent work **Be** Reliable / Prepared / Detail-oriented

2. Be visible

- Speak in meetings
- Share updates on projects
- Present results clearly

3. Build trust with leaders

- Ask smart questions

  Over time a senior person may say things like:

  “She should lead this project.” — > That’s **sponsorship**.

What is the difference between sponsor and ally?

	Sponsor	Ally
Core role	Advances your career	Supports you and your ideas
Power level	Usually senior with influence	Can be any colleague
Typical action	Recommends you for promotions, projects	Speaks up for you, backs your ideas
Where support happens	Behind closed doors (leadership discussions)	In everyday interactions (meetings, teamwork)
Impact	Opens doors and opportunities	Creates support and fairness

What is the difference between sponsor and ally?

Sponsor → uses power to promote you 🚀 elevate your career.

Ally → stands with you and supports you, support your voice. 🤝

We build allies intentionally through collaboration.

Sponsors often emerge naturally after they see your work and trust you.

Strategic networking inside your company

Many juniors make this mistake:

❌ waiting to be noticed
❌ only working with their immediate team

Use your position as a JUNIOR to your advantage

Being junior helps:

- ask questions without pressure
- learn from everyone
- build relationships early

People often enjoy helping **motivated juniors**.

The key signal you want to send:

curious + reliable + collaborative

SO, WHO?

Imagine your

Mentor

Sponsor

Ally

Top 5 actions WOMEN can take to find or create male allies

1. **Identify potential allies:** look for men who already demonstrate inclusive behaviours and have values of justice and fairness

2. **Build trusted relationships with them:** start with informal conversations or collaborate on shared projects

3. **Share your experiences and career goals:** when the time is right, share your experiences, ambitions, career plan and outline your challenges

4. **Let them know how they can support you:** ask for feedback, advocacy in meetings, mentoring, and even sponsorship

5. **Give feedback and acknowledge their efforts:** give constructive feedback to male allies on their efforts, champion their allyship to others

Top 5 actions MEN can take to be allies and inclusive leaders

1. **Listen and Learn:** set up informal conversations with women colleagues and actively listen to their experiences. Learn about the barriers women face in the workplace

2. **Actively check yourself and your team for biases:** educate yourself on gender bias, microaggressions and dominant culture

3. **Amplify women's voices:** make space in meetings for women to speak, share their ideas and ensure they get credit for their contributions

4. **Adopt a policy of zero tolerance to bias and unacceptable behaviours:** challenge bias, sexism and harassment

5. **Mentor or sponsor a woman to develop her career:** offer guidance, feedback, and pass on opportunities. Recommend her to others.

How can women support male allies?

Share your experiences of the workplace

Give constructive feedback to male allies

Mentor a male colleague

Understand men’s issues

Barriers for women in the workplace

- Always on / complete availability expectation / overwork
- Male dominated culture and performance appraisal
- Lack of family friendly policies: flexibility, parental leave, childcare
- Lack of mentoring / sponsorship / development opportunities
- Unconscious bias and role stereotyping
- Pay / promotion gap, especially after career breaks for maternity leave
- Exclusionary networking
- Inappropriate comments, microaggressions, harassment

Tips for avoiding bias in everyday situations

1. **Meetings and calls:** rotate who leads discussions and ask quieter colleagues for their input

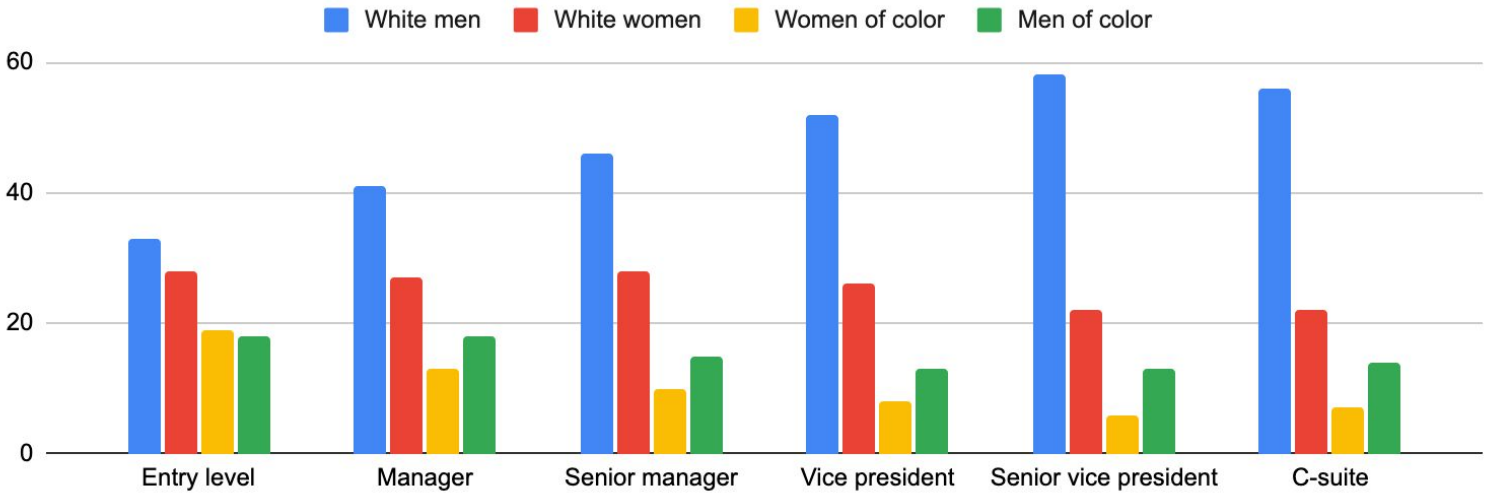
2. **Conversations with colleagues:** avoid making assumptions based on someone's appearance, background or characteristics

3. **Networking and social events:** choose locations that are neutral and accessible, consider timing and provide diverse activities

4. **Team assignments**: focus on the specific skills and experience needed

Women are underrepresented in the workplace and in leadership!

Representation in corporate role, by gender and race, % of employees



Source: McKinsey

Bias is the biggest barrier to inclusion

Unconscious bias: an implicit association, a mental short-cut to manage information

- It’s automatic
- It happens without us realizing
- Under stress and time pressures we judge in seconds
- Influenced by our experiences, upbringing and social context and media
- It unconsciously leads to prejudices, assumptions and discrimination