

# Advised, not Advanced: The Mentorship-Sponsorship Divide in High-Tech Leadership

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## *Abstract*

*Women in high-tech leadership can receive extensive mentorship yet remain stalled because they lack sponsorship, active advocacy by senior leaders with influence over promotions and high-visibility assignments. This study investigates the mentorship-sponsorship divide using a mixed-methods design: semi-structured interviews with 19 participants in Israeli high-tech (senior women leaders, HR directors, and male gatekeepers) triangulated with item-level survey data from 219 women in technology leadership. The qualitative analysis reveals three core themes: (1) a "Mentored to Death" phenomenon, where women accumulate development activities that rarely convert into upward mobility; (2) a sponsorship deficit driven by exclusionary informal networks and homophily in senior decision-making; and (3) bridging strategies, including accountable sponsorship programs and peer advocacy networks, that can close the gap between advice and advancement. The quantitative*

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## 1. Introduction

Leadership gender gaps persist in high-technology organizations despite sustained investment in development initiatives. A recurring pattern is that women receive extensive guidance on how to succeed but lack the political advocacy needed to convert readiness into promotion. This gap between mentorship and sponsorship is well documented in organizational research yet remains underexplored in the specific context of Israeli high-tech.

This paper investigates the divide between mentorship and sponsorship. Mentorship centers on learning and support; sponsorship centers on advocacy by a senior leader who uses positional influence to champion a protege's advancement (Hewlett, 2013). While both contribute to career development, they serve different functions and produce different outcomes, particularly in male-dominated technology environments where informal networks shape promotion decisions.

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The problem is not a lack of effort but a conversion gap: organizations can "develop" women without advancing them, a state many participants describe as being "mentored to death." We ask: How do high-tech women experience the transition (or failure to transition) from mentorship to sponsorship, and what organizational conditions either enable or block that transition?

We contribute a mechanism-focused qualitative account of how mentorship overload, the "Drinks and Deals" network effect, and the sponsorship deficit operate in practice. By identifying specific bridging strategies, we offer actionable guidance for organizations seeking to convert development investment into leadership mobility.

## **2. Literature review and theoretical framing**

### **2.1 Mentorship Versus Sponsorship: Conceptual Foundations**

Mentorship is a development relationship in which a more experienced individual provides guidance, feedback, and psychosocial support. Kram (1985) established the foundational taxonomy of mentoring functions, distinguishing career functions (coaching, exposure, sponsorship) from psychosocial functions (role modelling, counselling, friendship). Kram's framework revealed that the career-advancing dimension of mentoring, specifically the sponsorship component, was qualitatively distinct from its developmental dimensions. A mentor who offers advice differs from one who deploys positional influence to place a protege in a promotion pipeline. This distinction is central to the present study: the conversion failure from mentorship to sponsorship is not a matter of degree but of kind.

Hewlett (2013) formalized this distinction in practitioner and academic terms, defining sponsorship as a relationship in which a senior leader actively advocates for a protege's advancement by using political capital, endorsing the protege in talent reviews, and engineering access to high-visibility assignments. Hewlett's multi-industry data showed that employees with sponsors were 23% more likely to have moved up in their careers than those with mentors alone. The sponsor effect was strongest in promotion-critical moments: calibration meetings, succession planning sessions, and informal pre-decision conversations where readiness assessments are formed. For women in male-dominated industries, this effect is especially consequential because these arenas are often closed to those outside the dominant network.

Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010) provided one of the most widely cited empirical demonstrations of the mentorship-sponsorship divide. Surveying over 4,000 MBA alumni at a global consulting firm, they found that women were equally likely to have mentors as men but far less likely to have sponsors. Women's mentors tended to offer psychosocial support and coaching, while men's mentors more often functioned as sponsors who actively intervened in career decisions. The result was that equally talented women progressed more slowly: they were "over-mentored and under-sponsored." This finding reframes the advancement gap not as

a pipeline problem but as a conversion problem, where developmental investment fails to translate into upward mobility.

## **2.2 Gendered Organizational Structures and Leadership Prototypes**

Acker (1990) introduced the concept of gendered organizations, arguing that organizational structures, job hierarchies, and evaluation criteria embed assumptions about the ideal worker that systematically privilege men. In Acker's framework, the abstract "disembodied worker" at the centre of organizational design is implicitly male: unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, available for unlimited hours, and conforming to masculine norms of authority and self-promotion. This structural gendering means that even when organizations adopt formal equality policies, the criteria by which readiness, leadership potential, and cultural fit are assessed can reproduce gender inequality. For sponsorship, this implies that the willingness of senior leaders to invest political capital in a protege is filtered through gendered assumptions about who "looks like" a leader.

Eagly and Karau (2002) formalized this dynamic in role congruity theory, which posits that women in leadership face a double bind: they are evaluated against both the expectations for their gender role (communal, supportive, warm) and the expectations for the leader role (agentic, assertive, decisive). When women display agentic behaviour, they face backlash for violating gender norms; when they display communal behaviour, they are judged as lacking leadership qualities. This theory predicts that women will be seen as "not quite ready" for leadership at higher rates than equivalently qualified men, a pattern that manifests in sponsorship decisions as reluctance by senior leaders to stake their reputation on a female protege. Role congruity bias does not require conscious prejudice: it operates through evaluative heuristics in talent reviews and succession planning.

Kanter (1977) demonstrated that numerical representation shapes power dynamics within organizations. In her study of a large industrial corporation, Kanter found that women in token positions (less than 15% of a group) experienced heightened visibility, contrast effects, and role encapsulation. Tokens were paradoxically more visible yet more constrained: expected to represent their entire group while conforming to stereotypical roles. For sponsorship, tokenism creates a dual barrier. Potential sponsors perceive higher reputational risk in championing a token (because the protege's performance is scrutinized more intensely), and tokens themselves may hesitate to seek sponsorship for fear of confirming the perception that they require special treatment.

## **2.3 Network Homophily and Sponsorship Access**

Ibarra (1992) examined sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm, finding that men's networks were more homophilous (concentrated among other men) and more connected to senior decision-makers, while women's networks were more heterogeneous but less instrumentally effective. Men derived greater career returns from their networks because their contacts were positioned closer to resource allocation and promotion decisions. For

sponsorship, this means that the pool of potential sponsors, predominantly senior men, is structurally more accessible to junior men than to junior women, even absent explicit discrimination.

Rivera (2012) extended the homophily logic to selection and evaluation contexts, showing that elite professional service firms used "cultural fit" as a hiring criterion in ways that reproduced demographic similarity. Evaluators favoured candidates whose leisure activities, interaction styles, and self-presentation matched their own. Applied to sponsorship, Rivera's findings suggest that senior leaders select proteges through similarity-based comfort rather than merit-based assessment: they sponsor individuals who remind them of their younger selves. In male-dominated leadership contexts, this produces a closed system in which sponsorship circulates among men.

Granovetter (1973) established that weak ties, connections to individuals outside one's immediate social circle, are valuable for accessing novel information and opportunities. Strong ties (close friends, frequent contacts) provide redundant information, while weak ties bridge structural holes. For women in high-tech, the sponsorship deficit is partly a weak-tie deficit: women's networks tend to be denser but smaller, with fewer bridges to the senior decision-makers who control promotion outcomes. Military alumni networks, sports clubs, and after-hours social events in the Israeli high-tech context function as weak-tie generators for men, creating informal channels to sponsorship that women cannot easily replicate.

#### **2.4 Meritocracy, Bias, and the Conversion Gap**

Castilla and Benard (2010) documented the "paradox of meritocracy": organizations that explicitly adopted meritocratic values were more likely to favour men in performance-based reward decisions than organizations that did not emphasise meritocracy. The mechanism is that meritocratic framing gives evaluators moral licence to trust their own judgments, reducing scrutiny of biased assessments. For sponsorship, this paradox is directly relevant: high-tech organizations that pride themselves on talent-based advancement may be especially vulnerable to sponsorship inequality, because the belief that "the best rise" suppresses awareness that informal advocacy networks determine who is considered "the best."

Bol and Fogel-Yaari (2024) showed that cumulative micro-biases in performance evaluation erode women's career progression over time. Using longitudinal data from accounting firms, they found that small, individually insignificant biases in annual reviews compounded into substantial career gaps over five to ten years. This "death by a thousand cuts" mechanism is relevant to the mentorship-sponsorship divide because it explains how women can appear to be progressing (receiving positive feedback, completing development programs) while actually falling behind in the invisible currency of sponsorship and endorsement.

Diehl, Stephenson and Dzubinski (2020) developed and validated the Gender Bias Scale across multiple industries, identifying 27 distinct forms of gender bias organised into macro, meso, and micro levels. Their scale included

items measuring mentoring access, sponsorship access, and workplace exclusion, providing a measurement framework that aligns with the qualitative themes in this study. The scale's validation demonstrated that gender bias in advancement is not a single phenomenon but a multi-layered system of barriers, each reinforcing the others.

### 2.5 Contemporary Context: Persistent Gaps Despite Investment

McKinsey and Company (2023) reported that women continue to lose ground at every stage of the corporate pipeline: from entry level (48% women) to C-suite (28% women). The "broken rung" at the first promotion to manager remains the largest single barrier, with women promoted at lower rates than men despite comparable performance ratings. Critically, the report noted that companies with formal sponsorship programs showed smaller pipeline attrition than those relying on mentorship alone, providing industry-level evidence that the mentorship-sponsorship conversion is not merely a theoretical distinction but a measurable organizational lever.

Leslie (2019) reviewed the literature on diversity initiatives and concluded that many well-intentioned programs produce unintended consequences. Mentorship programs, in particular, can create a false sense of progress, where organizations report high mentoring participation rates while advancement gaps persist. Leslie argued that initiatives require embedded accountability, measurable outcomes, and senior leadership commitment to affect structural change. This finding motivates the present study's attention to accountable sponsorship as a bridging mechanism.

#### Evidence summary

**Table 1**

Source	Key Point	Relevance to This Study
Kram (1985)	Mentoring functions are multidimensional; sponsorship is a distinct career function	Establishes the theoretical basis for separating development from advocacy
Hewlett (2013)	Sponsors use political capital to place proteges in advancement positions	Defines the conceptual distinction and expected outcomes
Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010)	Women can be mentored yet excluded from promotion pipelines	Connects advice-heavy support to opportunity-light outcomes
Acker (1990)	Organizations embed gendered assumptions in structures	Frames the systemic context in which sponsorship operates
Eagly and Karau (2002)	Role congruity theory predicts backlash against	Explains reluctance to sponsor women into visible

Source	Key Point	Relevance to This Study
	women in leader roles	positions
Kanter (1977)	Token status increases visibility pressure and constrains behaviour	Contextualizes the experience of women in male-dominated settings
Ibarra (1992)	Homophily in networks limits cross-gender sponsorship access	Explains why senior men sponsor other men
Rivera (2012)	Hiring and selection as cultural matching favors demographic similarity	Extends homophily logic to sponsorship selection
Granovetter (1973)	Weak ties provide access to novel opportunities and bridge structural holes	Explains why exclusion from informal networks limits sponsorship
Castilla and Benard (2010)	Meritocracy claims can mask bias in evaluation and reward	Explains why development does not automatically convert to promotion
Bol and Fogel-Yaari (2024)	Cumulative micro-biases erode women's career progression	Shows how small evaluation gaps compound over time
Diehl, Stephenson and Dzubinski (2020)	Gender bias operates through measurable everyday experiences at multiple levels	Provides measurement framework for bias mechanisms
McKinsey and Company (2023)	Women remain underrepresented at every pipeline stage	Establishes the persistence of the advancement gap
Leslie (2019)	Diversity initiatives can produce unintended consequences without accountability	Warns against treating mentorship programs as sufficient

*Source:* Author's creation

### 3. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods design. The primary investigation is qualitative, based on semi-structured interviews with 19 participants (Stage 1). Findings are triangulated with item-level survey data from a parallel quantitative study (N = 219, Stage 2) that measured experienced career barriers, including mentoring and sponsorship access, using validated items on a 5-point Likert scale.

#### 3.1 Qualitative Component: Research Design

Semi-structured interviews examined how mentorship and sponsorship shape advancement in high-tech leadership.

### 3.2 Participants

We used purposeful sampling to recruit participants with experience-based insight into leadership progression and organizational gatekeeping in technology organizations. Participants were recruited via professional networks and organizational contacts. The final sample included 19 leaders and leadership-adjacent gatekeepers: 17 women (the focal group) and two male leaders for additional context.

Role category

Table 2

Role Category	Count
VP-level technical leadership (VP R&D, VP R&D & Founders)	7
HR leadership (HR Directors, HR Managers)	5
Director / Senior Manager (technical and product)	5
Male gatekeepers (CTO, VP)	2

Source: Author's creation

### 3.3 Data Collection

Interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were conducted either in person or via secure online platforms. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded.

The interview guide (peer reviewed for clarity and relevance) covered: (1) career trajectory and leadership self-perception, (2) workplace culture and leadership visibility, (3) promotions and performance evaluation processes, (4) mentorship versus sponsorship experiences, and (5) recommendations for improving women's advancement.

### 3.4 Transcription and Data Management

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized (removing names and identifying organizational details) and stored securely. Where feasible, transcripts were cross-checked against interview notes.

### 3.5 Analysis

We used qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in how mentorship and sponsorship shaped advancement. The analytic workflow followed structured stages: holistic reading; data organization and condensation; segmentation into analysis units; coding and categorization (theme development and category construction); holistic re-reading; and verification of interpretations.

### 3.6 Trustworthiness and Reliability

To enhance trustworthiness, we maintained an audit trail documenting key analytic decisions and used peer review and peer debrief to surface alternative interpretations. Where feasible, we used member checking by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants. These steps were complemented by reflexive attention to the researcher's position and prolonged engagement with the study context.

### 4. Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed three core themes, supported by item-level survey data (N = 219) from a parallel quantitative study of women in Israeli high-tech leadership. The survey measured mentoring and sponsorship access using validated barrier items (5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores on forward-coded items and reverse-coded items indicate greater experienced barriers.

The quantitative data confirm the qualitative pattern: the Lack of Mentoring factor (3 items; M = 3.62, SD = 0.92) scored significantly higher than the Lack of Sponsorship factor (2 items; M = 3.09, SD = 1.21), indicating that women report receiving mentoring but lacking sponsorship. The sponsorship factor showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80), indicating that the two sponsorship items capture a coherent construct. Mentorship was abundant; sponsorship, the active political capital required for promotion, was scarce for women, blocked by structural homophily, risk aversion, and exclusionary informal networks.

#### Lack of mentoring factor

Table 3

Item	Factor	M	SD	Top-Box %
I have received significant mentoring (R)	Lack of Mentoring	3.48	1.28	57.1
I have had a female mentor (R)	Lack of Mentoring	3.58	1.42	59.6
I have had to learn how to lead on my own	Lack of Mentoring	3.80	1.04	67.9
Other leaders have recommended me for advancement (R)	Lack of Sponsorship	2.87	1.24	31.5

Item	Factor	M	SD	Top-Box %
I have had another leader sponsor me for promotion (R)	Lack of Sponsorship	3.30	1.40	48.9

Note. N = 219. (R) = reverse-coded. Top-box = percentage scoring 4 or 5. Higher means on reverse-coded items indicate the barrier is less experienced (i.e., support was present).

Source: Author's creation

### Theme 1: The "Mentored to Death" Phenomenon

Women in the sample reported high engagement in development activities that rarely led to upward mobility. Participants described a cycle of "over-mentoring," where they received continuous feedback on soft skills, communication style, and confidence, but were excluded from the strategic assignments that trigger promotion.

One senior director described this as being "mentored to death":

*"I had so many meetings, training, and check-ins with various mentors, but none could actually pull me into the next level. They offered suggestions on how to improve my communication skills, yet I stayed in the same position."*

This pattern suggests that organizations use mentorship as a substitute for advancement. Women are assigned mentors to "fix" perceived gaps in readiness, often framed as a need for more assertiveness or "executive presence," while men are simply promoted based on potential. A hiring manager noted the contrast:

*"Men will apply for roles even when they don't fully meet the requirements. Women, however, self-eliminate if they don't meet 100% of the listed criteria, and the organization reinforces this by sending them to more training."*

The result is a "preparedness trap": women accumulate advice and certifications, but without a sponsor to advocate for them in closed-door calibration meetings, their readiness does not convert into a new role.

### Theme 2: The Sponsorship Deficit and the "Drinks and Deals" Effect

If mentorship is about advice, sponsorship is about power. Participants consistently identified sponsorship as the missing link in their career progression, but found it difficult to secure due to the exclusionary nature of informal networks.

Several participants described the "Drinks and Deals" effect, where critical relationship-building happened in spaces women were culturally or practically excluded from: late-night drinks, military alumni networks, or sports events. One hiring manager explained the mechanics of this exclusion:

*"Networking plays a huge role. Many promotions happen through informal networks, alumni connections, military backgrounds, or soccer games, traditional male-dominated spaces that create closed circles women don't have access to."*

This exclusion creates a sponsorship deficit. Senior leaders (mostly men) tend to sponsor those they trust and feel comfortable with, often other men who

remind them of their younger selves. This homophily is reinforced by a perception of risk. Following #MeToo, some participants noted that male executives were hesitant to engage in close mentorship or sponsorship relationships with junior women to avoid "what people might think," further isolating women from power.

The consequence is that women remain invisible when high-stakes decisions are made. As one participant summed up:

*"I worked incredibly hard, but the key decisions happened over lunch breaks, where I wasn't present."*

### Theme 3: Bridging Strategies and the "Queen Bee" Complexity

Participants employed specific strategies to bridge the gap between advice and advocacy, though success was uneven.

**Formalizing Accountability.** Structured sponsorship programs worked only when they included accountability mechanisms. One participant described a program where sponsors were required to report on their protege's progress as a "game changer," because it forced the sponsor to spend political capital rather than just giving advice:

*"They didn't just give me a sponsor on paper. My sponsor had to report on my career progress. Suddenly, people knew I was in line for a leadership spot."*

**Peer Networks as "Safe" Sponsorship.** Lacking access to the "old boys' club," some women formed their own power blocks. Participants mentioned networks like Baot (a community for women in tech) as vital for normalizing ambition and sharing salary data, though these networks often lacked the direct power to promote.

**Navigating the "Queen Bee."** Sponsorship from senior women was not guaranteed. Some participants described a "Queen Bee" phenomenon, where senior women, having fought hard for their spot, distanced themselves from junior women to maintain their own status. As one director cautioned:

*"If you see a senior woman acting like a queen bee, take it as an example of what not to become."*

When sponsorship did happen, whether from a male ally challenging the status quo or a senior woman reaching back, it was decisive. One leader recalled the moment her manager switched from mentor to sponsor:

*"He saw what I could do and fought for me. Without his voice, I might have stayed stuck. I needed someone with real power to say, 'She deserves this role.' That's when I finally got promoted."*

## 5. Discussion

The findings reveal a structural disconnect between development and advancement, confirmed by both qualitative themes and quantitative measurement. Organizations invest in mentorship for women but fail to provide the political advocacy, sponsorship, that converts readiness into promotion. The quantitative

data make this visible at scale: the Lack of Mentoring factor scored  $M = 3.62$ , while the Lack of Sponsorship factor scored  $M = 3.09$ , indicating that women report receiving mentoring but lacking the advocacy that converts development into mobility. The sponsorship items showed strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ), confirming that sponsorship access is a coherent and measurable construct. This pattern is consistent with Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010), who documented that women are over-mentored and under-sponsored, and with Hewlett (2013), who argued that sponsorship, not mentorship, is the critical lever for upward mobility.

The "Mentored to Death" pattern aligns with Kanter's (1977) observation that token status creates heightened visibility pressure. Women accumulate development activities as visible evidence of readiness, yet these activities function as a substitute for advancement rather than a pathway to it. The organization interprets mentorship as investment; women experience it as a cycle that defers promotion.

The sponsorship deficit connects directly to network homophily (Ibarra, 1992) and cultural matching in selection processes (Rivera, 2012). When senior leaders sponsor individuals who resemble their younger selves, the result is a closed system that reproduces existing leadership demographics. The "Drinks and Deals" effect articulates how informal social spaces, military alumni networks, sports events, and after-hours socializing, operate as gatekeeping arenas that exclude women from the relationship-building required for sponsorship.

The bridging strategies identified by participants, particularly accountable sponsorship programs, suggest that structural interventions can interrupt these patterns. When sponsors are required to report on protege progress, the relationship shifts from advisory to advocacy. This finding extends Leslie's (2019) argument that diversity initiatives require embedded accountability to produce intended outcomes.

The "Queen Bee" complexity adds nuance to assumptions about within-gender solidarity. Senior women do not automatically sponsor junior women; some actively distance themselves from the advancement of other women to protect their own position. This finding is consistent with research on competitive dynamics among tokens (Kanter, 1977) and highlights that sponsorship programs cannot rely on gender-matching alone.

## **6. Implications, limitations and future rresearch**

### **6.1 Practical Implications**

Organizations seeking to close leadership gaps should treat sponsorship as an advancement mechanism rather than a supplement to mentoring. Effective programs pair high-potential women with senior sponsors, define advocacy behaviors (e.g., nomination for stretch roles), and track outcomes over time.

## 6.2 Limitations

This qualitative study uses purposeful sampling and a leader-heavy participant pool; it is designed for analytic generalization rather than statistical inference. Transferability depends on context, so we report recruitment and participant role categories to support reader judgment.

## 6.3 Future Research

Future work can test whether accountable sponsorship programs shift promotion outcomes, and how organizational policies can reduce reputational-risk fears while maintaining safe professional boundaries.

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