The Blueprint: Keys to Successful Sponsorship
In the Fall of 2013, Cadwalader piloted its unique sponsorship program

for a small number of high-performing women attorneys. The program is the brainchild of the Firm’s Women’s Task Force, a group of five female partners formed to improve the Firm’s retention and promotion of women attorneys, and the Firm’s Chairman.

After extensive research and consultation with numerous diversity experts, we determined that of the many concepts organizations explore to promote diversity, a formal sponsorship program would be most likely to move the needle. The key to the Firm’s sponsorship pilot is providing a small group of our most talented women, the “protégés,” the opportunity to work closely with the most powerful partners at the Firm, the mostly male “sponsors,” to learn the soft skills necessary to practice law at the highest levels. So that protégés get the most out of their experience, the sponsorship pilot has included seminars and coaching to ensure that the women attorneys were equipped to capitalize on their new sponsor relationships. Similarly, the pilot also provided coaching and information for sponsors to facilitate productive relationships with their protégés.

Our sponsorship pilot already has enjoyed significant success, playing a role in partner and special counsel promotions among participants. Building on that success, Cadwalader now is expanding the sponsorship program to include other diverse attorneys.

We are still learning, and we realize that sponsorship is only one strategy to address diversity and inclusion challenges. But we have gained valuable skills from our experience creating and launching a unique sponsorship program at America’s oldest major law firm, and we are eager to help others develop ground-breaking ideas to increase diversity at all types of organizations.

Our Managing Partner’s View

The practice of law is changing. To compete among the elite in our field we need to deliver more than reliable execution. We need to deliver more creativity, more strategy, more understanding of our clients’ businesses and their industries. We believe that teams composed of lawyers of varying gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation are not only more representative of our clients, but offer a variety of viewpoints and a wider range of experience that is critical to solving the toughest problems and giving the best and most creative legal advice.

How do we create an environment for female and other diverse attorneys that meaningfully distinguishes us from other firms? What does every bright, hard-working, ambitious young lawyer — or banker, or any other professional — diverse or not, want? They want a clear path to success. They want to know that if they put in the hours and dedicate the effort and passion, that they can succeed in their firm. Diverse attorneys need to feel every day that the Firm will do what’s necessary to support them. That support must come from the leadership of the Firm. The focus must be constant, and we need programs and structures to put women and other diverse attorneys in a position to succeed and to become leaders at our Firm.

We believe our Sponsorship Program does just that. Since the program’s founding in 2013, we have promoted two of the women to partner and five more to Special Counsel. We are so pleased with our results that we are currently in the process of broadening the program to include other diverse attorneys, and we hope for similar results.

Until we get leadership of our organizations to be more diverse, with representation of women, racial minorities and the LGBT community, our work will not be done. The only way for us to accomplish this is by each of us taking on the challenge of diversity and making it “our issue.” And finally, if a 222-year-old Wall Street institution like ours can make an impact by making a commitment, thinking creatively and sustaining our effort, then your organization certainly can do the same.

Tell people exactly what to do.
We found that while many of our partners already utilized sponsorship principles, they still needed (and wanted) explicit guidance on the actions that make a truly good sponsor. No matter how well-intentioned or excited they were about the program, our sponsors still needed concrete examples of what to do. So we detailed activities for sponsors to suggest with protégés, and celebrated when sponsors undertook those tasks. Similarly, the protégés sought and were given granularity as to how to approach their sponsors, what types of activities or assignments to seek, and what their expectations should be from the program. As we suggested more ideas to all participants in the program, the program gained impressive traction.

Be flexible and open to unique ideas.
There is no secret formula for a successful sponsorship program. What may work in one organization could fail in another. In developing our sponsorship pilot, we considered numerous ideas from experts on how to structure the program and concluded that we had to create our own formula. For example, rather than utilize more traditional sponsor–and–protégé pairings, we created sponsorship circles giving each protégé not just one but several sponsors with whom they could work. This resonated with the way we work among multiple offices and areas of law, and it ultimately became a strength of the sponsorship pilot.

Establish metrics and accountability.
Structure and accountability for both sponsors and protégés is critical to ensuring that a sponsorship program gains momentum beyond the launch. We developed an internal database where participants could log their sponsorship activities, and we established monthly reporting requirements to be shared with the Firm’s Management Committee. This effectively provided regular reminders to interact with their sponsor/protégé and helped establish program discipline. We also conducted periodic interviews to obtain feedback on the pilot and ensure that sponsors and protégés were actively participating. Finally, we established internal goals on activities conducted within the program, as well as longer-term goals for the promotion of women.

Get buy-in and concrete support from power.
The single biggest asset in establishing the sponsorship pilot has been the support of our Firm’s Chairman and Management Committee. As active champions of the program, these leaders sent a powerful message to all of the partners that participation is valued and important. To that end, all significant sponsorship communications come directly from our Chairman or Managing Partner.

Do it yourself.
Consultants and experts are useful for certain aspects of establishing a program, and we utilized those resources in developing our sponsorship pilot. But we found that to really address the tough issues, we had to devote significant internal resources. No one on the outside can truly understand an organization and its unique needs. No consultant can predict internal allies and challengers, or perfectly craft the internal messaging that can motivate the most senior people. Only you know how to do that, so you have to be ready and willing to roll up your sleeves and “just do it.”

There’s no right way to communicate.
Establishing a sponsorship program requires a significant cultural change requiring considerable communication to constituencies across the Firm, from partners to junior lawyers and senior lawyers to administrative staff. We started by explaining the basic sponsorship concepts, the nuts and bolts of the pilot program, and detailing the expectations and requirements of participating partners. To do this we used every conceivable means of communication—e-mail, face-to-face group meetings, personal visits to critical partners, and seminars for administrative staff. We learned that, no matter what communication we thought would resonate, it wasn’t enough. You have to communicate, then communicate again … and again.

Tools for Creating a Sponsorship Program
Inaugural Sponsor Class

“The program encouraged me to give my protégé more responsibility, including client-facing time and handling more complex matters.”

“As a result of the sponsorship program, I’ve taken my protégé to conferences and actively worked to raise her profile in the industry.”

“The program is a statement from the highest levels of the firm that we value this and recognize the importance of diversity.”

Inaugural Protégé Class

“I feel that my involvement in the sponsorship program is recognition and validation of my work at the firm.”

“I feel more positive about my career development and opportunities at Cadwalader after being selected for this pilot.”

“The program has given protégés exposure to the unwritten rules of the firm. It has been a reality check on what it takes to make partner.”

“Because of the sponsorship program, my sponsor has taken a serious interest in my career. He has made a lot of efforts to include me and invite me to meetings, court, networking events. He is clearly aware of my goal of promotion and is helping me along the path.”
To learn more about the Sponsorship Program, contact Sonnia Shields, Director of Diversity, at sonnia.shields@cwt.com.