



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 3 - How to Find Mentors and Sponsors

By [Megan Monson](#), [Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#),
[Chandra Shih](#)
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Rachel Dikovics: Welcome back to the Women's Initiative Network: "Real Talk." I'm one of your hosts, Rachel Dikovics. I'm a White Collar Criminal Defense attorney at Lowenstein Sandler.

Megan Monson: And I'm one of your other hosts, Megan Monson, counsel in Lowenstein Sandler's Employee Benefits & Executive Compensation practice group. And today we're fortunate enough to be joined by a guest speaker.

Chandra Shih: Hi everyone, I'm Chandra Shih. I'm a partner here at Lowenstein Sandler in our Tech Group, on what we lovingly refer to as the Deal Team.

Rachel Dikovics: Thanks, Chandra. On this episode of "Real Talk," we're focusing on how important it is for professional women to find mentors and sponsors. According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett, author of the book, "Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor", women are only half as likely as men to have a sponsor who helps to guide their career and build their network. Together mentors and sponsors can serve as your own sort of personal board of directors. Today, we're discussing the difference between a mentor and a sponsor, how to find each of them, and their importance to your career development. Let's dive right in starting with the basics. Chandra, what do you think the difference is between a sponsor and a mentor?

Chandra Shih: I think for me, the interesting thing about sponsors and mentors is that they can be the same person, but, there really is a difference in my mind. A mentor can really be anyone in your life who helps shape your personal or professional development in one way or another. It can be teachers, it can be coaches, it could be friends or family, it could be people at work. But, they're not necessarily people who have to have an impact in advancing your career. For me, I think sponsors are people who can have and do have a direct impact in advancing your career. I think of a sponsor as a champion, someone who at your place of work or at the organization that you're at and looking to advance in is advocating for you and with you, even in rooms that

you're not in. For me having both is important, but for career advancement, having sponsors is hugely important.

Megan Monson: Yeah, I echo everything Chandra said and at a more junior level, it's going to be much more common to have mentors and have a multitude of mentors. Whether it's people you've met at a professional capacity, whether it's people in your personal life, but those are people who are really providing you advice and guidance as you navigate through the ropes of your career in practicing law or whatever other professional career you're in. I think as you get a little bit more senior and you're looking at where you want your career to go, that's definitely when a sponsor is going to come into play and really help guide you and finding you those opportunities for advancement to take your career to the next level.

Rachel Dikovics: So how did each of you meet the mentors and sponsors that are part of your lives today?

Megan Monson: That's a great question. Interestingly enough, when I was in law school, I joined a bunch of organizations where I was getting lined up with various mentors. At that point in my career, albeit early on, I thought that's how you would find the people who are going to be guiding you and providing you advice throughout your career, these arbitrary matchups. I went to lunch with those people and had a cursory level relationship, but it didn't really go anywhere. It was interesting to hear about their career path and how they got to where they were, but they didn't take much interest in my growth and I just didn't have a natural connection with them.

I found that as I started actually practicing, the best relationships that I've built in terms of mentors and sponsors happened organically. They were just by function of the people that I was either working with in my practice group, doing good work so people would take an interest in me. Then giving me more opportunities and it became a two-way street, or currently meeting people in our women's organization. It was building those relationships and finding people that I connected with on a personal level, as well as a professional level, because you want to have it be a relationship that not only you are enjoying putting the time in and spending with. But, also spending time with somebody who you respect and is going to be providing you guidance that you appreciate and would take them up on.

Chandra Shih: I agree with that completely. The most valuable sponsor and mentor or relationships in my life are ones that definitely came about organically. Sharing interests and being able to have a conversation with the person, feel comfortable discussing sensitive things like what your sort of hopes and dreams and goals are for your career and your life. It helps a lot when you can have those kind of conversations with people that you trust and even better if they're people that you view as role models for yourself, right? People that you want to mirror your life after, or mirror your career after. Getting to meet people that you want to step into their shoes is a huge opportunity. I do think working at a law firm, for example, with lots of other attorneys who've been doing this for a while is a great opportunity to find and meet people who can be potential mentors or sponsors for you.

Chandra Shih: I think it's easier to do that once you've started your professional career than when you're in law school. Unfortunately, because I agree, Megan, it feels a little like speed dating when you're trying to meet potential mentors who are gracious and have volunteered their time to come and meet you, but, it almost feels a little forced and you don't know what you have in common. You don't know what you're looking to do or what your career's going to shape like. Those relationships are still very worthwhile and you should pursue them because you might hit it off with someone and it's great. But, also don't feel guilty if you have to let some of those go because not everything's sustainable and you have to focus your energy on the things that sort of click and work.

Megan Monson: No, and that's a really good point. Is that it may serve a different purpose than what you were initially expecting. Even starting out some of the mentors I had when I first started practicing law are not the same mentors that I have now. Those relationships are going to change as your career develops. You could still maintain some of the same mentors throughout your career, but, you're going to pick up other people along the way and your network is going to build.

Chandra Shih: A funny concept that I hadn't thought about, but, that I have seen people discuss recently is the idea of shifting roles. At some point in your life, people who may have been mentors to you, you end up as peers, or maybe you've surpassed them in one way or another from a career perspective. You start to fall out of that mentor-mentee relationship, but it doesn't mean you can't have a great friendship. It's interesting because it's a natural evolution.

Rachel Dikovics: Absolutely. Can you each talk a little bit about the way that you each interact with both your mentors and sponsors today? What do you go to each of those people for?

Megan Monson: That's a really good question. For me, most often I go to my mentor on a much more frequent basis and when I'm looking for more general advice or guidance. Whether it's not even necessarily on a particular legal issue, but just trying to navigate certain things. For example, going on maternity leave, navigating through firm policies and how to figure out the best way to do that and keeping your docket full. That's what I would say a more personal level discussion. I find sometimes my mentors are either people that I can have that personal level of connection with so I feel comfortable having those relationships and discussions. Similar to having discussions about work- life balance and just figuring out how to do a good job, have a great career, meet all of my career goals, but not losing myself in the process because those people have already been there.

As Chandra said, I look to them as a role model. Also, on the substantive side, at least some of my professional mentors I go to them for guidance to learn about their career path or on a particular substantive issue that I know that they have more experience on to just bounce ideas off of versus utilizing my sponsor, I'd say is more so when I'm thinking about my long term career goals and what, even my short term goals are to get me there and how to get to that next level. I would say having more career- focused discussions about where I want my career to go, how I think it can get there, and talking to that

person about what kind of opportunities I can utilize to make those next steps.

Chandra Shih:

Those are all great points and I agree with all of them. The only other thing I'd add is staying in communication with people. Generally giving them updates about yourself even if you don't need advice or you don't need, "Hey, what is my next stepping stone in my career?" It helps people feel like they're part of your journey. The last thing you want to do is take people, like your sponsors or your mentors, by surprise. If they feel like they are having regular conversations with you, they know what's going on. It just creates a stronger bond and it allows them to be empowered to help you in ways that you may not realize. A mentor or a sponsor may recognize if they feel like something's off with you lately.

Maybe it's that you do need help in some way, but you haven't realized it. Or maybe you do have big life events coming up, like going on maternity leave or other stuff and how is that going to impact your career development? You may be thinking about it, but not voicing it and having those people in the loop, knowing what's going on, it gives them the opportunity to check in with you as well. What makes a successful relationship is having it be a two-way street. You always want to be the one who's advocating for yourself and making the effort because chances are your sponsor or mentor have other people that they are also sponsoring or mentoring and they're busy. Really take it upon yourself to make sure that you are part of their life in a meaningful way. It helps both of you.

Megan Monson:

That's a great point because thinking about the relationships that I have with those folks in my circle, even if there's not anything I particularly want to talk about with them, I'll schedule a time maybe every other month to have a catch up and get some coffee and just keep that personal connection going. To your point, it's making sure not only they're invested in and understand where things are from a professional side, but you're still maintaining that relationship because you've developed those relationships with people because they're invested in you, you get along, you have a good personal connection, and you want to spend time with those people. Making sure to continue to take time and invest it both in yourself and that relationship I think is key.

To the point you made about it being a two-way street, I couldn't agree more. Anyone who's going to be a sponsor or a mentor is taking time out of their already busy schedule. You want to make sure that not only you're making the best use of their time, but also think of ways that you can try to make their lives easier or better in some capacity as well. They're helping you out and giving you advice so you want to be reciprocal and see what you can do to help them.

Rachel Dikovics:

I totally agree with all those points and specifically what Chandra mentioned about keeping in touch with people, I think is critical to maintaining both sponsor and mentor relationships. One thing that I've tried to do is keep in touch with people from previous jobs and even previous parts of my career. You never know how those connections may be helpful to you in the future. The more that you can keep those relationships alive the better. That leaves

me to another question, which is, do you think that it's important to have mentors and sponsors both at your place of work and externally, or do you think it's okay to have them just internally?

Chandra Shih: I think it's important to have mentors in all facets of your life. You're doing yourself a disservice if you only have mentors at work because we're whole people who aren't just machines that work our entire lives and have nothing else going on. I think you're almost doing yourself a disservice by neglecting these other parts of your life if you don't have folks that you look up to or lean on in that mentor capacity in the outside world. For sponsors, the answer is, it depends. Having sponsors internally at your workplace or an organization that you're at, maybe you volunteer somewhere or you're part of some nonprofit. It is important. I think it's possible to have sponsors outside and we all have different career and life aspirations. It's something that's an evolution, but, I also think it's hard to maintain a sponsor relationship with someone who's not going to directly impact something in your life right now, or in the immediate future. From a practical perspective, where and why and how are they sponsoring you?

Megan Monson: Your point about the mentors, I think makes a lot of sense. You not only need mentors in your professional relationships, but also in your personal lives as well. Honestly, even having mentors that are counseling you on your professional goals and giving you advice that are from outside your current employer, it gives you an additional perspective and another set of eyes and ears. I think it gives you a more holistic picture of everything and more things to consider. I think it's great to have mentors from all across the board.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, absolutely. I definitely take the point that it's especially important to have a sponsor within your organization. I think sponsors are people who will speak up about you and for you in the room when you're not there. To some extent, I think that can exist externally as well as, especially in a field like ours, where we're trying to bring business into our firm and meet new people and attract new clients. Sometimes, I think external sponsors can be people who you know that mention you to their contacts and say, "Megan might be able to do this for you. You should meet her." Which can be equally as important as your internal sponsors for the long term.

Chandra Shih: That's a great point.

Rachel Dikovics: So over the past year and a half, getting scarily close to two years, things have changed significantly in our work and home landscapes. Have you found that since COVID happened, we're working remotely, we're seeing each other at events less frequently, have your mentor and sponsor relationships been impacted either positively or negatively by those changes?

Megan Monson: For me, I was able to keep them pretty well in check, but, that requires more effort on my part to set up those coffee dates or those happy hours, or even getting together for outdoor lunch because it doesn't happen as organically. Especially for the people in the office where I would normally just bump into and then we'd grab lunch. It requires I think a lot more effort. It's a lot more challenging for the junior attorneys who are just starting to practice now and don't already have those relationships in place that they're continuing to

foster because it's a lot easier for me to shoot an email to one of my mentors and say, "Hey, do you want to grab coffee?" Versus if it's somebody that you've never met in person or have only met once it can be a bit overwhelming to make that initial step and to make those connections. It takes a little bit more effort now.

Chandra Shih: I agree. Having the benefit of years of a relationship already with my mentors and sponsors it hasn't felt all that different, but I do feel for people who are trying to establish relationships, because at the end of the day it takes you back to that speed dating feeling again. I don't know what the answer is to try to make it easier. It's much harder to organically form relationships with and meet people virtually as compared to when we're in the office doing events, you're chit-chatting in between sessions or who knows what. But, it's hard. It's something we're going to have to try to tackle together because we don't really know when we get to go back to "normal".

Megan Monson: No, that's true. Especially as you're coming in as a junior attorney, it's intimidating in general, even more so if you're trying to network and get to know people on a more personal level. One of the things that I've tried to do when we've got the new class of first years or the summer associates is setting up an informal get together with them so that they have another familiar face at the firm, then taking the time and asking them for one-on-one coffee because it's something that I wish that somebody would've done for me at that level. As you said, Chandra, it's a much more challenging environment. I do try to be a little bit more cognizant about the effort on the more senior attorney side to do things like that, to try to help them at least have one point of connection going forward.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. One thing, especially in the context of remote work or a hybrid work schedule where sometimes we're seeing each other in person, sometimes we're not, we don't know when that's going to happen and when it isn't, we can also sometimes lean on our mentors to help us find sponsors. That's especially important for more junior attorneys to utilize your mentors, to help you make connections to the more senior people who are then going to be able to advocate for you going forward, who will get to know you and get to know your work. It can be very helpful to have someone link you when you're the new person and the most junior person, having somebody vouch for you to a more senior person, I think can be really helpful in establishing a relationship with that more senior person. Where otherwise, it might take you a while to make that connection and get them to be interested in you at a level where they can potentially become a sponsor for you.

Megan Monson: That's a really great point. One of the benefits from being in this kind of remote virtual environment, is that at least in the firm that I work in, it's broken down a lot of the barriers in terms of cross office work. While there was always a sense of comradery and working with other people cross offices, because everyone was just getting so much more comfortable in doing the zoom and video chats. Even as someone at my level, I found it was a good opportunity to reach out to other partners in other offices and get to know them or taking on new marketing opportunities and sending it their way. It gave me a little bit more confidence to do things like that because it was a little bit more mainstream versus if they were people who I would've not been in the office with them physically and would've been hesitant to contact.

- Rachel Dikovics:** Totally agree. Do you think that as a woman attorney, it's important to have mentors and sponsors who are women?
- Chandra Shih:** I think so. There's a well-known thing at this point that representation matters. Especially when you're first embarking on your career, being able to see someone who looks like you or who you can relate to in some way or another, that has been successful and made it and holds leadership position at the place you work. Generally someone you view as a model for how you want your career life to look like. It makes a huge difference. If you show up somewhere and nobody looks like you, nobody can share your experiences, or understands what it's like to want to be a working profess, but also be a mom or also do this or that. It's hard to picture yourself succeeding in that environment. It doesn't mean it's not possible, but I do think that finding mentors or finding sponsors who are women is just one extra tool in the toolkit that you can have. It helps give you confidence in a way that you may not realize.
- Megan Monson:** Yeah, I couldn't agree more. Certainly having male sponsors and mentors has its purpose and it's great for us to have those people in our networks too. But to Chandra's point, it helps when you have somebody that you can envision that that's where you want your career. It's almost that implicit bias that you just feel a little bit more comfortable with somebody potentially because they look like you, they're in these great leadership roles and that's really where you want to see your career going and they've been through some of the same issues that you're facing. Unfortunately, there are certain challenges that women in professional settings face that our male colleagues don't.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah, Megan, I was just thinking about how the legal field is still really heavily male-dominated, especially as seniority grows the number of women increase. A starting associate class may be 50/50 male female, or there may even be more women than men. As people get more senior, those numbers drop off because there are realities for women that still exist. Frequently women have to take the primary role as caregiver and their careers are impacted in a way that their partners' often are not. So it's important and helpful to have female sponsors and mentors who understand where you are in your life, what challenges outside of the workplace you may be facing. It's also incumbent upon all of us as women attorneys to focus on and make a conscious effort to be mentors to others even if they're not asking us for it.
- Madeline Albright famously said "there is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women." It's so important, especially as a woman in a male dominated field, when someone has held a door open for you figuratively, if you don't hold it open for the woman who's coming down the hall behind you, you're really not doing the most that you can to advance women in the legal field, generally. On that note, do you all have any tips for being an effective mentor or sponsor?
- Chandra Shih:** For me, one of the biggest lessons in mentoring is, is listening. Being a good listener, really helps shape the way you can impact someone's life or career. Not everyone wants or needs the same thing. If you assume what worked for you or what you were interested in is what everyone wants, you're doing a

disservice to the people who are looking to you as a mentor. Ask them what they want and ask them what their aspirations are and ask them how you can help, because it might be something completely different than what you would've expected or how you thought you might have been helpful. It's an amazing thing because you can actually be helpful to people in ways that you don't even realize, but, if you don't ask the questions and you don't listen to the answers you miss out on a lot of that.

Megan Monson: In addition to that, it's also making the time for people. As we said before, as attorneys and anyone who's in a professional job, you're really busy. As Rachel mentioned, for most of us, we've gotten to where we are and there's been somebody or more than one somebody, who's helped us along the way and been holding those doors open for other women, helping you progress through the career ladder. It's really important, not only to give back to other who are coming up behind you and making the time to share your experiences with them, but also to what Chandra mentioned, listening to them and seeing. Because their career path is not necessarily the same as yours, but they also want to just learn from your experiences. Because you've been working and practicing for longer, you're just going to come at things from a different perspective.

Rachel Dikovics: I definitely agree with all of those things. In addition to being a good listener, it's important as a mentor to offer the things that you can provide, because sometimes your mentee is not going to realize the ways in which you can help them from something as simple as one of my more junior colleagues might say to me, "have you ever filed a brief in the New York commercial division?" Because they're probably working on one and they are looking for a sample, but maybe they don't want to ask me for a sample because they don't realize that I might have one, but I do. So I say, "Hey, I will send you a sample." and that helps them out. To offering other connections, just other things that you can provide that the person who you are looking to assist and mentor and guide may not realize that you can do for them. It can be really helpful as well.

Megan Monson: On the mentor side in particular, also, if you're mentoring someone on more substantive issues, at least if it's somebody in your own organization. Walking them through and explaining things to them really helps because that goes back to the listening point that people may not understand why something's wrong or how to do things a particular way. If you take the time to explain it to them that goes a long way too.

Rachel Dikovics: What tips can we give people for how to be an effective mentee and somebody who people will want to mentor?

Megan Monson: That's a great question. We touched on it briefly earlier, but one of the things is trying to make the lives of your mentors or sponsors easier, right? If you're working with directly and they're assigning you work. One of the easiest, quickest ways to grow that relationship is by doing a good job, showing eagerness, and anticipating what that senior attorney's going to need out of that assignment. In effect you're making their lives easier, you're saving them time. They're going to not only want to spend more time developing you and guiding you, but you're also freeing up some time on their docket to do that.

Chandra Shih: Yeah, definitely making people's lives easier are always a welcomed thing. Showing an interest is a huge factor as well. I'm ten times happier to explain things to people or spend extra time with someone or go out of my way to do something if I feel like the person is really interested and wants to learn and wants to grow or wants to develop.

We spend a lot of time doing our jobs and we've spent a lot of time trying to become experts at what we do and when someone's actually really interested in it, not just how do I get the task done, but could you explain this to me or here's what I was thinking and you said X instead of Y and I wasn't sure why you did that and I was curious about it. That to me just goes such a long way and it helps build a better organic relationship as well because I might know that you're interested in something because you've expressed an interest in it and invite you to something related to that or want to reach out and initiate a conversation about something where I might not if I hadn't realized. And so that kind of a thing goes a long way as well.

Rachel Dikovics: It's important to remember that people love to talk about themselves. So, one of the best ways to be somebody who people will want to mentor and be around in a professional setting is to ask them questions about the work that they're doing and about themselves. And like Chandra said, really express an interest in the person. It's hard to turn away somebody who is expressing a genuine interest in what you're doing. It's easy to turn away somebody who seems transactional or even not necessarily turning them away, but making less of an effort to make that time to connect with them. I also agree with Megan that it's really important to provide value back to your mentor. It has to be a two-way street. Otherwise, you're asking for things all the time and you're not providing anything.

It can be hard as a more junior person to understand what value you can provide. But, like Megan said, anything that you can do to make that person's life easier, whether that's going above and beyond to prep something for them for a meeting that they didn't ask you to prep, but, based on your experience, they'll need it for the meeting. Whether it's just offering to take on additional tasks that they'll have on their plate otherwise. Even if it's somebody who is just a little bit more a senior than you, or even somebody who's really your peer, somebody who's a year ahead of you or a year behind you, it really can't hurt to make the effort proactively to help people out and just be nice to people. It often will come back to you in ways that you aren't expecting.

Megan Monson: I feel like that kind of ties into exactly what Chandra was saying is that it goes back to the eagerness and people's interest in something. If they're even taking that little extra step, it shows that they're invested in what they're doing and they want to help and they're concerned about the outcome and it just shows that they're a little bit more invested. Even if it was something as simple, as printing out copies of documents and bringing it to the meeting. It just shows that a little bit of extra effort and that makes a difference.

Rachel Dikovics: All right. Well, I think that wraps up all of the questions that I have for both of you. Thank you so much for joining us on this episode of the Women's Initiative Network: "Real Talk". Hopefully, this discussion provided some

insight into building your personal board of directors of both sponsors and mentors and why this is vital for a successful legal career. We hope you'll join us for future episodes as we continue the real talk.

Megan Monson: Thanks so much for tuning in today. We hope to have you guys join us again soon.

Chandra Shih: Thanks everyone. Great speaking with you.

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