

Mentoring, sponsorship, and reverse mentoring: three different things

Mentoring explains how things work. Sponsorship puts your credibility behind someone in a room they are not in. Reverse mentoring lets leaders learn from staff with different experience, if it is voluntary and does not become extra unpaid work.

Why it matters

People who are new to an organization's informal rules often get plenty of advice and very little sponsorship. Advancement usually depends on the second.

Content

Mentoring. Regular conversations about how decisions are made, what the next role requires, and how to prepare. Useful, and usually not enough on its own.

Sponsorship. A leader names a person for a stretch assignment, a panel, a project lead role, or a promotion conversation, and stands behind that recommendation. Sponsorship is where advancement actually happens. Track, at a level that protects individuals, who gets sponsored.

Reverse mentoring. A leader learns from a staff member whose experience differs from theirs. It works when the leader asks for it, the staff member chooses it, the time is recognized as work, and the leader acts on what they learn. It fails when it becomes a standing expectation placed on staff from underrepresented communities.

A practical start. Ask each leader in your unit to name one person they will sponsor this quarter and for what. Review the list for who is missing.

Next steps

- **Pay, classification, and advancement** — program page </library/pn-pay-classification-advancement>
- **Leadership and systems change area** — program page </areas/leadership-systems>