

Unseen, unsupported, and unstoppable

Why sponsorship and mentorship matter for Black women

by Dr. Leslye Renee Kornegay, contributing writer



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“They liked my leadership but never invested in it.”

This is a quiet truth many Black women leaders carry. In “Leading to Change the World,” I shared my journey from housekeeper to executive leader, navigating the sharp edges of institutional resistance, subtle exclusions, and the burden of leading in spaces never designed for us. One of the most glaring disparities I faced — and continue to witness — is the lack of sponsorship and mentorship available to Black women compared to our white and male peers.

Sponsorship is more than guidance; it’s advocacy. It’s the behind-the-scenes championing that accelerates careers, opens doors, and creates opportunity. Yet, Black women are routinely overlooked in these power exchanges. Despite our qualifications, work ethic, and leadership capabilities, we remain under-sponsored and under-mentored — left to forge paths alone through corporate and institutional minefields.

The Cost of Absence

Research confirms what many of us already know: Black women are the least likely group to have sponsors in the workplace. According to a McKinsey & Company report, while 59% of white men report having strong sponsors, only 19% of Black women say the same. That gap translates into lost promotions, stagnant pay, missed visibility, and fewer strategic roles.

In my own career, I was often informally mentored by doing my own outreach “from a distance” — given advice but not access. While others received invitations into power circles, I was expected to prove myself twice over just to be considered. That difference is more than symbolic — it’s structural. Without sponsors, we are locked out of succession pipelines, high-impact projects, and the kind of informal guidance that shapes successful careers.

The Power of Informal Mentorship and Confidence Circles

While formal mentorship remains elusive for many Black women, informal mentors have often stepped in where systems failed. In my research and leadership practice, I coined the term Confidence Circles — a powerful, community-driven strategy where women gather intentionally to build one another’s courage, sharpen professional insight, and offer accountability without hierarchy.

Confidence Circles are not about titles or rank; they are about trust, truth-telling, and transformation. These informal alliances serve as sacred spaces where we can speak freely, test ideas, affirm identity, and share wisdom without fear of judgment. They remind us that while institutions may overlook our potential, we do not have to.

Moreover, your mentor or sponsor does not need to look like you or even work in your industry to provide value. Some of my most transformational informal mentors have been white women,

male colleagues, or professionals in fields completely different from mine. What mattered was their willingness to invest, challenge, and advocate. That openness expands our networks and breaks the false narrative that mentorship must always come from someone who shares your lived experience.

What Organizations Must Do Now

- 1. Audit Sponsorship Structures:** Look beyond mentorship programs and assess who is actually being sponsored into leadership. The data will tell the truth.
- 2. Make Sponsorship Intentional:** Assign executive sponsors to high-potential Black women. Tie sponsorship outcomes to leadership accountability and compensation.
- 3. Train for Bias Disruption:** Teach sponsors to recognize and resist affinity bias—the tendency to uplift those who “look like” or remind them of themselves.
- 4. Recognize and Support Informal Networks:** Organizations should value the impact of informal mentorship and offer support — through time, space, and resources — for Confidence Circles and peer mentorship initiatives.

What Black Women Can Do

While the burden should not rest solely on us, we continue to navigate this terrain with creativity and resilience:

- **Build and Join “Confidence Circles”:** Create intentional support spaces that affirm, challenge, and uplift your leadership journey
- **Seek Diverse Mentors and Sponsors:** Look beyond race, gender, and industry — what matters most is shared values and reciprocal investment
- **Document and Advocate:** Keep track of your impact and advocate for your advancement in measurable, strategic ways
- **Mentor Across Generations:** As we rise, we must reach back. Intergenerational mentorship strengthens our collective voice and expands leadership capacity.

Conclusion: Rewriting the Power Equation

In “Leading to Change the World,” I didn’t just write about personal resiliency and perseverance — I wrote about systemic change. Black women should not have to succeed in spite of the system. We should thrive because the system sees our worth, invests in our potential, and walks beside us — not behind us or in our way.

Sponsorship, mentorship, and community-building aren’t just professional strategies — they are acts of resistance, reclamation, and revolution. The next generation is watching. Let us not leave them a blueprint for survival, but a legacy of empowered, connected leadership. **TE**



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