



Q&A

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Mentorship, sponsorship and lifting as you rise

Who was the first person in the industry to take a genuine bet on you, and how did that sponsorship change the trajectory of your career?

I met my now-team lead, Jessica Blumenthal, at an intake interview for ENS. I was a final year Bachelor of Laws student at the University of Cape Town at the time, and my mind was occupied with the thought of upcoming deadlines and the next exam on the roster. I was nervous. The stakes felt enormous, and I remember walking into the room, acutely aware of how much this interview meant. Jess shook my hand and we sat, and within minutes, I was put at ease. Jess was impressive, warm, intimidating, attentive, and genuinely interested in who I was beyond my CV.

I was not privy to what happened behind the scenes after that interview, but I know that Jess believed in me enough to want me on her team, and that belief was the beginning of everything that's followed. I completed my articles with her as my Principal, and now, four years later, I am a second-year Banking and Finance associate in Team Blumenthal.

In banter, but sincerely, our team refers to Jess and co-director Danielle Laubscher as our 'fearless leaders'. With daily use, the phrase has naturally become part of our vocabulary and, over time, has taken on a life of its own, becoming something of a catch-all expression within the team as shorthand for our appreciation of Jess and Dani's ability to lead without hesitation, and to make things happen.

What is a sponsor if not fearless? And what is a sponsor if not also a servant leader? Jess and Dani have seamlessly meshed their leadership styles to ensure the team works as a well-oiled machine that is hardy in all types of weather, and I believe this is largely due to the trust they place in each individual. Jess and Dani invest in the person, and train, lead, teach and champion that person in a way that one can only describe as sponsorship.

Those who have been trained by Jess and Dani will know the trust and confidence that they inspire as sponsors and, indeed, as servant leaders. Where a mentor's advice is given directly, my experience is that a sponsor's advocacy is given behind closed doors, in rooms one is not yet senior enough to enter, and on the strength of the reputation one has earned with them separately. That is a fearless act, because a sponsor stakes their own name on you, and it is an act of leadership, because it asks nothing in return except that one rises to meet it. This is the experience Jess

and Dani have given those of us fortunate enough to have been part of the team.

Looking back, that single decision made about me those many years ago in an ENS boardroom changed the trajectory of my career. I was quickly moved from the university space into the fast-paced environment of deal-making, and trained, sponsored and fearlessly led by Jess and Dani.

How can corporate finance institutions move beyond 'diversity checkboxes' to create environments where young women actually want to stay long-term?

Diversifying an environment does not end when a woman lawyer is simply brought into a firm. Real diversification only embeds once she is truly invested in and trusted by her firm, her mentors, and most importantly, by her women sponsors.

Having trained in an all-women Banking and Finance team, I have seen how junior lawyers absorb almost everything from their seniors, whether it is a precedent perfected by a particular director or a piece of guidance only a team lead can offer. Junior lawyers are reflective: we read the behaviour modelled around us and internalise it as our own. By the same token, where we feel genuinely invested in and sponsored, we come to embody that same generosity in turn. Watching a senior woman lawyer handle demanding clients, hard-fought negotiations and complex deals, all while managing the competing pressures of her own life, gives us a roadmap we come to believe we can follow ourselves.

This is where sponsorship between women achieves what a firm's 'diversity checkbox' exercise cannot. Seeing – through the lived example of a woman who has already navigated that path – how progression unfolds in practice, what obstacles may arise, and how to overcome them, is the real inspiration a junior woman lawyer carries with her; it is this kind of sponsorship that is actually credible.

Firms that are serious about retaining young women talent must deliberately cultivate and invest in relationships between women at different career stages, so that every cohort has access to a visible example of what remaining in the profession, and thriving, actually looks like. A junior woman who can identify a specific senior colleague who has made that path work, and who is willing to guide her, is far more likely to stay on than one who is simply reassured, in the abstract, that a firm 'values diversity'. 🙌