

ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF (AND OTHERS!):

TOOLKIT FOR WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT





Is it difficult for you to shape your work environment to align with your needs and values? From life's logistics to the emotional rollercoaster, advocating for yourself can feel difficult. Together with financial services industry leaders and educators, HLB developed a toolkit to help you build the right mindset, learn how to negotiate and find a community to support you.

WORK ON YOUR MINDSET

Mindset is foundational to how you think, learn, and behave. It can be a major booster, helping you embrace challenges and persist despite setbacks. Or it can be a salient detractor, holding you back in your progress. Granted, a mindset is something you can (and should!) work on to shake off any self-doubts and exercise better emotional control.



The starting point is you. Being clear on your needs, boundaries and values is essential. It is easier to plot your journey, if you know your non-negotiables.”

Stephanie Rix, Chief People Officer, HLB



BUILD UP YOUR CONFIDENCE



PRACTICE SELF-REFLECTION



PUT HEALTHY BOUNDRIES



BUILD UP YOUR CONFIDENCE

“Confidence needs to come first and that starts with you”, says Fotini Iconomopoulos, CEO at Forward Focusing and Author of ‘Say Less, Get More: Unconventional Negotiation Techniques to Get What You Want’. Confidence assumes unnerving trust in your judgements and abilities and internalised knowledge of being enough just as you are. “If you lack it, get some validation from other people around, people that are your safe places, your mentors, your sponsors, your champions”, Fotini encourages.

Her favourite method for boosting confidence is curating a ‘feel-good folder in an inbox’. “Anytime you get praise, anytime you get a thank you,

anytime you get accolades of any kind, anytime you get feedback, or results, or anything else positive about your work, put it in an email folder”, she recommends. The next time you’re having a bad day, you can browse the entries to remind yourself how good you are at what you do.

A curated summary of your achievements is also a great leverage in negotiations. Whenever you need to justify your worth, you have a list of testimonials to tap into. “Testimonials take out some of that ‘icky factor’ because it is not your words, it is someone else’s words. So they have more influence on others,” Fotini adds.



PRACTICE SELF-REFLECTION

For Kathryn Bishop, Associate Fellow at the University of Oxford, confidence is a combination of different factors, central to which is self-acceptance. “Self-acceptance comes from reflecting on and recognising one’s own achievements, perhaps quietly saying to oneself in the mirror, ‘That was really hard, but actually I managed it.’” Such a sense of self-acceptance is rooted in understanding your strengths and limitations.

A lot of leaders experience crucible moments, according to Kathryn Bishop. “A crucible moment is a moment when something significant happens. It usually generates some strong emotions, but it also brings learning. It might be a crisis or a setback or

a major achievement. Reflecting on these moments helps us to see the learning that they have to offer. The key is to take some time to reflect on it”.

It is easy to succumb to self-criticism when you miss the mark or get overlooked, blaming your personality, lack of effort, knowledge gaps, or even physical features. However, self-doubt will not prop you up for success the next time around. “Self-acceptance is seeing yourself clearly, with all your strengths and limitations in order to say: ‘This is what I have to work with. I can continue to develop myself and gain new experience, but this is me’”, Kathryn recommends.



Every moment is either an earn or a learn”.

Kathryn Bishop



PUT HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

As women, we are often told to 'develop a thicker skin' when it comes to problematic people's behaviours. Many of us have been socialised to avoid active confrontation, always be polite, and stay on the quieter side, which means we lack a healthy sense of assertiveness.

"Be confident to say where your boundaries are", recommends Julia Penny, Past President of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW). "Be stubborn when needed, push when needed, keep going. I mean, I did. I did have to have several goes at getting elected as president

of IAW and I nearly gave up and I was encouraged to keep going. And I'm so glad that I did because otherwise, other people think, oh, no, you cannot get there".

Being assertive does not mean ignoring other people's needs and emotions. It just means that you are proactive about communicating your needs and feelings in a clear, confident, and respectful manner. It also helps you better recover from setbacks and maintain a higher self-esteem.



LEARN TO NEGOTIATE

Negotiations allow you to be more vocal and deliberate about your needs and goals at work. By stating your baseline for content, you open the conversation about how these could be met. Each time you negotiate a higher base pay, more responsibilities, or more flexible hours, you invest in a better future for yourself. Here is how you can improve your negotiation skills.



SET YOUR GOALS



LISTEN TO YOUR OPPONENT



COLLABORATE ON A SOLUTION



SET YOUR GOALS

"It's important to have goals in a negotiation", says Paul Fisher, Director of the Oxford Programme on Negotiation (OPN). "Goals help structure the negotiation. They help you determine strategy and tactics and what success looks like. If you don't know where you're going, you'll essentially be on the road to nowhere".

Your negotiation goals should also be aspirational because this leaves room for concessions and counter offers.

For example, if you want to negotiate a salary, ask for a 30% raise. Seems bold? Absolutely, but it also means you can walk away with a 10%, 20%, or even

a full 30% increase, compared to if you were only negotiating a 10% in the first place. In other words: You increase your baseline for success and have more space to negotiate downwards.

Fotini Iconomopoulos calls this tactic 'the not average tax'. "When you look at salary websites, they give you average numbers for a role. But if you are presenting yourself as somebody who deserves promotion and advancement in the workplace, are you an average performer? No, because average performers are not the ones leading the pack. So I want you to add the 'not average tax' on top".



LISTEN TO YOUR OPPONENT

Successful negotiation is equally the art of inquiry and listening. Your goal is to understand your counterparts' interests and figure out how they can align with yours. "Too often in negotiations, we spend a lot of time trying to explain ourselves, rather than focusing on understanding why we are not getting a buy-in," says Paul Fisher.

The more you can listen — the more information you gain from your opponent, and that is really powerful because it allows you to focus on their interests. In many negotiations, people ask 'What do you want?'. However, what is more effective is to ask an opponent 'why you want it?'" recommends Paul. When you proactively exchange interests, you can find 'shared grounds' with your counterpart and reach a mutually satisfying outcome.



COLLABORATE ON A SOLUTION

Negotiation is not an adversarial process, even if your positions differ at the start. Paul Fisher encourages women to enter negotiations with a collaborative mindset. "It does not have to be a 'me against you' dynamic, but rather a 'me and you working together to solve a joint problem,' he says. By reframing your thinking and approach to negotiations, you can create more opportunities for discussion. A collaborative approach also reduces stress and anxiety around negotiations.

Fotini also agrees that collaboration is key to successful negotiations. She encourages you to continue the discussion even after hearing a 'no'.

"No for me is just an obstacle. How do I work around the obstacle? I ask questions," she shares. "Asking questions to overcome objections is not aggressive. It is just saying: 'Well, what solutions are out there?'. To avoid getting into a stalemate, ask open-ended questions: How could we make this work? Under what circumstances would your answer change? If you are not in a position to make this decision, whom should I have this conversation with? By asking questions you encourage the person to collaborate with you on finding a better solution.



BUILD OUT YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

Your daily battles do not have to be carried out alone. You have a community to support you, and your goal is to find it. Support at the workplace comes in different ways, via structured corporate sponsorship programs, informal mentorship opportunities, or leadership programmes, available through numerous public organisations.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF SUPPORTERS

Consider which approach resonates the most with you at your current career stage and then look for the available opportunities.



Mentors

A mentor **'talks at you'**. They provide non-evaluative feedback, counsel you through your career challenges, and provide personal advice, rooted in their experience. Mentors can be found inside and outside your organisation.



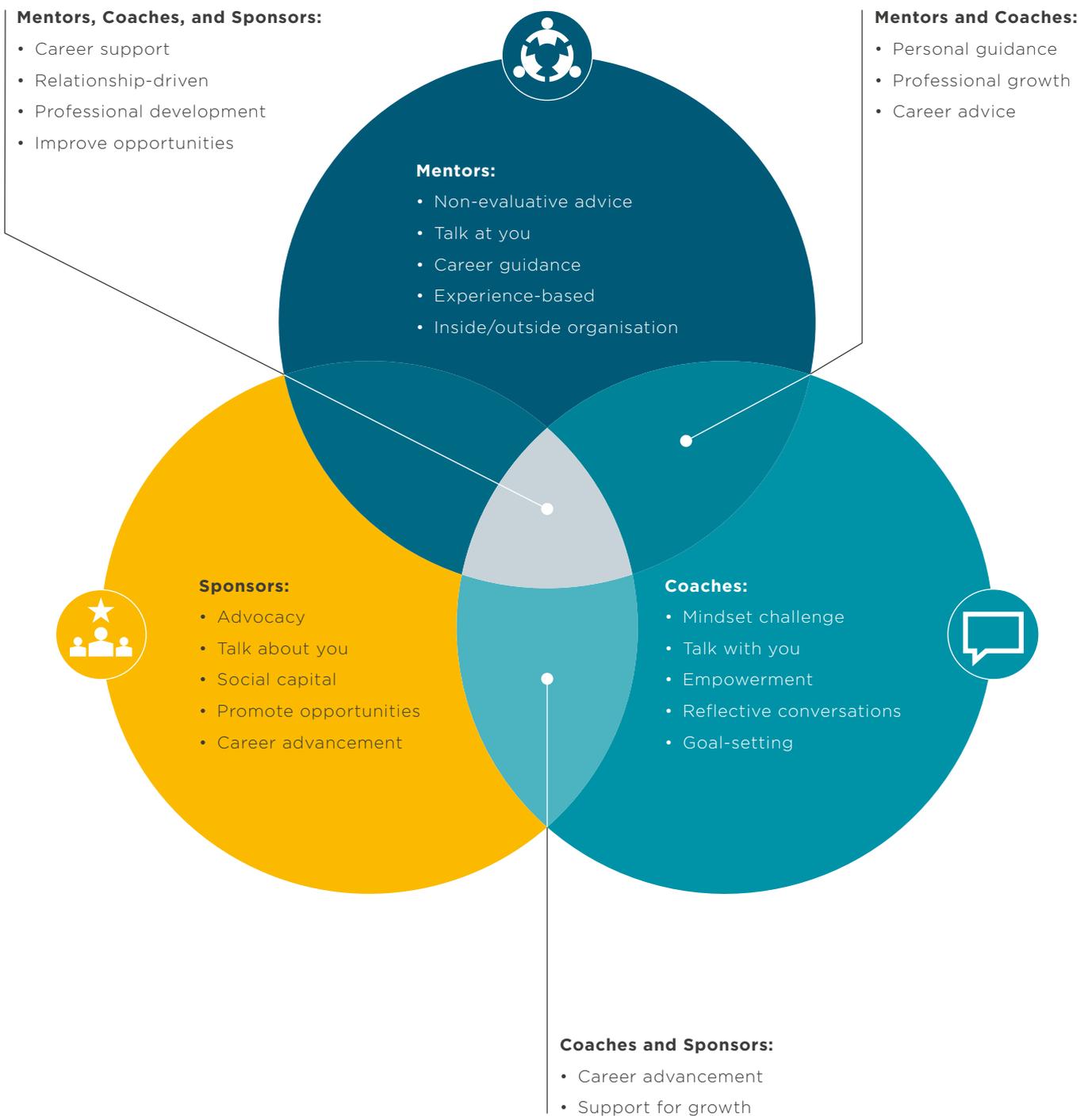
Coaches

A coach **'talks with you'** about the challenges you're facing and empowers you to stride towards your goals. Coaches challenge your mindset by reflecting on conversations and inspire you to act with greater confidence.



Sponsors

A sponsor **'talks about you'** – they advocate for your engagement in particular projects, suggest your candidacy for new positions, and otherwise leverage their social capital to provide you with greater access to opportunities.



WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR SUPPORTERS?

Mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship are powerful tools for advancing your career, but you must also understand the intricacies of such relationships. Be upfront about your expectations from the relationship and the mentor's degree of involvement. "Being a mentee is not sitting back and waiting for the mentor to reach out to you. You have to be an active mentee," says Crystal Cooke, Director of Diversity and Inclusion at AICPA. "A lot of your mentors want to help, but they are busy. They're working and excelling in their own lives, so you need to make it so that it's easy and convenient for them to meet and advise you".

You should come into the meeting with a clear agenda: a set of goals or problems you'd like to talk through and receive constructive feedback. Prepare some good questions. It is better to ask 'how' questions as these provide more actionable insights. Instead of asking 'What should I do with my career?', try 'How did you advance to the partner position?'. Avoid lofty questions that do not concern a particular goal.

A successful mentor-mentee relationship requires work. If you do not find a match immediately or if your engagement does not last long, that is okay. You are still gaining extra experience with every conversation and honing your skills to someday become that 'type of support' you wished your younger self could have had.



WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT

1



EVALUATE
CORPORATE
OPPORTUNITIES

TAP INTO YOUR
PROFESSIONAL
NETWORK



2

3



CONSIDER
JOINING A FORMAL
EDUCATIONAL
PROGRAMME

1



EVALUATE CORPORATE OPPORTUNITIES

Start with a simple question: Does my company offer any form of formal mentorship or coaching? You may be surprised to learn about the available free learning and development (L&D) programmes available online and in person.

“At Rehmann, HLB USA, we established our Women’s Initiative Network (WIN) in 2007. As part of WIN, we introduced the Women’s Career Advocacy Program (WCAP). An important part of WCAP was the assignment of a sponsor, typically a male because of the limited number of female principals, who worked closely with female associates to develop their careers at the firm,” shared Stacie Kwaiser, CEO at Rehmann, HLB USA. “This was the start of the efforts that led to Rehmann having 37% of principals and owners as females, and 42% of managers and senior managers as females and I believe this was helpful to the professional development that led to me becoming CEO in 2023.”

2



TAP INTO YOUR PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

“If organisations cannot help you to set up mentoring programmes or if you cannot find a mentor, we have got loads of social networks now. So you can often find a mentor and also offer yourself. When I have met young women in particular I said, ‘Stay in touch, let us have a coffee sometime,’” says Julia Penny

Think about a person, inside or outside of your workplace, who has advanced in the field further than you or just does the work you admire. Once you have a ‘candidate’, send a quick introductory note about why you’d like to connect and request an informational interview – a friendly conversation about their career path or experience in the industry. If you can find a particular match in your network, there are plenty of online platforms and digital communities that match mentees with available coaches for free or for a fixed fee.

3



CONSIDER JOINING A FORMAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME

If you would like to get coached in a particular skill, a number of identity-based educational programmes are now available, both for recent graduates and tenured leaders. Most combine workshops and peer learning with personal assessments and 1:1 coaching sessions. Your local Association of Chartered Accountants can be a good place to start.

Remember: You own your career and this means you need to put yourself in the right places. This includes active networking, outreach, relationship building, and community participation. The first steps may feel outside of your comfort zone, but the more you engage and commit to building a genuine relationship with others, the more you receive in return.

Take the first step in advocating for yourself and others by using the tools and strategies in this guide to build your confidence, set clear goals, and engage with your support network. To learn more and gain deeper insights, explore **HLB's Women Advancement Report**, which highlights key trends and strategies for advancing women's careers globally—defining your success starts today!



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