



Unlocking your Career:



Finding Mentors and Sponsors that Elevate you



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# My Path

- When I started as a trainee, I thought working hard was enough. But effort alone doesn't translate into opportunity.
- Like many women (and men) in medicine, I built my early career based on instinct, hard work, and resilience
- Residency → Fellowship → Faculty
- —but there was something missing there...



# I had no Guidance..

- I didn't have a mentor until I became a faculty member, and that too, a few years into being the faculty.
- I often wonder about how different my early years and career might have been if I had a mentor, or if someone had said, '*Let me walk this path with you.*'
- Without guidance, I reinvented wheels that didn't need reinventing.

# My Plan Today

- Effort isn't enough
- I learned that mentorship and sponsorship are *intentional acts* – built on clarity, connection, and courage.
- Today, I'd like to share lessons from my journey, evidence from leadership literature, and practical strategies that can help all of us, women in GI to build the networks that elevate us.

# Why does this Matter?

**Mentorship is the single most important determinant of career success in academic medicine.** (Sambunjak et al., *JAMA*, 2006)

- Studies consistently show mentorship is linked to greater research productivity, promotion, retention, and satisfaction.
- Mentored faculty have 37% higher publication rates and greater grant success. (Ref: Sambunjak D et al., *JAMA*, 2006)
- Women physicians are under-mentored and under-sponsored compared to male peers. (Ref: Files JA et al., *Acad Med*, 2019)
- Sponsorship is a *predictor of leadership advancement*. (Ref: Hewlett SA, *Harvard Business Review*, 2011)
- Yet, women and underrepresented groups report fewer mentors, less sponsorship, and fewer leadership opportunities.
- This talk is about closing that gap – not by waiting for someone to find you, but by designing the network that lifts you.

# The Leak in the pipeline: AAMC 2022

- Women in Medicine, particularly in academia, often have mentors but fewer sponsors.
- AAMC 2022: Women make up 41% of faculty but <25% of full professors
  - We have made progress in representation, but there is still a considerable gap in advancement
- Those with active sponsors are 3 × more likely to achieve leadership roles
- Mentorship improves retention and job satisfaction across all genders

# The Data and its Story

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# The story of Women in GI

- **Barriers for Women in GI**
- Only 18-20% of GI faculty are women.
- Women receive fewer nominations for awards and leadership roles
- Structural bias, lack of sponsorship, and limited networks continue to restrict advancement.  
That's why institutional programs and task forces – like the ones many of you lead – are critical.

# Mentorship and Sponsorship

Two words often used interchangeably, but are different

Mentor	Sponsor
Advises	Advocates
Helps you navigate	Uses their influence on your behalf
Private conversations	Public actions
“How can I help you grow?”	“How can I help you get there?”

# In a Nutshell

- Both change trajectories – especially for women in GI
- Mentorship helps you climb the mountain; sponsorship puts your name on the map.
- We need both – mentors to shape us, and sponsors to *showcase* us. Without sponsors, careers often plateau even with great mentorship.

# The Science of Networking

- Professionals with *diverse, open networks* are **3 × more likely** to be promoted (Cross & Thomas, *Harvard Business Review*).
- Women tend to have “**advice networks**,” while men have “power networks.”
- Networking isn’t about collecting contacts. It’s about cultivating *connectors* — those who bridge you to opportunity.
- We should be asking ourselves: is my network mostly people who are like me, or does it span different ranks, institutions, and disciplines?

# Realization

- I want to return to that moment in my career when I realized I didn't have a mentor.
- I started reaching out intentionally — to people I admired, not just within GI, but across departments. I learned to ask *specific questions* — ‘Could I get your advice on navigating early leadership roles?’ or ‘Would you mind sharing how you balanced research and clinical care?’
- Eventually, these conversations led to guidance, then trust — and finally, sponsorship. Each mentor added a *different lens* — scientific, leadership, and personal.
- It taught me this: mentorship isn't a single relationship. It's a **constellation**.



## THE CONSTELLATION MODEL



# Who can be your Mentors?

- Experienced advisors who provide guidance, share knowledge, help you develop skills, give feedback
- Role: support professional growth, help navigate challenges, provide wisdom
- Examples: A senior faculty member (preferably GI) who guides you through research, clinical skills, and work-life balance

## THE CONSTELLATION MODEL



# Mentorship needs to Evolve

- As a trainee, it's about guidance and skills
- As an early faculty, it's about direction and visibility.
- Mid-career is when you need sponsors who can advocate for your leadership roles.
- And as leaders, we have the privilege, and the responsibility to mentor others.
- Each stage prepares us to lift the next person up.

# How to Find the right Mentor?

- Be proactive. Don't wait to be chosen. People like to be asked. Don't worry if they don't reply immediately
- Clarity: Know what you need guidance on (research, leadership, work life balance)
- Diversity: mentors with different strengths: **Constellation Model**
- Chemistry: Choose people who *see your potential*
- Don't look for "one perfect mentor."
- Seek *a mosaic*: clinical, research, leadership, personal.
- (Ref: DeCastro R et al., *Acad Med*, 2013)

THE CONSTELLATION MODEL



# Self Assessment

Identify your goals (research, clinical expertise, education, leadership, work-life balance)

What skills do you want to focus on *that year*?

Where to look: Within the division or even department, at national meetings/conferences, through formal mentorship programs either at your institution or societies

Approach: Start with small interactions like asking advice on a paper, project

Be Clear about your goals and what you seek from mentorship

Seek Diversity in mentorship: Clinical, research, leadership, personal development

**Maintain the relationship** through regular check-ins

Show gratitude, update on your progress

Be open to feedback, implement mentors' suggestions

**Vision → Goals → Actions → Mentors.**

**Let's think what we want to be mentored on in 2026!**

# How to find Mentors?

- AGA Women's Committee mentorship programs
- ACG Emerging Leaders Program
- Bockus Society, AGA Future Leaders, Women in GI initiatives
- AGA and ACG Workshops
- AMWA
- Women's task Force in your institution

**“Formal structures help, but informal mentorship is often where transformation happens – a coffee conversation that changes direction.” Peers can be great lifelong mentors!**

# What are Sponsors?

- Influential Champions who actively advocate for your career advancement: promotions, awards, leadership opportunities even when you are not in the room
- Role: Support professional growth, help navigate challenges, provide wisdom
- Examples: Division Chief, Society leaders, Committee heads in your institution



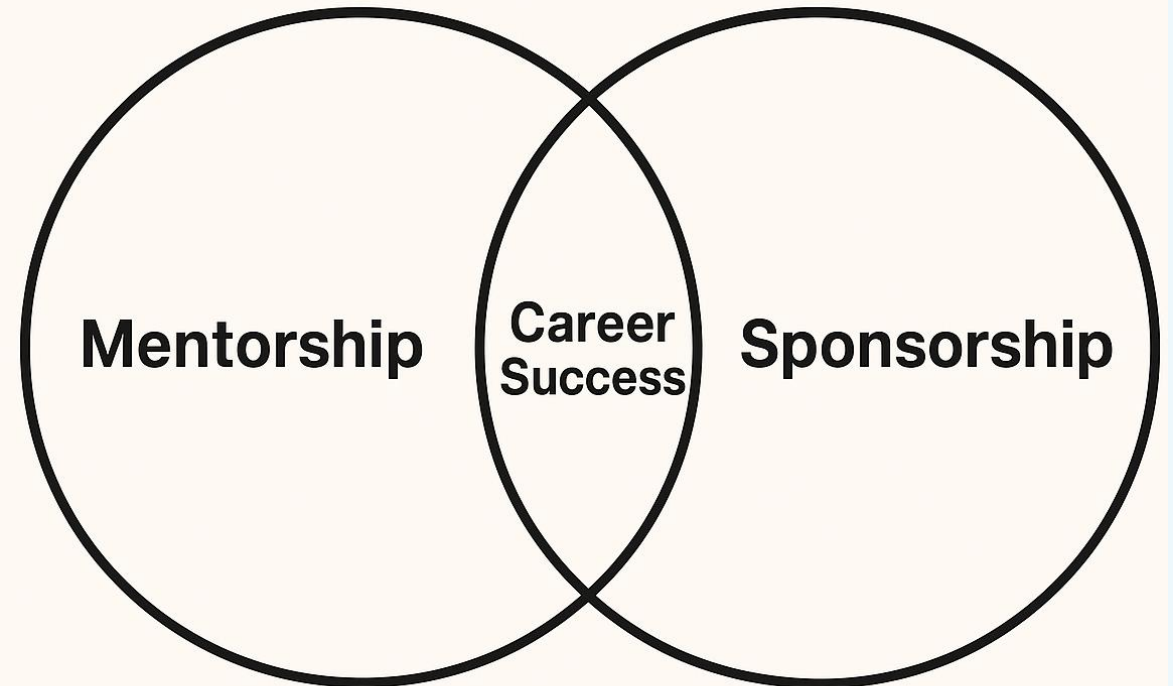
# Sponsor

# How do you Identify and Cultivate Sponsors?

- Recognize leaders with decision power who notice your work.
- Demonstrate excellence, reliability, initiative.
- Volunteer for high-impact projects; communicate aspirations clearly.
- **A sponsor is the person who uses their social capital on your behalf.**
- *Show Up → Stand Out → Seek Support.*
- “Would you be willing to support my nomination for....?”

# Are both mentorship and Sponsorship needed?

- Essential
- GI is a highly competitive field with rapid advances
- Complex Clinical environment that needs strong professional networks
- Research, publications and leadership roles needed for advancement
  
- Sponsorship is often the missing link.
- Having someone advocate for you in tangible ways – nominating you for committees, recommending you for speaking roles, leadership, or awards – can triple your chances of advancement.



**Mentors help you get ready; Sponsors help you get seen and promoted!**

# Designing your own Boardroom

- Think of your career as a company — and you are the CEO.
- Who's on your board of directors?
- Include mentors, peers, sponsors, friends — and even those who challenge you.
- Revisit your board every few years — prune, refresh, and diversify

# Building Institutional Support

Advocate for formal mentorship and sponsorship programs.

- Create metrics for equity and transparency.
- Celebrate success stories to normalize women leaders in GI.
- **Think about what initiatives exist at their own institutions and how you might strengthen them**

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1. Mentorship shapes you. Sponsorship propels you.

- Include cross-department and cross-gender mentors.
- Nurture peer-to-peer mentorship for mutual growth. Blend formal and informal mentors

1. Build a constellation, not a single mentor.

2. Curate your network intentionally.

3. Lift others as you rise.

4. My hope is that you walk away today with one actionable step: identify one person you will reach out to next week — either as a mentor or as a sponsor.”

# My Path without a “Map”

- If you remember one thing from today, let it be this:
- Remember that Cuckoo Choudhary did not have a career map for a long time..
- And you will not let that happen to you/others
- Your will not let your career grow in isolation.
- Let it grown in connection — with mentors who guide, sponsors who lift, and peers who cheer you on.
- Behind every successful woman is a tribe of other successful women who have her back.”
- We often talk about breaking glass ceilings — but mentorship helps us *build new rooms altogether.*



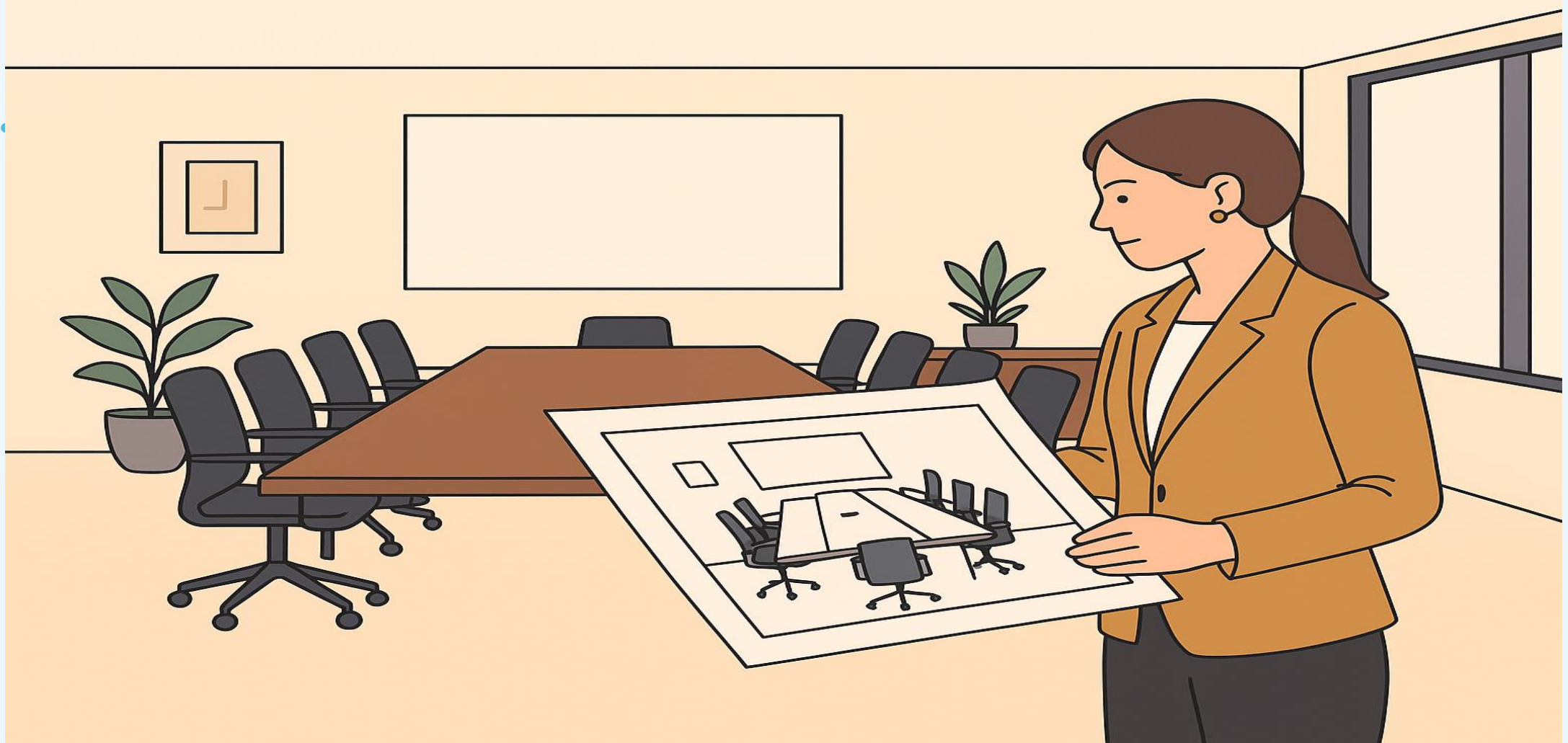
Be the mentor you needed.  
Be the sponsor you never had.

We can change the face of medicine by  
how we show up for one another.

And remember that we should strive to  
be that light that Cuckoo did not have.

We should work towards illuminating the  
path for the next generation of women in  
gastroenterology.

# Design your own Boardroom



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