

New York Womens Bar Association Foundation (NYWBAF) Breakfast featuring Ida O. Abbott and her latest book - *Sponsoring Women: What Men Need to Know*

By Katherine B. Posner

Author Ida O. Abbott spoke at a Foundation Breakfast event in September about her latest book, *Sponsoring Women: What Men Need to Know*. Ida's background and experience make her a unique voice in areas of mentoring, sponsorship and leadership issues for women in the legal profession. She was a trial lawyer for twenty years before turning her attention to the development and retention of professional talent. Ida is a Co-Founder of the highly-regarded Hastings Leadership Academy for Women and the author of many books, including *The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring*, the publication of which was underwritten by the NYWBAF through an anonymous grant and which was the subject of a NYWBAF-sponsored conference on mentoring at the New York City Bar Association in 2000.

As Ida explained at the Foundation Breakfast at the Cornell Club, while mentoring is important in the advancement of women in the profession, sponsorship is absolutely critical for career advancement into the higher levels in companies and organizations. Why is sponsorship so important and exactly what is it? As Ida explains in her book, "Sponsors are powerful backers who identify high performers and actively champion their advancement." These sponsors – who are more often than not men given the present make-up of C-suite and partnership board rooms – can give their protégées opportunities and can influence decisions about promotions, clients and compensation. While one can (and should) have mentors both inside and outside one's workplace, a sponsor is generally someone within your organization who not only has the interest in helping move your career forward but also the power to do so. This new focus and discussion among women about the need for sponsors in the area of career development is a natural progression in the area of women's leadership. We have focused on the important need for mentors and on diversity and other initiatives in the workplace and generally. The point of Ida's book is that we now need to also recognize and focus our attention of the critical importance of sponsors.

In Ida's talk and in her book she specially calls upon men to understand and embrace their important roles in sponsoring women. As Ida says in her book: "Women need the sponsorship of men, and men owe it to women, not because men are to blame but because they are in control. With a near monopoly on power and executive decision making, men are obligated to ensure that their companies retain and optimize all of the best available talent." Gender diversity programs and initiatives designed to help women generally are important but they are not enough to produce gender-balanced leadership. This can only be accomplished when both men and women in leadership roles actively sponsor women.

Katherine B. Posner is a partner at Condon & Forsyth LLP and serves on the Board of Directors of the New York Women's Bar Association Foundation.