

Find Your Sponsor (Not Just a Mentor)

January 27, 2026 | Career + Leadership

Map potential sponsors, understand their priorities, and prepare thoughtful outreach that offers value.

January 27, 2026

With Cheryl Thompson

Who it is for

Professionals building sponsorship and career visibility

Inside this playbook

4 copyable prompts and practice blocks.

[Open the online playbook](#)

The recorded session

Watch the Learning Lab.

Follow the session, then use the playbook with your own work.

[Watch replay on Vimeo](#) ^[1]

What to take into your work

1. Distinguish advice from active sponsorship.
2. Map potential sponsors using their priorities and your contributions.
3. Prepare outreach that offers specific value and keeps your own voice.

Use the learning

Your playbook

Choose a prompt, replace the bracketed inputs, and work through it in your approved AI tool. Review the result and adapt it to your situation.

This playbook accompanies the January 27, 2026 session. Tool names and setup steps reflect that session; available features may differ in your account.

Welcome to Your Sponsor-Building Toolkit

This playbook is here to help you move from reactive networking to intentional sponsorship.

- Instead of hoping the “right people” notice your work, you will identify who actually has influence and how to connect with them thoughtfully.
- Mentors mostly give advice. Sponsors use their voice and position to open doors, share opportunities, and advocate for you when you are not in the room.
- AI can act as your backstage research assistant. It helps you understand power dynamics, priorities, and pain points so your conversations are better targeted.
- You do not need to use every prompt or idea at once. Start with one sponsor conversation and one outreach email.
- The goal is steady, strategic relationship-building, not perfection. Small, consistent steps compound over time.

Mentor vs. Sponsor Framework

Mentors	Sponsors
Give advice	Give opportunities
Talk to you	Talk about you
Help you think	Help you advance
Respond when asked	Proactively advocate
Low-risk relationship	High-stakes relationship

Key Insight: A mentor helps you get better at your job. A sponsor helps you get a **better job** .
The Truth Most People Miss: You can't ask someone to be your sponsor the way you ask for a mentor. You earn sponsorship by making them look good. **My Sponsor Tips:**

- Make strategic asks and be strategic about who you ask
- Keep your powder dry
- You go first - always offer value

The AI Efficiency Ladder

Think of AI usage as a ladder. You do not need to climb all the way to the top right now.

Level	What It Looks Like	Time / Task
1. On-the-Fly Prompting	Opening an AI chat, typing a question, getting an answer. Starting from scratch every time.	5–10 minutes, inconsistent
2. Repeatable Prompts	Saved templates you fill in. Same quality every time because same structure.	2–3 minutes, consistent
3. Custom AI Projects	AI pre-loaded with your context – your role, industry, frameworks. Works like a team member.	1–2 minutes, personalized
4. Automation & Agents	AI connected to your systems, triggered automatically. Runs without you.	0 minutes, scales

Your goal: Move from Level 1 to Level 2. The prompts in this playbook get you there.

The Prompt Structure (How to Talk to AI)

When you talk to AI, a clear structure makes the output sharper and more useful. In this lab we use a four-part structure:

Part	Purpose	Example
ROLE	Who should AI pretend to be?	"You are a seasoned nonprofit strategist..."
CONTEXT	What does AI need to know about you?	"I lead a mid-sized nonprofit focused on workforce development..."
REQUEST	What specifically do you want?	"Help me draft a compelling board update..."
QUESTION	Invite the AI to get as much information from you as possible.	"Please ask me any clarifying questions."

Using this structure turns AI from a generic advice engine into a strategic thinking partner.

Key Prompts from This Lab

Below are the two core prompts from this lab. They are written so you can copy, paste, and adjust with your own details.

Prompt #1: Sponsor Mapping

What to use it for:

Identifying potential sponsors, understanding what they care about, and generating conversation starters that align with their priorities. **When to use it:**

When you are ready to build strategic relationships but are not yet sure who to approach or how to frame the conversation. **The Prompt (copy and paste):**

Prompt #1: Sponsor Mapping

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

YOU ARE A WORLD-CLASS CAREER COACH AND ORGANIZATIONAL POWER-DYNAMICS EXPERT SPECIALIZING IN AUTOMOTIVE LEADERSHIP ACROSS OEMS, TIER 1S, AND SUPPLIERS. YOU UNDERSTAND HOW REAL SPONSORSHIP WORKS INSIDE MATRIXED, ENGINEERING-DRIVEN ORGANIZATIONS — AND YOU ARE EXCITED TO HELP ME THINK MORE STRATEGICALLY ABOUT MY CAREER.

CONTEXT

I AM A PROFESSIONAL IN THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY WHO WANTS TO BUILD STRATEGIC SPONSORSHIP (NOT JUST MENTORSHIP) TO ACCELERATE MY CAREER. YOU WILL GATHER MY CONTEXT GRADUALLY SO THIS FEELS EASY AND THOUGHTFUL — NOT LIKE A FORM.

REQUEST

HELP ME IDENTIFY AND MAP POTENTIAL SPONSORS — PEOPLE WITH INFLUENCE, VISIBILITY, OR DECISION-MAKING POWER — WHO COULD REALISTICALLY ADVOCATE FOR MY CAREER PROGRESSION.

HOW TO WORK WITH ME

START BY ASKING ME ONLY 2–3 QUESTIONS AT A TIME. WAIT FOR MY ANSWERS BEFORE MOVING ON. USE MY RESPONSES TO SHARPEN YOUR THINKING AS WE GO.

BEGIN WITH THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What's your current title and function?
2. Who do you report to?
3. What type of company are you in? (OEM, Tier 1, or Supplier)

WHEN YOU HAVE ENOUGH CONTEXT, COMPLETE THIS TASK
MAP 5–7 POTENTIAL SPONSORS FOR ME.

FOR EACH SPONSOR, PROVIDE:

1. Name and title (use realistic, automotive-appropriate examples)
2. Why they matter to my career progression
3. What they actually care about, including:
 - Business metrics
 - Strategic priorities

PROMPT TO COPY

- Organizational or execution pain points
- 4. Three conversation starters that:
 - Show I understand their world
 - Offer value (insight, framing, help, or pattern recognition)
 - Do not sound like an ask, pitch, or favor request

OUTPUT STRUCTURE

PRESENT THE FINAL RESULTS AS A TABLE:

| Sponsor | Why They Matter | What They Care About | 3 Conversation Starters |

tone

SUPPORTIVE, STRATEGIC, AND EXECUTIVE-LEVEL. ASSUME I AM COMPETENT AND AMBITIOUS — I JUST HAVEN'T BEEN TAUGHT HOW SPONSORSHIP REALLY WORKS YET.

GOAL

HELP ME:

- SEE MY ORGANIZATION THROUGH A POWER AND VALUE LENS
- IDENTIFY WHO MATTERS BEFORE TRYING TO BE VISIBLE
- ENTER SPONSOR CONVERSATIONS AS A PEER, NOT A SUPPLICANT
- BUILD RELATIONSHIPS THAT NATURALLY TURN INTO ADVOCACY

NEXT STEP

AFTER THE FIRST SET OF QUESTIONS, CONTINUE BY ASKING 2–3 MORE AT A TIME, SUCH AS:

- Who are the most senior people I interact with regularly?
- What role or opportunity I want next
- What's currently blocking me from getting there

DO NOT GENERATE THE SPONSOR MAP UNTIL YOU HAVE ENOUGH CONTEXT TO DO THIS WELL.

Prompt #2: Outreach Email Draft

What to use it for:

Drafting a professional, sponsor-ready outreach email that connects your work to what a potential sponsor cares about. **When to use it:**

After you have mapped your sponsors and are ready to reach out to **one** person with a thoughtful, specific message. **The Prompt (copy and paste):**

Prompt #2: Outreach Email Draft

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

You are a career coach helping me draft a professional outreach email.

CONTEXT

My role: [Your title and function]

My company: [OEM/Tier 1/Supplier]

Potential sponsor: [Name and title]

Why they matter / what they care about: [pulled from previous output]

Conversation starter or insight to reference: [pulled from previous output]

REQUEST

Draft a concise, 3-paragraph email that:

- Opens with relevant context (how I know them or why reaching out now)
- Demonstrates value by referencing what they care about and offering a useful insight, perspective, or thoughtful question
- Closes with a low-pressure invitation (e.g., 15-minute coffee chat or brief call)

CONSTRAINTS & TONE

- Professional, warm, and peer-to-peer
- Confident, not salesy or needy
- No generic networking language
- Specific to the sponsor's priorities
- Clear, natural voice suitable for senior leaders

QUESTION

Please ask me any clarifying questions before drafting.

Prompt #3: The Sponsorship Value Engine

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

YOU ARE A WORLD-CLASS EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP AND POWER-DYNAMICS STRATEGIST.

YOU ANALYZE RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE LENS OF CONTEXT, TIMING, INCENTIVES, AND RISK.

REQUEST

YOUR JOB IS TO IDENTIFY CONTEXT-SPECIFIC WAYS THE USER CAN PROVIDE VALUE TO THIS SPONSOR IN THIS MOMENT, BASED ON:

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

PROMPT TO COPY

THE SPONSOR'S INCENTIVES AND RISKS RIGHT NOW

WHAT MAKES THE USER USEFUL AT THIS POINT IN TIME

YOU WILL NOT GIVE GENERIC ADVICE.

YOU WILL TAILOR ALL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GIVEN CONTEXT.

STRUCTURE

YOU WILL RESPOND USING THIS STRUCTURE:

Context Analysis

What's happening in this relationship right now

Where trust and leverage currently sit

Sponsor Incentives in This Moment

What the sponsor likely cares about right now

What risks they are managing

High-Leverage Value Plays (Top 3–5)

For each:

The specific value the user can offer

Why it matters now

How to deliver it naturally

Sponsorship Readiness Signals

Indicators the sponsor is becoming willing to advocate

Signals the user should wait or reframe

TONE

CLEAR. STRATEGIC. CONTEXT-AWARE.

NO FLUFF. NO GENERIC NETWORKING ADVICE.

GOAL

THE USER LEAVES WITH:

CONTEXTUAL CLARITY

STRATEGIC CONFIDENCE

A REALISTIC PATH TO EARNING ADVOCACY

PROMPT TO COPY

NEXT STEP

ASK THE USER FOR THE 4 INPUTS ABOVE AND PROCEED IMMEDIATELY WITH THE ANALYSIS.

Prompt #3: The Sponsorship Value Engine

PROMPT TO COPY

ROLE

YOU ARE A WORLD-CLASS EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP AND POWER-DYNAMICS STRATEGIST.

YOU ANALYZE RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE LENS OF CONTEXT, TIMING, INCENTIVES, AND RISK.

REQUEST

YOUR JOB IS TO IDENTIFY ****CONTEXT-SPECIFIC WAYS**** THE USER CAN PROVIDE VALUE TO THIS SPONSOR ****IN THIS MOMENT****, BASED ON:

- THE CURRENT STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP
- THE SPONSOR'S INCENTIVES AND RISKS RIGHT NOW
- WHAT MAKES THE USER USEFUL **AT THIS POINT IN TIME**

YOU WILL NOT GIVE GENERIC ADVICE.

YOU WILL TAILOR ALL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GIVEN CONTEXT.

STRUCTURE

YOU WILL RESPOND USING THIS STRUCTURE:

1. ****Context Analysis****

- What's happening in this relationship right now
- Where trust and leverage currently sit

2. ****Sponsor Incentives in This Moment****

- What the sponsor likely cares about **right now**
- What risks they are managing

3. ****High-Leverage Value Plays (Top 3-5)****

For each:

- The specific value the user can offer
 - Why it matters **now**
 - How to deliver it naturally
4. ****Sponsorship Readiness Signals****
- Indicators the sponsor is becoming willing to advocate
 - Signals the user should wait or reframe

TONE

PROMPT TO COPY

CLEAR. STRATEGIC. CONTEXT-AWARE.
NO FLUFF. NO GENERIC NETWORKING ADVICE.

GOAL

THE USER LEAVES WITH:

- CONTEXTUAL CLARITY
- STRATEGIC CONFIDENCE
- A REALISTIC PATH TO EARNING ADVOCACY

NEXT STEP

ASK THE USER FOR THE 4 INPUTS ABOVE AND PROCEED IMMEDIATELY WITH THE ANALYSIS.

How to Use This Playbook

This page is designed to help you move from insight to action quickly.

- Start with **Prompt #1: Sponsor Mapping** to identify potential sponsors and what they care about.
- Use the AI output to clarify who has real influence, where decisions get made, and which priorities matter most.
- Choose **ONE** person from that list.
- Use **Prompt #2: Outreach Email Draft** to draft a focused, professional email to that sponsor.
- Send that email this week while the lab is still fresh.
- Expect to iterate. Use what you learn from each interaction to refine your prompts, your sponsor list, and your approach.

Before You Send That Email

Critical reminder: AI drafts are starting points, not finished products. Before sending any sponsor outreach:

- [] Does this sound like ME? (Change words that don't match your voice)
- [] Did I add specific details only I would know?
- [] Am I offering value, not asking for favors?
- [] Is the tone peer-to-peer, not supplicant-to-superior?

- [] Would I be comfortable if this email got forwarded? **The Rule:** If you wouldn't say it in person, don't send it in writing.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

When building sponsor relationships with AI: **✗ Don't:**

- Ask AI to "find me a sponsor" (too vague, no context)
 - Use generic prompts from the internet (won't understand your org)
 - Ask for sponsorship without offering value first
 - Send the AI-generated email without personalizing it
 - Approach multiple sponsors at once (looks scattered) ✓ **Do:**
 - Use AI to research, strategize, and prepare
 - Offer value before asking for anything
 - Personalize every message with details only you would know
 - Focus on ONE sponsor at a time
 - Build the relationship gradually over weeks/months
-

Copilot Basics (If You Use Microsoft 365)

If you are using Microsoft Copilot, here are a few basics that matter for sponsor work.

Work Mode vs Web Mode

- **Work Mode:**
 - Uses your emails, calendar, documents, and Teams chats.
 - Best for sponsor research inside your company, preparing for 1:1s, and reviewing past interactions.
- **Web Mode:**
 - Searches the internet.
 - Best for industry trends, external leader research, and understanding the broader market context.

When to use each:

- Use **Work Mode** when you are mapping internal sponsors or reviewing how you have already interacted with them.

- Use **Web Mode** when you are researching external leaders, competitor organizations, or market trends that matter to your sponsors.

How to save prompts

- You can save, share or schedule prompts - hover over your prompt for those options.
- Copy these prompts into a Word document or OneNote page so you can reuse and adapt them.
- Consider creating a **"Sponsor Strategy"** folder in OneDrive to store your prompts, sponsor maps, and outreach drafts.

Important!

Always follow your company's AI usage policy.

- Do not paste confidential information into AI tools unless it is explicitly allowed.
- When in doubt, check your internal guidelines or ask your IT / security contact.

What to Try This Week

Keep the focus narrow: one sponsor, one email, one week.

- [] Run the **Sponsor Mapping** prompt with your real context.
- [] Review the output and choose **ONE** sponsor to approach.
- [] Use **Prompt #2** to draft an outreach email to that sponsor.
- [] Personalize the email by adding details only you would know (specific projects, shared history, recent conversations).
- [] Send the email this week. Put a calendar reminder on your schedule if helpful.
- [] Track the response and note what seemed to resonate so you can refine your next outreach.

Resources & Next Steps

Key Frameworks from This Lab

- Mentors give advice. **Sponsors create opportunities** by using their voice and influence.
- Sponsorship is earned by making sponsors look good, helping them advance their priorities, and being reliable.
- AI supports your **research and strategy**. You still own the relationship, the follow-through, and your reputation.

What We Did Not Cover (Yet)

- How to track and nurture sponsor relationships over months and years.
- How to position your AI skills and strategic thinking in sponsor conversations.
- How to build cross-functional sponsor networks across engineering, operations, commercial, and corporate functions.
- How to teach your team or ERG/BRG to use this approach systematically.

Next Steps

- Reuse these prompts monthly to refresh your sponsor map as roles, priorities, and org structures shift.
- Notice what works and what falls flat, and update your prompts to reflect those patterns.
- Share this approach with colleagues who are also navigating career growth so you can compare notes and support each other.

Sponsorship is a skill, not a secret:

- Build from there.
- Start with one email.
- You now have the tools to build strategic relationships that accelerate your career.

Related resources

Keep working with the material.

The prompts and exercises are included above. Save a useful prompt and return to it with your next task.

Links and resources

These links are clickable in the PDF. For a paper copy, use the numbered references below.

[1] <https://vimeo.com/1158918771/04350a1303?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>