

From Counsel to Catalyst: Architecting Sponsorship and Board-Level Influence

California Minority Counsel Program

2026 Women of CMCP Summit

Date and Time: Tuesday, April 21, 2026, 2:15 pm - 2:45 pm

Title: From Counsel to Catalyst: Architecting Sponsorship and Board-Level Influence

Description: Mentorship matters - but sponsorship is often what drives real advancement, especially for women of color. This session breaks down how to transition to sponsorship, and intentionally build the relationships that lead to meaningful opportunities. Attendees will hear practical examples and case studies on how women of color can leverage influential networks to increase visibility even in the absence of a sponsor, access stretch opportunities, and position themselves for C-suite and board roles—while also exploring how innovation and strategic relationship-building can accelerate career growth.

Moderator: Vanessa Yen (Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky and Popeo, P.C.)

Panelists:

- Jan Kang (Women's General Counsel Network)
- Pamela Lujan (Oportun)
- Peggy Otum (WilmerHale)

CA MCLE: 1.0 HR in General Credit and 0.50 HR in Recognition and Elimination Bias

OUTLINE

1: The Pivot From "Well-Liked" to "Well-Positioned"

- As a Law Firm Leader and Practice Co-Chair, you've seen many talented attorneys. What is the specific 'visibility' marker that makes you decide to put your own reputation on the line to sponsor a woman of color for a high-profile, bet-the-company case?
- You've built a network of 2,000+ GCs. In your experience, what is the biggest mistake women make when trying to convert those social connections into actual career equity?
- We often see women of color stuck in a 'mentorship plateau'—lots of advice, but no advancement. What is the shift required to move from a passive mentee to an active partner in a sponsorship relationship?

- If a traditional senior sponsor isn't in the room yet, how do you lead from where you are?

2. Architecting the "Stretch" Opportunity

- In a firm environment, a sponsor is essentially staking their internal reputation on your success.
 - What does a junior or mid-level attorney need to demonstrate to make that 'risk' look like a 'sure bet'?
 - Backup: How can attorneys secure 'stretch assignments: the kind that offer high visibility, without waiting for them to be assigned?
- You played a major role in Oportun's IPO. Those are the "high-beta" assignments this session description mentions. How can a woman of color in-house signal that she is ready for a pivotal moment like an IPO before the opportunity is even officially on the table?
- You've led "People Ops" as well as Legal. How can we use 'disruptive relationship-building' to get past the traditional HR or senior partner gatekeepers who might pigeonhole us into purely technical roles?

3. Translating Legal Expertise into "Board Speak"

- You advise clients on ESG, environmental justice, and racial equity—topics that are now central to Board governance. How do you coach attorneys to stop presenting these as just "compliance risks" and start presenting them as "strategic business assets"?
- In your work with SEC reporting and board governance, what is the one "Board Speak" habit you think every lawyer in this room should adopt to show they are ready for C-suite influence?

4. Leading From Where You Are (The Gap)

- Many women of color feel they lack a traditional senior sponsor. Vanessa, Jan, and Peggy—you've all been "firsts" or "onlys" in many rooms. How do you build an "influential network" that works for you even when there isn't a senior partner or executive holding the door open?

5. The "Catalyst" Closing Question

For all: "Our title is 'Counsel to Catalyst.' In one sentence, what is the single most important 'catalytic' action an attendee can take on Monday morning to start architecting their path to a Board or C-suite role?"

RESOURCES AND CITATIONS

This appendix provides attendees with research-based materials, practical tools, and governance-focused resources that deepen the concepts discussed in *From Counsel to Catalyst: Architecting Sponsorship and Board-Level Influence*. These sources support both the General MCLE credit and the Recognition & Elimination of Bias credit associated with this program.

I. Sponsorship, Leadership, and Career Advancement

These works explore the mechanics of sponsorship, strategic visibility, and advancement pathways for women and underrepresented attorneys.

McKinsey & Lean In – *Women in the Workplace* (Annual Report)

- Data on the “broken rung,” intersectional barriers, and leadership pipeline dynamics.

Catalyst – “Women of Color in Corporate Leadership”

- Research on visibility barriers, bias patterns, and advancement strategies.

Liz Wiseman – *Impact Players: How to Take the Lead, Play Bigger, and Multiply Your Impact*

- A practical framework for becoming the kind of high-leverage contributor who attracts sponsors, earns stretch opportunities, and demonstrates readiness for enterprise-level influence.

Mansi Shah – *The Monsoon Method*

- A leadership and negotiation framework tailored to women of color navigating power structures.

Amy Walters Cohen - *Ruthlessly Caring: Paradoxical Mindsets*

- Developing the “Executive Gravity” required for high-stakes C-suite decision-making

Andrea Bonime-Blanc - *Governing Pandora: Leading in the Age of AI and Exponential Tech*

- For IP and Tech-focused attorneys, this book teaches you how to position "exponential governance" (AI, Biotech, Quantum) as a strategic asset rather than just a legal headache.

Minda Harts - *The Memo: What Women of Color Need to Know to Secure a Seat at the Table*

- Practical advice on how to navigate networking and office politics while showing how to make real change to the system, sustaining that seat and pivoting into board roles through "strategic relationship capital."

Octavia Goredema - "Prep, Push, Pivot"

- Essential for the mid-career to board transition. It provides tactical strategies for underrepresented women to secure high-visibility assignments.

Tina Opie & Beth A. Livingston - *Shared Sisterhood*

- This is the "blueprint" for the horizontal alliances we discussed. It teaches women of color and their allies how to take collective action to break institutional barriers.