

Challenge: Developing, Retaining, and Promoting Talented Women

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Introduction

Leaning in?

Stepping up?

Dropping out?

Holding on?

What's going on with the women in your organization?

Research consistently shows the value women leaders bring to their companies. Women are critical to success, yet barriers remain to the advancement of women at work.

How can companies step up to the challenge of developing, retaining, and promoting talented women?

Having women on executive committees correlates with financial success and organizational effectiveness (Barsh).

Companies with female board representation had a 26% greater return on capital investment (Carter).

Highly diverse teams outperform nondiverse teams by as much as 80% (Bersin).

Many Women are Ambitious. Why the Leaky Pipeline?

A McKinsey survey found that 79% of entry-level women and 83% of middle-management women desire to move to the next level at work (Barsh). And 75% of women aspire to top management roles, including C-suite—on par with their male counterparts (Devillard).

Yet, the majority of female employees are concentrated in entry-level and middle-management positions—and that isn't changing. A 2014 study found that globally, the proportion of women in senior roles remains at 24%, the same as in 2007 (Scott). Just 4.8% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women (Fairchild). Women represent 15% to 18% on boards and senior executive teams in many countries. A recent study put that figure into perspective: fewer women are on S&P 1500 boards than men who were named John, Robert, James, and William (EY).

There is no single factor to explain the gap between women's interest in moving into more senior roles and the lack of women currently in them. Many barriers are what may be called second-generation bias or unconscious bias, including:

- *Traditional images of leadership are associated with qualities that are viewed as male qualities.*
- *Women have few female role models at high levels of leadership.*
- *Career paths and work are often defined by or associated with gender.*
- *Women are held to higher standards and offered fewer rewards.*
- *Women are not part of the networks that supply information and support.*
- *Women face a double bind of being either competent or liked—but not both.*
- *The combination of work and home responsibilities is a greater burden for women.*
- *Women may be hesitant to advocate for themselves or self-promote (Ibarra; Desvaux, Barsh, Devillard).*



Individual Development + System Shifts = Solution

Developing, retaining, and promoting female talent is a stated priority in many organizations—but there is a significant gap between knowing it is important and making it happen. Often gender-diversity efforts are vague, misdirected, or too limited. A McKinsey study found that 32% of companies had not implemented any specific gender-diversity measures, and only 30% implemented four measures or more (Desvaux).

Flexible working conditions, support for work and family life, and gender-specific hiring and promoting goals and programs are helpful. A deep understanding of the unconscious bias that affects women in organizations—is essential. Commitment of the CEO and/or other high-level leader is important. Coaching and mentoring, skill-building, and networking initiatives are valuable (Desvaux).

Why a women-only leadership development experience?

A women-only program or initiative doesn't reflect the everyday world of work—and that's a good thing. Novel contexts can shed new light on our experience and open the door to new ways to approach learning and leadership. Plus, a women-only context allows the shared experience of gender to inform the content and support the conversation.

As organizations pursue a range of strategies, three ideas for individuals and organizations can guide decisions about developing, retaining, and promoting talented women:

1. Address women’s leadership challenges and needed competencies. According to a CCL survey of 337 HR leaders and line managers, both men and women, the top leadership challenges for women are *establishing credibility, managing up and across the organization, negotiating adeptly, and influencing others*. The two most important competencies for women leaders to start developing now are *managing organizational complexity and strategic thinking and acting*.

2. Leverage the power of choosing. Women need to be intentional about their careers and development as leaders. The power to choose is one that is often overlooked by women. Encourage women in the organization to:

- Exert greater influence over the choices they make;
- Take the lead in shaping conversations about their career;
- Take greater ownership over their career choices; and
- Create a personal leadership development strategy.

3. Rethink systems, challenge assumptions. Look for ways that unconscious bias in the organization affects opportunities and motivation for women. Scheduling, opportunities for networking and mentoring, social norms, and talent management processes are some potential areas for rethinking and improvement. For example, a hiring manager may assume that a woman who doesn’t discuss her career ambitions is not interested in a promotion or that a woman with small children won’t take on a travel-intensive role. Instead, managers should ask women what they want—and organizations should create the culture and systems that make it easier to have those conversations.



In Action: 3 Levers for Women to Pull

CCL's Women's Leadership Experience (WLE) is an opportunity for experienced managers to choose how to take the next step as a leader in ways that get the results for them and for the organization. It is based around three themes, or levers, that have a powerful impact on women's effectiveness.

1. Gaining Self-Clarity. Women's leadership development is, in large part, about identity. Learning specific skills or competencies cannot be separated from strengthening a woman's identity as a leader.

Self-clarity comes from thinking about values, motivations, and behaviors, as well as the characteristics and roles that make up a woman's identity. It's also about gaining a clear-eyed picture of the social, organizational, and cultural dynamics that are part of her experience.

With self-clarity, women begin to see ways their identity is playing out positively or negatively in terms of leadership effectiveness. They are able to pinpoint developmental goals, explore an identity that includes "leader," and articulate a clear leadership brand.

2. Living Agentically. Agency is about taking control of one's career and shaping one's life. Often, women default into a role, assignment, or task—in their work and personal lives—rather than choosing. Living agentically begins with identifying a desired goal and then actively pursuing the experience, behaviors, skills, or relationships that fuel that goal. It can have a profound impact on career direction and accomplishments, as well as on personal resilience and capacity for living full, often overloaded, lives.

Living agentically is also tied to creating a desired and effective leadership brand. A person's leadership brand is created by the ways she behaves, reacts, and interacts. She can take ownership of her leadership brand by choosing how she shows up as a leader each day.

3. Partnering. The right relationships and ties are known to be an asset in getting access to information, earning promotions, and gaining opportunities. Effective leaders rely on key networks and trusted partners to get results.

Creating the right network is not about maintaining a big, expansive network or schmoozing with the boss or the boss's boss. Research has shown that high-quality networks are open and varied, with people who don't all know each other (Cross). They are diverse, crossing critical boundaries. And core relationships are deep, trusting, and mutually beneficial.

Many women resist the process of networking, believing it's insincere, manipulative, or political—or simply not a natural part of who they are. Unfortunately, the relationships that form easily or naturally are not necessarily beneficial for women, their careers, or their organization. To be more effective leaders, women need a clear understanding of the network they have versus the network they need. Then they need to improve their network by building, maintaining, leveraging, and transitioning relationships.

“When they are grounded in candid assessments of the cultural, organizational, and individual factors shaping them, women can construct coherent narratives about who they are and who they want to become.” (Ibarra)

The Bottom Line?

The business imperative to ensure women are fully participating in leadership is clear. Organizations can no longer accept the status quo in how they develop, retain, and promote female talent.

It is time for executive leadership, talent professionals, and women themselves to make women's careers a priority and their organizations places where women are motivated and supported to learn and lead.

“By addressing the mindsets holding women back, corporate leaders can reshape the talent pipeline . . . increasing the number of women role models at the top and, in turn, making it likelier that more women will retain their ambition.” (Barsh)



Want More on Women and Leadership?

The [Women's Leadership Experience \(WLE\)](#) is a multi-phase learning and networking opportunity for experienced managers. It begins and ends with short, face-to-face sessions with peers and specialized facilitators and coaches. In between, women work on challenges and goals, engage with coaches, and refine their personal leadership strategy.

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