

MAKING THE
**INVISIBLE
VISIBLE**

What's really preventing breakthrough progress on women in leadership?



INTRODUCTION

ONLY ONE IN FOUR EXECUTIVE LEADERS IS FEMALE

Companies recognize that diverse executive teams drive more innovation and better business outcomes, and in acknowledgment of that have been investing more in Inclusion and Diversity (I&D) initiatives.

Yet despite efforts to achieve C-suite gender diversity, diverse representation in senior leadership positions remains elusive: [Only one in four](#) executive leaders is female; across the top 3,000 companies in the United States, just 12 percent of profit-and-loss-focused roles such as chief operating officer or head of sales are filled by women; and fewer than six percent of these 3,000 companies are led by a female CEO.

Why do women get stuck in the middle? Why don't they rise to the top? What are the attitudes and obstacles — **both those that are visible as well as the invisible ones** — that stand in the way of greater diversity and inclusion at the highest levels of companies?

To understand why that is the case — and to make visible the invisible barriers holding women back — we at Oliver Wyman undertook a sweeping research initiative. This report is based on over 160 in-depth conversations with senior women executives from the United States and Canada, across a broad range of industries, to dive beneath the surface and capture the unseen nuances from all of those discussions. Our interviews probed for the lived experiences of these successful women at the most emotional levels. We asked executives to be as candid as possible. Out of respect for that, we've left their quotes anonymous. But we went back to them and checked quotes with our sources to make sure that we got it right. The effort also included a cross-industry survey of men and women to understand differences in attitudes and behaviors as well as perceptions on the success of I&D initiatives at major companies in the United States.

This issue — and its solution — begins at the highest level: with the decision-makers at leading companies who can drive changes in corporate culture. Our recommendations are aimed at you, the senior leaders, but there are also lessons for the women and men who are coming up through the ranks. You can't drive cultural change in an organization without everybody pulling on an oar. That said, someone has to be steering the ship.

The good news is that there are conditions to help level the playing field, and you can use that knowledge to your advantage in designing systemic solutions. The bad news is that organizations are not purposeful enough. The progress women have made getting into top leadership has been skewed so we are likely missing out on a large percent of very talented women who get “stuck” on the path to senior leadership.

WHY DO WOMEN GET (STUCK) IN THE MIDDLE?

Early in a career, individuals are evaluated based on functional capability and expertise — the hard skills and individual abilities needed to get things done. But as one rises through the ranks, the concept of “leadership skills” and getting things done by influencing others is what is being assessed. There is a lot less clarity and alignment on what defines effective leadership and individual potential, as those are far more subjective attributes to assess. Our research indicates a structural misalignment between men and women on what matters in terms of leadership and what it takes to advance into senior executive roles.

Combine this structural misalignment in perceptions of leadership with more subjectivity in assessing leadership skills and potential, and it’s no surprise that unconscious and implicit biases significantly affect the path of women to the top. Even if there was agreement on what “good” leadership looked like, businesses would still need to systematically address the issue of bias. Business cultures are still male-dominated because as the majority, they indirectly shape culture. Unconscious and implicit biases, therefore, affect the acceptable norms and unwritten rules of every interaction along the leadership journey. Our goal is to help executives

understand what is getting in the way of women breaking into the C-Suite so you can directly address this within your organization. We want to shed light on these otherwise “hidden” challenges that get in the way and explain how companies can systemically make change happen faster.

CRITICAL BARRIERS

Four problems unintentionally ignored

OUR RESEARCH IDENTIFIED **FOUR CRITICAL BARRIERS** FOR WOMEN SEEKING LEADERSHIP

First

Leadership is the same game
with different rules

Second

Results don't speak for themselves

Third

Qualified women are
unintentionally left on the sidelines

Fourth

Implicit biases and
microaggressions are exhausting

LEADERSHIP: THE SAME GAME WITH DIFFERENT RULES

In our cross-industry survey of more than 300 senior leaders, when asked about the top three traits that are imperative for effective leadership, there was only one that both genders agreed on — confidence. Beyond that, men and women defined effective leadership very differently. Women valued collaboration and team empowerment. Men, on the other hand, emphasized directness and decisiveness. The problem is, women leadership candidates tend to be evaluated by men who put much more weight on being direct and decisive (see Exhibit 1).

This misalignment in key leadership traits between the genders creates obstacles to women rising to leadership roles. Now, add in that one of the most common unconscious biases in our society, which is that too much confidence or decisiveness by women is viewed negatively (by

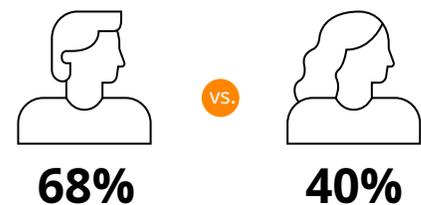
men and women, by the way). Is it any surprise that we have a problem? Women recognize this misalignment instinctively, even if they do not appreciate why it is happening. Only 40 percent of women said their leadership style was reflected in their company's leadership, compared with nearly 70 percent of men (see Exhibit 2).

The world of business is moving to a [more inclusive, collaborative work style](#) that better taps the talent and innovation of the full team — a style that women leaders bring. But the system is still wired around an old model that was built in an environment when the vast majority of employees were men. By not shifting the leadership model more explicitly, we are letting the old “norms” de-select the very leaders and styles we are seeking to grow — and making the journey to leadership more challenging for women.

Exhibit 1: What three key traits define an effective leader?

MEN	vs.	WOMEN
Direct	1	Empowers teams
Decisive	2	Confident
Confident	3	Collaborative

Exhibit 2: Percentage of men and women who think their personal leadership style aligns with the dominant leadership style of the company



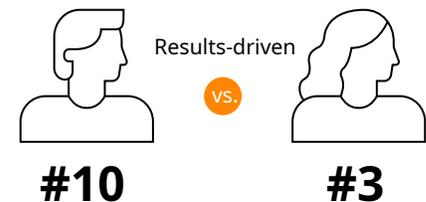
RESULTS DON'T SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Women ranked being “results-driven” as a key factor in their leadership success much higher than men who were asked the same question. And while this objective, outcome-driven orientation served women well early in their careers, it does not serve women as well as they get more senior (see Exhibit 3).

Women’s focus or predisposition toward results, [along with a dislike of “networking for networking’s sake,”](#) may be causing them to

miss an important dimension of what ultimately impacts leadership promotion decisions. Who to hire or promote into the most senior leadership roles is a trust-based decision. Studies have shown that trust-based decisions of all types are based not only on proven competency and integrity but are also based on affinity. Trust — which is facilitated by affinity — and affinity itself are both part of the intangible factors that make a decision-maker “more comfortable” with one candidate

Exhibit 3: Leadership traits key to my success



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Women begin their careers with a mindset if we do the best job we can, keep our heads down, and have the right answers, someone will notice.

Vice President, Healthcare

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I've been anti-networking most of my life. "Work hard, demonstrate results, get promoted" worked — until director level. Over the last two years, I started teaching myself to be aware of the full package.

Vice President, Healthcare



over another. Affinity develops as individuals truly get to know one another and in doing so find commonality and connection and most importantly, build trust. This is why one's network and informal relationships matter so much in the workplace.

It is easier to quickly develop affinity when you are part of the majority group in a situation because many of your life experiences are relatable or even shared. This is not about "old boys' clubs" or networking for

networking's sake, which is how the issue is often seen on the surface. This is about understanding the very human nature of affinity and how it influences who is chosen for leadership roles. It also reinforces the importance of developing relationships and finding connectivity with those who are not "like us."

Both are critical to overcoming bias and increasing diversity at the top. Strategies that simply ask us as human beings to eliminate all affinity biases are destined to fall short.

Women need to appreciate why these relationships matter perhaps as much as results do, and focus more attention on developing them. Likewise, senior men need to really understand how the affinity dynamic influences them and make more proactive efforts to develop deep connections more evenly.

QUALIFIED WOMEN ARE UNINTENTIONALLY LEFT ON THE SIDELINES

A breadth of experience is key to landing a senior leadership role; yet often, qualified women are underdeveloped in their organizations. At play are two key issues.

First, women are simply not top of mind. They are less likely to self-advocate and also must battle inaccurate assumptions related to their willingness to take on more intense roles.

Secondly, men and women perceive their readiness for the next role very differently, and most companies do not actively mitigate that bias. [Women are more socialized as rule followers](#) from an early age; they are more likely as girls to play games that require taking turns, for instance. This impacts how they perceive things later in life. Notably at play: A woman often won't apply to a job unless she feels she meets [100 percent](#) of the described qualifications. In contrast,

for men, this number is more like [60 percent](#). Raising one's hand does not necessarily equate with capability.

The result of these combined systemic challenges? [Women on average take three to five years longer than men do to reach CEO](#), with the former often getting stuck somewhere in the middle while their male peers rise through the ranks.

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I see men asking for what they want, and women don't. I used to assume I would simply be rewarded by my outcomes, but I realized people need to know what you want. Now, I say, 'I am ready. Will you support me?'

Director, Automotive

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There was a regional opening and I said, “What about me?” My boss asked, “You would travel?” And I said, “Of course. Why would you think I wouldn’t?” I was shocked the reason I hadn’t been considered was travel. I ended up getting the job, but it just shows on the leadership journey, you have to speak up for yourself.

Senior Vice President, CHRO, Financial Services

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Women want to dot our i’s and cross our t’s and then some before we put ourselves as a candidate for anything. Men think less about building credentials and more about capabilities and aptitude.

Senior Government Executive, Healthcare

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Early on, I didn’t have the confidence to put my hand up. My path would have been different and easier in some ways if I had.

COO, Financial Services

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IMPLICIT BIASES AND MICROAGGRESSIONS ARE EXHAUSTING

Research shows women are more likely to have ideas misattributed to others, be talked over in meetings, receive vague or unconstructive feedback, and be viewed negatively for visibly demonstrating the same confidence that is valued in male leaders.

These biases and microaggressions are commonplace and often unintentional, but nonetheless they take a toll on women. While the men may not see them, the women do, and it means that many women spend critical energy focused on adapting or self-editing. Over time, this can be demoralizing and exhausting.

Many high potential women, weary of bias, exit the talent pipeline, either opting out of the workforce or choosing a different career.

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If you're a man and you raise your voice or have a strong opinion, you're assertive. If you're a woman, you're over-passionate and aggressive.

Senior Vice President, Insurance

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“ I made an effective point in a meeting. No one touched it. When a guy repeated it, everyone said, “That’s a great idea.”

CEO, Healthcare ”

“ I self-edit more than my male peers do. I know if I’m not measured and using data in an opinion, it can get stereotyped and perceived differently. Men can offer an opinion with less substance and they’re just viewed as passionate.

Chief Experience Officer, Healthcare ”

“ You need a reason to get up in the morning, believe your voice is heard, and your opinions matter.

CEO, Aviation ”

“ I’ve seen people leave the company frustrated their ideas weren’t being heard. I realized I too had the power to leave, but I also had the power to stay and to strive for a position of greater influence in order to drive change and make some difference for the women coming up the ranks behind me.

Vice President, Rail ”

DEFYING THE **ODDS**

Why some break through the barriers



DESPITE THE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS, **SOME WOMEN HAVE MADE IT TO THE TOP LEADERSHIP POSITIONS** IN THEIR INDUSTRIES

Based on over 160 discussions, we sought to connect the dots across women who “broke through” and use their stories to understand what we’re collectively missing that can enable corporate America to finally make real progress.

Two drivers emerged as pivotal to women reaching executive roles despite barriers: hard-to-find sponsors leveling the playing field and certain innate personality traits.

The good news is that some conditions do help level the playing field, and companies can use that knowledge to their advantage in designing systemic solutions. The bad news is that organizations are not purposeful enough. The progress women have made getting into top leadership has been skewed toward the narrowly defined conditions and personality traits so we are likely missing out on a large percent of very talented women who get “stuck” on the path to senior leadership.

HARD-TO-FIND SPONSORS LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

Ninety-five percent of women we interviewed cited at least one critical sponsor. Unlike mentors, sponsors lend their personal credibility and advocate proactively for the sponsored party and are much more impactful on one's career. Sponsors are key for men and women alike who make it to the senior leadership ranks. However, sponsors are even more critical for women because they subtly but critically level the playing field because of the challenges women uniquely encounter.

SPONSORS SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE

Sponsors ensure women don't get stuck or trapped too narrowly, guiding them to take critical steps (like taking on that P&L role or gaining global experience) to obtain the breadth of perspective required for the C-suite — things men often instinctively and actively pursue.

SPONSORS LESSEN THE "CONFIDENCE GAP."

A good sponsor recognizes readiness and pushes candidates forward. Many women in the C-suite had a key sponsor who encouraged them to take on roles they otherwise might not have or sooner than they might have considered, thereby keeping talented leaders on a trajectory that continued their progress.

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My sponsor is the reason I'm here — not because I haven't earned my way, but because otherwise, I'd have hung out on the trading floor forever because I liked what I was doing and didn't have the perspective to reach higher and for more.

COO, Financial Services

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I wanted to put myself on a CFO track once after going back to get my CFA. I was determined to get into finance again. My mentor at the time said, “Don’t do what you’re comfortable with. You’ll make a better CFO if you become a CEO or a business leader.” At the time, it was hard for me to understand. But it was one of the greatest pieces of advice he gave me.

CEO, Insurance

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I had three young kids and worked part-time. My sponsor said, “When your youngest is in full-time school, you’ve got to come back full-time.” If that sponsor had not called me, where would I be? I was comfortable. I could have cruised on part-time, but it’s good to feel needed and that you have space amidst the fray.

CEO, Professional Services

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Throughout my career, there were always a series of people in the organization’s top leadership roles who saw me and believed I could do more. They saw me in roles I didn’t see for myself — roles where I had to grow and stretch. These were roles they were already in and that alone was very validating for me.

President and CEO, Healthcare

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I had people pushing me out of my comfort zone, giving me responsibility where I didn't quite know what I was doing. This allowed me to make mistakes that became more like data points versus insecurities.

Senior Vice President, Financial Services



SPONSORS HELP WOMEN BROADEN THEIR NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE.

The number one aspect women value from sponsors is access to their network. For men, this ranked fifth in importance. Building relationships and connections can be more difficult for women, given the natural affinity and networks already formed in more male-dominated leadership teams. Sponsors not only leverage their personal credibility to facilitate network connections, but they also help explain the unwritten rules and expectations. Stalwart sponsors are also adept at pushing back on the status quo on behalf of those they sponsor (see Exhibit 4).

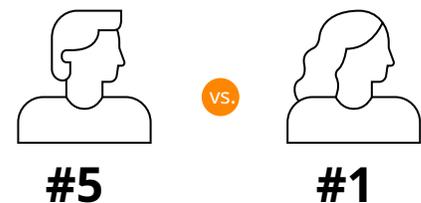
Sponsors' actions and proactive engagement subtly but meaningfully help overcome some of the otherwise

systemic barriers that women face. Women, therefore, clearly benefit even more than men do from good sponsorship.

Unfortunately, sponsors are also harder for women to find. Not surprisingly, affinity plays a role in strong sponsorship relationships. We all have a tendency to sponsor others "like us," which puts women at a disadvantage in a business world where top leadership is predominantly male. Of course, males can and do sponsor females. The challenge we see is that it is rarer because of both the amount of time that the men and women spend on it and the fact that finding commonality with people who have fewer shared life experiences takes a bit more purpose and effort. This means that left to our natural state, the male/male combinations

are likely to happen more effortlessly — and as a result, capable women are too often left out. But more than that, companies are leaving talent on the sidelines and must find ways to open the system to a broader group of women with different styles.

Exhibit 4: When it comes to what men and women value in sponsorship, here's where men and women ranked the importance of being introduced to others in their network



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Relationship building is harder for women. Sectors have been male-dominated, so the way we build relationships is different and the networking aspect can be more challenging for women.

Head of Enterprise Risk, Financial Services

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In the later stages of my career promotions, I had support from a broad bunch of senior leaders who advocated for me. That advocacy is different from mentoring. Building mentorship and a network through things like events and conferences is important, but you also must have internal advocacy.

COO, Automotive

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SOME PERSONALITY TRAITS ARE WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD IN TODAY'S CORPORATE WORLD

One surprising thing we found in our interviews is that many of our interviewees shared certain personality traits. Although these characteristics aren't empirically critical to success as a leader, we believe that they may have made these particular women more immune to the impact of the structural misalignment and biases that we highlighted earlier. As we acknowledged, it is exhausting to "go against type" or force oneself to fit into an unnatural mold. This is part of why

strategies based on a minority group (in this case, women) conforming to the default norms of the majority seldom achieve diversity at scale. There may be some bright spots, but those will tend to be the exceptional outliers, rather than the rule.

In the case of these successful senior women leaders, we are suggesting that certain personal attributes and motivations result in some specific default behaviors and actions that

are "natural" or "effortless" to these women. The behaviors are not critical to leadership in and of themselves, but rather they seem to have the accidental benefit of helping to overcome some of the structural misalignment and eliminate some biases. Our observations are not intended to imply that women with these traits are the only ones cut out for senior leadership roles.

Here are **two specific traits**:

1

THE CURIOUS
PROBLEM SOLVER

A surprisingly large number of interviewees commented on their intellectual curiosity and problem solving as a unique strength and intrinsic part of who they are. This was particularly true of women CEOs where 90 percent of the ones we interviewed commented on this specific characteristic as being a large motivator and driver of who they are.

Being a problem solver with a curiosity to learn and “connect the dots” meant these women naturally become more visible. They were more likely to interact with more people, share perspectives proactively, and broaden their organizational knowledge. They were not necessarily actively networking or being more direct in asking for what they wanted career-wise, but rather they indirectly built relationships and gained more

confidence in their understanding of areas they did not have roles in.

Driven by a curiosity about how things are connected, these women built up expertise and a broader understanding of the business beyond formal roles and reporting lines. This breadth of experience also galvanized them to take on further leadership challenges.

These women were simply being themselves and energized by their curiosity to learn and connect the dots. Ultimately, that instinct helped them be more visible, develop their networks, broaden their knowledge, and boost their confidence — all of which we previously noted is typically part of the structural challenges that women face in a male-dominated business environment.



When I can see the opportunity, I know I can help round out the picture, break down the problem, communicate, and motivate people.

Senior Government Executive, Healthcare



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Being a “learner” is in my DNA.

CEO, Financial Services

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Having a more curious approach means you look at problems from multiple angles to find the best solution. And as you put the pieces together, you come up with innovative and creative ways to deliver on strategies and solutions instead of just copying and pasting what’s worked in the past.

President, Healthcare

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I was working cross-functionally, outside of my direct function, to impact the organization at a higher level. The network across functions becomes your macro sponsors — not just who you’re reporting to but other people they’re working with who can speak to the impact you’re making.

President, Automotive

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The more well-rounded I was, the more confident I became because I could see how things impacted everybody. Women leaders need to understand and proactively try to understand the downstream and related impacts of a decision.

CFO, Professional Services



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OVERABUNDANT RESILIENCE

Women face countless instances of micro-aggression, and implicit bias pervades businesses. Women are often told they're too forceful or, conversely, that they are too timid. They are regularly interrupted. When their ideas are co-opted by others, women are often forced to bounce back. They take feedback in stride and grow.

Resilience allowed those women who reached the C-suite to stay the course.

Most people would feel demoralized or exhausted by constantly fighting to be heard and respected. It takes resilience and a good deal of energy to overcome these challenges.

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I've been ignored in meetings. I've had two colleagues put me in awkward situations, but I never felt like I needed to run to people and complain. I'm strong enough to deal with it myself.

CEO, Energy

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Over time, I cultivated fearlessness. I would ask myself, “How bad can it be?” I could always move on if needed.

Vice President, Rail

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One of the biggest keys to my success is tenacity — you cannot give up. The harder things get, try harder.

CFO, Automotive

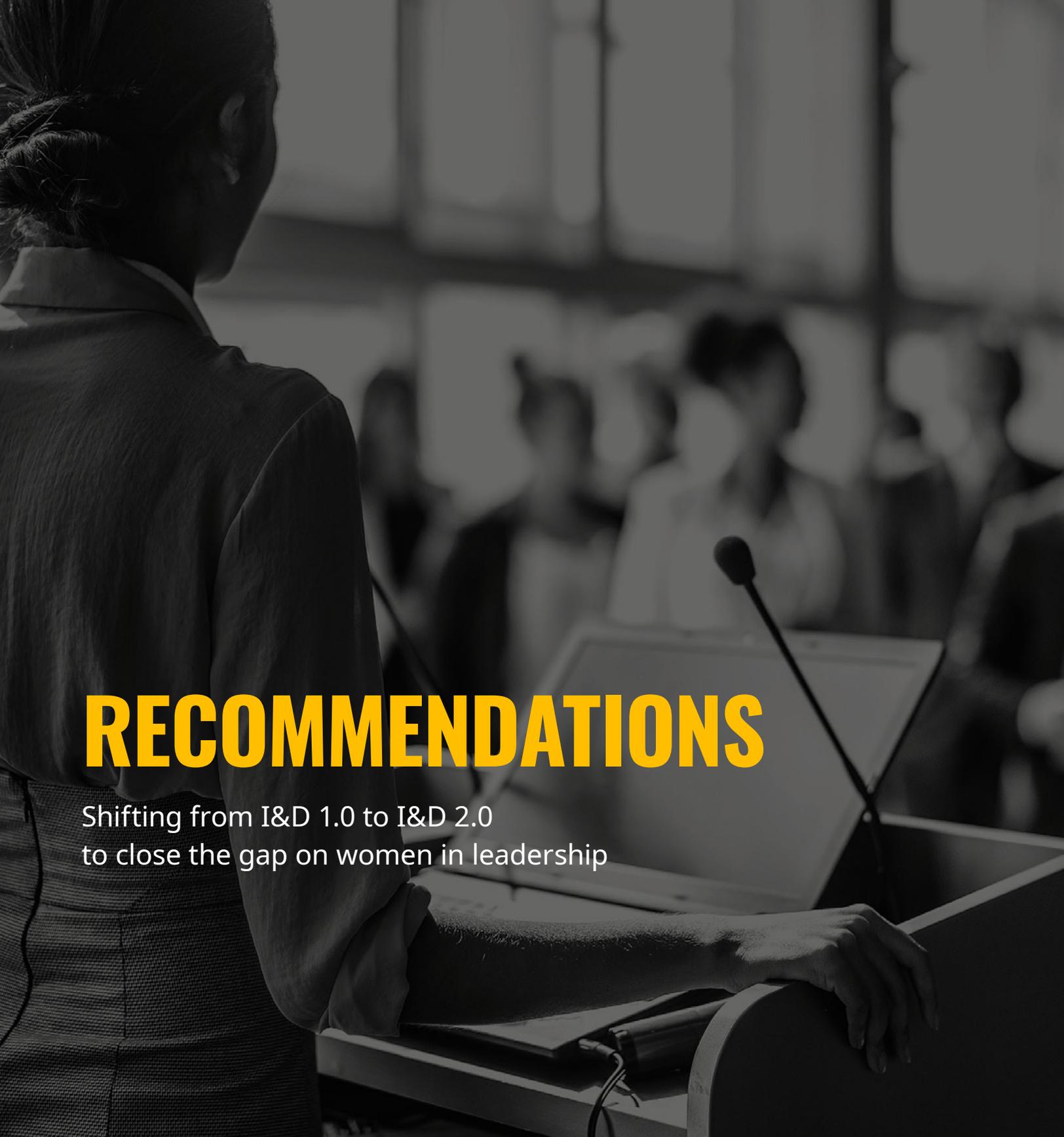
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DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT WILL SHAPE FUTURE INNOVATIONS, INCLUDING THOSE YOUR OWN COMPANY CREATES

Now more than ever companies need diversity of thought to tackle the challenges ahead. Organizations are missing key business opportunities to strengthen leadership and advance innovation. Simply put, we need more women to make it into senior leadership. Those that do break through in today's environment seem to do so not only by their talents and capabilities, but also by a rare combination of the right conditions (like great sponsors) and distinct personality traits that overcome the systemic structural challenges for women in the workplace.

The challenge is that these conditions too rarely line up by chance. When you consider racial and ethnic diversity, the same underlying dynamic is at play. There are different systemic biases and structural barriers for any specific minority group, but the dynamic at play is the same. The business world today implicitly defaults to a White male norm in terms of perceptions and biases. This is not a conscious thing, but is rather the natural result of one group dominating the culture for so long. To reduce the bias, corporations need to move the unconscious to the conscious — to create new corporate cultures by design rather than by default.

Most organizations have I&D efforts and programs in place, but we believe few get to the core of the issue enough to create scaled, sustainable change.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Shifting from I&D 1.0 to I&D 2.0
to close the gap on women in leadership

I&D 1.0 BY ITSELF DOES NOT WORK

There is a belief among many senior executives that if you fix the challenges at the bottom, expand the pipeline of diverse talent, and implement discrete policies and even quotas to drive women into leadership, gender diverse leaders will emerge. We call this approach I&D 1.0. And we have enough years behind us to confirm that I&D 1.0 by itself does not work.

Too much focus has been placed on discrete programs and initiatives aimed at “fixing” pieces of the problem. Understandably, it often feels like we have lots of activity in the area of I&D; yet it is not translating into the pace of change needed at the more senior leadership levels.

This is why we believe that if we want more systemic change and faster progress, it is time for I&D 2.0. I&D 2.0 focuses on a much more foundational effort to understand these fundamental misalignments as the basis for acting collectively to create a new normal. It requires much more intentionality by leadership and a business-driven approach to driving change within the organization.

Shifting mindsets and deeply ingrained perceptions may seem like something that will take a long time. We do not believe this has to be the case.

With the right focus and attention, and by starting at the top, you can move things much more quickly than we have seen with past efforts. What follows

is our proposed playbook for accelerating progress on women in leadership.

By focusing on making change happen in the most senior leadership roles, you manage to shrink the scale of the problem. Also, once you get more women in leadership, their presence and influence further shapes the default culture and broadens the impact, cascading down into the organization. By changing the emphasis from fixing things bottom-up to top-down, we can make impact happen faster. We believe there are three core elements in this effort:

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP STARTS AT THE TOP

Educate your existing leadership on the gender bias and systemic barriers that disproportionately thwart women leaders and motivate them to be change agents. Create a shared view of what makes great leadership (a shared leadership model) and be more explicit and purposeful about how you develop and assess leaders against inclusive criteria.

TREAT I&D LIKE A BUSINESS TO GET MORE RESULTS

Just like in business, you get what you measure and prioritize. So get over any discomfort with targets and measurement, and start challenging yourself by asking, “If I had to get ‘x’ more women in leadership roles within a year, how would I do that?” Then take action and make it happen like you would any operational challenge.

DOUBLE DOWN ON SPONSORSHIP

Intentional sponsorship is the biggest lever at your disposal. If you invest in one thing, it should be to improve the effectiveness of senior leaders’ sponsorship of the women in the next level down. Changes at the top can happen faster and leading by example cascades and multiplies the impact throughout the organization.

INCLUSIVE CULTURE BEGINS WITH INCLUSIVE LEADERS

Creating a diverse senior leadership team requires changes in mindset and behaviors at the top. Transformational impact starts with purposeful, comprehensive leadership that ultimately shapes a broader inclusive culture. Organizations have gotten much better at bringing women into the workplace, but somewhere along the way to the most senior leadership ranks, they tend to be lost. Despite a much more heterogeneous workforce in the last few decades, corporations have not helped their most established leaders grow and evolve to get the most out of this diverse workforce.

Companies all have leadership-training programs, but are those giving them what they need most? Too often, such programs are focused on teaching management skills to high potential managers about how to manage better, rotational programs to broaden experience. Or, these programs present opportunities for skilled staff to work on special

projects and get exposure to more senior executives. Those are great programs for many reasons, but they do not raise overall leadership acumen on how to create an inclusive environment where you get the most from a broader group of people, and in doing so, level the playing field.

To begin to make real change, we recommend you start by investing in inclusive leadership development as a senior team. In the course of this journey, you need to accomplish a few things. First, you need to get your leadership team (male and female) more consciously aware of implicit biases and socialized norms that impact behaviors and perceptions. When this type of education and engagement is done effectively, we typically find that leadership teams become much more engaged in solving for this shared challenge that they now better understand. Leaders (men and women) tend to become more curious and emotionally invested, and less skeptical or

defensive. Individuals see it as something we can solve for, rather than a flaw or failure.

Once your collective awareness is raised and you can see what changes in behaviors are needed, it is time to get much more explicit about what you collectively value in terms of leadership and how you assess and develop your leaders. Your goal is to actively explore leadership and create a more contemporary, shared view of what good leadership looks like for your company versus implicitly defaulting to outdated, unspoken assumptions.

Finally, you start to cascade this throughout the organization by expanding training throughout the organization. By starting at the top, you set the direction and tone, and you accelerate the path of a few to the most senior leadership levels where their presence has a multiplier effect.

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Gone are the days when leaders want to be told only what they want to hear. Opportunities stem from leaders who prefer surrounding themselves with people who challenge them, with people who speak up, and with people hold different views. Transformation starts at the top in this way.

President, Healthcare

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We (in business today) seem to assume leadership skills are either innate or developed over time by exposure to other good leaders. If we could just enhance overall leadership competency by being more explicit about the role of leaders in creating an inclusive environment and how to actually do that, we would make major progress in leveling the playing field for everyone.

President and CEO, Healthcare

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TREAT I&D LIKE A BUSINESS TO GET MORE RESULTS

The old adage that you get what you measure is true. In talking with CEOs at companies where they have succeeded in creating a C-suite with more than 40 percent women, there are various philosophies on how accountability is created. For example, some CEOs were firm believers in establishing hiring targets for diversity. Others were philosophically opposed to what they saw as quotas. However, these leaders consistently made diversity part of both C-suite and board discussions — making it clear to executive teams that NOT being focused on improving diversity was not an option. These leaders are laser-focused on hiring and succession planning as key opportunities to drive diversity whether through strict targets, encouraging leaders to include diverse candidates in the process,

or assessing prior experience along with potential.

Whether you set targets or not, bringing the facts and tracking your metrics in regular leadership conversations, much like you do about financial performance or operational improvements, is critical to keeping everyone focused on real progress.

Once you focus on outcomes versus inputs and you concentrate your efforts toward the top of the house, you may be surprised by the potential solutions you see. Too often leadership teams' default assumption is that because the existing seats are filled with men, and most "obvious" candidates next in line are men, nothing can be done in the short term. Another false pretense is that external female candidates simply

are not out there. The truth is there are women you can recruit; you just need to look a little harder, push your recruiting team or headhunters, and refuse to settle for only being shown the easy candidates to find. Likewise, there are high-potential women leaders within your organization who have been overlooked because of the structural challenges we explored earlier.

If you force yourself to commit to more senior women in leadership roles, set a challenging deadline, and work the problem backward, suddenly you start to see other possibilities. You look harder at your high-potential women candidates one level down. You ask yourself why they did not get the last leadership role and think about where you can put them now. You take a chance

on someone internal who may have been unintentionally passed over. You can also always restructure the roles and chairs around the most-senior leadership tables and create room for more diverse candidates and women. If you wanted Maria or Jasmine at the table, how would you think about a different structure or role and make that happen in the next 12 months, rather than waiting and assuming that it will eventually happen?

Necessity is the mother of invention. Leaders who think they run their businesses efficiently and effectively

somehow always manage to find a way to reduce costs by five percent more when facing a recession and feeling like their back is against the wall. If we apply the same challenge to this business problem, we will see other possibilities. While you cannot solve the whole conundrum overnight, you can get people's attention with a focus on ensuring the aspirations are clear and the pace of progress is faster. Ultimately, this is a board-level item: Companies that are serious about I&D and gender diversity in leadership should be sharing the progress, the metrics,

and the action plans with the board. If you are on a board, you should be pushing for executives to make progress faster. Investors are demanding transparency and performance in this arena — and it is directly impacting valuations.

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A company's stats about inclusion and diversity tell you if they're walking the walk. At some point in our country, we must examine these stats more closely together, and discuss what to expect next. How should boards be evaluated with respect to female percentages? What should be the expectations about diversity? How should we think about officer rank percentages? We don't necessarily need hard and fast numbers, but we do need more discussion about what should be expected.

President and CEO, Insurance

”

GREAT SPONSORSHIP TAKES INTENTION AND THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE PEOPLE

Sponsorship is the biggest lever at your disposal for helping overcome the systemic challenges that create gender imbalance in the workplace. However, if you want to get the impact from sponsorship, you likely need to step up your game and become more intentional at sponsorship. Women continue to be under-sponsored across organizations relative to men for a variety of reasons. We believe existing leaders must enable sponsors to pivot to these three specific approaches: Firstly, stop mentoring and start sponsoring; secondly, actively choose your sponsored party; and, finally, purposefully mitigate the imbalances against women.

MENTORING IS THE PAST. SPONSORSHIP IS THE FUTURE.

Sponsors need to be active advocates for their sponsored party. One critical approach: using organizational capital — both publicly and behind closed doors — to push for advancement, open up opportunities, and provide critical “air cover” for risk taking. [Research on sponsorship](#) has shown only about 25 percent of people who believe they are sponsors say they advocate for their sponsored party’s promotion. Less than 20 percent typically report providing “air cover” for those they sponsor. For women in particular, sponsors play a key role in leveling the playing field by using

their reputation and credibility to overcome real, implicit bias. They also help address the “confidence gap” by pushing those they sponsor to use real projects and opportunities, provided they have room to take needed risks. Without these, women are left with well-intended mentors and no systematic support in re-leveling the playing field.

“

My sponsor gave me opportunities and took the time to teach me. Sometimes he would have projects he didn't need me on but he would ask if I was interested and have me sit in on meetings just to give me repeated opportunities.

Senior Vice President, Financial Services

”

“

Doing isn't enough. Sponsors helped me realize you must sell yourself, your work, and your vision. I was coached into opportunities I wouldn't have considered, like speaking opportunities or *Modern Healthcare's* lists of top leaders. Being visible and raising my profile furthered my personal success and the success of the work itself.

Senior Government Executive, Healthcare

”

SPONSOR RELATIONSHIP SHOULD BE BASED ON CHOICE, NOT CHANCE

Sponsorship is built on mutual respect and trust. It is born out of a senior person with influence taking an active role supporting a high-potential performer whose personal success they care about. Based on this, affinity and relationship play a significant role in strong sponsorship pairings. Successful executives sponsor people who they care about, and who in turn make the sponsor look good. This is why formal sponsorship programs for women where the sponsored parties are assigned are rarely effective.

In our survey, men ranked formal sponsorship programs as the least effective options to advance women in leadership (ranked last out of 14 different programs). Women, many of whom likely are not receiving organic sponsorship given previously noted barriers to building affinity, show a preference for more formalized programs. It's clear overall that sponsors can be more intentional and companies can enable, encourage, and reward leaders who actively sponsor a diverse slate of rising talent (see Exhibit 5).

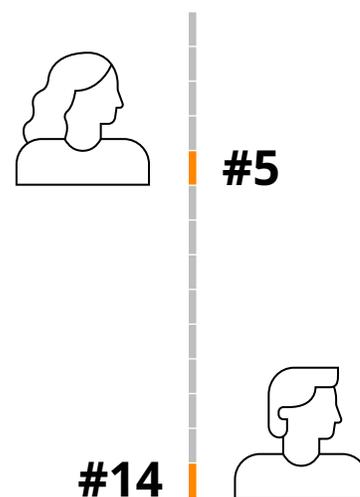
IT'S TIME TO BALANCE THE GENDER INEQUITY SCALES

Women approach the journey to leadership differently than men do. As we've discovered, they are less likely to articulate their aspirations and goals, and they tend to underpromote their capability and accomplishments relative to their male counterparts. They tend to put their head down, work hard, and expect their performance to speak for itself. Women face micro-aggressions daily in the workplace, which can ultimately wear down even the most persistent and confident individuals. Sponsors of women need to better understand these points of structural misalignment between the genders and be more active in supporting the women in navigating the biases of today's workplace, while at the same time removing the biases through their efforts as a senior sponsor.

By actively engaging and becoming more informed about what is getting in the way, sponsors naturally deepen their inclusive leadership acumen. It matters. The women we interviewed who broke through despite structural challenges, universally noted the importance of sponsors' guiding them through unwritten rules and reassuring them along the way —

different skills than when sponsoring men. It's critical your leaders understand and have the skill to be more agile and adaptable; the reward is tangible when those women rise and make great company contributions.

Exhibit 5: How women and men rank formal sponsorship programs regarding how effectively programs like these generally improve women's leadership representation



Note: 1 = highest ranked in terms of effectiveness; 14 = lowest ranked in terms of effectiveness

According to our survey, respondents believe inclusive leadership programs for all genders is one of the most effective ways to advance women; it ranked second only behind leadership development programs in general.

ULTIMATELY, SPONSORSHIP MUST BE PURPOSEFUL, ENERGIZING, AND AUTHENTIC

Our recommendation is to get purposeful about sponsorship. Your top executives need to assess where they spend their time sponsoring individuals and identify specific high-potential women to actively sponsor. Redesign your sponsorship programs to better enable experiences that create lasting connections and turn into organic sponsorship relationships. As you create space for the sponsorship relationship to grow, sponsors also need to be provided with inclusive leadership training that transcends sponsorship.

Example: Oliver Wyman runs a sponsorship program called Inspiring Leaders for under-represented groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ colleagues. The year-long program pairs a junior colleague with a Partner or senior leader who is willing to be their sponsor and wants to augment their sponsorship skills to be more inclusive. Both individuals are coached on inclusive leadership and speak openly about challenges the sponsored party has faced. They work to understand each other on a deeper level and discuss the inherent values that drive them to succeed. Sponsors receive performance feedback from

the sponsored party's managers and colleagues, and leverage this to provide a realistic view of others' perceptions. The pairs collaborate on a leadership project to help showcase the talents of the sponsored party and build a sponsorship relationship that will endure beyond the program. The hope is that participants will take their learnings and continue to sponsor others outside of the program to embed sponsorship as part of the firm's culture.

A grayscale photograph of a woman with short, wavy hair and round glasses, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark top and a lanyard. In the background, another person with curly hair is partially visible, looking to the right. The overall scene suggests a professional or academic environment.

**FROM I&D 1.0
TO I&D 2.0**

OUR ADVICE TO LEADERS IS SIMPLE

In 2021 implement at least one recommendation in this paper. Oliver Wyman recognizes we need active buy-in from top executives willing to use their power to make real progress on advancing women into senior leadership. Together, we must shift from I&D 1.0, which focuses on tactics and initiatives aimed at addressing symptoms of the problem, to an I&D 2.0 mindset where we get at the root cause of challenges. With I&D 2.0, organizations commit to being more honest with themselves, digging for a deeper and systemic understanding of bias and what gets in the way despite the best of intentions. As the status quo becomes acceptable, we must push to make changes even if that proves uncomfortable. In doing so, we will create the future, making a real difference for the performance of our organizations, but also for generations to come.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

NO PRESSURE, NO DIAMOND

Sometimes, amazing things happen when constraints and pressure are applied. Leadership theory has historically been built around a male norm. As a result, many leadership styles feel unavailable to women, a feeling compounded by the negative reaction they receive when they act outside of an expected archetype. When women are more direct or drive too hard, they are often told they're too aggressive. If too reserved, they're called out as passive, indecisive, and ineffective. The result? A narrow band of leadership styles for women to choose from. Women, who are like diamonds being shaped under pressure, make it to the top by having an adaptive and flexible approach.

What winds up happening is women by virtue of no choice, end up kind of being forced under pressure and come out just right at the right time, like a diamond.

AGILITY PROPELS WOMEN FORWARD

Our interviewees seemed to thrive when they could be purposeful in their leadership style to navigate acceptable norms, while remaining authentic to themselves. This purposefulness in approach resulted in a more agile leadership style appropriate for a range of workplace situations.

“ You have to worry about how to be taken seriously — what do you look like, sound like, is your voice too squeaky, do you look too emotional — you don't want to play into a stereotype about women.

Former Executive Vice President, Energy ”

“ Great leaders don't have particular styles, but change their styles based on the situation. I focus on moving in and out of styles.

Executive Vice President, Rail ”

OVER-MENTORED AND UNDER-SPONSORED

People often identify sponsors as leaders who take an interest in their career and play a positive role. But effective sponsors broaden the sponsored party's perspective, network, and opportunities. Often this means advocating on their behalf or using political capital to open doors. Though mentorship may make a woman more effective in her current role, sponsorship helps her find the next one — even if this costs the sponsor.

THE POWER OF ORGANIC SPONSORSHIPS

Based on our survey data, 80 percent of men (compared to 66 percent of women) cite affiliation and social connection as significant motivators at work. Having a pre-existing relationship and connection with someone helps develop trust that drives a sponsor to invest in you. Without this connection, an assigned sponsor becomes a valued mentor at best. At worst, the pairing feels superficial.

FEW FEMALE LEADERS MEAN FEW SENIOR FEMALE SPONSORS

Some women find a more natural connection or affinity with female sponsors, but the persistent lack of women at the top leaves a dearth of options for individuals positioned to be effective sponsors. Women often end up with more junior mentors who don't have the personal capital to advocate and advance these women's careers.

“ You have to earn a sponsor's trust. Prove yourself through hard work and volunteering to take on new challenges.

Head of Enterprise Risk,
Financial Services ”

“ I would find opportunities where I could work for a month or six weeks on a special project, where I had an opportunity to show a senior leader I was more than a name on a piece of paper. Until you work with someone, they don't have a clear view.

CEO, Aviation ”

“ I just haven't found any men I connect with as fully, which is terrible to say because that's what you hear male mentors say about females.

COO, Healthcare ”

Oliver Wyman is a global leader in management consulting. With offices in 60 cities across 29 countries, Oliver Wyman combines deep industry knowledge with specialized expertise in strategy, operations, risk management, and organization transformation. The firm has more than 5,000 professionals around the world who work with clients to optimize their business, improve their operations and risk profile, and accelerate their organizational performance to seize the most attractive opportunities. OliverWyman is a wholly owned subsidiary of Marsh & McLennan Companies [NYSE:MCC].

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