Women in Leadership

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“On Forbes list of America’s 100 ‘Most Innovative Leaders’, there are twice as many men named Stanley as there are women of any name. And there are only two Stanley’s. That’s right: 99 of America’s 100 most innovative leaders are men, Forbes says.” This quote by Anand Giridharadas was meant to question whether Forbes’ list was developed in an unbiased manner.

Forbes responded to by saying, “Don’t shoot the messenger!” and in its rebuttal stated, “Our lists are data driven exercises (and) the pool ultimately proved the problem: Women, as we all know, are poorly represented at the top of the largest corporations (just 5% of the S&P 500) and fare even worse among growing public tech companies. In other words, for all our carefully calibrated methodology, women never had much of a chance here.

On its face, common sense tells us that something is wrong with the conclusion that 99% of the world’s most innovative leaders are male. While successful companies hire the best people regardless of gender, the truth is that companies are missing a glaring opportunity to tap into the leadership talents of women.

In this installment of Linking Theory and Practice, we explore how executives can make a meaningful difference in addressing the dearth of women in leadership. We conclude that it is time for organizational leaders – those who bear the stewardship of power – to move from commitment to action, and show how executives can enculturate greater inclusivity of women in their companies.

We gratefully acknowledge the contributing ideas offered during personal interviews with prominent leadership scholars, including Quinetta Roberson at Villanova University, Marian N. Ruderman at the Center for Creative Leadership, Anna Marie Valerio at Executive Leadership Strategies, and Donna Chrobot-Mason at the University of Cincinnati. Our interviews focused on the following questions:

1. What are the key barriers and challenges regarding women in leadership?
2. How can executives leverage their stewardship of power to support women in leadership and create a culture of inclusion?

Barriers to Women in Leadership

Women in leadership experience a labyrinth of challenges, including the existing shallow pool of female leaders at the top, a narrowing pipeline of female leaders beginning early in their careers, historical and current gender bias and stereotyping, traditionally masculine definitions of leadership, a lack of challenging developmental opportunities assigned to women, pressures of work/life balance including parenting, biased artificial intelligence, and cultural challenges. Each of these barriers can impede an organization’s ability to maximize the contributions of its total workforce. But each can be overcome as powerful organizational leaders work to clearly understand and systematically address these challenges one by one.

The Shallow Pool & Narrow Pipeline

Women account for almost half of the US labor force and a majority of the college-educated workforce. Yet, from an approximately 50/50 pool at entry level, only about 1 in 5 females ends up as a C-suite leader. The gender barrier for women aspiring to leadership positions occurs not only at the top, but begins early in their careers. “Contrary to popular belief, the glass ceiling is not the biggest obstacle to women’s profession. It is actually at the first step up to manager – or the broken rung. Since men significantly outnumber women at the manager level, there are significantly fewer women to
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hire or promote to senior managers. The number of women decreases at every subsequent level. So even as hiring and promotions rates improve for women at senior levels, women as a whole can never catch up. There are simply too few women to advance.\(^v\)

A breakdown of positions within the C-Suite shows a similar picture. In a 2019 study of the nation’s top 1,000 companies, Korn Ferry determined that the percentage of females in almost all C-suite positions is significantly lower than their male counterparts. The following chart shows the breakdown by role.\(^vi\)

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**The Barrier of Bias**
While a shallow pool presents a persistent challenge for women in leadership, research suggests that the cause is an underlying bias against women in the workforce. “Men underestimate the magnitude of gender bias in their workplaces,” vii “There is a persistent belief that there are not enough qualified women to fill existing leadership positions. However, data show that there are more than enough qualified women for leadership positions.” viii These trends are not due to any lack of ambition on the part of female employees. On the contrary, women are, on average, equally as likely as men to seek out promotions and ask for raises.ix Furthermore, executives tend to hire and promote those who we believe are bright, capable, and highly skilled. Yet leaders also tend to rate people more favorably on these criteria if they think, act, and believe similarly to themselves.

**Narrow Definitions of Leadership**

As it turns out, the way in which executives define leadership can go a long way toward overcoming bias. What qualities of leadership are valued and promoted? Some of the most common themes that emerge from those who attempt to define leadership include: (1) envisioning an innovative new future, (2) engendering shared purpose and trust, and (3) inspiring, empowering, and orchestrating others to make their vision a reality and execute on strategy.x These aspects of leadership have been successfully enacted over time by both women and men. Yet traditional or stereotypical masculine leadership characteristics such as decisiveness, assertiveness, and competitiveness have at times overshadowed the importance of other important leadership qualities such as appreciative inquiry, deference, collaboration, forgiveness, temperance, cooperation, compassion, humility, and active listening.xi There can be a disconnect between how women are perceived and how executives define traditional leadership. According to Donna Chrobot-Mason, “How women define themselves in conjunction with how they define leadership appears to be a challenge. This can affect whether women identify with and subsequently aspire to become leaders.” Organizations that narrowly define or selectively value certain leadership traits may influence some women to opt out.

**Dearth of Challenging Assignments**

Women tend to receive fewer challenging work assignments. A critical opportunity for increasing the number of women in top leadership positions begins by offering them meaningful developmental assignments, especially early in their careers. Matt Moore, Chief Talent Officer at Alpine Investors, stated, “Because of long-term institutional bias, many women and ethnic minorities haven’t had the opportunity to get the type of experience that many companies require. But that doesn’t mean they don’t have the skills and insight to do the job well.”xii Leaders should monitor the extent to which women are receiving challenging development opportunities early in their careers.

**The Challenge of Balancing Work and Family**

Employees want to succeed both at work and at home, and companies are increasingly recognizing the value of work/life balance. Women who have children can be subject to potential discrimination when additional leadership responsibilities are being considered. In our interview with Donna Chrobot-Mason, she stated, “Women who want to have children and be a mother may bump into work policies that do not provide adequate flexibility nor good child care options. For many women this is a core concern. Most find that if they take a leave, it’s difficult to come back without a loss of momentum and opportunity in the work force. Many women find that it is possible to succeed in both worlds, but it surely makes it easier where biases have been overtly checked and the structural policies supporting work and family are in place.” Executives have an opportunity to solidify their support for women who take maternity leave. Leaders should be intentional and creative in designing a plan for successful re-entry after maternity or other family-related short-term leaves.

**Biased Artificial Intelligence**

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Frida Polli writes, “Like any new technology, artificial intelligence is capable of immensely good or bad outcomes. The public seems increasingly focused on the bad, especially when it
comes to the potential for bias in AI. This concern is both well-founded and well-documented. But (AI is merely) the simulation of human processes by machines. This fear of biased AI ignores a critical fact: The deepest-rooted source of bias in AI is the human behavior it is simulating. It is the biased data set used to train the algorithm. If you don’t like what the AI is doing, you definitely won’t like what humans are doing because AI is purely learning from humans.” The point is that leaders need to watch carefully to ensure their companies do not unintentionally hard-wire gender and other biases into their data and artificial intelligence systems.

The Challenge of Culture

Cultivating a culture of inclusion within your organization is perhaps the most difficult and most important step toward supporting women in leadership. This goes beyond increasing diverse representation and implementing equitable HR practices. The organizational culture must value the integration of differences and giving voice to women and other marginalized individuals who feel interrupted, overspoken, and overlooked.

A culture of inclusion encourages all team members to share their perspectives and takes all opinions into account when making decisions, even if they disrupt the status quo. Understanding employee perceptions of current employment practices is critical to eliminating biases that hinder the development of an inclusive environment. The inclusive organizational culture is cognizant of and celebrates the leadership contributions of women as a business imperative.

The Stewardship of Power: Ten Leadership Imperatives

Powerful executives can make a meaningful difference for women in leadership by (1) focusing on recognizing their own biases and blind spots, (2) proactively investing in and promoting women throughout their careers, and (3) systematically addressing structural and cultural biases throughout their organizations.

Uncovering Our Own Biases

1. Become more cognizant of your own barriers of bias. Actively and continuously find ways to gather candid feedback about your blind spots. Gain clarity on how women perceive you as a leader. Acknowledge were you are now and where you want to be in the future.
2. Assume that women want leadership roles in your organization. Assume that women will contribute uniquely to leadership teams. Assume that women will influence your organization in meaningful and powerful ways that fill important leadership gaps in your organization.
3. Rethink how you define leadership. Which leadership traits are over-valued relative to what is currently needed? What important qualities or leadership descriptors are under-valued? Champion the full range of leadership qualities that are mission-critical for your organization and be explicit in communicating them.

Promoting Women in Leadership

4. Give women in your organization challenging and varied assignments to develop their abilities as leaders. Provide these assignments early in their employment and consistently throughout their careers. Measure how women are promoted through each level of leadership in your organization, especially first-level management positions.
5. Give women in your organization honest and specific feedback. Be candid and direct so they clearly understand why they are or are not progressing toward greater leadership responsibilities. Do not shy away from truthful and frank conversations. Follow up with pathways for improvement.
6. Publicly recognize women in leadership. Acknowledge women as a part of your inner circle of trust. Ask them for their ideas and opinions both publicly and privately. Notice women who are not leaning into conversations and invite their participation. If a woman expresses hesitancy when offered a leadership opportunity, find out why. And do not assume that hesitancy now means hesitancy forever.

Structuring a Culture of Inclusion

7. Work intentionally, creatively, relentlessly, and non-traditionally to fill your hiring pool with qualified women. Anticipate, well in advance, the challenge of developing gender-diverse pools. Implement accountability measures for how you
creatively market to and recruit for qualified female applicants. Determine if there are structural issues at your company that discourage women from applying. Ensure that your data and AI systems do not promulgate human biases.

8. Establish formal sponsorship initiatives for women. “Establish mentor and sponsorship programs where leaders can guide and support the next generation of (female) leaders—and share credit when there are achievements to celebrate.”

9. Recognize the value of work/life balance to the long-term success of your company. Conduct an audit on organizational and structural issues that women face when they decide to have children or make other family choices. Find ways to embed flexible work and child care options. Openly discuss your work/life balance policies and post-maternity re-entry strategies to ensure women feel supported.

10. Team up with other like-minded, empowered leaders and move from commitment to action. Have the courage to directly address resistance to inclusion. Exhibit a commitment to educating one another about differences and seek to eliminate HR or organizational practices that foster bias and/or turn a blind eye to discrimination.

A 20/20 Vision for Stewards of Power

Senior organizational leaders have a unique opportunity to make a positive difference in overcoming barriers and addressing challenges faced by women in leadership. People throughout the organization take cues from what executives say and do. They notice who is included in (and who is excluded from) the inner circles of power, respect and influence.

Executives have a leadership responsibility to use their privilege – their stewardship of power – to create an inclusive organization. As organizations focus on inclusion and belonging, a new opportunity has arisen for leaders to leverage the benefits that women bring to their organizations. Benefits of inclusion, such as increased innovation, reduced conflict, lower turnover, higher performance, fewer legal challenges, and increased innovation, are undeniable. According to Marian Ruderman, “If you really want to succeed in your role of cultivating top leadership, you need to look seriously at overcoming the barriers women face at work and use your positions to build a workplace that is inclusive of all genders. Otherwise you are overlooking the variety of talent and perspectives in your organizations, and that’s bad for business.”

Female leaders have made significant strides since the late 20th century, but there is still a long way to go to reap the benefits of the inclusive organization. Institutional bias and social stigma have long blinded society from recognizing the benefits of diversity and inclusion in leadership. As a result, barriers continue to rest between where female leadership currently stands and where it should be. Top leaders can make a lasting difference by opening avenues for women who aspire to become leaders. The time is right for organizational leaders to see more clearly, acknowledge their blind spots, and use their stewardship of power to promote, value, and sustain women in leadership.

i https://www.forbes.com/lists/innovative-leaders/#4fd410f226aa
ii https://twitter.com/AnandWrites.
vii Women, leadership, and the priority paradox. IBM. March 2019
viii The gender leadership gap. www.jpmorgan.com
ix https://hbr.org/2018/06/research-women-ask-for-raises-as-often-as-men-but-are-less-likely-to-get-them
xiv The leadership gender gap. www.jpmorgan.com