

News: Releases & White Papers

Leadership Experts Make Their Case: 10 Steps for Getting Women to the Top – and Addressing an Emerging Shortage of Executive Talent

NEW YORK CITY (August 8, 2011) – Demographics don't lie: a leadership shortage is fast approaching. As a result, American companies need to get serious about identifying and developing new leaders – especially women, who are currently underrepresented in the Executive Suite. And for their part, women executives need to better understand the often invisible forces holding them back, if they are to fulfill their potential as the executive leaders of the 21st Century.

That's the message of a new white paper – **“The Executive Leadership Imperative: A New Perspective on How Companies and Executives Can Accelerate the Development of Women Leaders” (click to download pdf)** – by John Beeson and Anna Marie Valerio. Beeson is Principal of Beeson Consulting and author of *The Unwritten Rules: The Six Skills You Need to Get Promoted to the Executive Level* (Jossey-Bass). Valerio, Principal of Executive Leadership Strategies, is an executive coach, author of *Developing Women Leaders: A Guide for Men and Women in Organizations* (Wiley-Blackwell), and also an associate of Beeson Consulting.

The authors argue that there will be a rush to fill top executive positions as retiring baby boomers are replaced by a much more diverse workforce. They believe that women leaders are key to filling the talent pipelines leading to the C-Suite. But women can only assume those roles if stumbling blocks are removed and companies make a deliberate effort to develop their women leaders into strong executives.

In their white paper, Beeson and Valerio make specific recommendations for companies that want to develop and retain promising women leaders, as well as for women who want to take charge of their own advancement to the executive ranks:

A Leadership Roadmap for Companies: 5 Steps to Developing and Retaining Women Leaders

1. **Ensure that women leaders get the right experience.** Women are less likely to be given line-management responsibilities, which are typically the source of candidates for senior executive slots in most companies. Strategic thinking is usually built through experience in customer-facing positions that position a manager close to the marketplace in order to spot emerging trends. Working across organizational boundaries, another requirement for promotion to the executive level, typically comes from having had a variety of positions that allow a manager to get a deep sense of how the organization works. Women need to be placed in these types of roles, rather than in staff roles (e.g., human resources, marketing), which often leave them far from the action.
2. **Gender bias is pervasive; make sure it doesn't influence your identification of future executive talent.** The “unwritten rules” for executive promotion include several subjective criteria, such as “strategic thinking” and “executive presence.” And because these criteria are subjective, women end up being screened on gender-based “stereotypical perceptions” and put in a double bind: criticized for overemphasizing key traits that are valued in male leaders (e.g., assertiveness, toughness, dominance), yet faulted again for showing traits that are assumed to be more female (e.g., cooperativeness, empathy, nurturing). The key danger that must be avoided: assigning specific traits to aspiring leaders based on gender, and underestimating a candidate's executive potential based on preconceptions, rather than actual performance and leadership ability.
3. **Performance feedback is essential; don't shirk this important responsibility.** Holding back in performance evaluations is common for both male and female candidates – but it's

more pronounced for women. Many executives admit confidentially that they are especially reluctant to provide women with candid feedback, because they fear of provoking an emotional response and de-motivating a strong performer. Being candid and direct about performance and learning abilities, however, is the foundation for developing strong leaders: for men and women alike.

4. **Make a commitment to opportunity.** Highly skilled women leaders will inevitably become beneficiaries of the increased competition for talent. Companies lacking a commitment to developing women executives are likely to compound the shortfall in leadership as high-potential women leave to take advantage of other opportunities at other organizations with a track record for attracting and developing talent – thus further reducing the company’s pipeline of future talent.
5. **Clearly articulate the rules for advancement.** The criteria for executive promotion often fail to distinguish between the “must have” skills from the “nice to have.” To avoid leaving aspiring executives in the dark, companies need to be explicit about where candidates should focus their developmental efforts. And the company should be consistent in applying the rules it has laid out.

A Guide for Aspiring Women Leaders: 5 Steps for Taking Charge of Your Career

1. **Know the “unwritten rules” and how they affect you:** A starting point for your career development is knowing the “unwritten rules” for executive placement, and where you fit. Find out: what are the one to two skills, above all others, you need to develop in order to build confidence in your executive ability. Then take steps to both develop and display those skills to the people who make executive placement decisions for your company.
2. **Seek line management positions to build market knowledge and strategic skills:** Demonstrating strategic skills is a core selection factor in most organizations. Such positions build your knowledge of the business and provide important insight into industry forces, the needs of customers, and trends in competitive activity. Use your internal network to help you identify and win the “plum” assignments that have historically produced senior leaders.
3. **Develop your networks both internally and externally:** This may involve joining a women’s network (if one exists in your organization) as well as growing your internal networks of peers, managers, and others who know your work. Your network can keep you informed of opportunities within the company that could advance your career. Having a parallel network outside the organization can be helpful as well: improving your knowledge of innovative management approaches to introduce to your company, and being your “eyes and ears” when it comes time to identify and assess external job opportunities.
4. **Seek feedback:** Feedback can be difficult to hear, but it allows you to understand how you’re perceived by those who control promotional decisions. Thus it can benefit you in the long run. Keep in mind that most managers (male and female) are uncomfortable providing feedback and will tend to shut down if they see you as angry or defensive – so receive it graciously.
5. **Hone your executive presence:** Executive presence can be a highly subjective criterion, and it may be defined differently by different people and in different organizations. Nonetheless, it is an important factor in career advancement. Work on being a good communicator to groups both small and large – recognizing that you may require professional training to develop the poise and polish required to articulate your message and motivate others to follow you. Candid feedback will show you whether you are projecting the sense of self-confidence and control that senior executives look for in candidates for the Executive and C-suite levels.

“The ‘unwritten rules’ governing executive promotion apply differently to women than men,” added Beeson. “Given the subjective nature of the factors used to select executives in most organizations, women are at a special disadvantage unless companies take the steps to ‘gender-bias proof’ their

succession planning and talent development practices. Companies have to do a much better job of leveling the playing field.”

“Women leaders are a critically under-utilized resource,” added Valerio. “Research shows that companies with large numbers of women leaders perform better. But women are under-represented in top executive roles and in the C-Suite. So not only could women leaders fill the impending talent gap, they could substantially boost corporate performance if they can learn how to seize these opportunities.”

About John Beeson

John Beeson is principal of Beeson Consulting, which provides management consulting services to some of the largest, most respected companies in the world. Services include succession planning, top-talent development, executive assessment, organization design and executive coaching.

About Anna Marie Valerio

Anna Marie Valerio, Ph.D. is principal of Executive Leadership Strategies, which provides consulting services in executive coaching and leadership development for some of the world’s leading companies. Anna Marie is a licensed psychologist and spent more than twenty years in leadership roles in several Fortune 50 companies. To learn more about Executive Leadership Strategies, please visit <http://www.executiveleadershipstrategies.com>.
