

An Action Plan for Developing Women Leaders

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With the Baby Boom generation about to begin retiring and the smaller Generation X in line to provide replacements, a pressing task for many organizations is to ensure a supply of executive talent that will be ready to step into leadership roles when called upon.

Under these circumstances, diversity takes on critical importance. With fewer people available for the workforce, the pool of potential leaders could be insufficient unless it draws on not just the traditional source—white men—but also on women and all races and ethnicities.

Although organizational diversity has improved in the past two decades, problems remain. In the case of gender diversity the number of women in professional and managerial roles has increased notably, but women are still seriously underrepresented in the senior executive ranks. The most recent *Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners of the Fortune 500* (published in July 2006) found that more than one-half of companies in the Fortune 500 had fewer than three women corporate officers. Only eight companies in the Fortune 500 were led by a woman CEO in 2005, and none of these companies were among the Fortune 100. Fully 75 percent of Fortune 500 com-

panies reported no women as top earners. According to the census report, “Some companies have yet to understand the compelling business case for diversity and women’s advancement or to take meaningful steps to develop and retain women

standing what actions are needed to develop talented women. During the spring and summer of 2006, I talked with high-achieving women at major U.S. companies and universities to see what they believe can be done to develop and advance talented women.

I asked these women about the competencies leaders need to be successful, the developmental experiences that contributed to their own achievements as leaders, perceived differences in leadership development for men and women, and advice for women who want to advance. I also asked them to suggest actions that organizations and managers can take to develop talented women.

The developmental actions suggested by the interviewees can be divided into four areas: actions that can be taken by organizations, by both men and women, by men specifically, and by women specifically.

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leaders.” In recent years many women have left the corporate world, frustrated by what they view as limited options in that environment.

If an adequate leadership pipeline is to be created, companies need to significantly improve the advancement of women to senior positions. The current slow advancement has been attributed to many things—flawed selection processes, organizational expectations that favor males, and even gender discrimination and sexual harassment. I believe that solutions to this problem lie in under-

ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIONS

Organizations can take a range of actions to provide better developmental opportunities for women.

Sponsor Women’s Networks. Enabling women to get to know each other better across divisions or global functional teams increases the communication channels needed to get work done. The companies of several of the women I spoke with sponsor women’s networks. One interviewee said, “The networking groups consist of both junior and senior women so

Editor’s note: In Focus is an occasional series that takes close looks at specific topics of importance to leadership and leaders.

they can learn from each other.” Said another: “We do a women’s program to create the network and give participants a view of themselves as leaders. The network is global and goes across functions and levels.” Another interviewee said: “Earlier in my career I wasn’t clued into the subtleties of office politics that men know. Organizations can benefit from programs that enable women to build their relationships and networks across departments.”

Provide a Feedback-Rich

Environment. Women often do not receive timely, realistic feedback about their work performance. This is different from the experience of their male counterparts, who often receive informal feedback on their performance from male colleagues. Organizations have many tools at their disposal—including mentoring, multirater feedback, personal feedback from the boss, and executive coaching—to help women gain a realistic picture of their strengths and areas that need improvement. As one interviewee said, “Anything that can help women open their eyes about how they are perceived is important for companies to implement.”

Make Diversity a Required Consideration in Promotion

Decisions. Organizations can ensure that during talent reviews of women, accountability for diversity goes beyond the human resource department or the other women in the room. One interviewee said that during talent reviews, “I’m expected to be the one looking out for the advancement of women candidates. My male counterparts in the room rely on me and another female manager to raise the issue of promoting the women in the department. They will not speak up about it, even though we are supposed to have diverse candidate slates. There may be reluctance by male bosses to be as honest [as they are about the men]

because they are concerned about sexual harassment [complaints].”

Training for managers may need to address such issues as the importance of diversity to the financial success of the business and ways to hold candid dialogues with others in the organization to promote talented women.

Provide External Stretch Assignments for Women. Speaking at professional and industry meetings and serving on nonprofit boards can build

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confidence and provide deeper insights into organizational politics. Such engagements also offer women a chance to develop wider networks of people outside the organization. “Serving on a board gives you insight into how things work at high levels,” one interviewee said. Some interviewees said that giving presentations to external groups was personally helpful because it expanded both their knowledge and their ability to influence others.

Examine Programs and Policies.

Organizations can review policies—particularly those related to relocation, flextime, and reduced hours—to see if they might be obstacles to the advancement of women. One interviewee said that at one time in

her organization, high potentials had to relocate frequently to have a chance of advancing in the hierarchy. The organization’s policy was loosened to include visits, rather than just moves, to other locations where important learning could take place. Several interviewees spoke of telecommuting success stories and said organizations can be more open-minded about flextime and reduced hours so that both women and men can perform their jobs with more flexibility. Some of these solutions may also result in greater cost effectiveness.

Companies can also consider programs that enable easier reentry after a hiatus from work. Women who have taken time off for child rearing, for example, can be offered training, internships, and part-time work experiences. Just as companies offer new-hire orientations, they can offer training to update returning managers on recent changes in the company and the industry. Successful reentry can also be facilitated by programs that allow people to ease back into full-time schedules. Part-time work, reduced hours, or internships of one to six months can refresh previously learned skills and give families time to make adjustments as they integrate work and life activities.

Send Women to External Development Programs. External programs have traditionally been a way for talented managers to enhance their development and therefore improve their potential for advancement. Some of these programs include both men and women, and some are exclusively for women. Several interviewees said there are benefits to sending women to both types of programs.

The discussions in leadership programs tailored exclusively for women are different from those in mixed-gender programs. Women are eager to hear how other women deal with issues of work-life balance, a topic

that receives less focus in mixed-gender programs. As one interviewee explained, “For women, the opportunity to talk with other women and get validation about what they are experiencing is important.” Attending both types of programs gives women a variety of learning experiences that can help them negotiate the complexities of their societal roles as women and as leaders.

Offer Inclusion Training. Helping managers learn behaviors that include rather than exclude other people can be valuable. For example, in reverse-mentoring programs, senior male managers are mentored by more junior females to help the men understand issues facing females and avoid making erroneous gender-role assumptions detrimental to women’s careers.

One interviewee said that despite having two teenaged children, she still traveled around the world—much to the surprise of her CEO, who did not think she even wanted to travel. “He couldn’t believe that I had two kids and I traveled globally,” the manager said. “Once he understood that I wanted to travel and was able to do so, he said it opened his eyes about what women were capable of doing.”

Another interviewee said that creating a culture of inclusion raises expectations that more women will be included in events.

Set Up Child-Care Facilities.

Organizations can set up on-site or nearby child-care facilities with extended hours so that employees who have to work late won’t have to worry about needing to pick up a child before the facility closes. As one interviewee explained: “When ex-pats go to a foreign country, companies are willing to spend a great deal on perks such as cars, maid service, and so on. Why not earmark some money for child-care facilities here in the States?”

DUAL-GENDER ACTIONS

In addition to actions that organizations can take to foster a climate of leadership development for women, there are actions that managers, both men and women, can take to develop talented women.

Help Female Managers Develop Their Networks. This theme was common among all the interviewees. Managers can support talented females by giving them the support to develop their networks. Such actions can take several forms—for instance, bringing a talented woman into the manager’s own network inside the organization and encouraging partici-

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pation in women’s networks. Bringing a female into the manager’s network can be achieved both formally and informally by having the woman accompany the manager to meetings, lunches, and dinners and introducing her to others. As one interviewee said: “Men often take for granted their access to power. They need to open the door and include women in the power structure.”

Send Talented Women to Both Internal and External Training Programs. Women’s networks are not as extensive as men’s, but formal training programs expand women’s opportunities to network. Whether the programs are internal, external, or both, they offer chances to be exposed to the latest ideas and to

have conversations with others on job-related topics. In the words of one interviewee: “We’re still confused about what a successful female leader looks like. There are so many more male role models than female role models. It’s harder for women to be clear about how to develop their skills.” Sending women to various training programs gives them the opportunity to interact with different leaders and to see which models of leadership may work for them.

Give Women Challenging Assignments with Sufficient Support.

Among the key developmental experiences that contribute to the leadership skills of talented women are heading up big projects, managing a large number of people, leading global task forces, interacting with senior leaders, and being visible to the senior team.

One interviewee said that “being in charge of a cross-functional technology project pushed me outside my comfort zone.” The benefits of these increases in responsibility went beyond just heightened knowledge. The interviewees reported a boost in self-confidence and learning through experience that they could do the job. As one said: “My job involved the entire rebranding of my company. My interactions with ad agencies gave me a sense of confidence in my abilities because my recommendations were taken. It prepared me because people were taking me seriously.”

In giving women challenging assignments, however, it is important to enable success. Because women may not have extensive networks, support such as training, mentoring, and help in building new relationships should be provided both before and during the challenging assignment.

ACTIONS BY MEN

There are two things that men in particular can do to contribute to the

development of the women they work with.

Ask Questions to Understand the Perspective of Women. As one interviewee suggested, male managers can gain perspective by asking the question, “What things are you facing here that I need to be aware of?” When assumptions are made based on female stereotypes or expected female behaviors, erroneous judgments may result. It is simply good business practice for managers to understand the situation that each direct report faces, in order to make fair and appropriate decisions and avoid losing talented employees. One interviewee said: “Male managers should take the time to find out more about the people who work for them. They need to know what makes the talented women tick, what their needs are, and how to accommodate them in order to retain them.”

Overcome the Reluctance to Provide Women with Feedback About Their Performance. Unlike females, males often receive informal feedback through their conversations with colleagues. Sometimes a friend of a male colleague or direct report is enlisted to provide difficult or constructive feedback. However, for a variety of reasons male managers are often reluctant to have difficult conversations with women. But most women would rather receive important feedback so they can take corrective action than have their careers plateau because they never received the opportunity to improve. As one interviewee said: “Give women straight talk. It is important for women to hear about the negative reactions of others, as men do.”

ACTIONS BY WOMEN

There are a number of things that women in particular can do to contribute to the development of other women.

Share Experiences with Other Women. Women want to hear the stories of how female managers accomplished what they did and how they managed to get where they are. There are still relatively few women at high levels in organizations, but what these women have learned can provide other women with blueprints and examples of how to advance. Managerial development is assisted by seeing and experiencing the varying styles of

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different managers. When female managers share their experiences, other women are able to think about what might work for them. One interviewee said: “Female managers have an obligation to explain to women how they succeeded. For example, other women were interested in hearing about what it was like to be the first pregnant woman at this level in the company, so I talked about it with them.”

Recognize the Greater Prevalence of Diversity Among Women. Several interviewees said it’s important for female managers to not judge other women whose life experiences, demeanors, and even dress may be different from their own. “Female managers need to be more supportive of different styles,” said one interviewee. “They often don’t have much tolerance for different styles, but

being more flexible would be helpful.” Greater tolerance resulting from nonjudgmental attitudes could allow more women to be accepted in executive positions.

Provide Realistic Feedback. Never underestimate the power of a woman’s feedback. The interviewees saw the action of women giving feedback to other women as critical to success. Said one interviewee, “Female managers can make themselves available and offer their talented women unbiased, unabridged feedback.”

Another interviewee noted that some types of feedback are more easily given from one woman to another. “There is a reluctance to talk about physical appearance and presence, but it counts,” she said. “Even mentors are reluctant to tell someone that they need better grooming.”

ENSURING A PIPELINE

Over the years a number of business arguments have been made in support of diversity—for instance, that it promotes effectiveness and creativity. But the following argument may be the most compelling: if organizations are to survive in the wake of the upcoming generational shift, they must ensure that they have an adequate pipeline of leaders, and that will happen only if women and other underutilized sources of leadership are recruited, retained, and developed. ♀

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Editor’s note: The author intends to continue talking with executives, both women and men, to capture their ideas on best practices for developing talented women. To take part in this research, contact Valerio through her Web site, at www.executiveleadershipstrategies.com.

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