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All In

Viable solutions for organizations and women
themselves to address the gender gap.

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By Rosina L. Racioppi

“Slowly they turned” remains the unfortunate pace of achieving gender parity at higher corporate levels.

I could fill an article 10 times the length of this one, citing books, research studies, blogs, and articles that discuss the gender gap from every imaginable angle. Instead, I’d like to focus on what my colleagues and I at WOMEN Unlimited have learned about moving the needle of gender parity. My perspective on possible solutions is based on our more than 22 years working with leading organizations.

Piecemeal—An enabler

The clear majority of literature zeroes in on only one aspect of the gender equality problem. Consequently, solutions tend to be compartmentalized and mono-focused. For example: developing networks, finding mentors, combating male bias, changing corporate attitudes, and finding female role models. All these components contribute to increasing the representation of women at the highest corporate levels. However, our experience shows that when looked at piecemeal, rather than in totality, little if anything happens to foster pervasive change. It is the proverbial Band-Aid. Even more problematic, small strides can gridlock progress with a false sense of success, since programmatic solutions rarely yield lasting results.

Instead, for gender parity to be a sustainable reality, involvement has to be “all in.” It has to start at the top with

CEOs and boards believing gender equality is not just good citizenship, but good business. All levels of management need to be held accountable for making needed changes in their departments—and their attitudes—to foster the talented women on their teams. Women themselves must better understand how to play on the corporate landscape and become more confident advocates for their own advancement.

Of course, the devil is in the details. A pervasive, organization-wide approach to developing and retaining high-potential women can be challenging to get off the ground, but it is a path that has been successful for hundreds of leading organizations and thousands of women. Let's look at this proven organization-wide approach from two inter-twining perspectives: corporate culture and the women themselves. Together they hit on all the major problems and possibilities circling around gender parity.

Corporate culture

Twenty-first century corporate culture is rooted in the early 20th century and forged almost exclusively by men. Because of the unquestionable success of this American business model, there is understandable reluctance to change. Additionally, corporate movers and shakers remain largely the men who grew up in that culture.

Today, however, the paradigm for success has shifted dramatically, with diversity a proven contributor to long-term corporate growth and profitability. To enjoy this bottom-line advantage, corporate culture and attitudes need to evolve. Not drastically, but pervasively.

Top management must truly believe in the business case for diversity and convey their commitment to all levels. Male managers need to be motivated to assess whether they harbor unconscious biases toward women and move, as one

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chief diversity officer put it, toward “conscious inclusiveness.” Unconscious biases can take many forms, including fear that a close male/female mentoring relationship can be misconstrued, failure to assign stretch assignments to women, or undervaluing the suggestions of female colleagues.

Perhaps most detrimental to the issue is that research shows that male managers are less likely to give honest feedback to their female employees, making it difficult for women to understand specifically where they need to improve to advance. Additionally, men tend to use different terms in reviews of female subordinates. For example, statistically, “aggressive” is a word that rarely shows up in reviewing men, but appears frequently in assessing female performance. Shelley Correll and Caroline Simard’s *Harvard Business Review* article, “Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back,” outlines strategies to equalize the feedback process, including using the same criteria for all employees, tying feedback to business goals and outcomes, and equalizing references to technical accomplishments and capabilities.

If corporate culture is to change (and conscious inclusiveness is to replace unconscious bias), a detailed strategy that includes timeframes, metrics, and accountability is a must. It’s how the gridlock will be broken. It’s how I’ve seen it broken for hundreds of top organizations.

Women themselves—shifting attitudes

In working extensively with talented women, I see them clinging to three career-sabotaging attitudes. First, they tend



to lack the self-confidence to bring their special talents out of the shadows into the spotlight. For example, research shows a potential-versus-performance gap where women have to prove they can succeed in a position before they are promoted to it; while men often are promoted based on their perceived potential.

Women perpetuate the gap by believing they need all the competencies for a higher position before they can take it on. Men, on the

other hand, are confident they should be given a promotion based on what they've achieved to date. Until women move more toward that attitude, they will be hard-pressed to make significant progress.

Second, many women continue to believe that just doing their current job well is enough to get them ahead. They bury themselves in their work, failing to realize that doing a good job is their entry ticket to career advancement, but competence alone will not get them ahead. As the founder of WOMEN Unlimited often says, "It's not what you know. It's who knows you know."

Third, and likely underpinning the other two attitudes, is the tendency for women to be more risk averse than men. Women often see risk taking as upsetting the apple cart and beginning a downward spiral that undoes what they've worked so hard to achieve. They worry about losing status, being wrong, losing their jobs, and making enemies. However, failing to take sensible risks often is the worst risk of all. It deprives women of heightened visibility, being perceived as able to play "like the boys," greater individual and team

success, increased leadership skills, and greater likelihood of career-boosting projects.

Forging relationships that matter

Women are most successful when they don't try making these behavioral and attitudinal shifts alone. Rather, it's when they reach out to mentors, sponsors, and networks for advice and support.

In my independent research, *Women's Mentoring Wisdom*, I found that optimum mentoring relationships depended on the mentee, not the mentor. Women needed to actively orchestrate their mentoring relationships and take deliberate actions to make a positive outcome happen. I call it being intentional. Mentoring relationships were most successful when a mentee was intentional at three critical junctures: in preparing for her meetings with the mentor, in assessing and discussing the advice the mentor provided, and in applying that advice to corporate interactions. Women who actively engaged their mentors in these ways had more productive, long-term relationships with the mentors and also were more likely to advance their careers.

I am asked often about the role of sponsors. Without a doubt, sponsors are vital to career success, but in a very different way from mentors. Mentors can be within or outside the company. A sponsor is a woman's advocate within the organization. Sponsors have the power to provide opportunities and open doors, and also have a vested interest in how the woman they sponsor pans out. Therefore, a woman should first have the advice and expertise of a mentor. Then, with attitudes and

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behaviors in line with corporate goals, she can seek out a sponsor whose advocacy will make them both look good.

Networks also are critical for advancement. In my experience, many women sabotage their careers by misunderstanding what a network should be. They make their networks too insular and overlook the single most important aspect—a degree of discomfort. What does a successful network look like? It includes talented men and women with different views of the corporate world. It includes people with whom the woman does not normally come into contact, inside and outside the organization. It includes those above the woman's current corporate level. Additionally, a network should push a woman to see beyond her own point of view, changing and evolving as her career does.

Pulling it all together

Embedding gender parity in a company's DNA brings with it many advantages. It moves diversity front and center; its importance underscored at the highest levels. It ensures a more cohesive and sustained approach to feeding the talent pipeline. It defeats isolation for both the women and their managers, since no one is going it alone. It enables individuals to confront their own biases, ones they may not have previously acknowledged. It shows talented younger women there is room for them at the top. It positions the organization for better decision making, higher profitability, and competitive advantages that are the proven results of more diverse boards and C-suites.

In short, it's the business case for looking at gender equality through a much-needed, wide-angle lens.

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