

# How Office Politics Can Hold Women Back—and What to Do About it

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Rosina Racioppi, President & CEO WOMEN Unlimited, Inc.

The hazards of working at a company founded by “a bunch of white guys.”

We’ve heard how companies that have women on their boards have **higher returns**. We’ve heard how groups that include more women have a **higher collective intelligence** than those that don’t. Yet we’ve also heard how the number of women in top leadership positions is still growing very, very slowly. So how do we translate what we know about the power of workplace diversity into actual women getting seats at the table?

Rosina Racioppi has made a career of answering that question. As president and CEO of **WOMEN Unlimited, Inc.**, she helps women meet their full potential as leaders at some of the world’s largest companies, including Adobe Systems **ADBE 0.16%**, Bayer **BAYZF 3.60%**, Colgate-Palmolive, and Prudential **PUK -0.34%**.

I spoke with Racioppi about why there's a need for female-specific professional development programs like those offered by WOMEN Unlimited, why women "opt out" and what we can do to close the gender salary gap.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity. You can hear the full interview on [Inflection Point](#), of which WOMEN Unlimited is a sponsor.

**Fortune:** Why do women need a special development program?

**Rosina Racioppi:** I don't know that they need something special, but I do think they need something that's different than their male counterparts, especially if they're seeking to advance their careers. Women have a different experience in the organization than their male counterparts, mostly because the organizations' dynamics were designed by the people who founded them—basically white men. And since we have different expectations than our male counterparts, we need help decoding the organizational landscape that we're a part of. So that's what development programs can help women understand.

Your work is primarily with the Fortune 1000 companies, some of the biggest companies out there, which were primarily founded by men.

Even though most of our corporate partners are global multinationals, they were founded by a bunch of white guys. There's nothing wrong with that—they're very bright, wonderful, business-minded individuals—but those systems, the artifacts of how the organizations grew, were based on their perspective of how organizations should grow. As women joined the workforce and started growing their careers in structures that were designed by people who saw the world very differently, it's no wonder that frustration was the result.

The way in which women fundamentally like to work is very different than our male counterparts. Research tells us that men tend to like that hierarchical structure. Women tend to like a much more community-minded structure. Not to say that one is a right and one is wrong—it's a

different way of viewing the organization. These are things no one tells you the day that you start a new job, the behind-the-scenes ways the organization operates. We get a lot of rules and policy, but it's only when we are trying to get things done or work with other people that we understand the hidden ways in which things are done in the organization. And so it's part of that culture that creates some unintended barriers for women that are not present for our male counterparts.

When you go in to work with an organization and they've identified their high-potential women—the women that they want you to help develop—what is the approach to development?

Many women who are at a key juncture in their careers where they need to recalibrate their skill don't develop those networks, those mentoring relationships, that keep us informed so that we're prepared for that next opportunity. Women tend to get their work done and want their work to speak for itself, and because we work so independently we're not building those relationships. Hence, we're not getting that feedback. Our program focuses on working with the women to help them identify those stresses and challenges that they're experiencing and develop strategies to address them. It's not about commiserating about the challenges that we have; it's more important to figure out, "So what are we going to do about it?"

In addition to working with women through the experiential development program, we also work with their managers. It's important that their managers be aware of not only what is occurring during this development program, but more important what their role in this development process is. What do they need to do to ensure that they incorporate what the women are gaining through this program back into their organization so they can experience that return on investment?

You have talked about a woman's career being a series of inflection points, that there are these opportunities that we need to take advantage of when the time comes. How can a woman identify what those points are when they're happening, and what should she do?

I would say we all go through those, men and women. We attend college. We develop an expertise in a given area. Say I start my career as an

engineer in an organization where I create impact through a very tactical utilization of my skill. But then I am promoted, so I now manage other engineers. So the way that I create impact is not as direct; it's a lot more than me just being a good engineer. And it's those subtleties that oftentimes we're not taught at school. How do I confront without being confrontational? How do I disagree without being disagreeable? How do I create robust relationships in the organization that allow me to really pull apart challenges and ideas in a way that enables me to get the best results for the business, without damaging my relationships? So the work that you do is about more than helping women get promoted and move up the ladder. It sounds more nuanced than that.

I always say I think it's important for people to find their career joy. I know you love what you do. I love the work that I do. I see a lot of people that are in roles that they can functionally perform beautifully, and they're miserable. And I think that happens when you abdicate control over your career to other people. And so it's important to ask, "What are the things I'm really good at?" And of that, "What is the subset that I not only really love, but that brings value to the business that I'm a part of?" So we're always connecting it back to the business, and the nuances of our program help the women make those connections.

How did you know that this is what you were meant to do? You talked about finding joy. How did you find it?

I spent the early part of my career in human resources. I led HR departments in manufacturing and chemical companies. What I loved about being in human resources was truly partnering with my business partners to develop the talent to help them grow. Aligning the business strategy with the human development strategies — I found that to be just so much fun. I was in that neutral spot in the organization, and I loved it. I absolutely loved it. Then I met Jean Otte, the founder of Women Unlimited. I was a mentor in the program. Jean and I became friends, and then she asked me to join Women Unlimited. It really was bringing together the two things that I love: business and helping people be successful in business.

What is your thought on women who choose to “opt out” of the workforce, the women who leave midway through their careers? Are they holding themselves back? Is it a systemic problem?

I certainly can't speak for all women who opt out. But when I did my research on women at their mid-career stage and how they leverage their mentoring relationships, one of the things that I heard consistently is, “I was at a point in my career where I was very frustrated. I could not determine how I can get to that next level. And I was thinking about leaving.” What we hear often from women in our mid-career program is that weariness. “No one gave me the decoder ring. I don't know how to crack the code, and I'm working harder and not getting the same level of results that I once did.” This frustration is endemic across that mid-level. It seems so much easier to just leave and do something else or just opt out completely.

Another part of it is that women at that mid-career level who opt out view the world as either/or. I can either work, or I can stay home. They're not looking at it as if there's a middle ground. I remember being stuck on a flight with a woman who shared with me that she had three small children and was thinking of quitting because she felt guilty when she would arrange for a day to be at home when her son would get off the bus. But she had a very flexible schedule. Her boss didn't care how she managed her day. But she still felt guilty, and she was the highest-producing person on the team. And so I said, “Can't you possibly just sit down with your manager and say ‘this is what I need regarding my time in order to manage to have harmony in my life?’” We tend to think of it as, “No one will ever let me do that.” But you just need to ask.

If women could find their comfort in saying, “At this point in my life, this is how I can contribute to the business, and here are some of the considerations I need in order to make that happen,” I have found most businesses will say yes as long as it's reasonable. But when we have this either/or mentality, it shuts off those opportunities. And so then we just opt out.

Where does salary come into this picture? I have heard the argument that women are valued less, so we're paid less, or maybe we're not negotiating well enough for ourselves. Does this come back to the "just ask" theory?

I do think that there are pockets where women are more aware of their value and therefore are asking and negotiating more. And yet the wage gap still persists. So I do think a big part of it is women aren't asking or aren't as mindful of their value. And then there's that mindset that I was talking about earlier: "I'll do the work, prove that I can do it, and then I'll ask for the raise." That holds women back, because why would someone give you more money for something you're willingly doing already? We need to start thinking like this: "If I'm going to be getting a bigger role, if my role is expanding, then why wouldn't I negotiate to get paid differently or get some sort of benefit for that? My male colleagues always would." The worst that would happen is someone would say no.

What's the best advice that you've ever been given about supporting great talent?

The best advice I've gotten is to give people feedback on what you consider the strengths that they bring to the organization and their role. Help them understand their impact so that they can see that trajectory of talent and impact. And then have an honest dialogue about: "What are you interested in? What would you like to be doing?" As a leader, we don't need to create the plan for the individual. We to help them craft it for themselves. That's really what a good leader does.

Lauren Schiller is the host of [Inflection Point](#), a public radio show and [podcast](#) produced at KALW 91.7FM in San Francisco, featuring conversations with women who are changing the status quo. The above article is an edited and condensed version of the broadcast interview. Click [here to listen to the full audio](#).