

Making Gender Diversity a Reality

By German Herrera and Chuck Gray



In the last several years, most industrial companies, like most companies in other sectors, have openly embraced gender diversity as both a policy and a goal. This in itself represents important progress. But the relatively few women in industrial leadership positions underscores the fact that there are real challenges to making this vision a reality.



Based on what I've seen helping industrial enterprises across North America recruit leaders to key roles, the biggest challenge may be that companies do not always appreciate the scope of the changes they need to make to bring more women into senior management ranks. Companies that want to become more diverse cannot continue to assess, develop and promote talent the same way

they did before diversity became a priority. As industrial leaders know better than anyone, you can't keep your processes the same and expect a different outcome.

This hewing to old processes occurs in a number of ways. Industrial companies looking to fill a senior position will often explicitly ask to include female candidates—a good start. And when I tell them that might mean considering female candidates who are highly talented and promising but who don't yet “check all the boxes,” they'll agree that they may have to compromise on some of the role specifications. But when it comes time to evaluate candidates, those compromises become harder to make and the woman loses out to a man who better fits the traditional mold.

Or consider the promising woman executive who the company wants to relocate as part of her career development. If she's married and her spouse can't relocate as well—a likely possibility given the number of industrial facilities that are the main employer in one-company towns—she will decline, effectively removing her from the executive leadership track.

Maternity leave is another big derail. A woman who has been out for nine months comes back to find that she is now out of step with her peers who have received new assignments and promotions. If she had an operational role, she may find herself shunted to marketing or another support function, which, like declining a transfer, severely diminishes her C-suite prospects.

In each of these cases, a company's opportunity to increase gender diversity is stymied by legacy approaches. And here is the crux of the matter. For industrial organizations to achieve the gender diversity they seek, they need to take the lead in helping women navigate work-life hurdles and get

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the required experience, rather than putting the onus on women to come up with fixes and make unreasonable sacrifices for a system that wasn't designed for them. There are no prescribed solutions, but here are a few ideas to consider:

- When a woman goes on maternity leave, offer to keep her in the loop on a key project so she can contribute remotely and stay connected with her peers and the company.
- If a woman declines a transfer because of her spouse's job, see if there is an attractive role for the spouse at the new location. (Hiring spouses as a "package" is common in academia, another sector in which a spouse might otherwise have limited work options after a move.) And if the woman resigns because her spouse is taking a position elsewhere, find out if she's moving near any of the company's other facilities, or if there is a way she can continue in her role by working remotely.
- When the company has identified a woman as a high-potential leader, assume *from the start* that there will be work-life interruptions and figure out ways to give her critical P&L experience before and/or after those interruptions occur.

Industrial companies succeed because of their ability to rethink manufacturing processes. Addressing the challenges preventing greater gender diversity calls for a rethinking of social processes. Seen from that perspective, industrial companies are uniquely positioned to take a leadership role in tackling this complex set of issues.

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