

Filling the Leadership Pipeline with Women

By Cynthia Soledad



For nearly 40 years, women have outnumbered men in U.S. colleges, but as women move through the workforce, the scales tip in the other direction. Surprisingly, the U.S. market has fallen behind the rest of the world when it comes to gender diversity in the boardroom.

Egon Zehnder's 2016 Global Board Diversity Analysis report shows that board diversity progress has stagnated in the U.S., with just 1 percent growth between 2012 and 2016, compared to worldwide progress of 36 percent during the same time period.

Still, progress has been slow during the 12 years in which we've conducted this analysis, and only 19 percent of seats on the boards of the largest public global companies are held by females. At the executive level, women represent less than 4 percent of CEO roles globally and 11 percent of CFO roles. In only six of the 44 countries examined in the 2016 Global Board Diversity Analysis do women hold more than 10 percent of CEO roles, and half the countries in the survey have no female CEOs or CFOs at all.

Why, despite social and economic progress in other areas of the business world, has gender diversity at the leadership level not accelerated to meet the current business climate or even kept pace with the talent pool? More importantly, what can we do about it?

The New Potential

Attaining more female executives starts with attaining more female candidates, so organizations must fill their pipelines with high-potential women. In order to do so, however, they must challenge subjective assumptions about potential and get past traditional experience-based measurement.

Potential has typically been heavily based on opinion — i.e. this person has the “X-factor.” It's also often subject to unintentional bias, as people lean towards hiring similar people. And, while past performance should not be completely discounted, it's also not wholly reflective of what's possible in the future.

Rather than trying to find “it” and viewing an individual only as a sequence of promotions in a given timeframe, we recommend looking for qualities like determination, engagement, curiosity and insight — traits that demonstrate leadership. Women with these characteristics show they are capable of taking on more.

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The Importance of Mentors

In fact, stretch assignments are still critical for women to successfully advance in their careers, and this is where mentors are of particular value — exposing high-potential women to and pushing them in P&L roles.

We believe it's important for up-and-coming women to seek out mentors, or to take advantage of the ones companies provide, and maintain consistent communication with them. These guiding relationships between current and future female executives help design a career roadmap with concrete steps.

For example, a woman striving to be CEO of a global company will require practice as a multi-functional leader with P&L responsibility and also need time working outside her home base. We've seen that regular, ongoing discussions with mentors can bring such specific details to light and result in a clearer understanding of what's expected in an organization.

Accelerated integration

Nurturing female leaders should not stop when they reach the C-suite or board level, where, in general, there's often a sink or swim mentality. It's a fallacy to think leaders don't require guidance, and organizations would be well advised to build accelerated integration programs for new female leaders. The process enables the incoming executive to quickly feel rooted in the new organization and rapidly gain the followership she needs to drive results.

In the first 30 days, we recommend initiating a focused effort on disseminating the culture to the leader, connecting her with peers and introducing her to select teams. Beyond a conventional walkthrough meet and greet, the program's goal is to discuss the cultural dynamics and new leadership style. The contrast will reveal areas of opposition to help anticipate and manage through potential challenges.

A deep-dive cultural assessment should be conducted prior to onboarding. The result is then shared during a no-holds-barred dialogue with the incoming executive. The open discussion should be carefully moderated by a skilled human resources leader and conducted in a workshop-style session involving the existing leadership team. This ensures she is integrated seamlessly with her peers and drives acceptance and influence across the organization.

Knowing what she is walking into and understanding where potential pitfalls might exist enables the new leader to create solutions upfront and drive cohesion early on. Holding a 90-day review, with the same stakeholders from the first session, checks in on the new dynamics and provides timely feedback.

The more different individuals are from the environments they are entering, the more important accelerated integration becomes. So, it's especially vital for women if we consider that the C-suite and board are dominated by men.

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Keeping the Pipeline Full

According to the 2016 Global Board Diversity Analysis, not one of the countries progressing well in terms of board diversity, such as Norway, France and Germany, had women hold more than 10 percent of CEO roles. (Norway has no female CEOs.)

This is considered both welcome and worrisome news. On the one hand, the report illustrates that these countries stretched the role specification for board directors beyond CEOs and CFOs and embraced the international talent pool to meet gender diversity objectives.

At the same time, however, the positive actions that improved diversity on boards have not been applied to filling the pipeline with women. This will take casting a wider and deeper net for talent, beginning with the mindset shift about potential and the intent to change by hiring people who are different.

Intentional progress is also reflected in women purposefully seeking career mentors, and the mentors' accountability for their protégées' success. The more responsibility the mentors take in these influencer roles, the more effect they will ultimately have on the bigger diversity agenda.

The larger purpose is also the responsibility of the woman who reaches the executive level; she must then pay it forward to ensure the cycle of fulfillment and progress continues.

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