

Leadership Challenges for Women at Work

BY COLLEEN O'NEILL AND STACEY BOYLE

Organizations need to ensure women get the same development experiences and chances for visibility as men, but that's easier said than done.

Organizations around the world have made commitments to develop future leaders and enhance diversity in order to achieve better results for customers, stakeholders and employees. However, there is a marked lack of emphasis on leadership development for women, the largest of all diversity-targeted groups in any geography.

This disconnect poses a tough challenge for learning leaders, whose programs and initiatives for leadership education must overcome this organizational inertia in order to develop more women for top executive roles.

The solutions may not come easily or soon, but facts are emerging to sharply outline the problem. According to the 2011 Women's Leadership Development survey conducted by Mercer in conjunction with the Human Capital Media Advisory Group, the research arm of *Chief Learning Officer* magazine, 71 percent of global organizations do not have a clearly defined strategy or philosophy to develop women for leadership roles.

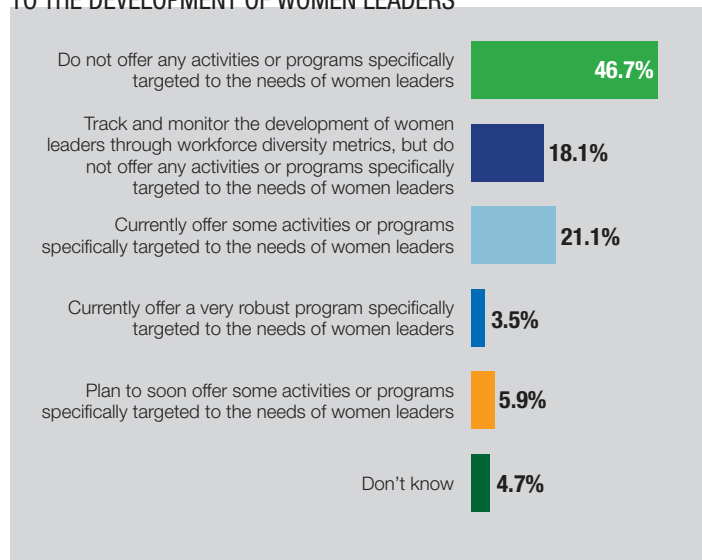
These findings underscore a *Harvard Business Review* research report released in January 2011, titled "The Spon-

sor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling," which stated: Women occupy 3 percent of Fortune 500 CEO positions, are outnumbered four to one in the C-suite, comprise less than 16 percent of all corporate officers and occupy only 7.6 percent of Fortune 500 top-earner positions.

The Mercer survey included responses from more than 1,800 human resources, talent management and diversity leaders at organizations throughout North America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific. A broad cross-section of industries took part, with for-profits, high-tech/telecommunications, financial/banking and durable manufacturing organizations representing the largest segments. Responses, which addressed current commitment and support for women's leadership, plans for the future and obstacles to success, were fairly consistent across regions.

Survey data reveals 47 percent of employers surveyed globally indicate their organizations do not offer any activities or programs targeted to meet women leaders' development needs. While 21 percent of organizations said they offer some activities or programs, only 6 percent said they are planning to add programs and activities in the future (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: ORGANIZATIONS' APPROACHES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN LEADERS



Source: Human Capital Media Advisory Group and Mercer, 2011

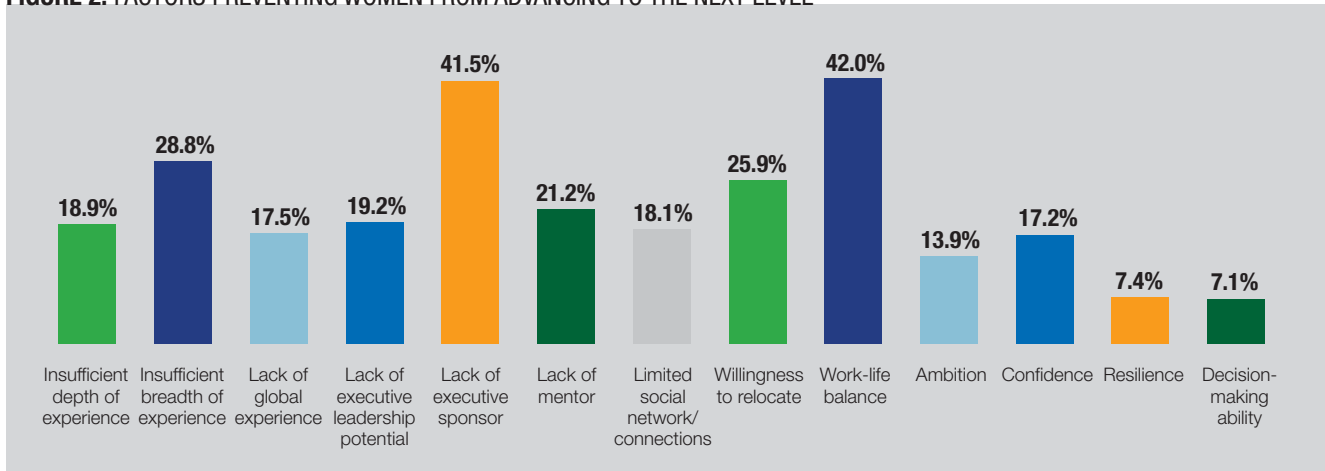
Global Differences, Top Programs

It appears while many multinational organizations value gender diversity in leadership, they are focused on broader diversity objectives and not specifically on accelerating the development and pipeline of qualified women leaders. As a result of not having a clearly defined strategy, the climate of support for developing women leaders is mixed.

Of survey respondents, 44 percent said their organizations support development of women leaders to a moderate extent, while just 19 percent said their organizations support women's leadership development to a great extent. Organizations in the U.S. and Asia Pacific showed a higher than average response, with 27 percent supporting the development of women to a great extent, while organizations in EMEA were below average at 14 percent.

This affirms that gender diversity in leadership can be a complex issue. While some organizations don't recognize the unique attributes women leaders bring to the table,

FIGURE 2: FACTORS PREVENTING WOMEN FROM ADVANCING TO THE NEXT LEVEL



Source: Human Capital Media Advisory Group and Mercer, 2011

others don't believe women should be treated differently than men. Even organizations committed to having a more diverse leadership team may not be making the kind of progress necessary to achieve their goals.

This lack of progress might be attributed to a flawed perception of what's valuable to women's leadership development. For example, according to the survey, the top solutions listed by organizations worldwide specifically targeting women leaders' needs were flexible work arrangements, 66 percent; followed by diversity sourcing and recruiting, 44 percent; coaching, 44 percent; and mentoring, 43 percent.

These same four programs also were identified as the most effective in developing women leaders. The emphasis on flexible work arrangements is an important acknowledgement of a work-life issue that traditionally has been associated with working women. But executive sponsorship and programs such as coaching and mentoring may be more valuable for leadership skills development even though survey respondents viewed these solutions as having less of an impact than flexible work arrangements.

In the U.S. and Asia Pacific regions, organizations showed a higher than average response of 69 percent that provide flexible work arrangements, while Canadian organizations showed a lower response, 60 percent. More U.S. and Asia Pacific organizations also provide coaching, 51 and 45 percent respectively, compared to 42 percent of organizations in EMEA and 37 percent in Canada.

Levels of Concern, Limiting Factors

What's worrisome is where there is inconsistency or a lack of targeted strategies for developing women leaders, organizations do not appear to be overly concerned. When asked about their level of concern regarding various aspects of women in leadership, the top three issues ranked "very concerned" were having enough women in the leadership pipeline, 21 percent; retaining women once they reach leadership levels, 20 percent; and having women develop the full range of skills necessary for a senior leadership position, 19 percent. These

relatively low levels of concern don't square with organizations' overall strategies around diversity and leadership.

That said, the top three factors preventing women in leadership talent pools from advancing to the next level in their organizations (Figure 2) were work-life balance and lack of an executive sponsor, which were nearly tied at about 42 percent, and insufficient breadth of experience, 29 percent. Organizations in Asia Pacific and EMEA also listed willingness to relocate as a leading factor preventing advancement, 36 percent and 27 percent respectively.

Similarly, survey respondents said the biggest challenges women face in their development as leaders pertains to work-life balance, lack of role models, lack of opportunities for career advancement and a lack of support from upper management. And while their organizations may not have expressed significant concern about women's leadership development, many survey respondents indicated their own desire to improve their program's effectiveness by instituting formal coaching and mentoring programs, promoting development for all potential leaders, emphasizing younger-generation leaders and launching affinity groups.

When it comes to offering programs to help women advance as leaders, the solutions being provided by organizations don't always address the issue. Leadership development is a multiphase process that goes beyond flexible work schedules and basic coaching; it must include opportunities to obtain leadership experience, and more importantly, it must have support from senior management.

Many organizations have talented women in their leadership pipelines, but to successfully advance them into leadership roles, they need a strategy. In addition to plans and programs to develop women, this strategy should outline how to change the organization's corporate culture to recognize the business value inherent to diverse leadership.

Learning Implications

Learning leaders have an opportunity to frame the issue as a strategic imperative and to advance the science and practice of



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women's leadership development. Most companies still rely on traditional approaches such as offering flexible schedules rather than taking a more systematic and integrated approach. Accelerating the development of women leaders will require coordinated individual and companywide change efforts. The problem should be attacked on two fronts: helping women build and demonstrate their leadership skills while simultaneously changing the organizational culture.

Further, the lack of executive sponsors and an insufficient breadth of experience were cited among the top factors preventing women in their organization's leadership talent pool from advancing to the next level. This calls for an exploration of exactly how executive sponsorship can drive career advancement, and what touchstones may be required for it to work effectively. Is it necessary, for example, for an executive sponsor or mentor to have had diversity training and specific capabilities to effectively mentor women executives? What must women bring to the task of partnering with male executives in terms of shared vision and career growth?

Leadership in today's global business world is about creating and sustaining cultures of risk taking and innovation, and unleashing new ideas and fresh approaches in order to drive business results. Despite the thin ranks of women in the C-suites, there's ample evidence that high-profile women CEOs and executives have been among the most aggressively innovative and fresh thinking on a global scale. Programs and initiatives that can develop and reinforce techniques to promote business innovation and creativity will be vital for tomorrow's women leaders.

However, embracing these goals and strategies isn't going to change the long-standing leadership paradigm overnight. Among the comments made by respondents to the Mercer survey, there were frequent references to the predominance of "old boys' clubs," inflexible corporate cultures and male-dominated leadership teams that do not support or enable women to move into comparable leadership roles.

Further, there are some real development challenges ahead for women. Survey respondents cited women's "struggle to be able to relocate or work on a long-term global assignment due to spouse work commitments and inability to travel." Others said there was not enough recognition of the need for targeted development, noting a lack of leadership support, while still others opined that "Women don't ask for the promotion. Men do and get it, whereas women wait to be recognized for all their hard work, and it never comes."

Chief learning officers can play a major role in ensuring women and minorities have the experiences and leadership development opportunities they need to be successful. After all, who could deny that true leadership diversity is a fundamental element of a global talent management strategy and a bottom-line necessity for global business in the 21st century? [CFO](#)

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