The Glass Ceiling: Women and Barriers to Leadership

By Matt Gonzales

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The U.S. is brimming with women qualified to fill leadership positions.

Research shows women are more likely than men to attain any college degree. In most leadership skills, they score higher (https://hbr.org/2019/06/research-women-score-higher-than-men-in-most-leadership-skills). Businesses with a higher proportion of women in leadership are more likely to report enhanced creativity and improved productivity.

But women experience challenges that men do not when attempting to advance their careers, according to a recent Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) report, *Women in Leadership: Unequal Access on the Journey to the Top* (https://shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Pages/SHRM-Women-in-Leadership-.aspx).

"Our research not only shows that women continue to face several barriers on their journey to the top, but it also reveals an alarming trend whereby women become increasingly disillusioned about equal access as they move into leadership positions," said Kerri Nelson, director of policy and partnership research at SHRM. "If organizations don't work to create equitable opportunities and more inclusive leadership environments, this disillusionment can have critical repercussions for organizations looking to develop and retain top female talent."

What Types of Barriers Do Women Face?

In a survey of HR professionals, individual contributors and managers, SHRM found that female managers are more likely than their male counterparts to aspire to higher-level roles because they would be good at it or because they're interested in taking on more or different responsibilities.

Yet organizations have disproportionately fewer women in top leadership positions: 9 percent of HR professionals describe their organization's leaders as predominantly women, whereas 50 percent describe their organization's senior leaders as predominantly men.

Kimberly Lee Minor, president of the activewear brand Bandier and founder of the nonprofit organization Women of Color in Retail, was unsurprised by the findings.

"There are several barriers in historical societal biases and outdated norms that still exist that leaders use as excuses not to consider [women]," she said. "These biases include [women being] care providers, myths like women lead with feeling and not with logic, and other outdated thoughts."

The study showed that women were less likely than men to say they've received tangible support from managers in attaining higher-level leadership positions despite being equally likely to share those aspirations. Female managers were also less likely than male managers to say employees in their company are made aware of internal job openings.

Women of color are even less likely to say their organization lets employees know when internal job openings become available. Female managers of color are over five times more likely than their white female counterparts to say they have quit a job after being overlooked for a new leadership opportunity.

"Women and especially women of color also lack the professional development at work that is required to advance," said Marsha Guerrier, founder of HerSuiteSpot, a network supporting women of color as leaders and entrepreneurs. "Without recognition and development, women often wait to be recognized for their contributions and don't feel confident enough to speak up."

Access to leadership networks helps women transition into senior positions, Guerrier explained. But female managers are less likely than male managers to feel included in key networks at their organizations, the survey found.

It's Lonelier at the Top for Female Leaders

Feel included in key networks at their organization:

White male managers	73%
Male managers of color	68%
White female managers	65%
Female managers of color	57%

Feel they can talk about their personal life with others at work without feeling judged:

White male managers	79%
Male managers of color	72%
White female managers	70%
Female managers of color	56%

Source: SHRM's *Women in Leadership: Unequal Access on the Journey to the Top* report, 2022. • Created with Datawrapper

"Women face structural barriers like having little to no access to established professional networks," Guerrier said. "Women are often not invited to interact in social activities where they can surround themselves with a network of people that can help them advance their career."

While the report suggested that companies could be hurting, not helping, women's careers, only half of HR professionals believe that senior leaders in their organization are held accountable for ensuring male and female employees have equal access to opportunities that lead to leadership roles.

Leveraging Metrics to Support Female Leaders

To increase equity, organizations must foster an environment in which women are encouraged to take on leadership roles. This may require companies to offer mentorship, professional networking and professional development opportunities to all employees.

"Encourage women to apply for promotions, and be sure unbiased training and professional development is given to those responsible for choosing potential candidates," Guerrier said. "Leaders should make sure everyone who is qualified is considered and that equal opportunities are offered to all skilled employees."

Companies could also develop a meaningful diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) strategy for their leadership pipeline that is aligned with the organization's mission, vision and values.

After developing a sound DE&I strategy (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/how-to-guides/pages/how-to-develop-a-diversity-and-inclusion-initiative.aspx), organizations should track and examine metrics to identify gaps in their leadership pipeline and gauge progress toward their goals. SHRM research shows tracking the equitability of promotion decisions and performance evaluations increases the success rate of DE&I programs.

"There needs to be goals and metrics, stating the gender representation goals for each level over the short term and longer term," said Kay Formanek, author of *Beyond D&I: Leading Diversity with Purpose and Inclusion* (Springer International Publishing, 2021). "What is measured must be met."

Data-driven DE&I efforts can reduce unconscious bias and support the recruitment and retention of women. Strong DE&I programs can also enhance the overall function of a company, Guerrier noted.

"When women feel supported and are provided the resources to advance, the result is usually increased positive performance as well as improved retention rates," she said. "Inclusivity fosters a more collaborative workplace."

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