

Best Practices for a Different Kind of Women's Leadership

This new era of women's leadership development is no longer about struggle but rather about focus and balance.

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Some of the world's best thinkers at Bain & Co., Deloitte, McKinsey & Co. and Mercer have produced a daunting amount of research about the advantages of a diverse leadership team. With the case for change well established, now leaders can focus on effective solutions. But many companies offer fractionated, insufficient solutions to develop their female talent pools. Successful strategies emphasize a different kind of women's leadership.

Create a holistic roadmap "that allows you to answer to not just high potentials and senior leaders, but also builds the infrastructure to support D&I [diversity and inclusion]," said Maria Brennan, president and CEO of Women in Cable Telecommunications, or WICT. "It cannot be piecemeal. If you commit to it, you have to go all in."

Marcia Avedon, senior vice president of human resources for communication and corporate affairs at Ingersoll Rand Inc., said companies must be "relentless in linking diversity and inclusion efforts to the business strategy. Don't make it one-off and isolated." That includes talent strategies. "Make sure you are identifying the best person for the job from a diverse slate."

There are many ways to crack the code on gender equality, but there are 17 best practices that stand out:

1. Update internal research.
2. Engage sponsorship from the board and CEO.
3. Connect initiative to business strategy.
4. Improve selection and retention.
5. Develop a pre-initiative toolkit
6. Revitalize employee resource groups.
7. Focus on career development.
8. Provide executive assessment.
9. Offer specialized executive education.
10. Document individual development plans.
11. Create peer-learning triads.
12. Focus on executive coaching.
13. Use action learning.
14. Start an alumni association.
15. Measure, measure, measure.
16. Institute family-friendly policies.
17. Get women on boards.

Of these 17 best practices, six require significant engagement and financial support. These are known as the “difficult six.”

1. Engage sponsorship from the board and CEO.

Nonexecutive board members, especially female board members, often can provide direct and quiet stewardship for the organization's women through private discussions with the board chair and CEO. This allows a board member to point out perceived diversity shortfalls and test management's resolve in selecting women for existing leadership roles. The chair's challenge is asserting how a diverse team can benefit customer service, employee engagement, sales and the bottom line.

Ingersoll Rand has seen the positive influence of its board members extend well beyond the boardroom and senior leadership, particularly through board member engagement with the company's employee resource groups. Avedon said two of Ingersoll Rand's four female board members have spoken via broadcast to the company's Women's Network, which has

about 2,000 members globally. "They shared their leadership lessons, how they found their voice, their impact, leadership styles, sacrifices they have made, and discussed the issue of balance and raising children.

Such an effort to develop existing leaders who already fit the culture can be efficient and powerful. It helps if board members and executives personally know the women. Engagement, exposure and direct commitments from top executives must drive any successful leadership development initiative. For female leaders, sponsorship is often the difference between development and advocacy.

2. Improve selection and retention practices.

San Antonio-based United States Automobile Association launched its Elevate talent initiative in September 2015. Home to many U.S. military veterans and their families, USAA aligns with the military's focus on diversity. "It's not a program, it's a strategy," said Pat Teague, senior vice president and chief operating officer for USAA's Staff Operations. For example, selection practices are designed to eliminate unconscious bias. For its pipeline, Teague said USAA wants a diverse pool of candidates for all positions based on availability in the market, and then wants to set an appropriate standard to ensure a healthy distribution internally. USAA emphasizes its dedication to effective inclusion. "Diversity is being invited to the dance, while inclusion is being asked to dance," Teague said.

One of WICT's member benefits is the PAR Initiative, a cable telecommunications industry diversity survey commissioned in partnership with the National Association for Multi-ethnicity in Communications and the Walter Kaitz Foundation, conducted by Mercer. The study identifies needed changes in the next five years to address a key challenge: employee retention. Brennan said having more women in the executive levels of management organically drives recruitment of women as well as talent development. "These [theories] are not controversial," she said. "Empirically, better general diversity makes better companies — higher morale, productivity and profitability." Brennan said it's about mindset: Gender equality is not just the right thing to do; it is effective because it is profitable.

3. Focus on career development.

Women represent a different variety of potential human characteristics from men, and female values offer career theory a more cyclic interpretation of phases, based on notions of ebb and flow, of shedding and renewal, according to Judi Marshall, professor at Lancaster University in the U.K. "Women bring their whole lives into review and expect to be transformed by [development]," she said. Marshall was one of the first to point out that women develop differently in their careers, and that most career models were developed by men for men. In fact, middle and late adulthood ages 40-plus may be periods of increased assertiveness for women in personal and professional accomplishments. Women's needs are different for many reasons, not the least of which is the percentage of time they spend in non-work activities like family care. So, why do we perpetuate a development process that deters gender equality?

Rather than concentrate on career and succession planning, women tend to focus on exceeding performance expectations. In addition, women say they must perform better than men to vie for a promotion. "Women wait until they're overqualified to apply," said Heather Healy, vice president at EMC. Healy also learned that if she did not identify a successor for herself, she was stuck indefinitely in her current role.

Further, women are less likely than male counterparts to have a five- or 10-year career plan. Diminished courage, confidence and grit are pressing issues to address in a women's leadership development initiative.

4. Offer specialized executive education.

In 2012, Ingersoll Rand introduced a new Women's Leadership Program developed in partnership with the Center for Creative Leadership. Through a blend of in-person training, online coursework, action learning projects involving business issues, and senior leader mentorship and networking, Ingersoll Rand's high-potential female participants hone leadership skills and broaden their perspective for their own career development and opportunities in the company. Since the program's inception, Ingersoll Rand achieved 90 percent retention of its 130 participants worldwide, with 67 percent of participants now in expanded roles or promoted.

At EMC, its leaders thank Chief Diversity Officer Jackie Glenn when their high-potential female nominees are admitted into the “Leadership in the Fast Lane” program. This multiday sabbatical called Fast Lane, provides relevant development for high-performing employees and allows them to build powerful networks among themselves and with the most senior leaders in the company. “The development of intimate relationships is fueled by holding the program offsite and including fireside chats with your top executives enabling sharing in an open and safe environment, all while providing unfettered access to off the record Q&A,” Glenn said.

Conducted on campus at Simmons College, the program provides avenues for executive sponsorship and executive awareness, including the board of directors. Now in its ninth year, Glenn said the latest additions to the program, which is now considered a company cultural initiative, include a module on diversity and inclusion as a critical business skill, and a panel discussion of men where male advocates share their own career stories and discuss the best ways to support high-performing women. Retention of program participants is near 90 percent, and a high percentage have received promotions and increased responsibilities post program.

5. Measure, measure, measure.

Metrics are important to any business initiative, especially those with a social and economic effect. A pre-/post-executive assessment is a minimum expectation to assess a benchmark on behavioral change. In combination with traditional metrics, the Success Case Method can identify case studies for application, learning and successful project implementation. This type of measurement occurs typically six, nine or 12 months after graduation to allow time for business results. Hold the executive team accountable for visible, measurable and inclusive metrics on talent acquisition, retention and development of diverse human resources.

Ingersoll Rand consistently receives recognition for its diversity and inclusion efforts internally and externally. However, one of its most valued measures comes directly from employees through the company's annual employee engagement survey. Each year, a portion of the survey measures how employees feel about the company's efforts to foster a progressive, diverse and inclusive environment, including the degree to which employees feel

their contributions are valued; they are treated with respect and dignity; and the ease with which people from diverse backgrounds can fit in and be accepted. Over the past two years, that measurement has increased more than 10 points to 75 percent favorable — validation that the company's holistic approach to diversity and inclusion in alignment with its global business strategies is felt favorably throughout the company.

Effective gender equality is about cultural change — and systemically part of a larger set of changes. WICT also provides ongoing measurement, and according to this year's PAR Initiative workforce study, (<https://www.wict.org/Documents/2015%20Par%20Executive%20Report.pdf>) the cable telecommunications industry offers a good career path for women when benchmarked against other industries. Women hold 32 percent of the executive and senior-level positions vs. 26 percent in other industries. "While it is not 50 percent, you know we're making progress," Brennan said.

6. Get women on boards.

Brennan has worked with numerous diversity-based nonprofits, including the National Association of Women Business Owners, American Women in Radio and Television, and The International Alliance of Women. Forecasting board diversity as the most important issue to address over the next year or so in this industry, Brennan said larger companies offer a strong opportunity with their boards of directors. "Make sure there are women and people of color," she said. "It starts at the board level, and this exponentially creates more success." For smaller companies, committing to provide learning and development resources for existing employees is key.

Men and women lead differently, communicate differently, have different influences on career goals and are motivated differently. A new era of women's leadership development is emerging that is no longer about struggle but rather about focus and balance. Companies seeking the economic and cultural benefits should use the 17 best practices to promote gender equality, focusing particularly on the "difficult six."

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