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## What are the Top Factors That Prohibit Women From Advancing Into Leadership Positions at the Same Rate as Men?

### Abstract

**Question:** What are the top factors that prohibit women from advancing into leadership positions at the same rate as men? Focus more on what causes this situation.

### Keywords

human resources, gender and work, inclusion, family and work

### Disciplines

Human Resources Management

### Comments

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## Executive Summary

*The cited references are listed in order of appearance in the Bibliography*

### Question

What are the top factors that prohibit women from advancing into leadership positions at the same rate as men? Focus more on what causes this situation.

### Introduction: Current Trend of Women Leadership Position

<sup>1</sup>For at least a quarter of a century, women have been entering the professional and managerial ranks of U.S. corporations at about the same rate as men. (See Table 1), yet they remain dramatically underrepresented at senior levels. <sup>2</sup>Women currently constitute only 2.2% of Fortune-500 CEOs and <sup>3</sup>about 15% of these companies' board seats and corporate officer positions. This report will analyze the top factors and make some recommendations to solve them.

### Analysis: The top factors that prohibit women from advancing into leadership position

We assessed impediments for women advancing into senior leadership positions by using <sup>4</sup>an ecological model which takes societal, organizational and individual levels into consideration.

#### 1) Societal Level Factors

Broad societal forces and policies perpetuate **assumptions and stereotypes** which present challenges to women in leadership roles.

- **Legislation and policies** related to employment equity, human rights, access to affordable day care and reproductive rights have a profound impact on the ability of women to advance in the workplace.
- **Social Norm driven by media** <sup>5</sup>Media perpetuates gender stereotypes by using images to reinforce gendered notions of leadership, often presenting men as "experts". Stereotypes are further perpetuated when female executives are portrayed as anomalies. <sup>6</sup>Media images show women in home and <sup>7</sup>as younger than men, which <sup>8</sup>communicates and reinforces perceptions of female professional incompetence and unsuitability for leadership position. <sup>9</sup>Pervasive stereotypes present women as lacking the 'right stuff' to be leaders, especially in the traditionally male-dominated domain such as business and politics.

#### 2) Organizational Level Factors

<sup>10</sup>While most organizations have attempted to change the exclusive work environments of previous eras, systemic barriers affecting the advancement of women still remain.

- **Higher Performance standards and risky task.** <sup>11</sup>When women are promoted to leadership positions, they are often held to higher performance standards than men and <sup>12</sup>tasked with responsibilities associated with great risk of failure. <sup>13</sup>They are also less likely to be given 'stretch' assignments and developmental opportunities, which are both critical to promotional opportunities.
- **Bad human resource practices.** <sup>14</sup>Research indicates that both recruitment choices and succession planning decisions are heavily influenced by informal networks and the adherence to unwritten rules. Once hired, women are often disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for networking and mentoring. <sup>15</sup>Research by the Diversity Institute and Catalyst(2007) showed that 66% of women feel that 'who you know' is more important

than 'what you know' when it comes to decisions about which employees will be promoted.

- **The conflict between work and family.** <sup>16</sup>Many female workers are also mothers. Their children and husbands can provide some burden that may negatively impact their chances at women's leadership position. It is also related with women's feeling that they cannot handle balancing work and family life with the rigorous demands that a leadership position takes. <sup>17</sup>A Pew study indicates that one third of women surveyed believed that their failure to reach the top management is "due to family obligations and family responsibilities".
- **Perceptions of the work-family conflict** <sup>18</sup>Even if women decide to go for top management and are willing to handle their work from a CEO and their family simultaneously, evaluators may not promote them due to their own perceptions of the work-family conflict that women go through.

### 3) Individual Level Factors

At the individual level, some research indicates that women's lack of confidence to succeed often leads to making decisions that affect their career prospects.

- <sup>19</sup>**The sense of diminished self-efficacy** is often shaped by the social context in which there are limited role models and highly gendered professional stereotypes and notions of leadership. For example, <sup>20</sup>Women are less likely to promote themselves; when they are successful, they are more likely to credit the team or circumstance and when they fail, they are more likely to blame themselves.
- <sup>21</sup>**Communication style** Another factor that has far reaching implications is differences in communication styles and <sup>22</sup>the fact that women are less likely to negotiate for what they want. <sup>23</sup>When women do assert themselves and negotiate, they are considered less socially attractive, less likeable, and less hireable.

### Recommendations

Given that such top factors which is holding women to be promoted to top management, companies need to establish integrated strategies which affect change at the societal, organizational and individual levels.

- **Leadership and Governance:** For Leadership Diversity in the organization, women must have the support and commitment of executive management who have the power to influence change across the organization. Diversity strategies with executives' commitment and initiatives can be more easily understood and communicated across the organization by engaging women in succession planning with explicit diversity goals in mind. <sup>24</sup> Mentors and role models of women managers can also have a great effect.
- **Balancing work & family:** Leading organizations have a wide range of programs aimed at reducing the challenges of balancing work and family obligations. For example, <sup>25</sup>TB bank and <sup>26</sup>HP Canada offer flexible work options, reduced workweeks, job partnership/sharing, and changing number of days in the workweek while keeping the hours the same.
- **Sharing Women's Success Stories:** Regardless of the barriers that persist, it is obvious that talented women are succeeding and taking their place in leadership roles. Therefore, it is critically important that women learn from their experiences in order to inspire and coach aspiring female leaders.

## Appendix

**Table 1. <sup>1</sup>Women in Management in the United States, 1960-Present**

Unit: %

Official Dept. of Labor Category	1960	1970	1980
Managers and administrators, except farm	15.6	15.9	26.2

  

Official Dept. of Labor Category	1985	1990	1995
Management, professional, and related occupations (reconstructed)	33.3	36.5	38.7

  

Official Dept. of Labor Category	2000	2005	2010	2011
Management, professional, and related occupations	48.8	50.6	51.5	51.4

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<sup>1</sup> Catalyst. Catalyst Quick Take: Women in Management in the United States, 1960-Present. New York: Catalyst, 2012.

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