Advancing Women in the Workplace

Strategies for Leaders and Organizations

In their annual report on women in the workplace, **McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org** note a trend in declining support for gender diversity. As described by the **University of California-Irvine Division of Continuing Education**, a particularly stubborn barrier to the advancement of women is the fact that men are more likely to be hired into entry-level positions, giving them an advantage as if they were a sprinter given a five-yard head start before the race begins. According to **Catalyst,** across regions and industries, women are underrepresented in senior leadership and earn less than men for the same work. Their labor force participation and advancement to top positions have also not kept pace with men. Women of color, particularly Latine and Black women, are even more underrepresented.

To create a workplace where women can thrive and advance, organizations must implement systems that *remove barriers* and *amplify potential*.

1. **Recommit to efforts beneficial to women:** Establish formal sponsorship to position women for advancement, implement flexible work options, and invest in targeted career development initiatives.
2. **Start from the beginning:** Provide opportunities for women at the entry level, including recommendations for stretch assignments, connections to people who could help with their career development, and support as candidates for promotion.
3. **Audit performance evaluations for bias:** Implement structured, objective rubrics for performance reviews to replace language that could disproportionately impact women:
   - Critiquing Personality and Behavior
     - Words like “abrasive” or “aggressive” that penalize women for direct communication or taking charge—attributes that are often identified with “confidence” and “leadership” when applied to men
     - Words like “too intense” or “too direct” that provide vague emotional feedback targeting a woman’s presence rather than her concrete workplace behaviors or measurable outcomes
     - Words like “emotional” or “temperamental” that undermine a woman’s professional rationale by framing passion or frustration as a lack of stability
     - Words like “not a team player” that are used disproportionately with high-performing women who display competitive or decisiveness traits
   - Acknowledging Effort Over Ability
     - Words like “hardworking,” “diligent,” or “organized” that can be harmful when they imply a woman succeeds through effort alone rather than through inherent skill or strategic talent
     - Words like “compassionate” or “cooperative” that limit women to supportive roles rather than recognizing technical or managerial achievements
   - Raising Doubt and Diminishing Potential
     - Commenting about personal life or family stability, which occurs more frequently in evaluations for women than for men
     - Providing a female colleague with vague growth feedback, such as that she needs to “improve her communication style” or “leadership presence” without giving concrete examples, measurable steps, or actionable metrics for advancement
4. **Champion fair compensation practices:** Conduct regular equity audits across all positions to identify and address pay gaps.
5. **Normalize psychological safety:** Creating psychological safety means building an environment where women feel comfortable speaking up, asking for help, admitting mistakes, and challenging the status quo without fear. Managers can implement strategies for:
   - Modeling vulnerability and openness
   - Facilitating open communication
   - Establishing supportive norms and team culture
   - Recognizing and empowering individuals
   - Addressing conflict and feedback positively

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6. **Design for inclusive meetings:** Establish meeting protocols that minimize interruptions, credit original idea generators, and give everyone an equal opportunity to speak. Features of inclusive meetings include:
   - Accessible scheduling that respects flexible working hours and competing commitments
   - Circulated agendas and materials
   - Multimodal participation options
   - Active facilitation (designated facilitator) to establish ground rules, monitor the room or chat, and intervene if someone interrupts or dominates
   - Structured format to eliminate free-for-all debates, such as a round-robin check-in or a digital hand-raising queue
   - Psychological safety modeled by leader(s)
7. **Provide clear pathways to leadership:** Map out transparent, milestone-based career trajectories so employees know exactly what is required to advance.
8. **Support women-focused groups:** Implement and strengthen employee resource groups (ERGs) to give women a formal platform for networking and professional growth (while also building empathy and community).
9. **Offer career development supports:** Invest in skill-development and upskilling programs, leadership development programs, career development content tailored for women, and funding assistance for individual career development like certifications.
10. **Redefine potential:** Reward emotional intelligence, collaborative decision-making, and inclusive leadership styles.
11. **Build strong allyship networks:** Educate and engage leaders on how to act as effective allies. Strong allyship networks focus on tangible behaviors—such as mentorship, sponsorship, and interrupting bias in daily operations—and amplify marginalized voices by sharing the spotlight, crediting others, and ensuring underrepresented voices are heard.
12. **Strengthen formal sponsorship efforts:** Women are less likely to have a sponsor or to have a sponsor in senior leadership. Strengthening sponsorship efforts can include:
   - Matching employees with well-positioned sponsors, setting expectations, and defining a successful sponsorship (such as greater stretch assignments)
   - Training sponsors and employees about an effective sponsorship relationship (scheduling, actions sponsors can take, questions employees could ask, etc.)
   - Expanding access for junior employees to more senior colleagues (who might become sponsors) inside and outside the organization, such as regular informal get-togethers (internal) and industry or professional association networking events (external)
   - Encouraging connection across differences so that employees and sponsors reach beyond their usual circles
13. **Equip managers to support women at all levels:** Provide managers with the time and tools to provide fundamental career support for women, such as:
   - Showing interest in their career advancement
   - Checking in on their general well-being
   - Advocating for them or their work
   - Assigning them projects that directly align with their career goals
   - Being transparent about the requirements for advancement

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