

Members Quarterly

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Feature

Women in the C-Suite

Time to remove the glass ceiling...

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It's interesting to see how the number of women in executive positions is still very anemic despite some strong focus on policies and gender diversity. Why is this? What can we do to qualify for a position at the executive level?

The study of career development of women has become increasingly important in recent years as the percentage of women entering the labour force has increased significantly.

Surveys conducted (2010) by Mercer and Catalyst revealed that gender is still a common barrier to women's career advancement. The surveys also indicated that progression to the executive ranks is blocked by the invisible barrier well-known as the "glass ceiling", a term coined by the U.S. department of Labour Statistics in 1986 to describe the barriers to advancement of women into leadership positions.

The statistics indicate that women today make up half the workforce, yet they remain scarce in the ranks of executive positions. Compared to their male counterparts, women are staying in school longer and holding off starting families. This should make them more than qualified to climb the executive ladder during their career lives.

In a volatile economy, human capital becomes an important source of competitive advantage and the backbone of every organization. Today's leaders need to recognize that leadership is not reserved for certain genders or generations. It should include everyone who has the ability to accomplish extraordinary things.

The companies that recognize and develop high potential talent in their organizations regardless of gender are more likely to combat times when resources are scarce and there is a growing war on talent. Organizations that have well developed talent strategies which are supportive, inclusive and reward for merit will come to see a more sustainable business advantage.

The old notion that men have more aggressive behavioural traits and operate in a more command-and-control type of leadership still applies. We must look at the transformation of leadership. The command-and-control style no longer signifies great leadership. Organizations today are building more teams and collaborative working -relationships. Leadership is becoming more participative which seems to be the only means of dealing with today's complex workforce.

Basically, no leader today can lead alone. Leaders need to build a team and influence everyone on the team to move towards their shared vision. This is how the overall goal of the organization can be attained. "Do it" must change to "Let's do it" as a participative and collaborative effort. Leadership needs to influence and not dictate what needs to be done.

This participative leadership style should include women in top positions alongside of male leaders with equal ability to contribute to major organizational decisions.

Despite the strong focus on gender diversity in organizations today, companies need to understand how to move from programmatic diversity to systemic diversity. Systemic changes,

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particularly in human resources practices, are necessary for long term organizational success. The lack of women in leadership positions means organizations are likely missing out on an important and measurable competitive advantage. The price of ignoring women in the leadership pipeline is high and can be measured in lost talent and lost opportunities.

While many organizations have made efforts to eliminate stereotyping and gender discrimination, the recognition of women's talent and worth remains underestimated and underutilized. Current strategies may not be effective and may not support the inclusion of women. It's not enough to just have a policy or strategy in place. The strategy needs to be systematically enforced throughout the enterprise. Everyone from the top down must embrace the same culture and values. This way, we can have policies embedded into practice so that they eventually become a cultural norm throughout the workplace.

While women have generally made progress into management positions in recent years, this has been predominantly into middle management ranks. Their access to executive roles is still restricted and limited.

Today's employers should support and maintain a bias-free workforce. This includes fair treatment of all employees, equal access to developmental experiences and family friendly programs to support obligations of women outside of the workplace so that they may continue on their career paths. They will then be able to retain their most talented people which leads to better financial performance and a sustainable competitive advantage in the future.

The significance of the absence of women in the C-Suite is not a matter to be ignored. As senior HR professionals, we can continue to forge strategies that work towards breaking the glass ceiling once and for all.

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