

# IS YOUR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP STRATEGY SITTING ON A ONE-LEGGED STOOL?

## Why aren't we making greater strides to advance women in the workplace?

If you ask senior leaders today, "Is the retention and advancement of women an important initiative for our company?" most will answer yes. Most senior executives believe that their leadership team understands the compelling business case—and knows what to do about it. If you believe your leadership team knows how to operationalize the business case for women, ask these three questions:

- 1 Can you articulate the day-to-day actions you are taking to improve the retention and advancement of women?
- 2 What metrics do you have in place to track progress?
- 3 How are you holding your direct reports accountable, specifically men and middle management?



My guess is that many leaders will be unable to answer these questions to your satisfaction. Unfortunately, most organizations believe that the key to retaining women is to "fix the women" by having women-only training initiatives, and they ignore the two greater obstacles: operationalizing the business case and engaging men as change agents. The "fix the women" strategy is not working, and the proof is in the numbers. Today, in most organizations, less than 15 percent of senior leadership roles are occupied by women and in the C-Suite, the number is less than 5 percent. These numbers are largely unchanged in the past 10 years.

To achieve gender equity—frankly, to achieve equity for all employees—organizations must address all three legs of the proverbial stool:

- **Women's Leadership Initiatives**
- **Operationalizing the Business Case and Corporate Culture**
- **Creating Male and Organizational Advocates**

Let's take a closer look at these three vital parts of your women's leadership strategy.

## Women's Leadership Initiatives

Most companies have programs in place for women (and some men) to support women's development. Many organizations have Business or Employee Resource Groups. These forums are 95 percent led by women and mostly attended by women. These initiatives include everything from targeted development, frequent lunch-and-learn activities, mentoring programs, annual events with speakers and workshops during Women's History Month.

These programs, as well as other company-led initiatives to target high-potential women, serve a critical need of helping women broaden their networks, receive stretch assignments and develop critical skills that all rising leaders need. I am a huge advocate for leadership development of all rising leaders—women and men. The challenge is that many companies place all of their women's initiatives on this one leg. It implies that if we "fix the women," they will be more promotable, choose to stay and be more engaged. Women do not need "fixing." The only way to drive significant long-term change is to fix the culture and to engage men.

## Operationalizing the Business Case and Corporate Culture

Operationalizing the Business Case means treating women's leadership advancement as a leadership imperative. This means total enterprise engagement. Women's leadership advancement must be owned by operations, sales and marketing.

Phaidon International's 2018 report [Gender Diversity: The Commercial Imperative](#) asked what percentage of an organization received gender diversity training. They found that only a third of participants and 25 percent of women surveyed said they had received gender diversity training from their organization. Where respondents had received training, two-thirds said it didn't include the business case for gender diversity. When a business case was presented, 42 percent said empirical evidence was not used to back it up. You must have locally relevant metrics in place regarding revenue (for B2C this is about women as customers, for B2B this is about matching your sales force to the client), talent, (recruitment, retention and advancement), engagement (productivity) and innovation (growth). Each of these focus areas must have a quantitative or qualitative metric so that you can hold people accountable.



From a Corporate Culture standpoint, Human Resources, Corporate Communications and Senior Leadership play critical support roles with the necessary progressive policies and programs. Senior leadership must be out in front, leading the initiative. Finally, do you have a culture that is supportive and representative of the inclusion of women? Ask your women's resource group to list the five to 10 unconscious gender biases they face on a daily basis. I guarantee that the answers to this simple question will be very telling.

## Creating Male and Organizational Advocates

Mercer Global's [When Women Thrive](#) report found that only 39 percent of middle management and 38 percent of male employees are engaged in company diversity and inclusion initiatives. While we can say nearly 40 percent is pretty good, there are men who are disenfranchised or who will interpret someone else's gain as their personal loss and will see your D&I initiatives as a zero-sum proposition. If a majority of your workforce is men, it is imperative that your company programming and solutions integrate and involve them in your diversity and inclusion initiatives in a deep and meaningful manner.

***The key is to move men from concept to action. There are four major issues stopping active male engagement:***

- Apathy (I don't know why gender equity is important.)
- Empathy (I don't believe men and women are having different experiences in the workplace.)
- Accountability (My results are not tracked, so why do it?)
- Fear (I may say or do the wrong thing or I will be judged by my peer group if I do this "women's thing.")

## Consider these steps to kickstart your male engagement initiatives:

- STEP 1** Assess your current behaviors and beliefs about advancing women and what actions you are taking to demonstrate advocacy. We offer a simple tool called the [Male Advocate Profile](#) quiz to help determine your team's current state of readiness.
- STEP 2** Choose to be a visible and vocal advocate. Download the [Advocating for Women](#) pledge and agree to commit to one of 10 actions to demonstrate your advocacy for women. Display the pledge in your workspace.
- STEP 3** Conduct a two-hour [Men and Women Working Together for Team Success](#) workshop. This program is designed to help attendees leverage gender differences (rather than ignoring them) and examines the unconscious gender bias that is present in every workplace.
- STEP 4** Conduct a [Creating Male Advocates program](#). This intense day-long session is for “ready-now” men who want to deepen their knowledge and skills to become visible and vocal advocates for advancing women.
- STEP 5** Keep the momentum going by committing to conducting monthly staff meetings on gender. Subscribe to our monthly [Staff Meeting in a Box](#) to receive tips and ideas to lead discussions about gender.

The key to advancing women in your organization is to encourage a culture that is supportive, inclusive and “owned by the business.” Men and middle managers must choose to become advocates by demonstrating their commitment through actions and senior leadership must hold people accountable for the change they desire. Let's stop trying to “fix” women and focus on fixing our culture and creating male advocates.

Contact me at [jthalter@ywomen.biz](mailto:jthalter@ywomen.biz) to discuss your objectives or visit my website for ideas about how to take your women's leadership initiative to the next level.



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Jeffery is a two-time TEDx speaker and the author of two books, including [WHY WOMEN, The Leadership Imperative to Advancing Women and Engaging Men](#). His clients include IBM, Amazon, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Delta, Barclays and dozens of other Fortune 500 companies.