

HUMAN RESOURCES

The Future of Female Corporate Leadership

by Amelia Sadler



While strong businesswomen like Sheryl Sandberg are emerging in the popular view, there is still some bias against women in the workplace. Instead, we should be welcoming these highly qualified business minds into executive offices and enjoy the growth in revenue, market shares and customer bases that follow.

✔ **INSIGHT** | NOTE 01 Dec 2016

For some time, electing a female president has been widely considered the key to shattering that final and highest glass ceiling. Putting a woman in the white house has become a symbolic image for feminists decrying the professional and political gender gap that has plagued the United States since its inception. Forget climbing ladders in corporate

America, they argue, the real feminist frontier is on Pennsylvania Avenue. The Washington Post recently published an article titled “Women who want to get ahead should look to the federal government, not corporate America,” with the argument that because women are better represented in government than wall street they should seek to advance their career in a field where they already have a better shot. “For every chair occupied by a woman in the corporate C-suite,” the Post writes, “six are filled by a man.” By comparison, “in the federal government, it’s 1 out of every 3.” Why this is an argument for abandoning the feminist cause in the private sphere is unclear. If anything, this statistic exposes the public misperception that the Cheryl Sandbergs of the world have secured a permanent place for women in boardrooms, that women have conquered corporate America. If anything, it ought to be a signal to management everywhere that they have a problem that needs fixing.

One of the biggest issues contributing to the misconception of female success in corporate America is the conflation of progress with fruition. In 1995, there were zero female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies; today there are 26. Within two decades women went from comprising zero to five percent of Fortune 500 CEOs, a gain of less than half a percent each year. For twenty years. Although half of managerial and professional positions in 2013 were held by women, senior management positions are still nearly subsumed by men. Yes, that is a 30 percent increase from 1968. No, it does not absolve companies from the continued need to advance women’s leadership in the upper echelons of the corporate structure. Today’s gains in female leadership are being measured relative to an obsolete metric steeped in a culture that was built to preclude them.

Cultural Bias: Evaluating Workplace Environments

Such raw statistics on the composition of American corporate entities are only just the beginning. The cultural opposition to female leadership that many feel has been eroded by social enlightenment and a decades long feminist movement is still alive and well, albeit less visibly. A recent report by the Pew Research Center found what may be the biggest issue for women in corporate leadership: a stark dichotomy between the rhetoric concerning gender equality and the actions taken to achieve it. Women are considered

equally intelligent and innovative by a majority of Americans, and even superior with regards to honesty, fairness, compassion and willingness to compromise. But the data doesn't match these qualitative surveys. The workplace and the leadership characteristics applauded there are, in reality, designed for men in such a way that double standards complicate virtually every decision a female executive makes. The same Pew report found that when male executives speak up, their competence reports increase an average of 10 percent. Women's decline by one and a half times that percentage. A survey of 48 tech company employee performance reviews revealed women are disproportionately criticized compared to their male colleagues and are far more likely to be described as "abrasive, aggressive and emotional." Parenthood also has vastly different impacts on men and women's professional careers. Women who have children are perceived as more irrational and less committed to work than their childless counterparts. At the same time, not only do fathers have the same competency ratings as childless men, but receive higher job commitment scores. These phenomena are now being referred to as the motherhood penalty and fatherhood bonus, respectively. It is an indication of a fundamental deficiency in these professional settings; corporate culture rewards characteristics of strength and masculinity in men and condemns them in women. It patronizes femininity and nurturing tendencies in new mothers while celebrating the family man— put simply, it is a space made by men and for men.

For many female business leaders, this is old news. Nearly every woman in senior management has a story about how she has modified her behavior (in ways her male colleagues will never have to) to help avoid these pitfalls in perception. One of the classic examples, that has come to symbolize the gendered double standards of the workplace, is the proverbial smile. Surveys consistently show that women in both professional and academic environments are not ranked as highly as men without smiling. The Atlantic published a series of firsthand accounts of women being told to smile at work. One woman, Gail, offers this advice on how to succeed as a woman in business.

"Always dress better than the discount to men's comp that you're paid, never overtly take credit, always settle for the unwanted or under-performing accounts, learn fast how to deal with customer and coworker sexual overtures without alienating, and SMILE."

The issue here is evident. The response to gender inequality in the corporate world should not be one in which women minimize their success, endure sexual harassment and feel obligated to maintain a façade not required of their male counterparts.

This kind of advice is symptomatic of a fundamentally flawed approach to closing the gender gap that has been pursued for years. Knowing that these inequities continue to persist in offices across America, professionals often ask, “what can women do to fix these perceptions, reverse the double standard, and gain the same level of credibility in the boardroom as male colleagues?” placing the burden on women themselves to combat these obstacles. They ought, instead, to be asking this of themselves.

Implications

Fostering an inclusive culture based on gender equality should not only be a responsibility of executives but a critical priority. It's past time that the issue of cultural bias against women in corporate environments moved from HR departments to executive offices. The most important step in this process is the promotion of women to higher positions within the corporate hierarchy. The data on this speaks for itself. Women-led startups are more likely to succeed, firms with female management are more profitable, and companies with greater gender diversity are proven to have more revenue, higher market share, and a larger customer base.

That's a lot of forfeited profit in a world with fewer than 30 Fortune 500 companies led by women.

While the United States' first female presidential candidate was historic and momentous, it should not preclude awareness of gender gaps elsewhere in American professional fields. The pursuit of gender equality cannot be a zero-sum game as some indications suggest. Staggeringly low numbers of women are finding success or even opportunity in corporate America, yet the discourse surrounding women's achievements in business has failed to capture this reality. Boardrooms have a conspicuous lack of women that is in many ways dismissed with visions of female achievement in government. Perhaps this is due to the

comparatively greater visibility of elected officials, or the social value attributed to the public sector. Regardless, it is a dangerous trend that deserves better than rosy rhetoric and the suggestion to lean in. After all, the oval office is but one of many.



Amelia Sadler [Follow](#)

Amelia Sadler is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, majoring in Economics and Business Administration with a minor in Spanish. She hails from Ann Arbor, Michigan.