How Gender Diversity Is Key to Organizational Success

Presented by
Manar Morales, JD

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STATEGICALLY APPROACHING WOMEN’S INITIATIVES

Retaining and advancing women where they are underrepresented takes more than hosting a panel discussion, establishing a committee, or more than engaging just the women. Creating a meaningful initiative to increase the representation and inclusion of women up the organizational ladder requires a strategic process reflecting the commitment of leaders and engaging both men and women. As detailed below, the hallmarks of that strategic process include: 1) assessing the current state, including identifying the barriers to women’s advancement; 2) articulating the purpose, including making a direct link to overcoming the identified barriers; and 3) organizing the initiative’s activities around fellowship, leadership development, and measurement for maximum impact.

- **Assess the Current State**: Successful women’s initiatives start with having a clear understanding of the experiences women are having in the organization. A critical part of this process includes analyzing various data points, including the gender breakdown at each level of the organization, attrition statistics, recruitment data, and promotion outcomes. Cross-referencing this information with performance data bolsters the analysis, as does examining other indicators outlined in the Alliance’s *Take a Picture of the Glass Ceiling* Action Step. In addition, conducting focus groups and/or one-on-one interviews with women from a cross section of departments, offices, and levels provides essential first-person perspectives about barriers to and opportunities for the advancement of women.

- **Articulate the Purpose**: Assessing the current state will uncover the specific problems the organization needs to solve -- including what it has lost or will lose as a result of its gender inequities -- and provide the strategic direction for its women’s initiative. This information should be used to articulate a statement of purpose for the initiative, as well as guide decisions about which activities to pursue based upon how well they align with the mission. The statement of purpose also becomes the basis to request the resources needed to support the work and communicate the importance of the women’s initiative and how it benefits the organization. Organizational leaders should champion this message by being vocal and visible in their support for the initiative, and convey their responsibility for its success. The Alliance’s *Support Diversity & Flexibility at the Top* Action Step provides concrete ways for leaders to execute on this duty.

- **Organize the Action**: While there should always be alignment between the work of the women’s initiative and its purpose, achieving the goal of advancing women will require taking action in a variety of ways. Organizing these activities around the following three pillars, which are discussed in greater detail in the Alliance’s *It Takes a
Community Action Step, is a useful way to ensure that the individual needs of women are addressed and organization responsibilities are carried out.

- **The first pillar is fellowship**, which means providing opportunities for women to come together to communicate in a safe space about the challenges and opportunities they experience as a result of their shared identity. This can be carried out through affinity groups, networking events, and other programs, including some that offer men the opportunity to demonstrate their support as allies. The focus of these activities is relationship building, including encouraging the development of mentorship, sponsorship, and other channels of access to the social capital needed to successfully navigate a path to advancement.

- **The second pillar is leadership development**, which includes providing educational and other opportunities that support both the technical and professional skill development required to be promoted and successful. It is important, however, not to make assumptions about what the women need. Instead, organizations should use the information gleaned at the assessment phase and continue to engage women to find out what types of development opportunities they want, as well as programs and policies they recommend to foster women’s advancement.

- **The third pillar is measurement**. It is important to establish regular communication channels between the leaders of the women’s initiative and organizational leadership to discuss how women are progressing in and experiencing the work environment. Specifically, organizational leaders should designate a member of the executive committee to liaise with the leaders of the women’s initiative, demonstrating leadership responsibility for its success. This process should also include reviewing the same data categories outlined in the assessment phase and examining the story of progress and continued challenges revealed in the data. In addition, periodic communication with the broader organizational community about the progress of the initiative, as well as plans for overcoming its challenges, is important to keep the momentum going and build in accountability for its success.

[Contact us](#) to learn more about developing women’s initiatives with strategic impact.
IS THE GLASS HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL?

Recent surveys show that men perceive greater progress towards gender equality than women do:

- More men (63%) than women (49%) think their organizations are making progress on gender diversity.\(^i\)
- More women (83%) than men (76%) see gender diversity as moderately or very important.\(^ii\)
- When asked about discrimination against women in the tech industry, 29% of men and 44% of women say it is a major problem.\(^iii\)

This presents both an insight and a challenge for initiatives to advance women. For the insight: it explains in part why women’s advancement is so slow. For change to occur, there has to be a sense of necessity and urgency to overcome inertia. If men see no particular need to prioritize women’s progress in their organizations, they will be more prone to sit on the sidelines while others work to advance women. Even worse, organizational leadership may believe their organizations have done enough to ensure gender parity and actively resist initiatives to advance women.

Which brings us to the challenge: how can change advocates use this information to advocate for the advancement of women? The key foundational step is to address the disconnect through evidence and encouraging reflection. Here are some suggestions:

1) **Overcome denial.** Distribute and discuss the research that highlights the fact that women perceive a higher prevalence of discrimination. Point to the low number of women in leadership and in particular, the even lower number of leaders who are women of color. Provide statistics showing the lack of women in senior level positions is not a pipeline, lack of ambition, or lack of talent issue.

2) **Make it immediate.** It’s common for people to believe that discrimination exists in other organizations, but not in their own. Start by focusing on data from your organization such as the number of women at each level, the number of women who leave each year and where they go, and the number of women on high profile matters. The numbers will show some progress over time, but it will also show where progress has been slow and inadequate.
3) **Bridge the gap.** The difference in men’s and women’s perceptions of discrimination may stem from a lack of knowledge or understanding. Both can be addressed with information and actual examples. Provide anonymous anecdotes from women in your organization about actions that have made them feel like an outsider, challenged their competence, or required them to “cover” their behavior to conform. Discuss the impact such situations can have on a woman’s career. Encourage men to view the situation from a female perspective and ask them to consider scenarios that involve repeated attempts to receive career-enhancing beneficial experiences, desirable assignments, or unbiased evaluations of their work.

As always, you can make change efforts more effective by basing them in company values, business objectives, and by leveraging the support of top management.

**Contact the Alliance** today to learn how we can assist with developing and implementing your women’s initiatives and overcome unconscious bias to advance women into leadership within your organization.

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Your opinion matters!

Please take a moment now to complete the evaluation.

Thank You!