Glass Doors to the Corner Office
Women and Leadership

By: Sophia Zhao and Sunil Puri

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Executive Summary

While more women than ever now participate in the paid workforce,[1] it still can be hard to find women in top leadership positions.

Only 26 CEOs (5.8%) at S&P 500 companies were women, according to 2017 data.[2] In 2016, 20.2% of Fortune 500 board seats were filled by women.[3] Across Asian companies, women held just 8.7% of board seats.[4]

To understand why so few women are in top leadership positions, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, CCL set out to understand what factors help women achieve leadership positions, what factors prevent it, and how organizations could add more women to their leadership ranks.

We learned that there is no single reason or simple solution. Increasing the number of women in leadership positions will require aspiring women leaders to develop themselves professionally and, in some cases, adopt new behaviors. But the organizational context that women work within is also important.

In this paper, we raise five key questions that women should reflect on as they consider their ambitions. We summarize five key lessons that came up repeatedly in our conversations with women leaders who had worked their way into leadership positions.

We also discuss some of the changes organizations can make to increase the number of women leaders. These include policies and changes in organizational culture.

How the Study Was Done

We conducted this research in two phases. First, we surveyed 204 women leaders from Singapore, Australia, India, and Korea. We gave them a list of reasons that might contribute to the lack of women in leadership positions and asked them to select up to five items they most agreed with and five they most disagreed with.

In phase two, we conducted 27 face-to-face interviews with women leaders working in Singapore. They told us their personal leadership stories, shared their perspective on women leaders' career enablers and blockers, and also completed the phase 1 survey.

Five Reflection Questions for Women

What are the main reasons for underrepresentation of women leaders? There is no simple answer. We identified five factors but are also aware that for every point, there exists a counter argument. Hence, we raise five questions for aspiring women to reflect, as candid self-assessment can help map out a path to leadership.

1. Am I a lesser among equals?

Do men outnumber women in leadership positions because male-dominated environments put women at a disadvantage? Some 37% of our survey respondents agreed that the statement "Organizations have a male-centric organizational culture" was one reason why women are underrepresented in leadership positions.

However, while many companies lack large numbers of women leaders, that's not true for all organizations. Respondents in the retail, fashion and design, and media industries told us that a majority of their leaders were women. We also heard from a woman leader in the engineering industry, who said half the leaders are women.

This suggests it's important for women to understand their own leadership success in the context of the company and industry they work in. It also suggests that, over the long run, women will have to work harder in some industries to create more leadership opportunities for themselves and their female colleagues.

2. Do I have the "hunger"?

A woman must be ambitious to achieve a leadership position, and she must also display that ambition. One woman leader we interviewed said, "I often see people ask 'Why am I not promoted?' but really it's about whether you show the hunger."

In our survey, 38% of respondents disagreed with the statement "women make a deliberate decision to not take up a corporate career." That shows women's ambition for career achievement. However, such ambition may give way to other priorities.

For example, women with young children may feel that taking time to focus on children is more important than their careers. Some interviewees also told us that it's more important to focus their career around personal values, such as making an impact, rather than simply trying to get to the top of a corporate pyramid.

3. Am I a victim of the lack of choice?

Sometimes women face other pressures—even from their own families—to make certain decisions or spend their time in certain ways. In our survey, 47% of respondents agreed that "Women face social pressure to shoulder more family responsibility" and 45% said that "Women take career breaks for personal/family reasons."

For women leaders, then, having instrumental support at home to help with the household responsibilities is critical, and having someone who understand their dreams and ambition and support them to "go for it" is also valuable. Women may feel greater pressure to perform at work in spite of family obligations. As one interviewee said:

> *They are a lot more committed because they know they have to juggle between priorities, so they will come in, get the work done as quickly as possible, and leave. Yes, they may leave a little bit earlier to pick up their kids, but they will come online whenever they can and they are dedicated to work, so I have no qualms with that.*

4. Who makes me think, "I want to be like her"?

Role models are important for women leaders because they show the possibility, the path, and hope. Many interviewees mentioned the experience of being inspired by role models in the workplace. And some of them cited family members as their role models. One woman leader said her grandmother inspired her.

"She was fierce in telling her many grandchildren that, as a woman, you have to have a job, you have to be financially independent, you have to do the best you can," this woman leader recalled. "We always remember her as being very, very strong. She was a very strong role model."

Consider who inspires you,—personally or professionally. If there are no women leaders that you look up to in your organization, are you letting that become a barrier for your own advancement?

5. Have I underestimated myself?

For aspiring women leaders, self-confidence is important. In our survey, 75% of respondents disagreed with the statement that "Women lack key skills required to be successful leaders." However, half of the respondents agreed that "Women underestimate their ability to lead."

A number of the women leaders we talked to cited the hypothetical situation of a man and a woman looking at the same job posting with 10 requirements. The man, they said, is likely to quickly look through the list and, so long as they think they can meet a couple of the requirements, go after the job. The woman, on the other hand, is likely to check every item carefully and hesitate because she does not meet two of the requirements.

Aspiring women leaders need to be aware of the strengths they bring to a position. They also must be careful to not let unconscious biases—including their own—stop them from seeking more challenging jobs.

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Leadership Lessons from Women Leaders

All of the women we interviewed were in senior positions at their organizations. Several common themes related to professional development and managing relationships emerged from those interviews. Our interviewees suggested these behaviors are keys to being successful as a woman leader.

Networking and find a sponsor

Some 26% of our survey participants agreed that a lack of strong networks hinders women's career advancement.

Women are aware of the career benefits of networking; many women have formal or informal networks inside or outside their organizations. But it takes more than just knowing people to reap the full benefits of networking; women need to be bolder to ask for help.

Women are more scared to ask from their network. So they get there and have coffee with the network, but they wouldn't say, "I really want to get into your company. Do you know if there are any opportunities? If I gave you my CV [could] you help me . . . Is there anything I can do for you?"

While mentors can provide women with advice and help them grow, women leaders also benefit from sponsors—senior leaders who advocate for junior leaders, give them challenging assignments, expose them to other executives, and advocate for their career advancement.

Having a sponsor working with you to help develop you, but also be somebody on the lookout for opportunities and being willing to say "Hey, consider <NAME> for this role, here are the reasons why."

Women should support women

Yeoja eui jeok eun yeoja
"Women are women's enemies"
—a common saying in Korea

This idea is so often used that some men say the main barrier to women becoming leaders is not their bias, but women themselves. Indeed, career obstacles sometimes come from other women.

Some female relatives may believe that women should stay home or take on major family responsibilities instead of investing in a career. Senior women may sometimes act like "queen bees" and fail to support junior-level women.[5] And female colleagues may judge or criticize other women.

One thing is that women shouldn't be their own enemy.
So try to stay together in a positive way, not stick together to exclude others.
I've heard women saying it's so hard working in [female] environments
and it's so much better working with men . . .
If you're a woman and you are saying that, it's terrible.
Women shouldn't undercut each other.

To grow the ranks of women leaders, our interviewees said, women must work together and support each other.

I think women mentoring women is powerful . . .
I always learned a lot when talking to women,
how they position themselves,
what makes them move to the next level.

More experienced women can mentor and sponsor less experienced women. Women leaders can be role models for young women. And all women can be cheerleaders for each other.

Leverage your strengths

Women are effective leaders. Just like their male counterparts, they make decisions, solve problems, and achieve goals. Women also bring their own perspectives and strengths to their leadership roles, providing the organization with additional ideas and capabilities.

Among the traits our interviewees cited, women often bring an attention to detail, creativity, and simply a different perspective.

We can have the patience, empathy . . .
and I think we have the capability to be broad in our perspectives and intuition.
That gives us an edge, and we need to make use of that
for the benefit of the organization.

Women leaders we spoke with said women tend to experience stronger emotions when a setback arises, but they are also resilient—able to bounce back, focus on what they can do to overcome the problem, and then execute.

In addition, women are willing to learn from men.

Pay attention to the differences . . .
be aware of what the men are doing differently,
why they're doing it, is there something that I can adjust
and take into account, just so we're on an even playing field.

Be courageous and "point the elbow"

Humility and modesty are often seen as positive traits, but ambitious women may benefit by not being too humble or too modest.

The successful women leaders we interviewed said women leaders should be more courageous—both in the work they take on and in ensuring they're recognized for their accomplishments.

> *Realize the best job for you is the job where you can do maybe 30% because you are going to learn, you are going to grow into it. Seriously—if you can do 90%, you should be going for next job up. I don't think as young girls we are told that enough. I don't think as young women we are told that enough. I don't think we are encouraged to take leadership positions.*

Women should take risks and challenge themselves, our interviewees said, even when they don't feel 100% ready for a new position or project.

At the same time, when women are successful, they shouldn't assume that others will notice and reward their work. Women need to make sure their abilities and achievements are recognized.

One woman leader we talked to called this the "pointing elbow" strategy.

> *I played [field] hockey. Sometimes when you were playing hockey, you had to learn how to get your elbow in to get someone away from the ball. And it was very subtle because you couldn't be seen to be aggressive, otherwise you would get a red card. But you had to protect your base or you had to get someone out of the way.*

Likewise, sometimes women must point their elbows—subtly but effectively—to ensure they're recognized. That positions them to move to the next assignment and take on more responsibility and authority.

Develop your own executive presence

Executive presence is critical for career advancement and success. It also seems to be harder for women who are sometimes told their lack of executive presence is holding back their careers.

> *I've heard that several times, and I've applied for executive director positions over the last five years. And the constant in all the feedback I've received is, "You have the technical capabilities; however, it's that executive presence." What do you mean? I've never understood what that is.*

Executive presence is a poorly defined, ambiguous concept that seems to be largely subjective, and that may make it tougher for women to demonstrate it. A lack of "executive presence" may be a biased description of a particular leadership style, a description that serves men and harms women.

"So what exactly is executive presence?" one of our interviewees asked. Executive presence is about carrying yourself, and it is about how you are perceived as a leader.

While we agree that women leaders need to develop their executive presence, we don't believe that means they need to adopt men's leadership styles. And we don't agree that women leaders should be evaluated through a biased lens.

Instead, women should find a leadership style that works best for themselves—one that can align people and inspire others to work toward a common goal.

> *Executive presence, to me, is about being able to communicate ideas clearly, being able to win people over and bring them along on the journey with you.*

How Organizations Can Support Women's Leadership

There are many things women can do individually and together to reach higher leadership levels in their careers. But organizational culture, company policies, and decisions by a company's senior leaders are also important. And those all have an impact on companies' bottom lines.

Organizations that value gender diversity financially outperform those that do not.[6] A recent study published by CCL and Watermark, Silicon Valley's leading community of senior and emerging women executives and entrepreneurs, also found that in companies with more female employees, both men and women have more job satisfaction, have more dedication to the organization, and feel their work is more meaningful. In these companies, employees also experience burnout at lower rates.[7]

So, what can organizations do to support women's leadership development?

Provide flexibility

In our survey, among all the organizational factors, flexibility was the most commonly chosen. About 27% of respondents agreed that "Organizations lack the flexibility women need."

Modern technology, which enables many managers and executives to work from anywhere they can get Internet access, makes it easier than ever for organizations of all types to adopt flexible workplace policies.

Flexible workplace policies make it easier for both women and men to balance their jobs with family responsibilities. Such policies, though, must be grounded in a rigorous performance management system and a motivating environment.

"We have a lot of KPI items; you still have to work very hard," said one woman leader who works for a company with flexible workplace policies. "And people here are all very competitive; they are self-motivated to perform."

Flexible work policies themselves also tend to increase employee loyalty to the company, reducing turnover.

To be effective, though, those policies also need to be enforced at all levels of the organization.

> *They say you can have flexible work arrangements, you can work from home, but my boss didn't allow it. So the policy is there, but whether they execute it or not is very different.*

Companies must also challenge themselves to make flexible work arrangements compatible with top-level jobs in the organization. In a survey of 1,421 global executives, more than 90% of the participants see flexible work policies as incompatible with senior leadership careers.[8]

Because flexibility is equally important for men and women, one solution is to enhance how men can benefit from the same policies. For example, paternity leave should be more normalized, with no negative impacts on career advancement, just like maternity leave. This will not only help men accept these flexibility arrangements, but also to remove the social bias that only women take time off work for their children.

Give women more challenges and opportunities

Working in this globalized era, overseas experience is critical for anyone who aspires to a top leadership position. In global organizations, there are two main types of overseas experiences: a short-term (usually a couple of months) assignment and a medium-term (usually a couple of years) assignment.

Women leaders we talked to often mentioned these international leadership experiences as significant transitions in their career. First, working and living in a foreign country brought out their potential and built up their resilience. Second, if they were sent to lead an overseas market, it helped deepen their understanding of the business. And third, if they were sent to work in headquarters, it helped broaden their perspective and gave them opportunities to build relationships with senior management.

Aspiring women leaders told us that they're willing to move or take on other challenges to grow. But, too often, organizations assume that women cannot move. Many women are not promoted to senior leadership roles because they don't get challenging assignments[9] that build their knowledge and strengthen their résumés.

I just told HR that I hope to move. I am very open about moving, which means I am open to experiencing other markets, new roles, and a bigger picture.

Organizations that are serious about developing more women leaders must provide those leaders with challenging assignments. One interviewee told us that her organization consistently sends the message that if you want to grow, you have to move. No assumption is made and equal opportunities are given to men and women. In addition, those senior women who have gone through the path and "made it" become role models, mentors and sponsors for young leaders.
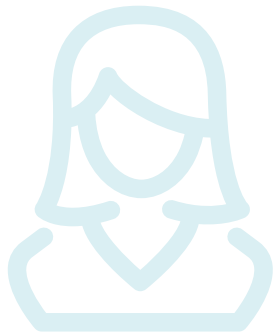
Insist senior leaders advocate for women leaders

Many organizations talk about women in leadership; many organizations have statistics about women in leadership; and many organizations also report on diversity and inclusion. These are all good signs. But diversity isn't just a number.

The most important factor in determining whether organizations develop women leaders is the senior leadership team's attitude toward gender diversity. When senior leaders believe in the value of diversity, they promote more women and are likely to set policies that help encourage women leaders throughout the organization.

It comes from the top. If your top leaders are very open to a culture of women in leadership, they will do everything to push it. It's not about HR alone; it has to be from the top.

Promoting gender diversity and leadership opportunities for women should be an ongoing effort. Companies that are the most successful in cultivating women leaders have focused on it for a longer time.[10]

Finally, having senior leader advocates who are themselves women is valuable. These leaders can share their firsthand experiences with aspiring women leaders and function as role models.

I am very inspired by the visiting senior managers. They have been here a few times over the years, and every time they are here they have a separate session for women only. And that's when you can ask the manager questions and she answers as a woman herself, as a mother. Her message has been very consistent, and I am very inspired.

Shift the culture

Most of our interviewees shared that their companies have implemented some women's leadership initiatives. However, when asked how many women leaders were at the top, interviewees said it was just a few, or even zero.

That echoes a McKinsey report that showed that, although more than half the companies surveyed had implemented several programs to increase women's leadership development, only 24% of those companies reported having more than 20% of their top management ranks filled by women.[10]

A fundamental shift in mindset and culture is the key. A supportive corporate culture, or lack thereof, plays a significant role determining gender diversity among top leaders.

Unconscious bias affects how organizations define, select, promote, and evaluate leaders. Some 22% of our survey participants agreed that "Recruiting managers hold unconscious bias against hiring/promoting women leaders."

> *Recruiting managers tend to assume that women leaders would always have family-related constraints and concerns . . .*
> *[They] may say, "Most probably she would reject [the opportunity] because of her family. So let's not make an offer, so we're not putting her in that awkward position."*
> *When we hire, there are still people who try to make some assumptions—even though it is not consciously done— like saying, "This person will get married in two years' time," and so actually influence the decision making.*

To make this fundamental shift in culture and mindset, men must join the conversation. While women are fighting for advancement, men may be unaware of women's ambition and may not understand the barriers women face.

Organizations should spread the idea that what is good for women will be good for men, because men also benefit from more diverse and effective teams, as well as from the higher company returns those teams can generate.

As one interviewee told us, "We need to have men along on the journey with us."

BARRIERS TO THE CORNER OFFICE FOR WOMEN

5 QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1 Am I a lesser among equals?

2 Do I have the "hunger"?

3 Am I a victim of the lack of choice?

4 Who makes me think, *"I want to be like her"*?

5 Have I underestimated myself?

Conclusion

The issue of women's leadership is a complicated one. Individuals, organizations, and societies all play a role. We hope this article can trigger reflection, conversation, and possibly more solutions. We would like to see diversity being truly valued, not just a dashboard report. We encourage individuals to choose paths that align with their values. We also want to raise awareness of gender biases, even the unintentional ones. Lastly, we hope to see more organizations initiating a culture shift that embraces diversity.

" . . . don't make every issue about being a woman, don't turn every issue into a gender issue. . . But if you pretend there is no gender issue no gender discrimination in an organization that's naïve, because there is, we just have to do whatever we can, particularly sitting in the HR space, to try and overcome those viruses to try and make it as easy as possible for women to be successful in the workplace."

Endnotes

[1] International Labour Office, 2016

[2] Catalyst, *Women CEOS of the S&P 500,* (2017).

[3] Deloitte and Alliance for Board Diversity, (2017).

[4] Centre for Governance, Institutions & Organisations (CGIO) https://bschool.nus.edu.sg/cgio

[5] Recent CCL research found that the "queen bee syndrome" is related to hazardous working environments against women. Zhao, S. & Foo, M-D. (2016) Queen Bee syndrome: The real reason women do not promote women. A Center for Creative Leadership white paper.

[6] http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters http://www.catalyst.org/media/companies-more-women-board-directors-experience-higher-financialperformance-according-latest

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About the Authors

Sophia Zhao, PhD, is a senior research faculty at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®), based at CCL's Asia-Pacific campus in Singapore. Her focus is on conducting research about leadership and leadership development in specific sectors, regions, and populations in order to make significant contributions to the understanding of leadership and leadership development. She has published more than 20 academic journal papers, research reports, white papers, and media articles. Her current research interest focuses on global leadership and women's leadership. Sophia holds a PhD degree from National University of Singapore and a BA degree from Fudan University.

Sunil Puri is the Asia Pacific director of research, innovation, and product development at CCL. Sunil is a seasoned leadership and human capital researcher and thought leader with 20 years of experience across large global organizations. In his current role at CCL, he is responsible for leading research/product design around leadership development in the region. His research interests include Asian leadership, global leadership development, HR transformation, and cross-cultural influences. Sunil has authored/coauthored several CCL research studies including *CHRO 3.0: Preparing to Lead the Future HR Function in Asia*, *Developing Next Generation Indian Business Leaders*. Sunil holds a post graduate degree in technology from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi, India (where he was a gold medallist), and post graduate diploma in management from Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad, India.

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CCL - Americas

www.ccl.org
+1 800 780 1031 (US or Canada)
+1 336 545 2810 (Worldwide)
info@ccl.org

Greensboro, North Carolina
+1 336 545 2810

Colorado Springs, Colorado
+1 719 633 3891

San Diego, California
+1 858 638 8000

CCL - Europe, Middle East, Africa

www.ccl.org/emea

Brussels, Belgium
+32 (0) 2 679 09 10
ccl.emea@ccl.org

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
+251 118 957086
LBB.Africa@ccl.org

Johannesburg, South Africa
+27 (11) 783 4963
southafrica.office@ccl.org

Moscow, Russia
+7 495 662 31 39
ccl.cis@ccl.org

CCL - Asia Pacific

www.ccl.org/apac

Singapore
+65 6854 6000
ccl.apac@ccl.org

Gurgaon, India
+91 124 676 9200
cclindia@ccl.org

Shanghai, China
+86 21 6881 6683
ccl.china@ccl.org

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