



Challenges Faced by Women in Senior Positions—Quick Tips

These tips are intended for anyone in a professional position who would like to understand and improve aspects of professional life that can be particular to the experience of women. Like all the Leadership Collection's Quick Tips, they address a topic that has a large and detailed literature devoted to it; the tips are intended to give readers new to the subject an overview and to remind more experienced readers of key points.

The Differences are Real

Men dominate leadership at senior and executive levels in many professional contexts. Even though that trend has been shifting, disparities remain between the number of men and women who have worked their way into senior leadership roles. Globally, women hold approximately a quarter of senior leadership positions. Women hold one third of university president positions. However, women tend to hold fewer board seats and fewer executive roles and are not among the top earners, despite the fact that they make up nearly half of all professional employees.¹

The difference in outcomes is due, in part, to the challenges unique to women in the workplace. This Quick Tips describes underlying reasons why women face gender-specific challenges and approaches for overcoming them.

Challenges for Women in Senior Leadership Roles

Listed here are especially common challenges that affect women's experiences of achieving senior level leadership. This list is not exhaustive; it highlights issues that can be particularly difficult for women navigating the path to senior leadership positions.

Challenges to normative expectations

Norms are informal beliefs that guide expectations and behavior. There are leadership norms that come from popularly accepted models and examples. Leaders are typically perceived of as assertive, strong, powerful, and authoritative. There are also gender norms concerning the difference for expectations of behavior by men and women. Women are widely, across cultures, expected to be caring, communal, thoughtful, and passive compared to men, who are normally expected to be more assertive and dominant. When they act in ways that are assertive, strong, powerful, and authoritative, this is often perceived and valued differently - even negatively. Thus the stereotypical norms for men and leaders align, and the norms for women and leaders can be at odds. When men are in leadership positions, expectations for assertive and strong behavior align. Women can face a challenge; if they are caring and thoughtful, they fit the female gender norm, but challenge the leader norm. If women are assertive and strong, they fit the leader norm, but can challenge the gender expectation. This dissonance is at the heart of the glass ceiling effect,^{2,3} which is the persistent difference in the rates at which women and members of underrepresented groups reach senior levels of leadership.

¹ Catalyst: Women in Management Quick Take (2018, July 30). Retrieved from <https://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-management>

² Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological review*, 109(3), 573.

³ Glass, C., & Cook, A. (2016). Leading at the top: Understanding women's challenges above the glass ceiling. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(1), 51-63.





Challenges of work-life balance

Another challenge women face comes from the shifting nature of life in the home. Becoming a senior leader in an organization requires investment of time and dedication. Over the course of the past 40 years in the United States, there has been a significant increase in dual income households,⁴ in which both adults work primarily outside of the home. Research shows that where both adults work full time, women still do or manage the majority of the household chores.⁵ Further, women's careers are often penalized if they step outside of work to have and/or raise children, meaning that they can be less likely than men to rise to senior level positions. For women to navigate the path to senior leadership, they face the need to overcome hurdles that remain, despite advances in gender dynamics in organizations.

Challenges of tokenism and harassment

A challenge for women in senior leadership is that sometimes there is a perception that they have been selected to fill a quota. Research has demonstrated that women in senior positions can feel as though they are taking on a "token" role, and may be less likely to identify and mentor junior women up through the ranks.⁶ If women in senior positions are given to believe that they are the only woman "needed" in a group, they can form barriers between themselves and other women who may come to seem like threats to their roles. If more junior women are viewed by the senior level women as competition, this may prevent the senior women from reaching out and mentoring these women into higher positions within the company.

There are data showing that women are all too often harassed in the workplace⁷, which can also prevent them from rising through the ranks. Often perceived as an expression of sexuality or sexual interest, it is now widely accepted that harassment is an expression of a power differential, and tends to be focused on belittling women and those of lower power. Harassment has this in common with other disruptive behaviors like bullying, or isolating people for negative attention based on their cultural background, sexual preference, religion, or other characteristics and choices.

Roughly 4 in 10 working women say that they have experienced gender discrimination at work, including earning less than men, being treated as if they are not competent, feeling isolated in the workplace, or being victims of harassment.⁷

⁴ The rise in dual income households (2015, June 18). Retrieved from http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_dual-income-households-1960-2012-2/

⁵Lyonette, C., & Crompton, R. (2015). Sharing the load? Partners' relative earnings and the division of domestic labour. *Work, employment and society*, 29(1), 23-40.

⁶ Duguid, M. (2011). Female tokens in high-prestige work groups: Catalysts or inhibitors of group diversification?. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 116(1), 104-115.

⁷ Gender discrimination comes in many forms for today's working women (2017, December 14). Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/14/gender-discrimination-comes-in-many-forms-for-todays-working-women/>





Navigating these Challenges

Understanding these challenges is the first step to facing them. Here we identify three initial practices that can be used to overcome these barriers.

Acknowledge your position, strength, character, and role—“own it”

Sometimes people will make an assumption about you that is not true. Typically, the best thing you can do is identify the elephant in the room. For example, accept and own that you violate a particular gender norm. Do not be defensive, and do acknowledge it. Women may find that they are well served by being as comfortable as possible in their own skin, and developing that skin to be as thick as possible. If you can ignore inappropriate behavior (for example, being spoken over in a meeting), do.

Develop personal scripts (see Leadership Collection Quick Tips on Personal Scripts) for when you cannot ignore the issue. Developing effective personal scripts may vary by place and time—scripts that would work well in a departmental meeting with colleagues might not be as effective in a senior cabinet meeting. Keep your eyes open for examples that are helpful and that fit your persona and comfort level. Be persistent, pleasant, clear, and firm—even when you are calling someone out for an inappropriate remark. Assume the best intent and do not look for problems; you and the people around you are better served if you continue with professional courtesy and a focus on the objective.

Personal script examples:

Personal scripts should be factual, use “I” instead of “you”, and consist of low-key language. Here are some examples.

<p>Someone repeats what you just said in a meeting:</p>	<p>Thank you for reiterating my point.</p> <p>I'm encouraged that you agree with my point, [name].</p> <p>Thanks, [name], you put that more clearly than I did.</p> <p>I believe that's what I just said, so we're on the same page.</p>
<p>When someone enters your personal space or touches you:</p>	<p>I'm more comfortable keeping more space between people in a professional environment.</p> <p>Please don't put your hand on my shoulder.</p> <p>I don't want to offend you, and my expectations in a workplace are that people don't have that kind of physical contact.</p>
<p>When someone makes an inappropriate comment:</p>	<p>I'm uncomfortable singling out people that way.</p> <p>I don't think we know why [name of comment focus] does that. People are individuals and deserve to be judged by their actions.</p> <p>Let's take a professional approach here.</p>

Cultivate trusting relationships and build alliances

If someone does not know you, they will make assumptions about you based on characteristics that are easily seen and stereotyped. Gender, ethnicity, height, or even non-verbal behaviors like facial expressions can be the first cues that another individual uses to make assumptions about you. Building meaningful relationships with others includes listening to them, getting to know more about them, and letting them know more about you (see Leadership Collection Quick Tips on Listening and Asking Questions). These relationships will help you to overcome being stereotyped by your visible





characteristics. Cultivating trusting relationships begins with being curious and honest about others. Demonstrating genuine interest in others will often result in a reciprocal interest. Finding common ground by asking each other questions is a great place to start. Being transparent about your goals and motivations at work is also helpful. Trusting relationships are developed through listening and asking questions as well as knowing how to navigate difficult conversations.

Mentor other women

Mentorship is one of the most powerful tools that we have at our disposal. People learn best on the job with guidance from those who have navigated the waters before them. If you are a woman, accept that other women are not your competition or your enemy; by mentoring them you are contributing to your own success and the success of the organization. Actively seeking out junior level women and acting as a role model and a champion for their careers will not only help to bring other women up through the ranks, it will show that you are confident and capable of mentoring others.

Call out bad behavior

Sometimes you observe someone being treated unjustly or you may hear about it from others. Often, the easiest thing to do is to ignore that information, which allows the bad behavior to grow. On the other hand, you can be an active bystander by thoughtfully bringing the incident to the attention of the appropriate individual. Find out if your work environment has an ombudsperson or a hotline where concerned individuals can anonymously report discrimination in the workplace. Even if it is not happening directly to you, by being an active bystander you can help to thwart the cultivation of discriminatory behaviors.

Active bystanders follow the five D's⁸:

Direct - say or do something

Distract - move away from the situation

Delegate - get help from others

Delay - stay and offer support

Document - record events

⁸ NSF ADVANCEGeo Project Team. Intervention Strategies. Slide deck provided to NCPRE by the American Geophysical Union, 9/23/2018.





Overview of the challenges and opportunities for women in leadership roles

Challenges	Opportunities
<i>Conflict between gender and leader norms for women</i>	<i>Cultivate relationships and get to know your co-workers</i>
<i>Work-life balance</i>	<i>Be cognizant of labor division at home and work; ask for help when opportunity is there</i>
<i>Tokenism</i>	<i>Seek out and mentor young women, help them network and introduce them to senior members of the team in order to build their reputations</i>
<i>Harassment</i>	<i>Pay attention to power dynamics; develop a protocol for dealing with harassment at work</i>
<i>Stereotypes and biases</i>	<i>Acknowledge stereotypes and encourage open conversations about them when necessary</i>

To Close

A few key points to remember:

- Acknowledge that women face different challenges than men for achieving and sustaining senior leadership roles
- Build meaningful relationships with those around you at work in order to encourage people think beyond stereotypes and gender and power
- When you are a man or a woman, seek out junior women who could benefit from a mentor
- Focus on building a culture and a work environment that are inclusive of female needs, so that evaluation is on merit and not gender identity

