

TIME FOR A NEW GENDER-EQUALITY PLAYBOOK

The old one isn't working. We need bolder leadership and more exacting execution.



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More than 75 percent of CEOs include gender equality in their top ten business priorities, but gender outcomes across the largest companies are not changing. Our research indicates, for example, that corporate America promotes men at 30 percent higher rates than women during their early career stages and that entry-level women are significantly more likely than men to have spent five or more years in the same role.



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Why is gender inequality in the workplace so persistent despite growing attention from business leaders and the media—and what should we all do differently? Our research suggests we fall short in translating top-level commitment into a truly inclusive work environment. We see strong evidence that even when top executives say the right things, employees don't think they have a plan for making progress toward gender equality, don't see those words backed up with action, don't feel confident calling out gender bias when they see it, and don't think frontline managers have gotten the message. Consider these findings from our survey conducted with LeanIn.Org, which included more than 130 companies and over 34,000 men and women:

- **Employees question the plan of attack.** Companies have been trying to apply the same playbook of programs and policies for more than a decade. The vast majority of companies have flexibility, mentorship, and parental-leave programs. Despite these efforts, only 45 percent of employees think their companies are doing what it takes to improve diversity outcomes. The younger generation is even less confident—with only 38 percent of entry-level women thinking their company has a good handle on gender diversity.
- **Commitment isn't evident in everyday actions.** There's also a yawning gap between what companies think they do and what people experience day to day. For example, more than 70 percent

of companies say they are committed to diversity, but less than a third of their workers see senior leaders held accountable for improving gender outcomes. Over 90 percent of companies report using clear, objective criteria for hiring and promotions, yet only about half of women believe they have equal opportunities for growth at their companies. Without bridging the gap between corporate intent and individual experience, companies won't break the stall.


- **People and organizations are afraid to address bias head on.** Men and women, in all roles, shy away from calling out gender bias when it occurs. Less than a quarter of employees see their managers regularly challenge gender-biased language or behavior. Less than half of all employees see day-to-day evidence that their company is worried about creating a culture that embraces diverse leadership styles. Though there has been a surge of corporate programs focused on unconscious bias, people aren't having the courageous conversations.
- **Frontline managers need help.** Change does not happen without the full engagement of frontline leaders. These are the plant managers, regional sales leaders, store managers, team coaches, and general managers who make companies tick. Today, only 9 percent of employees see managers recognized for making progress on gender-diversity goals. Less than half of all workers see managers taking advantage of the diverse strengths of their teams or considering a diverse lineup of candidates for open positions. What this tells us is that managers are either not getting the message or don't know how to manage differently.

Faced with these challenges, it's time to rewrite our gender playbooks so that they do more to change the fabric of everyday work life by encouraging relentless execution, fresh ideas, and courageous personal actions.

- **Uncompromising execution.** Changing outcomes on a scale that will move the needle requires relentless—even radical—execution that builds on the hits and misses of the past decade. Areas to focus on include creating fair, “first promotion” experiences and developing more holistic family-leave programs that incorporate longer leave options, systematic onboarding back into roles, and tracking of promotion and attrition one to three years postleave. Sponsorship needs a shot in the arm, too. Instead of designing rifle-shot sponsorship initiatives, as is too often the case, we need to do more to embed sponsorship, over the long haul, in the career development of men and women.

- **Fresh, bold thinking.** It's sorely needed—and there are some promising signs. For instance, one industrial company is implementing a new program called All Roles Flex, which incorporates flexibility into every role from the factory floor to the corporate center. Other companies are openly and transparently addressing pay equity. Still others are experimenting with new analytic tools to reduce bias in résumé screening and improve local talent sourcing.
- **Courageous leadership.** A few months ago, one of our partners at McKinsey made waves by posting on our intranet an anecdote about showing up at a meeting with an all-male team of experts. His client asked whether this team was sufficiently diverse to see all sides of the client's problem. Our partner said this was a defining moment for him in confronting his blind spots with respect to gender and described how he was acting differently as a result—starting with engaging women at the firm whose expertise advanced his thinking about the client's situation. When leaders communicate openly about experiences like this, they help shift the dialogue, influence everyday decisions up and down the line, and change the corporate culture.

Improving gender outcomes is extremely hard, as we well know from the obstacles our own organizations continue to encounter in making deep and lasting progress on this front. We offer these ideas not to discourage leaders about the magnitude of the challenge but to embolden us all to be persistent and creative.

As our research underscores, we need to look more carefully at the day-to-day experiences, for better or worse, of the people in our organizations. Such a look, even if sobering, will be an invaluable step toward breaking gender gridlock. 

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