

HOW COMPANIES CAN GUARD AGAINST GENDER FATIGUE

Show you are serious about basics such as mentoring and work-life flexibility—then hold yourself accountable.



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Most of the corporate world has set a bold aspiration to achieve equality for women in the workplace. Ninety percent of US companies in our latest research, for example, say they are “very committed” to this goal, and just about all of them are taking action.

It’s also obvious that we’re still in the early stages of the journey: Currently, just 20 percent of C-suite executives in the United States are female. Although that figure is inching up—from 19 percent a year ago—more than one CEO has confided to us, “We’re implementing all the best practices, but the numbers aren’t moving fast enough, and I’m worried about maintaining the energy we need to keep going.”



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The good news is there are ways to counter change fatigue. Our third annual *Women in the Workplace* report, developed in collaboration with LeanIn.Org, shows the importance of executing the basics with conviction. The experience of 70,000 surveyed employees, coupled with performance benchmarking of the 222 participating companies, shines a light on bolder actions we see from companies that are top performers in employing and promoting women.

Break through on the basics

Many companies have put in place the right building blocks: They’re developing a business case, tracking gender representation across the workforce, and developing training, flexibility, and networking programs. Breaking through on the basics isn’t easy, though.

Consider the metrics: Some 85 percent of companies surveyed track gender representation. Yet less than a third set targets, and transparency is rarer still. Most companies say they share a majority of diversity metrics with senior leaders, but just 23 percent do so with managers, and a mere 8 percent with all employees. It’s the same with the business case: 78 percent of companies say they articulate one, but only 16 percent back up the case with data.

Top-performing companies are executing with greater intensity and have the results to show for it. For example, while many managers work with their teams to identify development opportunities, top companies also have programs aimed specifically at boosting the mentorship of women and their promotion rates.


Or consider flexibility: The top-performing companies in our research are more than twice as likely as those at the bottom to offer emergency backup childcare services; three times as likely to offer on-site childcare; and more likely to offer extended maternity and paternity leave, as well as programs to smooth the transition to and from extended leave. Moves such as these build broad-based enthusiasm because they help men and women alike.

Maintaining momentum

Despite these encouraging signs, the overall picture is one of uneven results, which sometimes breeds skepticism. Barely half of the men and women in our survey expressed confidence that their company is doing what it takes to advance women. To keep organizational uncertainty from slowing progress, leaders should take additional steps like these:

- ***Hold yourself accountable.*** A majority of companies say they don't hold their senior leaders accountable for performance against gender-diversity metrics, or use financial incentives to encourage action. Employees notice: less than 20 percent in the survey said they saw leaders regularly being held accountable for performance on gender diversity. If you want to help keep your organization on track, show your people that senior leaders are taking responsibility for the outcomes of the initiatives they are driving. Forty percent of the companies in our survey do emphasize top-management accountability, and many of them are seeing much better results.
- ***Make men part of the solution.*** Less than half of men report that advancing women is an important priority for them. Leaders hoping to bring them on board need to show, through actions, not just words, how things can be different: the data show that when men think their company or direct manager is highly committed, or get explicit guidance from a senior leader on how to improve, they are more likely to embrace the cause.
- ***Emphasize race and gender.*** Sometimes change efforts benefit from widening the lens, such as addressing the reality that there is still a disquieting racial component to gender bias. Just 3 percent of C-suite

roles are held by Asian, black, Latina, or other women of color. Black women face the longest odds. Promotion rates for them are 50 percent below those of white women, and only 23 percent of black women say managers help them navigate organizational politics, compared with 36 percent for white women. These challenges are a critical, too-often overlooked piece of the gender puzzle that demand their own attention, commitment, and solutions.

In the first year of our research, we shared data suggesting that American corporations were 100 years from parity at the top. Two years later, even if the top-performing companies are still early in the journey, they're providing the clues on how to break through. That's encouraging: The data is getting clearer, and the answers are in front of us. If we stay committed, lead boldly, and execute relentlessly, we can build momentum and accelerate change. 

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Read the full report, *Women in the Workplace 2017*, conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, on womenintheworkplace.com.