



**By Women, For Women:**  
A Transformational Approach  
to Leadership Development

By Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D.

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## By Women, For Women: A Transformational Approach to Leadership Development

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In organizations all across the country, a new class of leaders is getting attention: talented women. Research shows that companies with higher percentages of women in senior leadership positions achieve 46% higher revenue<sup>1</sup>, which alone would be reason to emphasize their development. In addition, many companies understand the economic and social benefits that come from a diverse workforce that reflects their customer base. For many companies, advancing women into positions of leadership simply makes good sense.

What doesn't make sense is why it isn't working.

An unimpressive 3% of CEO positions are held by women, and fewer than 20% of the women in successful large corporations reach the executive ranks<sup>2</sup>.

What can organizations do to advance talented women into leadership positions? How can they support and develop the women in their current roles to become role models in the organization, and is there a way to use their successes to attract even more women to create a more balanced and diverse cadre of leaders?

Leadership development specialists from big companies on Wall Street to the small startups of Silicon Valley are diligently trying to find out. In this article, we study the challenges of women in corporate settings and describe leadership development principles devoted to their success.

### Leadership Development for Women in Business

Many organizations have a persistent imbalance in their workforce. Every year, the Fortune 500 spends at least \$8 billion to promote workplace diversity, much of it aimed at advancing women, but with such little change in the makeup of corporate leaders, it clearly isn't working.

The goals for these efforts don't seem to be the problem. Most companies focusing on the advancement of women set three main goals:

- Attract, develop, and retain a pipeline of female leaders at all levels
- Increase the representation of women in leadership and management roles
- Create networking and mentoring opportunities that build a sense of community while enabling growth and development.

The strategies for leadership development are likewise sufficient. Employee networking groups, mentoring and sponsorship programs, online forums, speakers' series and workshops abound in many organizations.

The hope is that these initiatives will engage women in new ways and inspire them to step forward to claim a leadership role. But when the data is in, few of them actually move the needle on the numbers of women leading in their companies.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Adler. "Women in the Executive Suite Correlate to High Profits." Cited in Shipman, C. and K. Kay (2009). Womonomics. New York, Harper Business.

<sup>2</sup> New Voice Strategies. "Work of Our Own: An Action Plan to Solve, Resolve and Ultimately Advance Women in Business." Bentley University Center for Women and Business.

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Why don't programs for women succeed in getting results? Or to put a positive spin on it, how could such programs be modified to align better to the needs of the women who participate and deliver real results for the company?

The answers rest with the women themselves.

### *Leadership Development By Women, For Women*

One solution that is emerging as a promising way to bring women into *leadership* is to bring women into the planning of *leadership development*. When women are engaged early in the process of designing leadership development programs intended to help them excel, the programs take on new relevance. The strongest programs contain many of the elements known to support women in their growth and learning while advancing business goals like profitability, productivity, and performance.

This can be achieved by opening a dialogue about what it's like to be a woman in an organization and then using the responses to shape leadership development that addresses their needs.

#### *"What's it like to be a woman in business?"*

Involving women in the design of their development is especially important for corporate sponsors – often CEOs and executives who are men. It turns out that asking women what it's like to be a woman in their organization not only helps provide clarity that can shape a program, it also opens up communication channels that help *men* support *women* by helping men better understand the dilemmas women commonly face.

One executive vice president wanted to increase the number of women leading in his global sales organization. He worked with his HR business partners to adopt a year-long leadership development program. Instead of kicking off the program with a few inspirational words – or simply letting the women from HR who were running the program do it for him – he posed questions to this audience of women, essentially asking, "What's it like to be a woman in this organization?"

The women had answers. In that conference room and throughout the program, the women described a number of challenges shared by women in corporate America.

- **Few women role models hold leadership positions.** Women often find themselves at a loss for other women to look up to, for direction or advice or even career paths. Even when they do find potential mentors, these women are swamped already with mentoring requests. Their male role models can provide business advice, but it's hard to get good ideas about how to manage the child care challenges, for instance, from a man with a stay-at-home wife.
- **Women feel isolated in a male-dominated environment.** Women often complain of feeling shut out of the "old-boys' networks." They fear they are being frowned upon for leaving work to attend to family needs, and they worry they are lacking exposure to the right people to learn about career opportunities. For various reasons, networking as men do is often problematic for women, who report feeling unwelcome or uncomfortable in the kinds of settings and styles of men.
- **A male-dominated culture works against women's ways of working.** Women tend to be collaborators, networkers, relationship-builders and communicators – all positive traits that can be valuable in business, but traits they express differently than men. When women are surrounded by men, they find themselves limited in their ability to do their work, their way.

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They end up conforming to a culture, for better or for worse, simply because it's the way the majority of people (men) around them prefer to work. To give one example, many women are hesitant to ask directly for raises, promotions and opportunities, preferring instead to let their results speak for themselves with an expectation that good work will pay off. Men, by contrast, tend to claim what they want in a style that can overshadow women's subtler efforts at recognition.

- **Overwhelm, overwork and continuous change hamper success.** Most corporations are experiencing a time of change, especially in a rapidly-transforming, global, high-tech culture. As one woman said, "Demands are ever-increasing. Demands are ever-changing." Even when such change leads to long term business growth, in the short term people are distracted by it. They find it difficult to rise above the day-to-day challenges to find a more strategic way of transforming business to meet the new needs.
- **Work/life balance suffers.** Women feel a lot is expected of them at work and at home, and the competing demands of work and life are ever-present. Setting boundaries can be difficult when there's so much to do to succeed as a leader, and yet that very success can feel like a sacrifice when it takes away from a healthy sense of well-being and balance in life.

When corporate leaders listen to the women in the company talk about their challenges and commit to addressing those challenges through leadership development, they can then design programs that will really make a difference.

### *Principles for High-Impact Leadership Development*

One model of leadership development that has proven especially effective for women is that of the long-term, comprehensive program. In this kind of opportunity, members work in large group, small group and individualized settings with a team of facilitators to define a vision for their own success and achievement, clarify their goals, and create a personalized development plan to help them improve their effectiveness and advance as leaders in the organization.

By taking a multi-faceted approach, leadership development programs can adopt principles that lead to high impact – principles not always possible to attain in shorter or one-shot workshops. Below are some of the tenets program designers can follow that directly address the common concerns expressed by women in business.

#### **1. Help leaders move from overwork and execution to a strategic leadership mindset.**

Women are often stopped in their career tracks by neglecting to make the shift from overworking "doers" to strategic-minded "leaders." A focus on personal leadership – the ability for each of us to lead ourselves - along with the core strategies of leadership capacity often taught in programs - ensures the growth and development of program members in keeping with the executive sponsors' goals to grow women into leadership positions.

#### **2. Create a fast track for high-potential, high-performing women.**

Any company hoping to build strong leaders is well-advised to grow the talent they already have. Effective programs start with a process of identifying highly-talented, high-potential leaders – women, in this case - so that the most promotable leaders are being prepared. By bringing together select groups of leaders for development, programs can increase opportunities for growing talent while also offering a valuable experience that will positively affect the retention of the women in a company that cares about their success. Over time, the success of such programs can also be used as a recruiting tool, improving attraction of talented women, as well.

#### **3. Build leadership skill and confidence to develop future leaders.**

No leadership development program on its own can increase the representation in management roles; only hiring and promoting practices among managers can do that. However, what leadership development programs can do is consciously build the skills that will help women to be successful in advanced roles. Women who learn to take ownership and responsibility for their successes; see themselves as leaders who have something valuable to contribute; align their personal goals with their professional goals and their impact on business results; and gain confidence to step up into more senior roles.

#### **4. Provide opportunities for networking and collaboration.**

Beyond whatever new skills or concepts women learn in programs dedicated to their success, one of the most cherished elements of such programs is the ability to connect with other women. Even in international companies where team members span the globe, from San Jose to Singapore and many nations in between, program participants can meet regularly in the same room or on the same webinar, conference call or coaching session, sharing success stories and learning more about how they can support each other on their way.

#### **5. Leverage women's ways of leading and succeeding.**

Programs are particularly effective when they leverage learning styles and leading styles for women. Research by McKinsey shows that what makes women successful – such as finding meaning in one's work, managing one's energy, and finding one's voice<sup>3</sup> – are themes found in the practices of personal leadership. Effective programs help women define their strengths, become aware of their values, and understand how they link to the organizational values, creating a greater sense of meaning, and even loyalty.

#### **6. Focus on the culture, themes and opportunities at the organization.**

Unfortunately, despite an intention of company leaders to bring a positive experience to their talented women, such programs are commonly stigmatized. Program designers can overcome this bias in part by ensuring a singular focus on the particular needs and goals of the company. For example, program facilitators can make it a priority to address current business challenges such as a changing business model, or fast-paced and complex structure– and adjust program elements to ensure the success of its members in this environment and take advantage of the unique possibilities in the company for women to succeed.

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<sup>3</sup> Craske, J. B. S. C. R. A. (2008). "Centered leadership: How talented women thrive." *The McKinsey Quarterly*(4).

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With these themes driving their progress, designers of leadership development programs can create the learning experiences their talented women want and need.

#### ***Research and Results***

Women who participate in leadership development programs designed around their specific challenges and priorities are exciting program leaders and sponsors alike. At the Leadership Research Institute, where we have tracked programs that follow this model, we have witnessed some impressive results.

- At the beginning of one program, 72% of the program members self-identified as wanting to hold a senior management position but only 44% saw an opportunity to advance. By the end of the program, 90% of the members finishing the program reported aspiring to a senior management position, and up to six members had already been promoted.
- At the beginning of another such program, 37% of program members had a development plan for themselves. By the end of the program, that number had risen to 89%.
- Whereas only 38% of members in a program once saw themselves as consistently maintaining peak performance and balancing a healthy quality of life both on and off the job – an important metric related to retention - by the end of the program that number had almost doubled to 74%.

Perhaps even more telling than the numbers are the stories the women tell about such programs and what they have accomplished in their lives.

In their own words, the women say the program “supports them” and makes them feel “connected.” As one member said, “I know I’m not alone.”

“This program has helped me be more conscious about the things I don’t usually have time to think about,” said another. “The conscious act of talking about your [leadership] positions it in your mind to be more strategic.”

Executive sponsors of the program agree. After one recent event, they too were enthusiastic about the “buzz” and the “energy” of having so many talented women working together at once. “It’s changing the impact they have on their jobs,” reported one of the corporate sponsors of a leadership development program for women. “It is very encouraging!”

#### ***Conclusion***

One idea for improving leadership development program does not a revolution make, and success for women in leadership will come from a variety of efforts to advance them. Still, one theory of change suggests that finding “bright spots” like these can be one way to create transformative change, even in complex, multi-faceted challenges. Advancing women into senior leadership roles in corporate America has proven itself to be just such a challenge, but the women in leadership development programs designed specifically for them are also proof it can be done.

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### *About the Author*

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Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D., is a principal at the global leadership development firm, Leadership Research Institute. As an executive coach, author and speaker, Joelle helps leaders achieve top performance and business results. Her clients include presidents, vice presidents, and C-level executives in Fortune 500 companies. Joelle is the author of *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership* and co-author of *The New Advantage: How Women in Leadership Can Create Win-Wins for Their Companies and Themselves*.

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