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Create lasting leadership impact



ADVANCING Women Leaders:

CHANGING THE GAME FOR WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

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Introduction

Many large organizations have goals in place to increase the percentage of women in leadership positions by 2020 or 2025.

There are myriad reasons for setting these goals, including generating new ideas and perspectives, increasing innovation, better reflecting customer demographics, strengthening the leadership bench, improving team performance, or simply fulfilling a moral obligation or an organizational commitment to diversity.

Do you know how to increase the number of women leaders at your organization?

Our research shows that women leaders perform better, stay at their companies longer, and advance in their careers when organizations address four strategic dimensions: **Culture, Talent Systems, Focused Leadership Development and Executive Action.**

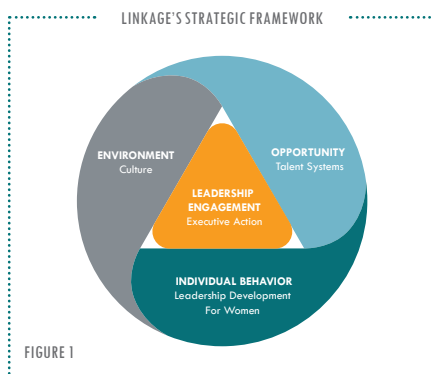
"Advancing Women Leaders: Changing the Game for Women in the Workplace" provides you with insight into the organizational and leadership shifts required to effectively advance and retain women leaders in your organization.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN LEADERS?

Women don't make it to the top levels of leadership for many reasons, ranging from division of labor and job demands to systemic bias and organizational culture—and the potentially limiting behavior of women themselves.¹

And often, the women who *do* make it to the senior leadership ranks don't last, especially when they don't feel like their values resonate, that the company isn't investing in their development, they can't see future career potential, and executives in their organization aren't involved in the advancement of women.

But there is good news—individuals and organizations committed to this work have ample opportunity to make a measurable difference in advancing women.



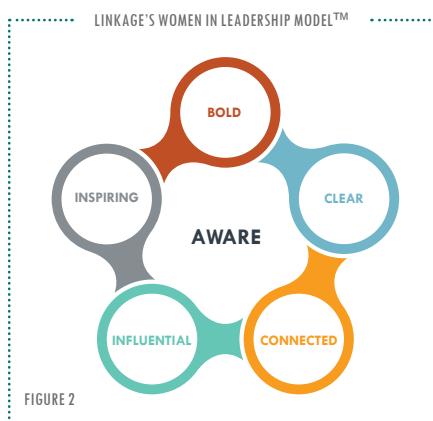
FOUR DIMENSIONS FOR ADVANCING WOMEN LEADERS

CHANGING THE GAME

In selecting a strategy for advancing women, it is important to recognize that work can be done *directly with* women leaders to provide specific opportunities, skills and tools to help overcome obstacles—but focusing on the individual is not enough. Successful organizations must take active steps to improve the working *environment* for women and members of underrepresented groups.

There are **four opportunity-rich dimensions**—**Culture, Talent Systems, Focused Leadership Development, and Executive Action** (*Figure 1: Linkage's Strategic Framework: Advancing Women Leaders*)—that any organization would be wise to consider. Success in all of these areas, or in any combination of them, can lead to powerful shifts, enabling more women leaders to leap forward and thrive.

NEW RESEARCH REVEALS IMPACTFUL INSIGHTS



SIX COMPETENCIES FOR WOMEN LEADERS

Linkage recently completed a study to assess the four dimensions, with the ultimate goal of validating their importance and identifying which is most effective in different organizational settings.

More than 1,500 global women leaders from across industries, and at multiple leadership levels, rated their organizations using Linkage's *Advancing Women Organizational Assessment™* on the indicators representing the four dimensions and other accompanying metrics. These leading indicators include organizational values fit, effectiveness, engagement, commitment, Net Promoter Score, belief in future promotion opportunities, and aspiration to lead.

Participants also assessed themselves using Linkage's *Women in Leadership Assessment™* on the behaviors associated with the six leadership competencies key to advancement (*Figure 2: Linkage's Women in Leadership Model™*). Participants provided additional demographic, descriptive and attitudinal responses. The data set also included 360° feedback from more than 7,000 managers, colleagues and direct reports of the women leaders.

The results of this multifaceted study provide important new insights.

⁴Eagly, Alice H. & Carli, Linda L. 2007. *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

DIMENSION 1: CULTURE

Do women feel valued and respected in your organization?

Culture provides an important foundation for the advancement of women. It creates an environment for success. Focusing on culture indicates that an organization is working to ensure that all women feel valued and respected.

Effective organizations recognize the tremendous opportunity in creating and sustaining a positive *environment*—one that maximizes the collective intelligence and goodwill of people. Culture can be more influential than strategy or policy—it sends and reinforces messages about what is expected of employees, valued and celebrated in the organization. Culture can attract, legitimize and advance women leaders, empowering them to make massive contributions to the business.

Culture also has the potential to demoralize and minimize women—sending high-potential talent running to the door.

In top-performing cultures, leaders are expected and developed to lead inclusively. They demonstrate, in day-to-day behaviors, the value the organization places on uniqueness, individuality and diversity of ideas. In organizations where women are already in positions of visible leadership, women leaders are more often recognized and celebrated.

FINDING | Sense of Belonging



Women's sense of belonging is 22 percent higher in cultures where they feel welcome and respected.

Culture impacts the extent to which an organization's values resonate with its women leaders, a measure we call *Organizational Values Fit*, or a sense of belonging. This sense of alignment with an organization's values is critical to the comfort and authenticity women leaders experience in organizations. The best way to impact organizational values fit is through culture. The more women feel welcome and respected in an organization, the more they feel their values fit.

FINDING | Belief in a Future with the Company



When executives demonstrate confidence in women leaders, women are more likely to believe in promotion opportunities. Women who are confident in their future with the company are 23 percent more likely to be engaged.

Culture also has a big impact on women's belief that they may be promoted. The more an organization's executives show confidence in the effectiveness of women leaders through visible actions, the more the women in the organization believe that if a position opens in the next year or two, they will be considered for it. Confidence in the likelihood of advancement, as with any type of self-efficacy, can positively impact motivation and performance—leading to higher overall levels of engagement.

DIMENSION 2: TALENT SYSTEMS

Do women in your organization have equal opportunities?

Fair and transparent talent management practices can open the floodgates for women to enter and advance in an organization.

Effective organizations understand that *opportunity*, embedded in talent systems, provides an avenue for women leaders to advance. Opportunities come in the form of benefits that encourage women to take on leadership roles, as well as human resource policies that can enable women to excel.

Opportunities are also provided to women through an organization's decision-making processes. Hiring, performance management, promotion and compensation systems can all impact the likelihood that women will advance.

In organizations with the best talent systems, benefits like child care and family medical leave, along with family-friendly human resource practices (e.g., flexible work schedules and locations), are expected, and they enable outstanding contributions. For top companies, it's not just about becoming an employer of choice—women leaders in the organization must see career progression as a real possibility.

FINDING | Effectiveness of Women Leaders



Top performing women leaders are 7 percent more likely to be found in organizations with top benefits.

Organizations with strong talent systems have more effective women leaders. In short, they attract and retain the best. In this study, effectiveness was measured by the women's overall score on Linkage's *Women in Leadership Assessment™*, a 360° evaluation on the six competencies key to advancement, as well as on a self-assessment of their current job performance. Organizations with the best benefits (e.g., child care, family medical leave, etc.) have women leaders that are more effective on both measures.

FINDING | Effectiveness of Women Leaders



Highly effective women leaders are two times more likely to be found in organizations with transparent and fair people-related decision-making processes.

The better the talent systems an organization has—ranging from decision-making processes to human resource benefits—the more effective the women leaders are. Notably, although the women are two times more effective as rated by others, they tended to be tougher on themselves.

DIMENSION 3: FOCUSED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN

Is your organization providing focused development for women?

Leadership development on key competencies can enable women leaders to overcome internal and external hurdles, maximize positive impact on the organization, and contribute to their own advancement.

In most corporate environments, the model of effective leadership, "rules of the game," and expected behavior have, for generations, been defined by men. Successful organizations realize that simply waiting for culture and systems to change is not enough. For women leaders to grow, companies must differentially invest in their leadership development, above and beyond what is typical for all leaders.

The best organizations know that development for women leaders should focus on competencies key to advancement, but also that *development* can happen in many ways, including:

- Formal programs and experiences
- High-visibility opportunities and stretch assignments within or outside of their organization
- Feedback and coaching to build self-awareness

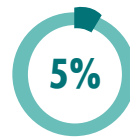
FINDING | Engagement in the Organization

7X

Women are **seven times** more likely to be highly engaged if they are encouraged to take on growth opportunities.

Focused leadership development efforts directly impact employee engagement. The more an organization supports and encourages women to take on growth opportunities, the higher levels of engagement the women report.

FINDING | Aspiration to Lead



Women have a **5 percent** higher aspiration to lead when they experience leadership programs that are tailored to the advancement of women.

When it comes to the advancement of women leaders, personal aspiration is vital. Our study found that leadership development has a direct impact on a woman's aspiration to advance.

Women leaders are more likely to aspire to greater positions of leadership when organizations provide leadership development programs that are specifically tailored to both their individual development goals and the needs of the business.

FINDING | Belief in a Future with the Company

Women leaders who experience all types of development— inclusive of internal programs, outside opportunities and consistent feedback and coaching—are much more likely to believe they will be promoted.

Women who believe in future promotion opportunities are:

16X

16 times more likely to be in a company where women receive consistent feedback and coaching

4X

Four times more likely to be in a company with internal leadership development programs for women

3X

Three times more likely to be in a company that encourages women to take advantage of outside development

DIMENSION 4: EXECUTIVE ACTION

Are your organization's executives engaged in efforts to advance women?

A focus on executive action indicates that an organization is working to engage their executives in creating solutions that lead the way.

For women leaders to fully engage and be inspired by a future vision that includes equality, they must look up and see executives in their organization taking action to advance women. Even more impressive—an organization that can demonstrate “early” success with placing high-potential women leaders into key roles.

Executive action sends a strong message that advancing women is a strategic priority. This type of initiative is often characterized by purposeful action to fill the organization's pipeline with women, engage in efforts to support, strengthen and develop women, and creatively work to retain key female talent. To jump-start the system, many executives in the best organizations lead *sponsorship* initiatives—to increase the visibility of “up-and-coming” women leaders and accelerate their advancement.

FINDING | Effectiveness of Women Leaders

7X

Highly effective women leaders are **seven times more likely to be found in organizations where executives creatively work to retain key female talent.**

The efforts of executives to get involved in the engagement, retention and advancement of women leaders has a very real impact on the effectiveness of these women leaders. Organizations with executives who creatively work to retain key female talent report higher overall levels of effectiveness when it comes to their women leaders.

FINDING | Belief in a Future with the Company

14%

Women are **14 percent more likely to believe they will be promoted when executives at their organization formally sponsor or mentor women leaders.**

Sponsorship provides a clear and deliberate framework that ultimately helps create a more capable, aligned and engaged group of women leaders throughout your organization. When executives demonstrate a commitment to advancing women through opportunities like sponsorship and mentorship, women are much more likely to demonstrate a belief that they will be promoted.

Where to Start?

THE JOURNEY TO INCLUSION AND EQUITY

When it comes to advancing women, every organization has enablers, challenges and peculiarities. These may stem from geographic, cultural, industry and size differences, or can be a function of the unique history of your company. Regardless of these differences and where you are in your journey to advance women, any organization can benefit from taking these tangible next steps.

ACTION STEP 1 | Collect Data

Data collection is essential when it comes to any advancement effort. Collecting and analyzing data allows you to identify—and target—levels of leadership where women leaders appear to be dropping off, as well as key areas of concern for women leaders.

If you can protect the anonymity of the participants, it would be helpful to collect data on additional individual characteristics like race and ethnicity. Forthcoming Linkage research (Ihsanullah & Hashmi, 2019) will demonstrate that race and ethnicity has a substantial effect on how women leaders assess themselves and how others assess them. By collecting this richer data set, you can add much-needed nuance to your recommendations for leadership development and culture-building.

ACTION STEP 2 | Select Target Population & Dimension of Focus

Once data is available on the percentages of women leaders at each level, identify a target population of women leaders that is at least one level below where the drop-off occurs. For example, if the percentage of female vice presidents is much smaller than the percentage of female directors, advancement would be most effective if focused on women at the director level and below.

After the target population is identified, select which dimensions to focus on. Work on any of the four dimensions will positively impact *all* women at your organization. However, some dimensions are more effective for certain levels of leadership, or when addressing certain areas of concern for women.

Levels of Leadership

For example: **Culture**, due to its breadth of impact, is often selected when organizations want to begin with **entry- or lower-level women leaders**, or recognize the need to shift the environment for all women in the organization. Culture efforts often extend beyond women to all leaders, and often all employees.

Addressing **Talent Systems** is most impactful when the target group of current or future women leaders is large, making fair and consistent decision-making processes especially critical. This dimension is most effective when organizations are looking to advance those at **the director level or below** as a starting point—before higher-level elements like succession planning, sponsorship initiatives and executive perks and benefits come into play.

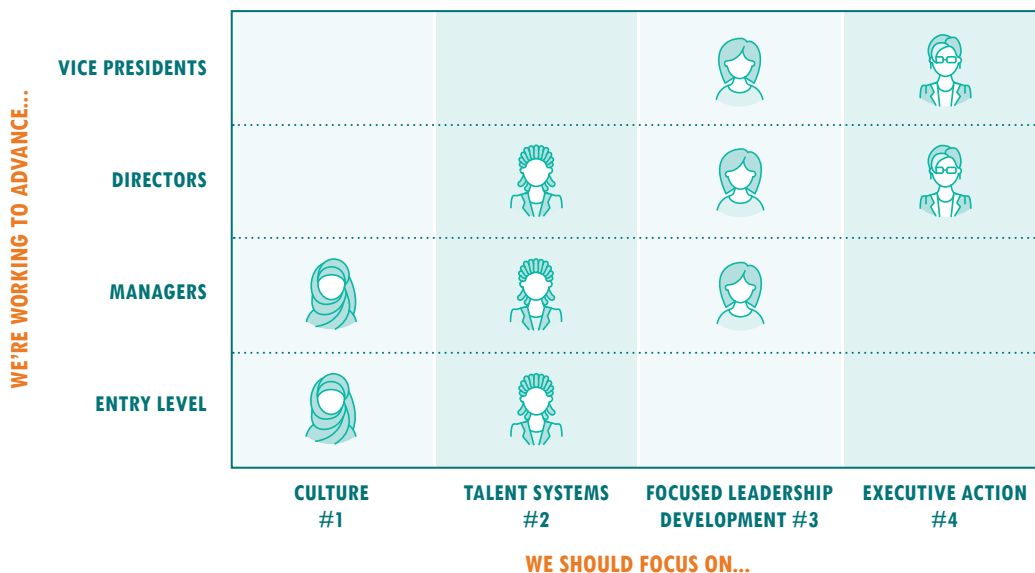
Focused Leadership Development for Women is most effectively reserved for **high-potential managers, directors and vice presidents** because it requires a differential investment in these specific groups. Interestingly, our research shows that internal programs have a significant positive impact on women's perceptions of the organization, whether they have participated in these programs or not.

Executive Action is most effective for the development of **vice presidents, directors and other senior leadership roles**. For example, executives may choose to sponsor specific women leaders who are currently one or two levels below them, but who have been identified as a candidate for advancement. Importantly, **Executive Action** has an effect that reaches far beyond the target population of senior leadership to a potentially larger population. This is evidenced by the fact that women at organizations with strong **Executive Action** report being positively impacted by it, whether or not they are personally involved.

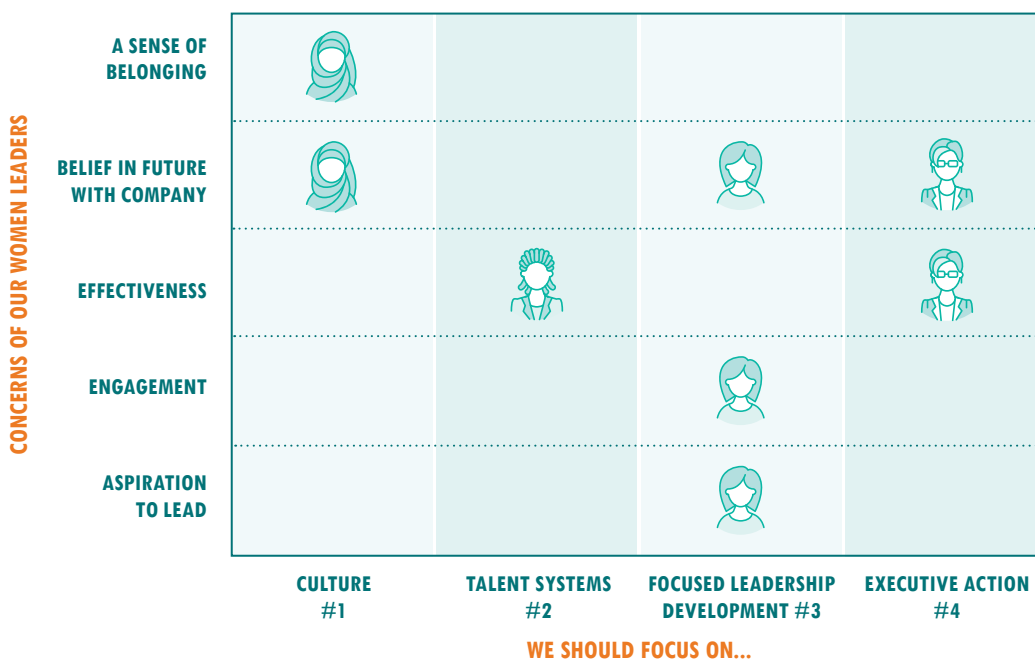
Areas of Concern for Women Leaders

The data you collect about women leaders should play a significant part in selecting a dimension. The following chart represents a summary of the findings included in this paper, offering insight into which dimension to focus on depending on the key areas of concern among women leaders at your organization.

Where to Focus: Levels of Leadership



Where to Focus: Areas of Concern for Women Leaders



ACTION STEP 3 | Launch Initiatives & Measure the Impact

Once the goals and plans for any initiative to advance women leaders are clear, the metrics must be, too. Often, organizations only look at a basic demographic split, such as percentage of female/male employees at all leadership levels, and retention rates for female/male employees in key talent positions. These measures are lagging indicators, since they reflect only whether women are choosing to work at your organization, and not at the underlying factors that contribute to their success—or lack thereof. These lagging indicators cannot provide data soon enough to empower you to change course.

Instead, we recommend establishing metrics that will help you assess the current state and measure meaningful impact in specific areas that contribute to overall levels of the advancement and retention of women leaders. These leading indicators, such as the ones used in this study—like engagement, commitment and aspiration to lead—allow you to accomplish this.

ACTION STEP 4 | Consider Your Diversity & Inclusion Strategy

When it comes to developing an overall diversity and inclusion strategy, many organizations grapple with where to begin. Is it acceptable to start with a program specifically focused on women?

Initiatives to advance women are an important cornerstone in any diversity and inclusion effort and are certainly a great place to start. But, it is important to consider intersectionality (the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender) as you take on this work. Just as in our universe, the same stars can be part of multiple named constellations, women are often underrepresented in a variety of different, complex and interrelated ways. As you work to create an advancing women leaders strategy, it is important to consider intersectionality and how that relates to the demographic makeup of current and future “stars” in your organization.

Remember, while it is true that efforts to advance women will be good for everyone in an organization, there is a range in how apparent those benefits will be, depending on the dimension you select. For example, initiatives focused on **Culture** or **Talent Systems**, while taken on to advance women leaders, will have more obvious and immediate positive benefits for all employees.

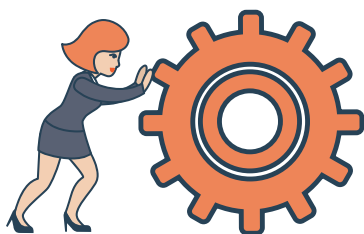
Conclusion

We know that women leaders excel and advance in organizations with **great cultures, strong talent systems** and **ample development opportunities**, and when they know **executives are invested in their growth**.

We've given you an insider's look at these four dimensions, which have the power to transform how you advance women leaders across your organization.

Our hope is that these insights and next steps will guide you as you continue your journey to achieve gender parity in your organization.

Together, we can—and will—change the game for women in the workplace.



About The Authors



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Jillian Maver Ihsanullah is Linkage's principal researcher and thought leader on gender and leadership. In addition to her academic background and publications, she brings over 25 years of experience working with organizations all over the globe to build values, people systems and leadership experiences that accelerate the development and commitment of women. She holds a BA in psychology from Connecticut College and an MS and PhD in industrial/organizational psychology from Purdue University, where her research focused on measurement, decision making and leadership styles.



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About Linkage

For over 30 years, Linkage has partnered with organizations to accelerate the readiness and effectiveness of leaders worldwide. Our evidence-based, scalable leadership solutions are focused on creating more purposeful organizations and advancing women leaders and cultures of inclusion to solve critical business challenges in a measurable way.

Linkage's approach to advancing women leaders empowers organizations to achieve gender parity by both readying women for opportunities of greater leadership and creating environments where women can thrive.





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