INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE WORKPLACE & THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN LEADERS
INTRODUCTION

Organizations that don’t actively address the role intersectionality plays in the advancement of women leaders are less successful in developing a diverse leadership bench.

For women in different racial and ethnic groups, things like cultural expectations, life experiences, and a complex combination of different forms of discrimination, including racism and sexism, overlap in ways that profoundly affect their ability to professionally advance.

Do you understand how intersectionality affects women leaders at your organization?

Linkage research finds that race and ethnicity have a substantial effect on how women leaders assess themselves—and how others assess them. For example, one behavior difference is that African American/Black women and Asian American/Asian women are less likely to volunteer to work on high-profile projects than White women. One bias we uncovered is that Latina and multi-racial women unfairly received overall assessment scores that were significantly lower than those of women in other groups.

When working toward advancing women, looking at the needs of women as one homogeneous group can create bias and further disadvantage. In order to build leadership development initiatives that effectively meet the needs of all leaders, organizations must:

• Purposefully collect data designed to identify the potential differences in advancement behaviors between women in different racial/ethnic groups
• Understand and mitigate biases at play in assessments of women leaders in different racial/ethnic groups
• Incorporate targeted leadership development opportunities for subgroups based on Linkage’s intersectionality research
• Implement focused leadership development efforts that strengthen the Inclusion competency in all leaders

“Intersectionality in the Workplace and the Advancement of Women Leaders” includes brand new research into the role intersectionality plays in the advancement of women leaders and outlines key recommendations for integrating intersectionality data into leadership development efforts.
WE’VE MADE ACHIEVING GENDER PARITY OUR MISSION.

Linkage has partnered with organizations globally for more than two decades to help create gender parity in the workforce. We are committed to solving the urgent business and leadership crisis that is the result of women and other underrepresented populations not advancing quickly enough. Our research-based solutions empower organizations to take active steps to improve the environment for women and develop and prepare women leaders for advancement.

Linkage’s Advancing Women Leaders™ Solution enables organizations to attract, retain, develop and advance women leaders at all levels, and delivers measurable results with sustainable impact.

Here’s how:

ESTABLISH benchmarks and strategies to accelerate women leaders.
- Advancing Women Leaders 360° Assessment™
- Advancing Women Leaders Organizational Analysis
- Advancing Women Leaders Organizational Assessment™

EQUIP women leaders with a variety of development opportunities purposefully designed to meet their unique needs.
- Women in Leadership Institute™
- Advancing Women Leaders Academy | Face-to-face, digital, or blended learning experience
- Advancing Women Leaders Virtual Sessions
- Advancing Women Leaders Coaching

EXPAND your impact by building a culture where women leaders can excel.
- Advancing Women Leaders 360° Assessment Certification
- The Executive Forum for Advancing Women & Inclusion at the Women in Leadership Institute™
- Leading with a Mindset of Inclusion Workshop & Virtual Sessions
- Sponsorship Advisory Services
LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The advancement of women leaders, especially those who are also members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, doesn’t happen on its own.

Successful organizations take active steps to improve the working environment for women. Linkage’s research has identified four opportunity-rich dimensions—Culture, Talent Systems, Focused Leadership Development, and Executive Action—that are most strongly associated with the effective advancement of women leaders. Linkage research also points to six Competencies key to ascending into senior leadership positions. (Figure 1: Linkage’s Strategic Framework: Advancing Women Leaders) (Figure 2: Linkage’s Women in Leadership Model™)

Using these dimensions and Competencies to strategically identify the factors most affecting women at your organization can lead to powerful shifts, enabling more women to leap forward.

But this is only one piece of the picture. We must view leadership development for women through the lens of intersectionality in order to understand and address the complexity of the factors affecting the advancement of women leaders across diverse populations.

Without considering intersectionality, we’re primarily addressing the needs of the majority group of women in the organization, while missing the unique strengths and development needs of women from diverse racial and ethnic groups. And we also do a disservice to women potentially facing complex and multifaceted forms of discrimination.
UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality, a term coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a professor of law at Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles, is the interconnected nature of social categorization, including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, which creates overlapping or interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage\(^1\).

An organization cannot have a diverse workplace without the presence of intersectionality. At a minimum, every single organization should be equipped to develop women leaders who are members of a variety of racial/ethnic groups.

CONSIDERING THE “TRIPLE BIND”

We know from research going back decades that, across societies, expectations for the behavior of women and men differ. Furthermore, our expectations for the behavior of “leaders” in the workplace tend to have more in common with what we traditionally expect from men (i.e., to be assertive, forceful, dominant and competitive).

For male leaders, the consistency between their gender and role in the workplace is straightforward; it results in a clear set of expectations for leadership behaviors. However, for women leaders in the workplace, the inconsistency between the expectations for women (i.e., to be affectionate, compassionate, warm and gentle) and the expectations for leaders (i.e., to be assertive, forceful, etc.) presents a much more difficult problem. In order to be liked, women leaders must behave like “women” and at the same time, in order to be respected, they must behave like “men”. This is the classic double bind, and the challenge it presents for women leaders has been well documented\(^2\).

However, what happens when we consider intersectionality? Could the race or ethnicity of women leaders, due to the additional challenge of culture-based expectations for some, present a form of a “triple bind” affecting both the actual leadership behavior of women in specific groups, as well as the ways in which they are assessed? This was the challenge Linkage set out to research in our treasure trove of assessment data from over 150 organizations across the last three years.
EVALUATING THE DATA

Linkage findings are based on data from thousands of 360° assessments of high-performing women leaders. Women were assessed through Linkage’s Advancing Women Leaders 360° Assessment, which focuses on 30 behaviors associated with the six Competencies women need for advancement. These 360° assessments include a self-assessment completed by each leader and ratings completed by the leader’s manager, colleagues, and direct reports.

Participants and their raters were asked to evaluate the extent to which they demonstrated the advancement-related leadership behaviors in the workplace on a five-point scale. At the end of the assessment, as part of a research section, women were also asked to self-identify in one of nine racial/ethnic groups, including “multi-racial” and “other”. The self-ratings and ratings of others were analyzed to identify statistically significant differences between women in the racial and ethnic groups. The results for the five largest groups in the data set are presented here: African American/Black; Asian/South Asian; Hispanic/Latina/Spanish Origin; Multi-Racial; and White.

Our focus is on statistically significant race- and ethnicity-based differences in the women’s self-assessments and how those findings compare to statistically significant race and ethnicity-based differences in assessments from their managers, colleagues, and direct reports.

When there is agreement between the leader and their raters, there is evidence of real behavioral differences, providing insights into potential new opportunities for developing women leaders in specific racial and ethnic groups. When there is disagreement between the two, there is evidence of potential bias, highlighting the presence of unique invisible strengths as well as expectation-based challenges for women in these groups.
REVEALING THE FINDINGS

Linkage research finds that race and ethnicity have a substantial effect on how women leaders assess themselves and how others assess them.

We aim to address the following questions as we examine this data:

- Are women in specific racial/ethnic groups behaving differently as leaders?
- Is there evidence of bias in how women leaders from different racial/ethnic groups are assessed?

The results of this multifaceted study provide important new insights:

**FINDING: There are real, behavioral differences between women leaders of different racial/ethnic identities.**

When there is agreement between the leader and their raters, there is evidence of real behavioral differences, suggesting important implications for the leadership development of women. For example, if African American/Black women rated themselves as significantly more likely to demonstrate a behavior than women in other racial and ethnic groups and the raters of African American/Black women also tended to assess them as significantly higher on that same item, then we have agreement.

We can identify several real behavioral differences between women in different racial/ethnic groups. The most highly significant findings indicate real behavioral differences for African American/Black women, Asian/South Asian women, and White women, as follows:

- **African American/Black women are**
  - Less likely to volunteer to work on high-profile projects

- **Asian/South Asian women are**
  - Less likely to volunteer to work on high-profile projects
  - Less likely to speak assertively to promote themselves or their ideas
  - Less likely to establish a broad network of relationships inside and outside of the organization

- **White women are**
  - Less likely to spend time engaging, inspiring and enabling others versus trying to “do it all” themselves
  - More likely to volunteer on high-profile projects
  - More likely to be seen and see themselves as highly competent
  - (e.g., demonstrate exceptional job-relevant knowledge and achievement of results)
What do we do with this information?

Although the current study did not investigate the reasons for behavioral differences, there are certainly many potential explanations. Drivers for the differences could range from the advantages White women have in the workplace (benefits from access to additional leadership and career opportunities) compared to women from other racial and ethnic groups, to inequality in work consequences (creating a situation where women in some groups become more risk-averse), to “triple bind” cultural expectations, (reducing the likelihood of some women speaking assertively). However, regardless of cause, organizations must take potential racial and ethnic differences into account when assessing and developing women leaders.

In recent years, HR/OD and DE&I experts have come a long way in understanding the obstacles facing women in the workplace and the types of organizational interventions needed to overcome them. When it comes to leadership development for women, the state of the art has been to assess the needs of individual women leaders on key advancement behaviors through some type of quantitative measure (a 360° feedback tool or manager assessment) and then look at the aggregate scores for the women, using these average scores as a foundation to design leadership development opportunities. Internal practitioners and experts take pride in what has become a focused and data-based standard, and they should.
However, it stands to reason that if White women are the majority group of women in an organization, any average behavioral ratings that are computed will be biased toward the behaviors and needs of white women. Imagine mixing blue paint with yellow paint. A fifty-fifty mix of the two would result in the color green. However, if you start with 80% blue paint, after mixing, the resulting color will be much more blue than green. And it will have almost no resemblance to yellow. Similarly, if 80% of an organization’s women are White, any aggregate data collected on the women will be much more “White” than anything else, resulting in leadership development experiences optimally designed for White women. This reinforcing phenomenon continues the cycle of advantage for women in the majority group and increases the negative impact of intersectionality.

**Stop Using Averages – Organizations must assess the leadership development needs of women differently.** The data for every organization, as well as each individual woman leader within an organization, is unique. The differences between organizations and individuals will always be important. Therefore, we cannot propose blanket leadership development programs for women in specific racial and ethnic groups. In addition to losing the benefit of learning and growing in a diverse environment, this approach could serve to reinforce bias and create a negative impact.

In order to truly leverage diversity and advance all women leaders, we need to do more than evaluate the strengths and needs of women as an overall group.

Instead, leading organizations collect data and conduct separate analyses by race and ethnicity. They use this data to better design and tailor their leadership development efforts. The new state of assessing and developing women leaders must consider, not only individual differences between women, but the impact of intersectionality on the advancement of women.
FINDING: Women leaders from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups experience bias in the workplace.

We can identify evidence of bias by comparing how raters view themselves, and how they are viewed by others in their work environment. When there is disagreement or misalignment between the leader self-assessment and their raters, there is potential evidence of bias, indicating an opportunity for culture shift or other specific strategies for overcoming bias.

When we consider this data, it is important to note that a disagreement between any individual leader and her rater could be for an appropriate reason, such as not knowing the woman well enough or not seeing her in particular environments or situations. However, when we look across thousands of women leaders and see common race and ethnicity-based misalignment in their scores, these individual reasons become irrelevant. Instead, we are left with true differences, with bias as the most likely explanation. Although all forms of bias have an adverse impact, biases that result in women leaders being assessed less favorably are considered “negative.”

Invisible Strength Bias is evident when raters fail to see a woman leader’s significant strength when they assess them.

In this data, Invisible Strength Bias was demonstrated toward the following racial and ethnic groups:

Raters failed to notice or acknowledge the following strengths of African American/Black women:
- Recognizing the value they bring to the organization
- Being open-minded or unlimited-in-thinking about their own capability and potential to achieve
- Being able to control and filter their emotions in a constructive manner

Raters failed to notice or acknowledge the following strengths of Hispanic/Latina/Spanish-Origin women:
- Being willing to take calculated risks to accomplish results
- Having an impact on important decisions that are made in the organization
- Stimulating strong commitment to collective efforts through praise and recognition of individual contributions
**Stereotype Bias** occurs when raters assume, based on stereotypes, that women leaders in particular racial/ethnic groups have weaknesses in areas that they don’t.

In this data, **Stereotype Bias** was demonstrated toward Hispanic/Latina/Spanish-Origin women, multi-racial women, African American/Black women, and White women. The breadth of bias against Hispanic/Latina/Spanish-Origin women and multi-racial women was particularly alarming and resulted in significantly lower overall assessment scores for women in these groups.

**Raters demonstrated the following instances of inaccurate attributions and Stereotype Bias against the following groups:**

- **Hispanic/Latina/Spanish-Origin Women**
  Raters made unsupported assumptions that Hispanic/Latina/Spanish-Origin women are less likely to control and filter emotions in a constructive manner, and less likely to demonstrate a number of behaviors in the Competencies of **Bold, Clear and Influential**. As a result, Latina women unfairly received overall assessment scores that were significantly lower than those of women in other groups.

- **Multi-Racial Women**
  Raters inaccurately assumed that multi-racial women are less likely to clearly define and communicate a strategic direction, as well as less likely to demonstrate a number of behaviors across the Competencies of **Aware, Bold, Influential and Inspiring**. As a result, multi-racial women also ended up with overall assessment scores that were significantly lower than those of women in other groups.

- **African American/Black Women**
  Raters inaccurately assumed that African American/Black women are less likely to clearly define and communicate a strategic direction, and less likely to have an impact on important decisions that are made in the organization.

- **White Women**
  Raters inaccurately assumed that White women are less likely to create personal connections with others, leading to a failure to demonstrate openness and appreciation of others’ viewpoints. White women were also assumed to be less likely to engage in several behaviors in the Competency of **Aware**.
FINDING: Women leaders from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups experience “positive bias” in the workplace—and the effects are far from positive.

Biases that result in women leaders being assessed more favorably than is accurate are considered “positive.” The problem with “positive” bias is that the act of incorrectly assuming strengths in women leaders could result in applying unfairly high standards to their behavior. It may also keep them from receiving key development opportunities and could set them up for failure in other ways.

Positive Stereotype Bias occurs when raters assume, based on stereotypes, that women have strengths in areas that they don’t. In this dataset, Positive Stereotype Bias was demonstrated toward Asian/South Asian women and White women.

Raters demonstrated the following instances of inaccurate assumptions and positive bias against the following groups:

Asian/South Asian Women

- Raters inaccurately assumed that Asian/South Asian women have strength in creating personal connections with others, demonstrating openness and appreciation of their viewpoints, as well as skillfully complementing formal authority with effective personal influence. Interestingly, Asian women rated themselves significantly lower than women in other groups on these two behaviors. It is possible that the other raters were largely non-Asian and that the discrepancy between women and their raters results from a different standard across Asian/South Asian cultures regarding the quality of relationships and personal influence. However alternatively, or perhaps in addition, if the women's raters are assuming strengths that may actually be weaknesses, this is the type of substantial misperception that exemplifies the depth and power of bias.

- Raters also attributed a number of other strengths to Asian/South Asian women that weren’t supported in the data, including behaviors across the Competencies of Aware, Clear, Influential and Inspiring. As a result, Asian/South Asian women earned overall assessment scores that were significantly higher than those of women in other groups.
White Women

- Raters inaccurately assumed that White women have strength in clearly defining and communicating the strategic direction, speaking assertively, being willing to promote themselves and their ideas, seizing moments to “move things forward” even if not in a leadership role, asking for what they want and need with an expectation they may get it, and being authentic leaders.

What do we do with this information?

In the past few years, many organizations have put time and resources into training employees on the concept of unconscious and unintended bias. These types of training programs can be an effective first step in raising awareness so that organizations can create more inclusive environments. However, awareness alone is not nearly enough.

What has become evident is the big opportunity that comes with a deeper understanding of intersectionality, particularly in the design of leadership development for women. Women leaders who are likely to be targets of bias (all women leaders to different extents) can learn strategies to overcome specific biases. For example, if a woman leader believes team members whom she’s going to meet for the first time will assume that she is averse to making bold decisions, she can intentionally work to pre-empt that thinking. For example, she might incorporate examples of “bold” decision-making into a formal introduction or choose to drop “bold” stories from her past into casual conversation.

The best development experiences for women leaders are built on the Competencies women need for advancement and integrate strategies for overcoming bias. Now with a new understanding of the impact of intersectionality, leadership development for women can become much more nuanced, targeted and ultimately more effective.
CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

1. In identifying the development needs of women leaders, organizations should focus on advancement behaviors. While it can be interesting to look at potential differences between women and men on generic leadership assessments, findings from these types of evaluations are not likely to get at the crux of inequality. As we see in differences between individuals, in any one organization, women and men may lead differently from each other and still be equally effective. Or the ratings of one group may be higher than the other. However, regardless of the result, differences in these types of general leadership profiles do not directly target the issue of why women are not advancing. For example, you may learn that women in your organization are rated higher as a group, but still not be clear on how women can overcome bias and what they need to do to be promoted at the same rate as men.

Linkage research has identified six advancement Competencies that women need in order to overcome internal and external hurdles to advancement. A major step in any gender equity initiative is to understand the behaviors most important for women leaders.
2. In identifying the development needs of women leaders, organizations must consider intersectionality. The simplest method to look for intersectionality involves, either separately or as part of an assessment, asking women leaders to identify their race and ethnicity. Then, instead of just relying on overall averages, which are weighted toward the needs of the majority, analyze data collected from the women by identity. Side-by-side comparisons of the data can be used to illuminate similarities across racial/ethnic or other protected categories in the strengths and development needs of the women.

Most powerfully, where these comparisons are helpful is in uncovering key differences. For example, if you learn that one group is less likely to create future visions for themselves as leaders, you can include future-vision exercises in the leadership development experience. Organizations that incorporate intersectionality as an intentional and thoughtful part of a needs assessment will be in the best position to design leadership development experiences to meet the needs of all women.

Linkage has developed modular training content that allows organizations to tailor synchronous women’s development programs based on aggregate results of their assessment data. Similarly, coaching or asynchronous delivery of digital content allows each woman to focus on relevant development aligned to their individual assessment results.

3. In designing leadership development for women leaders, organizations should incorporate an understanding of common biases toward women in specific racial and ethnic groups.

Race and ethnic group-specific techniques for overcoming bias can be either implicitly or explicitly built into leadership development programs for women. The challenge is that evidence of bias, with its substantial talent management implications, may be difficult for organizations to uncover in their own data.

The present findings of significant bias, along with significant behavioral differences, suggest the need for unique leadership development considerations for women in each racial and ethnic group.

We recommend the following targeted leadership development considerations for these groups:
AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK WOMEN LEADERS

• Strategies to leverage a unique strength in the Competency group of Aware, which is defined as:
  Seeks and utilizes reflective and in-the-moment self-knowledge
• More opportunities and encouragement to work on high-profile projects
• Help and support to overcome bias, especially on the Competencies of
  – Clear: in defining and communicating strategic direction
  – Influential: in impacting organizational decisions
  – and Aware, because others don’t see the strength

ASIAN/SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN LEADERS

• More opportunities and encouragement to
  – work on high-profile projects
  – speak assertively and promote themselves and their ideas
  – establish broad networks of relationships
• Awareness that, as a group, they have a tendency to rate themselves significantly lower in a number of areas compared to women in other racial/ethnic groups (and their raters do not agree with them)
• Recognition that they may be more likely to get “the benefit of the doubt” (i.e., be targets of “positive” bias) on behaviors across a number of Competencies, (all except Bold)

HISPANIC/LATINA/SPANISH-ORIGIN WOMEN

• Strategies to leverage unique strengths in taking risks (Bold), having an impact on organizational decisions (Influential), and recognizing individuals (Inspiring) that others don’t see
• Help and support to overcome bias across the board on all of the Competencies (except Connected)

MULTI-RACIAL WOMAN LEADERS

• Help and support to overcome bias across the board on all of the Competencies (except Connected)

WHITE WOMAN LEADERS

• Recognition that they are significantly less likely than women leaders in other racial/ethnic groups to view themselves as having an impact on important organizational decisions
• Recognition that when compared to women leaders from other racial/ethnic groups, they may be more likely to get “the benefit of the doubt” (i.e., be targets of positive bias), particularly on the Competencies of Bold, Clear, Influential and Inspiring
• Help spend more time engaging others in work, versus trying to prove their value by doing everything themselves
• Support to overcome negative bias, particularly on the Competency of Aware, but also in the extent to which they create personal connections with others (Connected)
The suggested actions presented for each racial and ethnic group should be considered a starting point. They do not replace insights from data organizations can collect on their own unique populations. In addition to already-existing differences between individuals, the enormous variety in organizations, including differences based in geographic location, industry, context and culture, to name a few, can affect the way women leaders are assessed. These contextual factors can also impact the behaviors demonstrated (i.e., the ways in which women lead).

4. Organizations must enable all leaders to become more purposeful and inclusive. While organizations are working to understand and meet the specific needs of women, expectation-setting and development for all leaders can be highly effective additional levers. Organizations can help their leaders become fluent in intersectionality and the impact of bias. Leaders can become more purposeful and inclusive in their day-to-day decision making. And leaders can champion and model effective behaviors and techniques for leveraging diversity. With an understanding of intersectionality and action-oriented inclusive leadership tools in hand, leaders in organizations will be poised to engage and advance women of all identities.

Sources

Presented by Linkage’s Advancing Women Leaders Solution

Linkage’s Advancing Women Leaders Solution enables organizations to attract, retain, develop and advance women leaders at all levels. It is based on two decades of research and work with thousands of leaders worldwide and includes assessment, development, coaching and consulting that delivers measurable impact.

About Linkage

For more than 30 years, Linkage has been changing the face of leadership. Through our work with more than one million leaders, we continue to evolve our leadership data, insights and frameworks, empowering leading organizations to solve their most vexing leadership development challenges. From developing effective, purposeful leaders to advancing women and creating cultures of inclusion, we guide our clients with proven Solutions to create transformative change.

Special Thank You

This research was presented with support from Jillian Ihsanullah, PhD, Mark Hannum, Chief Research Officer of Linkage, Nada Hashmi, PhD, Assistant Professor, Babson College, and Jennifer McCollum, CEO of Linkage. The data that informs this research is collected through Linkage’s Advancing Women Leaders 360° Assessment, supported by Donald Auger, Assessments Services Manager.