

[Plugging the Leaky Pipeline at the Mid-Management Level](#)

November 17th, 2011 | 6:00 am



By Tina Vasquez (Los Angeles)

For years, we've been led to believe that once women had the "right" education, the "right" training, and the "right" work experience, not only would they succeed at the highest levels of business, but they'd also reach parity in the c-suite. According to the Catalyst report [The Pipeline's Broken Promise](#) [PDF], the premise of this assumption was that the pipeline for women into senior leadership was robust, but it appears that the hopes surrounding parity were too optimistic.

Catalyst reports that when it comes to top talent, women lag in advancement, compensation, and career satisfaction and in order to combat this systematic gender inequity, companies must better develop and fully leverage highly talented women in the workforce.

The good news is that there are major companies, like Time Warner, American Express, and McKinsey, that are working to plug the leaky pipeline at the mid-management level.

American Express – Sponsorship

As chief diversity officer and vice president of executive recruitment at American Express, Jennifer Christie believes that the issues affecting women in mid-management are the same that affect those at any level, everything from work/life balance issues to making difficult choices and career trade-offs while trying to make their way to the top. One issue proving to be particularly difficult to overcome is communication. According to Christie, women who are supervised by men sometimes don't get the feedback they need because of their difference in communication styles, which eventually affects sponsorship opportunities.

"One of the challenges that we have uncovered through our extensive research with the Center for Work Life Policy is that women do not easily build sponsorship with men at more senior levels," Christie said. "We find that women are over-mentored and under-sponsored and while mentors are important for your career, sponsorship is a critical relationship that advances your career. It's about building organic relationships with those who can truly be your advocate and propel your career forward."

American Express partnered with the Center for Work Life Policy for the report entitled [The Sponsor Effect](#), which outlines the ways in which women are missing out when it comes to sponsorship. This report was one of the key drivers that helped the company shape their Women in the Pipeline and at the Top initiative, which Christie says brought more clarity on the challenges senior women face within the organization, while also helping American Express better understand the effect of sponsorship on career advancement and retention.

Essentially, the initiative really pushes sponsorship opportunities between women and senior leaders and creates a community for women to network and share their experiences. “The real focus,” Christie said, “is to create a more gender intelligent organization, one that enables sponsorship and community.”

It appears as if it’s working. At the recent conclusion of Women in the Pipeline and at the Top’s first year, American Express increased their c-suite female representation and doubled its instances of career movement among women in their highest ranks.

Time Warner – Broadening Experience

Not only has Time Warner created innovative organizational approaches to address the recruitment, development, and advancement of women, but they’ve also been [honored by Catalyst](#) for their efforts and cited by [Joanna Barsh](#), McKinsey & Company’s New York director, as taking a truly proactive approach to remedying the pipeline issue.

From 2003-2009, a strong pipeline of women slated for the c-suite increased from 37 to 42 percent and during this same period, women’s representation in executive management rose from 18 to 23 percent. The company cites its high-potential development programs and employee resource groups as contributing factors to women’s advancement in the company.

The most important factor, however, comes from the company’s push to have leadership candidates gain operational experience in all areas of the company. Not only is it a crucial step to becoming general manager, but it also results in a “zigzag effect” that forces women out of their comfort zones and ideally, into a partnership with a sponsor who can provide crucial resources and support during the process.

McKinsey – Spotlight on Role Models

In the study [Unlocking the Full Potential of Women in the U.S. Economy](#), Barsh references a CEO who told her “there are a thousand reasons for a thousand little leaks in the talent pipeline,” which is why she says companies are trying to put together programs featuring flexible work options and mentorship opportunities, hoping to nail the problem. By doing this, companies fail to realize that the reasons why some women leave and others get left behind should be analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

“Companies want a silver bullet and there isn’t one,” Barsh said. “They have to take the time to understand where each woman is coming from. They have to become curious and care enough to investigate why women in their company aren’t getting to where they want to go. What’s holding women back and what is the company doing that’s causing it to happen?”

Unlocking the Full Potential of Women in the U.S. Economy also revealed some common reasons for the pipeline problem, including exclusion from informal networks, not having a

sponsor, and a lack of role models. According to Barsh, if a company has a woman CEO, there will be more women flowing through the pipeline. Women need to see themselves represented at the top so they're not discouraged to move forward.

Unfortunately, the most powerful thing holding women back is also the one thing that's entirely out of their control. According to Barsh's report, it's not necessarily overt discrimination, but rather "mindsets that limit opportunity."

As an example, Barsh cites a recent study which found that women are most often promoted based on performance, whereas men are often promoted based on potential. Barsh says this is happening because there's less of a safety net for women, meaning there's more of a risk that they'll stumble and when they do, it'll be in the spotlight. Companies know that men will be protected, so they're given more opportunities.

"Here at McKinsey we believe that a company must have at least 30 percent of its top jobs held by women in order for it to matter and not just be a matter of tokenism," Barsh said. "If you want women to truly flourish, there must be role models other women can look up to, sponsorships must be offered, and informal networks must be inclusive of women. If you can do these three things, hitting 30 percent shouldn't be an problem."