

# Leadership Program for Women Targets Subtle Promotion Biases

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## Executive Summary:

Despite more women in the corporate work force, they still are underrepresented in executive officer positions. Professor **Robin Ely** and colleagues propose a new way to think about developing women for leadership.

## About Faculty in this Article:



Robin Ely is the Warren Alpert Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

For the last quarter century, many fought hard to overcome gender discrimination in the workplace by raising awareness, strengthening antidiscrimination policies, and encouraging more women to enter the corporate world.

At first blush, that work appeared to pay off. After all, as of 2010, women made up 46.7 percent of the US labor force, and filled more than half of management, professional, and related occupations. If the strategy was to get more women in the workplace and let them naturally ascend to positions of upper management, it seemed the pump was well primed.

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—Robin Ely

But even with increasing representation, women still fill less than 15 percent of executive officer positions at *Fortune* 500 companies and make up just 3.6 percent of CEOs.

The glass ceiling, it seems, moved higher up the organization, but was far from broken.

"Women's progress has really leveled off, and has been stuck for at least 10 years," says Robin J. Ely, the Warren Alpert Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and senior associate dean for Culture and Community.

What went wrong? In their article [Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs](#), which appeared in the September 2011 issue of the *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Ely and coauthors Herminia Ibarra (INSEAD) and Deborah Kolb (Simmons School of Management) describe how previously identified "second-generation" forms of subtle gender bias have impeded women's progress. These practices and patterns, although unintentional, favor men and create structural career blocks for women.

The paper is believed to be the first to incorporate an understanding of second-generation bias into a new approach to women's leadership development, moving beyond traditional programs developed for men.

"Most leadership development for women is 'add women and stir'—basically, delivering to women what is delivered to men—or 'fix the women,' a strategy of training-up to be 'as good as' men," says Ely. "They don't take the systemic gender biases in organizations into account when educating women about how to move into and exercise leadership."

### **How people become leaders**

The paper frames leadership development as "identity work" requiring the person to undertake two tasks: internalizing a leader identity (coming to see oneself and being seen by others as a leader) and developing an elevated sense of purpose.



This article is part of a continuing series on faculty research and teaching commemorating the 50th anniversary of the first women to enter Harvard Business School's two-year MBA program.

Identity work is a process shaped by loops of action and feedback. For example, a person asserts leadership in an area, feedback affirms or disaffirms those actions, which builds or reduces confidence, in turn encouraging or discouraging further actions. "Through this back-and-forth, the would-be leader accumulates experiences that inform his or her sense of self as a leader, as well as feedback about his or her fit for taking up the leader role," according to the paper.

Furthermore, a leader's identity is tied to her or his sense of purpose. Leaders are most effective—both with themselves and with those they lead—when their personal values align with the work they are doing and connect to something that is larger than themselves.

But women doing the sort of identity work it takes to reach top-level positions in companies are often stopped in their tracks by subtle forms of gender bias, which are deeply ingrained

in workplace culture and society at large. These biases can interfere with the dual requirements of internalizing a leader identity and developing an elevated sense of purpose.

First-generation biases, such as policies or actions that deliberately discriminate against women in hiring and promotion, have been largely wiped off the books. Second-generation biases, while unintentional, can have the same effect, blocking women from upper management.

## **Second-generation bias**

For example, women are ascribed to be friendly, emotional, and unselfish, attributes that seem inconsistent with larger societal beliefs about what a leader must be, such as assertive, self-confident, and entrepreneurial (which are traditionally seen as masculine traits.) Furthermore, women who do display those behaviors can be seen as abrasive instead of assertive, arrogant instead of self-confident, and self-promoting instead of entrepreneurial. These perceptions can hold women back.

"We cannot just tell women that if they want to take their place at the top of their organizations, they need to follow the patterns of their male colleagues," says coauthor Kolb.

And without women in high places, younger women lack the role models and mentors to help them succeed. It seems the organization is signaling that being female is a liability, discouraging talented women from working toward top positions.

Second-generation gender bias also manifests itself in organizational practices that fail to take women's lives into account, hinder their ability to develop powerful networks, and create excessive performance pressure on women.

## **A fresh approach**

The solution offered by traditional leadership development programs for women has been to teach them the established rules so they could be effective players in a masculine culture.

By contrast, Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb propose a new set of principles to drive women's leadership programs (WLPs):

1. *Situate topics and tools in an analysis of second-generation gender bias.* Participants receive a nuanced understanding of second-generation bias and how it may impact their own career development and the career development of other women in their firms.
2. *Create a holding environment to support women's identity work.* The programs create a safe environment and peer networks that support participants in understanding and shaping who they are and who they can become.
3. *Anchor participants on their leadership purpose.* WLPs redirect the participants away from a single-minded focus on career advancement and managing other people's perceptions of them as leaders, and toward identifying larger leadership purposes and the actions they need to undertake to accomplish them.

These programs help participants build skills around networking, negotiation, leading change, and managing career transitions. "We raise women's consciousness about how subtle forms of gender bias can get in their way and in other women's way, while giving them tools for addressing these problems and thus imparting in them a sense of agency," Ely says.

## **Negotiation and networking**

One important technique women must master to create change in their organizations is negotiation, but research shows that women who negotiate hard for themselves experience backlash, says Ely. "They're evaluated negatively. Oftentimes, it's not that they don't know how to negotiate or don't want to negotiate. It's that they're trying to avoid the negative evaluation that comes along with being a hard negotiator as a woman."

The authors recommend that WLPs use a "shadow negotiation" framework that focuses on strategic "moves and turns" to give women tools to negotiate over potentially controversial issues and decisions.

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—*Deborah Kolb*

In this process, the negotiator must come to see her own value and find ways to make it visible, gain from the experience of others in similar circumstances, explore various alternatives to agreement, learn to quickly regain one's footing when challenged, and develop an appreciation for why her request might be resisted.

These negotiations entail skill not only at assessing which options might lead to mutually acceptable agreements but also at enlisting support—women's negotiations often require raising awareness of and pushing back on gendered structures and work practices.

Another way women can gain access to leadership opportunities is through more effective networking. And since there are myriad differences between the way men and women network, and the networks themselves, WLPs must do more than teach traditional networking skills. They should, for example, address the issue of authenticity: women tend to see the sort of networking men do as inauthentic; they feel as if they're using people.


Vital networks can begin to form as soon as WLP participants walk in the door. "You bring senior women together from around the company, and it's the first time they've been in a room with that many women at their level, because they're in all different divisions, different parts of the world...It's powerful...it's something they've really been missing," says Ely. "And a lot of them don't even realize they've been missing it because they've never had it."

In the authors' experience, the networks formed within WLPs carry on well beyond the programs themselves and expand to create mentor relationships that help other women move up the corporate ladder.

When WLP attendees return, they are prepared to "catalyze change" in their companies that will help them and other women advance."

### **Organizational accountability**

Organizations must also take responsibility for giving equal opportunities to their employees.

"What would help is for organizations to examine some of the assumptions they make about who is an 'ideal worker,' how they judge commitment, and what they look for in leaders," says Kolb. "If work cultures enabled both men and women to have full work and personal lives, it might help to level the playing field." 

### **About the author**

**Maggie Starvish** is a writer based in Somerville, Massachusetts.