

# Research Reveals 7 Notable Findings about Women in Leadership

*by Lillian Lincoln Lambert*



## **Introduction**

The topic of women moving into and being retained in senior level positions in corporations has been discussed and studied for a number of years. During a presentation to a women's group at a major corporation the subject came up during conversations with female senior managers. The company had less than desirable experience over the years but no one was sure why it was still an issue or what to do about it.

That was not the topic for my presentation, but the conversation resonated with me. Other major companies probably shared the same or similar experiences. Consequently, I undertook a study of companies and their efforts to increase the number of women in senior level positions. Female and male (25% of the interviewees) executives in mid and senior management positions from twelve different companies were interviewed. Industries included telecommunications, investment banking, consumer products, retail, banking, technology, finance and consulting. Companies were scattered geographically and the number of employees ranged from hundreds to thousands with sales in each company from millions to more than a billion. Company and individual names are **confidential**.

## Notable Findings

**There is an unwritten adage that promoting women is good business.** However, experiences varied from companies that seemed committed to those that didn't see it as an issue deserving special attention. In most cases, progression was merit-based instead of promoting simply because the candidate was a woman. The effectiveness of using a merit-based system depended on the culture of the company. Two different companies were cited where both used a merit-based system but one had a constructive culture while the other a cut-throat environment.



**Companies where women are CEO's have done a better job of integrating women into senior positions than ones where the CEO is a male.** In one company, of the total number of senior level positions, 30% were female. In another, a female CEO came in and broke down the "old boy's" network. Many of those changes continued and were even expanded.

**Legal and marketing are leading disciplines where more women are found.** Technology fared better than finance.

**Few women are able to break into the executive level.** Though they still lag behind men, women have progressed to a greater extent than minorities. The glass ceiling is lower for African Americans than white women or white men.

**Women leave a company or a senior position for a variety of reasons.** Women often come to a company with clearly defined career plans and if she can't move up she will leave. At times a company may have a nice way of moving people out with an exit package when they get on the wrong side of someone. Depending on their circumstances, women may elect to remain in lower positions because other factors outweigh the higher compensation or prestige of the title, i.e. flexible schedule, no direct reports, and no travel. Title carries lesser significance for women in senior level positions because the title given is not always reflective of what they do; they do more than what the title implies. In a marriage, the person who is the primary breadwinner, which is not the usual case for women, will have the upper hand in a decision to move for a promotion. Hence, she may leave because of a promotion of her spouse.

**Greater success was achieved when companies gave more attention to providing professional development for middle management.** Senior managers understood that growing and developing people was a priority and gender was not a factor. This was most effective where managers had fewer direct reports and could spend more time developing their people.

**Having accurate data to work with makes it easier to develop a strategy.** In one success story the company developed a strategy initiated from compiled data which showed that women were undervalued. They implemented initiatives and placed emphasis on keeping their word.

### **Three Specific Problems Identified**

1. In banking there is a limited pool from which to draw for senior level positions because the industry has fewer women in investment banking and commercial lending, the areas where directional decisions of the company are made. Most women are in entry level positions and their numbers taper off moving higher in the company.
2. In one case the Human Resources Department was headed by a woman who seemed insecure in her position and appeared threatened by competent people joining the company. Consequently, she often hired the wrong people for positions and they tended not to stay.
3. Women are not good at finding and establishing networks. Men have learned to do this well and they groom their successor. As quoted by one person “Men are like little generals building pyramids around them so when they see an opportunity to move up they have a strategy in place.” Women are good at building relationships with children, families, and even men but have difficulty carrying it into the workplace.

## **Case Studies**

### **Impact of Sexual Harassment Laws**

One woman explained how sexual harassment laws could be a double-edged sword. In her company, many men were intimidated when working closely with women. While traveling some of them would not fly on the same plane nor stay in the same hotel and certainly would not have dinner together. Their fear of being accused of sexual harassment was exaggerated. She was not denouncing the value of sexual harassment laws and training but said "it's as it is". A male respondent disclosed that conversations in male locker rooms "see women as objects".

### **Women as Supervisors**

One of the male participants shared his positive experience in working under a female manager. He credits her with helping him in some of his major growth by showing him how his actions came off as "gruff" when he considered himself as being direct. He altered his style and believes it made him a better manager. In general, he prefers working with women but acknowledges that many men are uncomfortable working with women, particularly if the women are assertive.

Other reasons given for the positive impact of women managers were:

- their management style is different and they bring a positive perspective
- there is no gamesmanship whereas men play games
- they tend to be more inclusive and bring different ideas to the table
- they look out for you if you are loyal to them while men are more likely to look out for themselves.

### **Mentoring as an Effective Tool**

Some companies that have successfully handled this issue find that mentorships have been a positive contributing factor. One woman directly attributed her ascension in the company to having men as mentors who have appreciated her work and made sure she was taken care of. The company emphasized team building as a means to move forward quickly and efficiently being sure that team members fit in and understand the culture. She is viewed as a valued member of the team. It was her opinion that many people are willing to mentor because they want to hitch themselves to someone they see as a rising star. They feel they can take some credit for that person's success. A woman may want a female mentor but may need a male mentor because of the shortage of women in or who have been where she wants to go.

Another woman felt her company's structured mentoring program was a plus. Their program included both internal and external mentorships. Internally, they paired a senior person with a middle management person and they jointly worked on projects that would be a stretch for the

middle management person but gave that person the opportunity to learn. Externally, a middle management and senior level person partnered to participate in a reading program at a local school. This gave the two the opportunity to get to know each other in a setting other than strictly business. In addition annually, they sponsored an all day event at an exclusive location with workshops on issues of interest to women. i.e., finance, self image, styles and relationships.

### **Women Advocating for Women**

An intriguing concept was offered by one woman. She felt there is a generation gap. Women who are age 50 and above have fought to get where they are in their careers. Most overcame many obstacles along the way. Those in the 30 to 50-year range have lots of opportunities in front of them and are positioned to understand their choices. They have the examples of the 50 and above age group to draw upon. The 20 to 30-year groups do not seem to have much appreciation for those who fought to get where they are even though this made it easier for their age group. She felt there would be value from the 50-70 age groups mentoring younger.



### **Proposed Solutions**

1. Survey female employees in or aspiring to senior positions to determine their needs and tailor benefits programs to their individual needs, i.e., flexible work hours, child care, maternity leave, etc
2. Have concrete procedures and policies in place and educate those at the more senior levels who make the decisions. Use the increase of women managers as one of the metrics for evaluating managers who have hiring and promotion responsibilities.
3. Identify people who are willing to be mentors and pair them with those interested in being mentored. Structure the program considering the needs of both parties instead of leaving it to happenstance. To be successful, it must have the support of top executives. Encourage women to identify mentors.
4. Promote programs designed to advance women. These can be workshops or seminars which address personal and career interests. Provide opportunities for women to be involved in networking and social events. For example, men often make deals while involved in sports such as golf and tennis. For women who play those sports or interested in them, give them membership to clubs and sponsor female teams in tournaments. Also maintain membership in women organizations.

5. Provide training for senior managers who make these decisions or are directly affected by the decision. Create a culture of acceptance and have mechanisms in place to promote it. Be creative in new hires and promotions.

### **Additional Pointers Shared**

#### **For Companies**

- Point out biases so that they do not fester in the workplace
- Establish and live by values and incorporate them in all the company does
- Acknowledge people of all types so no one stands out
- Don't pigeon hole people – men or women
- Put emphasis on diverse options and output and hire from diverse pools
- Look at people as individuals with strengths and weaknesses
- Do less talking about the issue and do more action

#### **For Women**

- Do your job and develop a strategy to get you to the level you want; a place where you may not otherwise be considered
- Prepare your exit strategy to move to the next level
- When you encounter barriers, use tenacity to chip away and build your credibility
- Present yourself in a way that your skills will impact the way you are perceived
- Be the best person you can be
- Know your job and take on additional projects to be visible
- Differentiate yourself and try to make yourself indispensable
- Position yourself to move where necessary
  - Step outside the box instead of getting pulled into female friendly areas
  - Groom your successor so when you move up the company does not have someone new in two positions – yours and your replacement

#### **General Comments**

- People are afraid to talk about women moving up because of possible repercussions
- Women who have confidence in themselves don't seem to have much of a problem
- Women sometimes experience the self-fulfilling prophesy
- Women can't move up if there is only lip service to moving them
- Younger people may come into a company with fresh ideas but will soon conform to the rules that exist
- The types of employees in a company should reflect their marketplace
- The more diverse a team the more controversy
- People who move up are making money for the company instead of being in a support role

## About Lillian

After more than 35 years of entrepreneurial experience, I now devote my time to speaking, writing and coaching – certified by Center for Executive Coaching. Both my education and experiences are in the business arena with an undergraduate degree in business and an MBA. Visit my website [www.lillianlincolnlambert.com](http://www.lillianlincolnlambert.com) for more information about me and my services. Contact me at [lillianlincolnlambert@gmail.com](mailto:lillianlincolnlambert@gmail.com) or 804-873-4858 for information about this study or to discuss opportunities to work with your company.

Below are some recent articles and publications on the subject.



## Resources

<http://catalyst.org/press-release/213/calling-all-white-men-catalyst-study-shows-training-for-white-men-key-to-improving-workplace-culture>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/moiraforbes/2012/10/05/ambassador-melanne-verveer-do-women-hinder-their-own-advancement/>

<http://www.iveybusinessjournal.com/topics/the-workplace/more-women-in-senior-roles-if-only-companies-really-wanted-it#.UJ17LYbcCng>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-end-of-men/308135/2/>

<http://www.theglasshammer.com/>

**How Women Lead: The 8 Essential Strategies Successful Women Know** by Sharon Hadary and Laura Henderson; <http://howsuccessfulwomenlead.com>