

# **A winning combination**

**By adding and developing more women as executives, major sports organizations reap benefits. Women must step up to the challenge.**

# The gender challenge and opportunity.

Diversity is critical for societal and business reasons in elite sports, some of the last, perceived men's worlds that have been slow to change. Korn Ferry research finds:

- A dearth of women in sports executive ranks, and far fewer in operations/coaching.
- To change this, women need to get to the core of the business—often revenue-generating roles, and, in operations, player coaching and positions with personnel decision-making powers.
- Women also need to step up sooner, even if they feel they aren't 100% ready.
- Leagues and teams can figure out ways to help women ascend and assimilate.

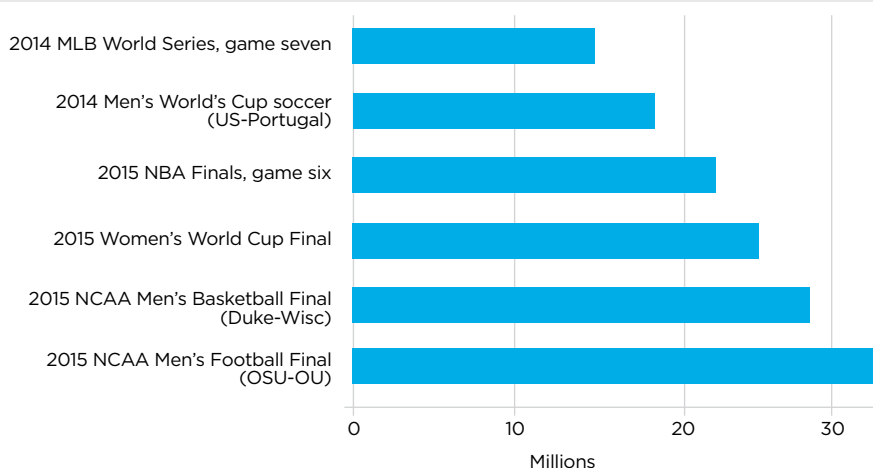
To win in gender diversity, major sports organizations must improve the playing field to attract and retain more women who can step into critical leadership roles. At the same time, women must put themselves into a position to compete for these roles, and this requires honing crucial business skills and creating a great deal of stamina. The fact is, despite a sincere desire by major leagues and teams to recruit more women into senior positions, female leaders—both on and off the playing field—are far outnumbered by their male counterparts. But, if major sports organizations can focus on developing women in the front and league offices, the presence of women in those ranks can have a positive effect on sports holistically. How then do we change the dynamics, and in doing so, improve the industry?

Although gender diversity is an oft-cited need in organizations, reaching far beyond sports and across the Fortune 500, politics, and academia, there are benefits far beyond the societal that are critical. The business case for including women in executive positions in sports is overwhelming.

Greater gender diversity offers organizations advantages in leadership strength, while also promoting a more positive image among consumers, especially with women who drive much of household spending. As tens of millions of young women, both in the United States and globally, participate and excel in various levels and types of sports, the business imperative for professional organizations to keep up with and capture their interests will expand exponentially. Consider the eye-popping broadcast audiences won by the 2015 Women's World Cup Championships. (see figure 1) As NFL Chief Marketing Officer Mark Waller has said, "The matriarch of the family predetermines an awful lot that goes on, from what sport you play to what media you watch to what products get bought. The role of the female in the household is huge" (Belson 2014).

Figure 1

**Women's World Cup Championship draws large TV audience.**  
**Sports TV audiences:**



Sources: Littleton 2015, Forbes 2014

Beyond helping to attract key audiences, sports organizations could see wider business benefits, as corporations demonstrably have, by broadening the experiences and points of view in the C-suite. Research shows that organizations with more female leaders produce better financial results, with some studies finding the earnings margin before interest and taxes at 56% higher for companies that have the largest share of women on their executive committees (Korn Ferry 2013).

Both organizations and women themselves need to act to increase the number of female executives in professional sports. First, what steps should leagues and teams take to deal with this challenge? Corporations have seen the value of advocates and mentors in advancing women's careers (Korn Ferry 2013). Targeted, sustained initiatives to increase the number of female leaders and to retain them have shown marked results (Korn Ferry 2014 ). The issue certainly can be addressed with strategic, thoughtful talent recruitment and development, and leading sports organizations are already doing so. As Sam Kennedy, president of the Boston Red Sox describes it: "We purposely create a culture where we individually train aspiring industry leaders, and we always have a strong focus on diversity. For our sales academy, in particular, we focus on one-on-one mentorship and shadowing. ... What that does is support an environment where we identify and build each person's strengths, so that they become a valuable part of our Red Sox organization and we can foster long-term careers." The results are evident, as the Red

## A scorecard for female leaders in sports

The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, part of the University of Central Florida's College of Business Administration, tracks diversity in major sports. Its recent data on the gender composition of teams, coaching staffs, and front office-athletic departments show:

- Major League Baseball (MLB) received a C+ in gender hiring practices in 2014, with a score of 77.5%, versus 77.6% in 2013. In gender hiring, the percentage of women in team professional administration increased; there were decreases in the percentages of women in the league office and among team vice presidents and senior administrators. In the MLB central office, at the senior executive level, women occupied 21.4% of positions, up from 18.7% in 2013.
- The National Football League (NFL) received a "C-" in gender hiring in 2014, with a score of 69%, down from 71% in 2013. "The NFL continues to struggle with gender hiring practices at the team level while there was a slight improvement for gender at the league level where a B- was earned for the first time," the institute said. In the league office, the number of women at or above the VP level increased from 20 in 2013 to 21 in 2014.

Sox experience not only low turnover, but have a discernible number of emerging female leaders across the business.

While the onus is often on the organizations themselves, women in the industry also need to proactively put themselves forward as candidates for leadership roles, even if they think they may not be 100% ready, just as their male counterparts do. Women need to address the "confidence gap" that is evident even among many highly successful and well-qualified women, as discussed in a May 2014 Atlantic magazine cover story by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman: "Compared with men, women don't consider themselves as ready for promotions, they predict they'll do worse on tests, and they generally underestimate their abilities."

Women also need to take individual, personal steps: strategizing and planning their careers; taking on difficult, uncomfortable tasks; building their capacities but equally their self-confidence, tough assignment by tough assignment; getting fair, insightful, and useful feedback about ways they can improve; and by speaking up for themselves and stepping forward at the appropriate moments (Korn Ferry 2013). Even more central to the sports industry, women can better position themselves to rise in the ranks by taking on roles mission-critical to their organizations, as revenue-related posts are in sports. "It is important for women in sports to garner direct sales experience," says Valerie Camillo, chief revenue and marketing officer for the Washington Nationals. "Often, women start their careers in sales, but then switch to service or activation roles early in their careers. ... Unfortunately, too many women have taken themselves out of the track that leads to the top job."

This powerful combination—of more women who show confidence in stepping into the challenge of bigger leadership roles, and sports organizations that know how to recruit, attract, and empower women—will help advance gender diversity significantly. The result will be a win-win as women assume more visible leadership roles in sports and organizations tap into a highly capable talent pool that contributes diversity of thinking, nuance, and insight.



# Where the women are.

When major sports leagues and teams search for leadership talent, they often specifically seek qualified female candidates. Having access to an extensive, rigorously screened network of candidates is crucial, and having specific experience recruiting women in sports is helpful. But women are challenged in competing for these elite opportunities, because in comparison with their male counterparts, fewer females have experience in commercially driven roles that prepare them to become chief commercial officer or chief revenue officer, posts that often serve as the foundation for becoming a CEO or president of a sports franchise. These positions oversee and drive corporate sales, ticket sales, and consumer marketing, the lifeblood of sports organizations. Without vast commercial experience, or aspirations to oversee all aspects of a business, women are at a disadvantage in being recruited for teams' CEOs or presidents, and certainly that makes them distant from consideration to be commissioners of the top male athlete-focused professional leagues. Many female leaders in the industry know this, and it has been essential in accelerating their careers. Gillian Zucker, the highest-ranking team leader in the NBA as president of the Los Angeles Clippers, notes that sports leaders are all focused on the same goal. "We are all here to drive revenue and win games, to elevate the brand." To the extent women can be at the forefront of bringing in critical dollars and accelerating play on the field, they will have a much clearer path to ascend to the top role.

Yet, the dearth of women in revenue-generating roles may have more to do with culture than aptitude and experience. Executives in revenue-generating roles must bring in sponsor dollars and negotiate with media partners to buy content—deals that, even to this day, can get sealed on golf courses or in other male-dominated venues. It can certainly be challenging for women to assimilate, but it is not insurmountable.

To encourage greater gender diversity in the revenue-generating roles in sports, organizations can make women feel both welcome and comfortable working in what have been male-dominated roles and environments. Organizations across the spectrum—including the US military, Fortune 500 corporations, and government—struggle with gender equality issues and culture change, and sports organizations can learn from their best practices. These can benefit

**For women seeking advancement in sports, "Jump high or you don't. There's nothing in between."**

- Gillian Zucker,  
president of  
operations, the Los  
Angeles Clippers  
basketball team

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- Valerie Camillo,  
chief revenue  
and marketing  
officer, Washington  
Nationals

C-suites and organizations as a whole as well as women and can include: improved civility and conflict management; identifying and eliminating detrimental, conscious and unconscious biases, especially sexism; and an embrace from the top of the reality that individuals have different leadership styles and motivators, some of these gender-based. The heavily male-dominated culture of sports can be perceived as hostile to women—a perception that has not been helped by recent domestic abuse allegations involving some athletes. Over the years, female sports leaders have dealt with chauvinism that few will talk about publicly but most will acknowledge privately. To attract more women and fulfill their own mandates for greater diversity in hiring, sports organizations must become more attractive to women. At the same time, women also must push past perceived barriers. As the Clippers’ Zucker observed of the male-dominated culture in sports: “I never acknowledged it and I never noticed it. I would walk in a room, and my focus was not that I was the only woman in the room, or that there was a culture shift I have to be a part of, it’s, how do I solve for x?”

Female leaders do exist in sports (see figure 2) and their slowly increasing numbers say both that the industry is evolving, and that there is even more room for women in the corporate world of professional sports.

Figure 2

**Female leaders at the top of their game.** *Women are advancing into leadership roles in pro sports. These are just some examples of leaders in the C-suite and coaching ranks:*

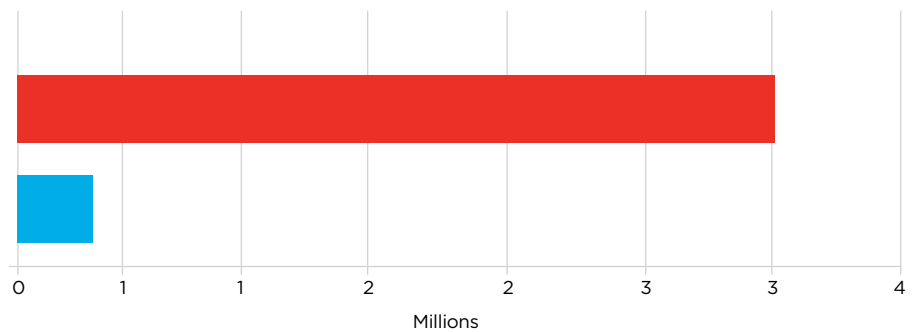
Name	Background and notable
<b>Val Ackerman</b> Commissioner Big East collegiate athletic league	University of Virginia basketball star, pro player in France, worked in NBA, served as founding president, WNBA
<b>Stacy Allaster</b> Chairman, CEO Women's Tennis Association	Served as vice president, sales and marketing, Tennis Canada; was president of WTA; was a junior and collegiate player and taught tennis
<b>Renie Anderson</b> Senior vice president, sponsorship and partnership management NFL	Started as assistant to Arena Football commissioner, held various league posts for almost a decade; served as NFL vice president of business development and as league business development director
<b>Dawn Aponte</b> Vice president, football operations NFL Miami Dolphins	Was senior vice president, football administration, Miami Dolphins; intern and numerous front office posts, New York Jets; vice president, labor finance, NFL; vice president, football operations, Cleveland Browns; accountant; attorney
<b>Amy Brooks</b> Executive vice president, team marketing and business operations NBA	Served as senior director, marketing partnerships, NBA; consultant, Bain Inc.; market development manager, Sun Microsystems
<b>Valerie Camillo</b> Chief revenue and marketing officer MLB Washington Nationals	Served as senior vice president, team marketing and business operations, NBA; principal, Booze Allen Hamilton; financial management consulting practice, IBM Global Services
<b>Anita de Frantz</b> Outgoing President, LA84	First American, African American, female vice president on International Olympic Committee; two-time Olympic medalist; headed LA84 Foundation; built legacy endowment from 1984 LA Olympic movement from \$93 million to \$160 million, distributing \$225 million to 2,200+ youth sports organizations
<b>Sophie Goldschmidt</b> Chief commercial officer Rugby Football Union	Served as NBA senior vice President for Europe, Middle East, and Africa; was Women's Tennis Association vice president, marketing and sponsorship; started at adidas, as tennis and women's soccer sports marketing manager
<b>Becky Hammon</b> Assistant coach NBA San Antonio Spurs	Colorado State University All-American, Euro League All-Star, Russian Olympic team member, WNBA All-Star
<b>Bernadette V. McGlade</b> Commissioner Atlantic 10 collegiate athletic league	North Carolina player; legendary, winning Atlantic Coast Conference coach; ACC administrator
<b>Kim Ng</b> Senior vice president, baseball operations, MLB	Served as: vice president, assistant general manager, MLB's Los Angeles Dodgers; vice president, assistant general manager, MLB New York Yankees; director of waivers, records MLB American League. Started with Chicago White Sox; played softball.
<b>Irina Pavlova</b> President Onexim Sports and Entertainment Holding USA Inc.	Headed Google's strategic partnerships in Russia where she was tech giant's first employee; served as equity analyst, portfolio manager, Wentworth, Hauser and Violich; began as financial analyst, Prudential Investment Corp; serves on boards of Brooklyn Nets, Barclays Center
<b>Laurel J. Richie</b> President WNBA	Senior vice president, chief marketing officer, Girl Scouts USA; senior partner, Ogilvy & Mather; worked at Leo Burnett Worldwide
<b>Michele A. Roberts</b> Executive director NBA Players' Association	Former public defender, Washington, D.C.; partner, Akin, Gump; partner, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom
<b>Justine Siegal</b> Guest instructor (Coach) MLB Oakland Athletics instructional league slate	Was first woman to throw batting practice for a Major League Baseball team; first woman to coach men's baseball professionally in 2009, serving as first-base coach for the Brockton Rox, an independent baseball team. Was assistant coach, baseball, Springfield College; head coach, founder of Baseball For All, a national nonprofit seeking to provide instruction, opportunity in baseball, especially for girls
<b>Jen Welter</b> Intern coach NFL St. Louis Cardinals	Women's leagues player; first woman to coach NFL players (linebackers) who are not kickers; Ph. D.
<b>Gillian Zucker</b> President, business operations NBA Los Angeles Clippers	President, Auto Club Speedway; vice president, business and development, Daytona International Speedway; assistant general manager, Durham Bulls; worked in hockey and pro football.

# Connecting with women.

From a purely business perspective, gender diversity is a strategic advantage, given the dominance of women as consumers, especially in driving household spending. Maintaining the loyalty of female fans and consumers is a priority for sports organizations, which can't escape the business implications of their demographic-linked destiny. Since the 1972 passage of the landmark Title IX education amendment in the United States, millions of girls and young women, have become athletes and fans. (see figure 3 and figure 4).

Figure 3

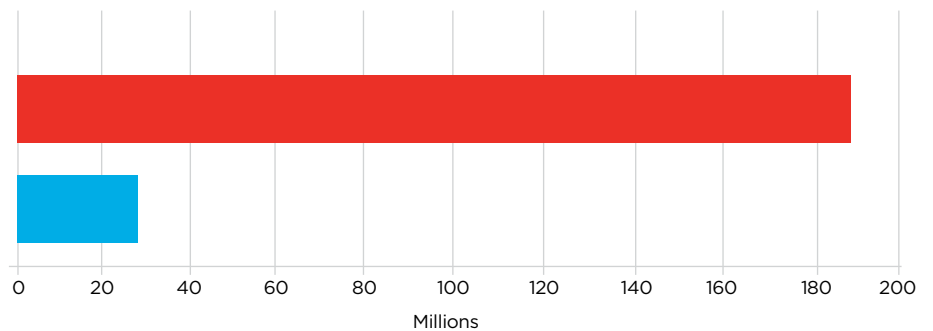
**Soaring female participation in prep sports after, before 1972 Title IX**



Source: Sharp Center 2013

Figure 4

**Soaring female participation in NCAA sports after, before 1972 Title IX**



Source: Sharp Center 2013



Research has linked women's growing involvement with sports to parallel achievement, accomplishments, and leadership in sectors across society; they have shared in some of the benefits that male athletes knew, as exemplified in the adage about the "playing fields of Eton" (Sharp Center 2013). While advocates say further progress still must occur in prep and collegiate sports for women, both also have provided significant opportunity for women to gain leadership experience, including in high-powered, high-revenue programs (NCAA 2009). Their engagement in and empowerment through sports further has transformed women as sports fans and consumers around the globe. They not only are purchasers in an active wear market with an estimated total size of \$15.1 billion (Kell 2014), they represent major growth opportunities for professional sports, particularly professional football, where more women have watched the Super Bowl than the Emmys or Grammys (Kitroeff 2013). The NFL, whose officials have estimated that 45% of their fan base is female, has reached out to women with campaigns, such as targeted advertising and breast-cancer awareness events with football teams wearing the trademark pink on their uniforms (Boudway 2013).

But even as pro organizations have sought to improve their standing with women, top sports leaders say they have learned tough lessons about the importance of ensuring there are female leaders in the top ranks to provide distinctive, invaluable counsel in dealing with adverse circumstances. These include a highly publicized incident involving domestic abuse allegations against Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice. He was later released by the Ravens, suspended indefinitely by the NFL, and then reinstated after a court ruling in his favor. Slow response to Rice's situation by the league drew the ire of fans, politicians, and corporate sponsors. Both NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and Baltimore Ravens owner Steve Bisciotti said publicly they needed they needed better counsel from female leaders to improve their crisis response. The NFL moved Anna Isaacson, the league's vice president of community affairs and philanthropy, into a new and expanded role as vice president of social responsibility, including education and programs on violence and domestic issues. Further, the league retained as senior advisors: Lisa Friel, former head of the Sex Crimes Prosecution Unit in the New York County District Attorney's Office; Jane Randel, co-founder of NO MORE, a national initiative to raise the profile of and normalize the conversation about domestic violence and sexual assault; and

**"Diversity across race and gender at the [National Football] League office continues to increase, and we are always looking for ways to improve. We remain committed to diversity and inclusion and... being an organization that benefits from different backgrounds, perspective, and experiences."**

- Robert Gulliver,  
executive vice  
president of  
human resources,  
The National  
Football League  
(Belson 2014)

Rita Smith, the former executive director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. In late 2014, Goodell presented to NFL team owners a measurably improved personal-conduct policy and immediate, actionable steps to take involving accused players. The *Wall Street Journal* called the new rules “a shift for the NFL, which has been criticized for failing to properly address instances of domestic violence by players” (Langely 2014).

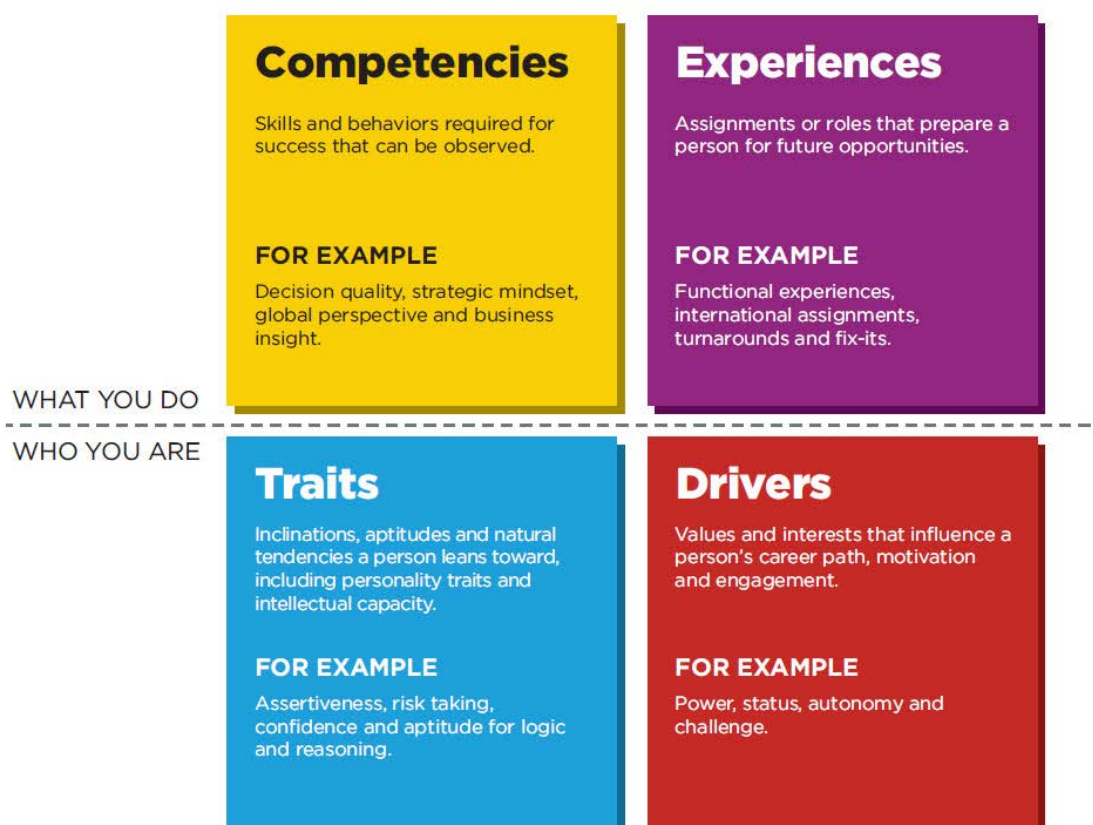
While the NFL drew constant criticism in the court of public opinion for a lack of gender diversity at the top, it’s hardly alone. Two MLB teams, the New York Mets and the Chicago White Sox, have been sued by female executives alleging discrimination. The highest-ranking Hispanic woman in a management position at MLB has also filed a lawsuit, alleging that she faced discrimination for two decades. Such allegations and lawsuits could prove costly in terms of litigation, and could tarnish the reputation of sports organizations. In the words of ESPN.com, “several women have scaled baseball’s corporate ladder, but their ranks are still deplorably thin; one would be hard-pressed to field a starting lineup of female leaders” (Kimes 2014).

# Four dimensions of leadership talent.

When organizations find they need to reassess their talent, specialized knowledge, experience, research, and formal frameworks all can be valuable for decision makers. Korn Ferry's Framework of Leadership and Talent (see figure 5, KF4D) is based on more than 40 years of research into what makes leaders successful in different environments. Korn Ferry organizes the qualities that lead to success into four distinct categories: competencies, experiences, drivers, and traits. Two quadrants (competencies and experiences) describe "what you do," while two (drivers and traits) reflect "who you are." Most individual attributes related to potential fall in the drivers and traits quadrants.

Figure 5

**KF4D**



Drivers are values and interests that influence a person's career orientation and motivation. People with leadership potential find the role of a leader interesting and they are motivated by the work of leading; this is crucial to effectiveness as a leader. Traits play a large role in how people develop—what is more natural for them and what is more of an effort. Possessing certain traits makes it easier to develop individuals into future leadership roles, while possessing other traits makes it more difficult for them to succeed as leaders.

Leagues and teams that successfully attract, retain, and develop more female leaders will benefit from unique strengths those executives bring to their roles, including being perceptive, having a high degree of emotional intelligence, and being sensitive to the dynamics around them. Given the high visibility of sports and recent news about the lack of gender diversity in the leadership ranks, professional teams and organizations find themselves under considerable public pressure to make their next play. Women, too, need to put themselves forward as candidates ready to assume larger leadership roles in an effort to improve the playing field for all. Though she found the competition to be president of the International Olympic Committee “daunting,” partly because “the rules kept changing,” Anita DeFrantz has said she adopted a “Why not?” attitude and pursued the position the same way she had as an Olympic medalist—to be a winner. She did not succeed but has observed, “The good news is that no one said I couldn't do it.” In her executive role with the IOC, she became a champion to increase the number of women in Olympic leadership roles (Kort 2004). In 2014, 22.6% of the IOC's 104 members were women.

Zucker, of the Clippers, said women need to commit fully to advancing: “Jump high or you don't. There's nothing in between.”

“People,” she added, “want to segment [others]—to, say, segregate a smaller group, such as women. And [then you are] comparing yourself against a smaller group when the real benchmark is everyone in your universe. It's really simple. If you're really good at what you do, there is zero reason to consider your gender. ... What you can do is outsell everyone around you, outperform, have a higher close ratio, be more creative than everyone in the office. Do those things, and your gender is irrelevant.”

If US pro sports leagues and teams, meantime, are truly committed to gender diversity in hiring and grooming candidates for senior leadership, they should consider steps to equalize the playing field and attract more women.

- **Tapping the “motivators” for women in leadership:** As Korn Ferry research into women in corporate leadership has found, men and women are driven by many of the same motivators: stimulating and challenging work; influence on the organization’s direction; personal accomplishment; work/life balance (rated highly by both men and women); and belief in the mission of the organization. There are differences, as well. Men put more emphasis on a broader scope of responsibilities, influence, and performance, while women focus on stimulating work that gives a sense of personal accomplishment in a friendly environment (Orr 2013). To attract and retain more high-potential women, sports organizations should ensure that their work environments are genuinely welcoming to women.
- **Grooming women for key roles:** To increase the talent pool, more women must be groomed for senior leadership positions with key roles, starting with such positions as sponsor management and event marketing, as well as ticket and sponsorship sales. These roles will help develop women for senior positions in revenue generation, thus putting them on track with their male peers for CEO, general manager, and other senior leadership positions. Savvy companies ensure their high-potential staff get placed in multiple vantage points during their careers to learn the organization thoroughly, and “stretch” assignments to develop business acumen occur for elite talent across the C-suite (Crandell et al. 2015), meaning they should not be perceived negatively as a special perk just for women. Further, research shows that organizations that commit to sustained efforts to diversify their leadership, particularly with expertise from Korn Ferry, can achieve results, as occurred with a company that doubled its representation of executive women of color in four years (Korn Ferry 2014).



- **Pursuing key assignments, building acumen:** Women, too, must do their part, seeking out the formative assignments and roles that will position them for career advancement in any organization, including sports. As the Korn Ferry corporate research found, men rated higher than women in strategic skills and financial acumen, which are viewed as critically important in setting future direction for a business or enterprise. The need for women in corporate America to develop more strategic and financial skills calls to mind the challenge for women in sports who, in general, do not hold in-depth revenue-generating roles. Providing opportunities for women to acquire and develop these skills will help increase the pool of female talent that is qualified to assume senior leadership roles.
- **Valuing female leadership strengths:** Korn Ferry research found that women scored higher than men in the skills areas of building talent, engaging employees, collaboration, and customer focus, which are key to creating a positive, productive company culture (Orr 2013). As sports organizations extend their outreach to fans and consumers, particularly in marketing to women, having diverse marketing, sales, and leadership teams will be a competitive advantage.

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## About Korn Ferry

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The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books and a quarterly magazine, Briefings, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth and success.

