

Leveling the playing field: What organizations can do.





Rethink how you recruit, develop, promote, and reward women.

Start by looking at your organization's design

—the jobs in it, its career ladders, and typical paths up and through it. Now, how could the design change to fix known issues? If fewer women than men put themselves up for promotions, can job designs change so promotions are a step up one job level, not two?

Next, look at your job designs.

How well are roles defined, and what's the pay at each level? Are people clear about what they need to do to move up?

How do these processes affect recruiting?

Do newcomers, especially men who negotiate aggressively, get paid more? If it's clear what each job involves—the skills, experience, and competencies it requires—you can prevent the starting-salary negotiations that can put men ahead of women from the outset. (You may need a policy of ignoring past salaries to make this feasible.)

Organizations do their best to eliminate bias

in recruitment processes. But, as with diversity policies, there can be big gaps between theory and practice. Check in regularly to make sure the right things are happening—are people using objective selection criteria and “name-blind” processes? Are diverse teams interviewing candidates, and are psychometric tests in place to measure potential and soft skills? Has your organization eliminated subtle bias, such as job descriptions that unnecessarily demand foreign travel or overseas placement? Or ones with such unrealistic lists of expectations that they cry out, “Unicorn wanted”?

Actively approach good internal candidates before advertising a job externally; don't just post openings on the intranet and hope the best people will come forward.

Finally, forensically examine your organization's reward strategy—particularly how it links pay to performance. When awarding bonuses and salary increases for promotions and otherwise, what does it base those on? Can line managers make subjective pay decisions? Or are your measures bias-free? (They measure productivity instead of time spent in the office for example.) Some more innovative organizations tap big data to find and map network “hubs,” then adapt their performance metrics to recognize the influencers (often women) who sit in the heart of these hubs.

“Change starts at the top, with leaders and HR diagnosing headwinds in the system and putting initiatives in place to address them.”

Benjamin Frost,
Korn Ferry Hay Group



Getting women into your pipeline (and keeping them there).

Succession planning helps organizations identify and develop people with the potential to step into current leaders' shoes. But rather than relying on women to put themselves forward, develop a high-potentials program, with clear and objective criteria, to guide leaders and line managers. And offer the people in the program opportunities to fast-track their development, such as by working on high-profile projects.

Champion female role models, but be careful about whom you choose: A board member who hasn't taken a holiday with her family for years isn't going to be a great role model. Find women who are relatable and realistic.

Diversity programs work best when both men and women champion the cause. Offer opportunities for mentoring and sponsoring to both men and women. Sponsoring can be particularly useful: Having someone else sing a woman's praises can mean she doesn't have to self-promote, which is seen by many as unappealing.

Look at your organization's mobility strategy. Is spending time overseas an expected part of a leader's development? Can that requirement (which is stressful for families) change? Can leaders get a global perspective in other ways that don't uproot them and their families for years?

Hunt out and challenge assumptions about fit—especially when it comes to leadership styles.

Don't restrict onboarding to people who are new to the organization or a role. Offer a re-familiarization program to anyone who's had time away, such as women or men who've been on maternity or paternity leave.

Finally, remember that not all women seek leadership roles immediately. Some may want to gather valuable experience by moving sideways before moving up (a career lattice); others may want to become "high professionals"—chief engineers or top-flight software developers. Organizations need to support these career paths, too—otherwise, women who take them may find that the playing field still favors men.



Create the right kind of culture.

When it comes to engagement, the same things motivate most people, such as inspiring leadership, a great work climate, and opportunities to develop. But many organizations assume that women just want flexible work and day care in the office. Ask the women in your organization which benefits appeal to them most. Must your company offer full family health insurance, giving families double coverage when both parents work? Might a pick-and-mix approach work better so everyone can choose the best options for their situation?

Keep track of the latest research on which benefits work best for women. A recent study found a strong correlation between paid paternity leave and having more women on boards, for example—while mandated maternity leave showed no correlation (Noland et al. 2016).

Often, though, women leave because they don't want to work in a toxic culture. When this happens, the women who stay will develop coping strategies, such as behaving like men; but these behaviors don't work in their favor. If your organization has cultural issues, it needs to go back to what it exists to do; if an inclusive, meritocratic, and collaborative working culture helps the organization achieve its goals, then it's in the interests of everyone concerned to build it.

Once a positive culture exists, make it part of the employee value proposition. Then use it to a) make sure the organization hires managers whose values reflect it, and b) forge strong connections among women's groups and online communities.

Champion inclusivity, lead by example.

Organizations, line managers, and women themselves share the responsibility for tackling the headwinds that hold women back. But for diversity programs to work, senior leaders need to champion them openly and take responsibility for their success. Otherwise, the initiatives will start with a bang and end with a fizzle.

First, set internal targets—for example, having a certain percentage of women at each level of management by a specified year. Analyze and simulate the implications of your targets. For example, if you aim for 40% of your top leaders to be women in five years, you may need to hire a 60:40 mix of women and men at the next level down. This will compensate for a lack of women now, and account for things like turnover or maternity leave. Analysis will help you assess the feasibility of your targets and will help gather support across the organization for changes.

Once you've got targets in place, work with internal communications to share what's changing, why, when, and how progress will be measured. Share updates regularly so people don't slip back into old habits.

As part of that regular communication, be clear with all employees—especially line managers—about the business benefits of advancing women and how these efforts fit into the organization's strategy to become diverse and inclusive. This helps counter pushback that women are getting special treatment.