



# Career mentoring for women: New horizons/Expanded methods

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**Abstract** Although women make up nearly half of the workforce in the United States, the number of women who hold senior management positions in large U.S. firms continues to be disproportionately low. This fact raises concerns about individual fairness and equality of opportunity. Herein, we demonstrate that the use of strong mentoring programs holds great promise as a way to increase the number of women in senior management roles. An extensive study supports the mentoring program recommendation, as do examples of foreign firms which far more readily employ women in executive positions than do U.S. firms.

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## 1. Women in the workplace

Several recent anniversaries and published articles have coincided to highlight the lack of progress in women gaining parity in the workplace, particularly as regards attaining leadership positions. Thirty years after Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed to the Supreme Court, judges at both the state and federal levels are still overwhelmingly male, and only 6% of equity partners at the 200 largest law firms are women ("Glass Ceiling," 2011). The figures are similarly dismal on Wall Street. Fewer than 20% of finance industry directors and executives are women, and the ouster of Sallie Krawcheck from Bank of America Corporation in September 2011 left

no women leading the 20 biggest U.S. banks and securities firms (Fitzpatrick & Rappaport, 2011). While women possess 60% of bachelor's degrees and make up nearly 50% of the workforce, they hold only 14% of senior executive positions at Fortune 500 companies, a percentage nearly unchanged in a decade (Korkki, 2011). Disappointingly, only 15% of senior managers and fewer than 3% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are women (Economist, 2011).

Pay disparities also stubbornly remain, with women earning one-third to one-quarter less than men when all factors are considered. For example, a recent White House study showed that older women in the workforce earn 74% of what men earn (Jackson & Hall, 2011). Another piece of research revealed that newly-trained female doctors earn about \$17,000 less than their male counterparts, and the gap is growing (Silverman, 2011).

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The leadership gap is particularly surprising, given that a noteworthy body of research suggests businesses and organizations which employ women at the highest levels reap significant financial benefits in doing so. Studies by organizations as diverse as Ernst & Young and Catalyst Inc., and academic studies at institutions such as Columbia and Pepperdine, support the notion that gender diversity in top management of organizations is good for business and the economy. For example, the [Ernst and Young \(2010\)](#) report states: “[The] undisputed conclusion is that having more women at the top improves financial performance.” The Pepperdine University study—of 215 Fortune 500 companies over 19 years—revealed that firms with the best record of promoting women to high positions were between 18% and 69% more profitable than the median Fortune 500 firms in their industries ([Adler, 2010](#)).

This gender effect is not simply an American phenomenon; it is replicated in studies of other western industrial nations. “European firms with the highest proportion of women in power saw their stock value climb by 64 percent over two years, compared with an average of 47 percent [for others]” ([Tuhus-Dubrow, 2009](#)). Norway contends that gender equality in the workforce and society gives the nation a competitive advantage, and allows it to continue its generous welfare system at a 10% budget surplus in this time of global economic crisis ([Bennhold, 2011a](#)). Nonetheless, *The Economist* (2011) Special Report on Women and Work reports that “[a]cross Europe, the proportion of women on company boards averages around 10% though with large variations; from less than 1% in Portugal to nudging 40% in Norway.” For at least two decades, organizations have acknowledged that diversity is a worthy goal. At a minimum, they’ve paid lip service to it; at a maximum, they’ve tried to achieve it. As the aforementioned statistics illustrate, however, diversity at the top remains elusive. The causes are many. It is not generally a matter of intentional discrimination; antidiscrimination laws and their enforcement have ameliorated the worst of this overt behavior. Rather, more subtle actions are responsible for the entrenchment.

For example, only one in ten executives is proactive about diversity. Many look at it as a matter of ‘metrics and compliance’ instead of working for real inclusion ([Kwoh, 2011](#)). Exclusion of women from meetings, promoting men on potential and women on achievement, not making diversity a priority, and not making sure there is representation at all levels are some other factors ([Blumenstein, 2011](#)). Additionally, women’s leadership styles may be discounted based on stereotypes of leadership more typically exhibited by males ([Tuhus-Dubrow, 2009](#)).

This is certainly not an exclusive list, but it does beg the question: How, in light of these factors, do we get to the next level?

That inequities persist will not surprise most readers of this publication. The inequities are often featured in the media, and gender differences in career attainment is an oft-studied area of social science and management research ([Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, & Weithoff, 2010](#)). To shed further light on these issues and arrive at some workable solutions, we conducted a multi-phase, multi-year study—The Pathways Research Project—on the use of mentoring programs as strategies for promoting gender leadership diversity in organizations ([Schipani, Dworkin, Kwolek-Folland, & Maurer, 2009](#)). This article proposes that businesses and organizations can use available data from the social sciences about the differing impact of variables in mentoring for women and men to tailor programs that will help remediate the gender gap. In so doing, though, organizations need to be aware of legal constraints and structure the programs accordingly. Additionally, we urge that mentoring programs be employed in structured settlements of Title VII-based discrimination claims and in mediation and arbitral awards. The proposed legal remedies could be fashioned to address both individual fairness and organizational needs in the search for talented leadership at the highest levels.

## 2. The Pathways Study

If research is to translate into changes in the composition of top management, directors and managers must fashion management training and career paths that address the needs of diverse would-be top managers. Because many organizations have a global reach and global diversity of managers/leaders, and because very little of the mentoring literature addresses global and cultural diversity, our study surveyed graduates of business schools in the U.S. and Europe—both male and female—about their mentoring relationships.

Before drafting the survey, we invited female leaders in business, government, and academia to a conference to discuss their perceptions of the most crucial elements that helped them reach leadership positions. Mentoring programs surfaced as the most effective path for avoiding barriers and easing into top management. Thus, our study—denoted the Pathways Study—was undertaken with the goal of better understanding the nature of mentorships and how they might differ by gender and geographical location, specifically focusing on businesses within the United States and Europe.

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