What Companies Can Do To Support Women Leaders (and Why They Should)

As it turns out, what's good for women is good for business.[1] Furthermore, a 2003 Catalyst study found that more than one-half (55 percent) of women who are not already in the most senior leadership positions desire to be there and another 19 percent have not ruled it out.[2] But it is also true that women are leaving Corporate America in alarming numbers to stay at home with their children or to start their own businesses. We are not suggesting that if companies provided more support the women who decide to drop out (or "stop out") to stay home with their children would remain in the game. However, there is a strong argument to be made that if companies provided more support to women leaders, the disillusionment, isolation and frustration some of them feel would be reduced and the brain drain would be stemmed.[3]

So What Steps Should Companies Take?

- Recognize that gender tests are still a practical reality. Educate people in the organization to proactively to question themselves and those whom they lead regarding their attitudes toward women in leadership positions.

- Establish or enhance initiatives to support women currently in leadership positions as well as those who aspire to them. These may include women's networks, conferences and message boards where women leaders can provide support to one another and provide guidance to less senior women.

- Review the five leadership challenges we identify, then carefully examine the strategic moves we suggest women leaders make. For most of them, there is a complement for the organization. Here are some examples:

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[1]Catalyst, *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity* (New York: 2004).

[2] Catalyst, Women in U.S. Corporate Leadership: (New York: 2003).
[3] Time Magazine, The Case for Staying Home March 22, 2004, Fast Company: Where Are the Women? February, 2204

1. **Intelligence**: Review recruiting policies, processes and practices to ensure that candid conversations occur to ensure women get off to the best possible start.
   - *Encourage candidates to network with people who will be in a position to help them assess whether they are a good fit with the company and for the role.*
   - *Share relevant information freely including position profiles, competency analyses, organizational charts and compensation guidelines early in the process.*
   - *Encourage senior executives to be accessible and open throughout the process. Ensure they are able to clearly articulate expectations regarding how success will be measured.*

2. **Support:** Coach senior executives to coach and support women in leadership positions. Our experience suggests that many senior executives are not unwilling; rather they are unaware of the steps they can take and how to take them.
   - *Encourage senior executives to engage in dialogues that cover more than simply the business at hand but also include information regarding their work styles and feedback preferences. Convince them that the more specificity they offer regarding their expectations about communication and the more they learn about the other person's expectations, the better.*
   - *Persuade senior leaders to ask directly what support will be helpful, consider the requests carefully and deliver on the ones he/she commits to without fail.*

3. **Resources:** Take a fresh look at how resources are allocated in the firm. Review the processes and consider the internal politics of who gets what and how they get it.
   - *Conduct an "audit" to ensure that women leaders are not being asked to do more with less.*
   - *Encourage all who control the purse-strings to be flexible about new ideas and approaches to resource allocations.*

4. **Buy-in:** Recognize that women leaders face high hurdles as they work to establish credibility with their teams.
   - *Coach senior executives to facilitate listening tours and other learning opportunities by making introductions to peers in other cross-functional roles.*
   - *Encourage both line managers and Human Resource partners to support decisions women leaders make about redeployment or more difficult decisions about termination.*
   - *Assess your culture to determine how mistakes are treated. Do people see them as learning opportunities? If not, what steps can the company take to document best practices and to share lessons learned?*

5. **Visibility and Value:** Take a hard look at the work is valued in your organization, who is doing it and the implications— both long and short term— to the business.

- *Study what is considered important work. Determine whether other important contributions may be ignored or de-valued and if so, why. Decide what, if anything, should change and start to change it.*
- *Track the numbers of women in line positions. Ensure that women who wish to do so are given opportunities to move into line jobs to gain profit and loss management experience.*
- *Put measures in place to ensure parity in compensation. Women should not have to ask over and over again.*

Both individual women and the organizations they work for have a role to play in supporting women leaders to make a difference, whether they are new to the role or not. It's not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. Women have earned their places at the table; companies should make sure there is a chair.