



Negotiating Women, Inc.
Training. Consulting. Advancing Women.

Leadership Development for Women: A New Approach^{*}

by

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For at least a quarter of a century, women have been entering the professional and managerial ranks of U.S. corporations at about the same rate as men, yet they remain dramatically underrepresented at senior levels.ⁱ An earlier generation's hope that filling the pipeline would eventually produce parity up through the ranks has clearly not materialized. If these data suggest that the paucity of women in leadership is problematic, a central question is how one accounts for it. Some explain the situation by focusing on the women themselves—they don't ask and if they did they might be more likely to achieve the same outcomes as their male colleagues who do.ⁱⁱ Others focus on the observation that women take themselves out of contention by opting out of opportunitiesⁱⁱⁱ and that differences in earnings can be partially explained by women choosing family over work.^{iv} The problem with this focus, which is solely on women and the choices they make or do not make, leads to leadership development programs aimed at "fixing" women.^v While these programs may impart some useful skills and tactics, they do not address the organizational realities women face and as such are not likely foster in them a sustained capacity for leadership.

A different way to understand the underrepresentation of women in leadership is to focus on organizations, rather than individuals, to look at the systemic factors that can contribute to gender inequities, and then work to design programs that help women and their organizations address these issues. Our focus has been on what we and others label *second generation gender bias*,^{vi} the powerful yet often invisible barriers to women's advancement that arise from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men. Leadership programs for women, if they are to fulfill the promise of expanding the pool of women leaders need to address second generation gender bias at both the individual and organizational levels. Below we describe some of these second generation biases and how a Women's Leadership Programs (WLP) can effectively address them.

^{*} Adapted from "Taking Gender into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs," R.J. Ely, H. Ibarra, and D.M. Kolb. *Academy of Management Journal of Learning and Education*, 2011, 10(3)

Gendered career paths and gendered work. Because most organizational structures and work practices were designed when women had only a small presence in the labor force, many taken-for-granted organizational features reflect men's lives and situations, making it difficult for women to get on—and stay—the course to leadership.^{vii} For example, expectations about time and commitment, functional rotations and multiple relocations are more likely to fit the model of full time workers with stay at home spouses. The result is a vicious cycle: people see men as better fit for leadership roles partly because the paths to such roles were designed with men mind; the belief that men are a better fit propels more men into leadership roles, which in turn reinforces the perception that men are a better fit, leaving gendered practices intact. In a WLP, we help participants work on this issue in several ways. First, the program itself is based on a second generation framework that helps women become aware of how the opportunity structures in their organizations may be gendered and how it impacts them and their organization. But fostering this awareness, women develop a sense of agency that helps them individually and collectively. This sense of agency is further developed in several of the program modules. In the **negotiation** module, we use a “shadow negotiation” framework, with its focus on strategic “moves and turns,” to give women tools to negotiate over potentially controversial issues and decisions.^{viii} For example, participants experiment with ways they can put themselves forward for leadership opportunities for which they have skills and experience, but have not been considered. In the **leading change** module, cohorts from different organizations plan together how they can raise these issues to promote equity in their companies, furthering the opportunities for other women, but also in ways that contribute to the effectiveness of their organizations.^{ix}

Women's lack of access to networks and sponsors. Informal networks can shape career trajectories by regulating access to jobs; channeling the flow of information and referrals; creating influence and reputation; supplying emotional support, feedback, political advice, and protection; and increasing the likelihood and speed of promotion. Women generally have less access to these networks, particularly to those who would sponsor them for leadership roles.^x Further, powerful, high-status men tend to support and channel career development opportunities to male subordinates, whom they judge as more likely to succeed than women.^{xi} Thus, women's networks yield fewer leadership opportunities, provide less visibility for their leadership claims, and generate less recognition and endorsement.

Networking plays a major role in a WLP. The **networking** module gives participants a framework and assessment tools for exploring how gender may be operating in their networks as well as opportunities to identify gaps in their relationships and strategies for improvement. But networking in a WLP goes beyond assessment by helping women find ways to deepen their networks through interactions with key players. In WLPs that span several off-sites, participants have opportunities to work with assigned advocates or sponsors to build the kinds of relationships that are often lacking for women.^{xii}

Few role models for women. Relative to their male counterparts, aspiring women leaders have less social support for learning how to credibly take on new leadership roles. People learn new roles by identifying with role models, experimenting with provisional identities, and evaluating these experiences against internal standards and external feedback. Yet a dearth of women leaders leaves younger women with few role models whose styles are feasible or congruent with their self-concepts.^{xiii} Women's under-representation in senior positions can also signal that being female is a liability,

which can discourage would-be women leaders from turning to senior women for developmental advice and support.

In its very design a WLP provides role models for women leaders. First, the programs are designed to give senior women a rare opportunity to spend time with women peers. Peer mentoring and coaching help participants become more open and less defensive as they learn that other women share experiences they thought were unique and as they see how others have dealt with similar issues. Beyond a community of peers, a WLP creates a “holding environment,” where participants can candidly assess the cultural, organizational, and individual factors that have shaped who they are as leaders and can help them figure out who they are and want to be in their next leadership role.^{xiv} The uses of cases that track the arcs of different women’s careers provide a forum to discuss the different ways that successful women lead. In most WLPs, senior leaders play a major role as speakers, panelists, and mentors to the women in the program talking frankly about their leadership journeys and challenges. In attending these programs, these senior leaders, not only serve as role models in how they have managed their lives, but also in their willingness to help and support other women on their journeys.

Double binds. In most cultures, the meaning of what it means to be a leader is masculine, --decisive, assertive, and independent.^{xv} By contrast, women are thought to be communal—friendly, unselfish, care-taking—and thus lacking in the qualities required for success in leadership roles.^{xvi} The mismatch between qualities attributed to women and qualities thought necessary for leadership can place women leaders in a double bind. Women in positions of authority are thought too aggressive or not aggressive enough, and what appears assertive, self-confident, or entrepreneurial in a man often looks abrasive, arrogant, or self-promoting in a woman.^{xvii}

Women in a WLP often receive mixed messages about themselves and their styles, frequently through **assessment and feedback** portions of a WLP. The contradictory feedback can leave women puzzling over how to strike just the right balance between two seemingly opposing styles; being told to soften a hard-charging style that has heretofore been effective then a call to be more feminine. Both messages can lead women to become preoccupied with how they are coming across to others, and both can engender resentment. Interpreting these messages in the context of double binds helps participants make sense of the feedback they receive. Through peer coaching and modules on **team leadership**, participants see that by anchoring on their values and on larger leadership purposes, they can shift their focus outward, toward shared goals and the work necessary to accomplish them.^{xviii} Further, in contrast to typical sessions on **branding**, where people are encouraged to think about their image, in a WLP, women are invited to redefine who they need to be and what they need to do in light of what they value and want to accomplish. In short, by anchoring women on their leadership purposes, our programs offer women a way to navigate the double bind and remain authentic in the process.

Women leaders’ heightened visibility and scrutiny. Some women rise to leadership positions in spite of these challenges, but as they rise in the hierarchy, they become increasingly scarce and so become more visible and subject to greater scrutiny. The fewer women in the organization’s upper echelons, the more vulnerable a woman may feel to the possibility of failure. Making a significant leadership transition may also require that she relinquish work she enjoys and does well—stepping outside of one’s comfort zone—which can feel particularly threatening for women, who may worry about

their ability to sustain success as they move up the corporate ladder. Feeling that they are under the microscope, women can become risk-averse, overly focused on details, and prone to micro-manage which can further undermine perceptions of them as a promising leader. ^{xix}

Helping high potential women make successful leadership transitions, and getting the support to do, is a major objective of a WLP. The program helps women track timelines of their career. Using cases and their own experiences, women develop their **leadership story** over time to help them see patterns in their choices and the passion and purpose that drive them. In the program, they learn more about the leader they are today through **assessment**, company **feedback**, and generally by participation in the program. As they prepare for new leadership roles, they first consider how **'what got you here might not get you there.'** In this module, women identify behaviors that have contributed to their success--often these are operational roles--but that may preclude them from developing the skills and strategic perspectives that are required of more senior leaders. Recognizing these trade-offs, they are better prepared to make a critical leadership transition. **Action planning** is the culmination of the leadership story. Planning where they might want to be in three years, they work backwards to map the steps they need to take in the near term. A critical part of this planning process is arranging critical conversations with bosses and sponsors.

Seeing oneself, and being seen as a leader, is not simply the result of formally held leadership positions, but is an evolutionary process by which one comes to see oneself and be seen by others as a leader. ^{xx} A person takes actions aimed at asserting leadership, others affirm or disaffirm those actions, encouraging or discouraging further assertions, and so on. Through this back and forth, the would-be leader accumulates experiences that inform his or her sense of self as a leader, as well as feedback about his or her fit for taking up the leader role. For a woman, this process can be stunted by the second-generation biases she faces. A WLP that is based on three major principles--situating topics and tools in an analysis of second generation gender bias; creating a holding environment to support women's leadership development work; and anchoring participants on their leadership purpose prepares high potential women to take up—and take in—new leadership roles.

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ⁱ Women currently constitute only 2.2 percent of *Fortune* 500 CEOsⁱ and about 15 percent of these companies' board seats and corporate officer positionsⁱ The gap widens for women of color, who account for about twelve percent of the managerial and professional labor forceⁱ but a scant three percent of *Fortune* 500 directors; only three of the 500 CEOs are women of color.ⁱ Furthermore, progress in women's advancement achieved over the past several decades has slowed considerably in recent years

ⁱⁱ (Babcock and Laschever, 2003)

ⁱⁱⁱ (Belkin, 2003)

^{iv} (Blau and Kahn, 2007).

^v (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000).

^{vi} Sturm, 2000; Kolb and McGinn, 2009

^{vii} (Acker, 1990, Bailyn, 2006, Hewlett, 2007).

^{viii} (Kolb & Williams, 2000; 2003).

^{ix} See Ely and Meyerson 2000

^x (Ibarra, 1992; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010)

^{xi} (McGuire, 2002).

^{xii} (Hewlett, et al, 2011).

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- xiii (Ely, 1994; Ibarra, 1999).
xiv (Petriglieri & Petriblieri, 2010)
xv (Bailyn, 2006; Calás & Smircich, 1991).
xvi (Fletcher, 2004).
xvii (Ely and Rhode, 2010).
xviii (Morriss, Ely, & Frei, 2011; Quinn, 2004).
xix (Kanter, 1977; Kram & McCollom-Hampton, 1998
xx DeRue and Ashford, 2010