



Expert Speak

Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Women's Journey to Leadership

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Despite the challenges that stand in the way of women climbing up the career ladder, many women have shattered the glass ceiling and gained key leadership positions. Over the past few decades, the number of women in leadership roles has increased significantly. Yet, research shows that the biases and microaggressions stemming from gendered role perceptions and assumptions of their capabilities can cause women in leadership to be faced with a trust crisis. How does one approach this deep-rooted issue? Gauri Padmanabhan, Leadership Advisor, discusses the intricacies of leadership among women.

Over the past few decades, women have made remarkable progress in the workforce by breaking down barriers and challenging gender norms. They have gained recognition for their impressive multitasking capabilities, strong leadership skills, and determination. However, as women grow in their careers and move into leadership positions, the gender gap widens at a drastic scale. Several studies have indicated that women are not the immediate choice when it comes to hiring for C-suite positions and they only constitute about 13% of the total CEOs among the Fortune 500.

Even though there is enough data that clearly indicates that diverse leadership teams tend to produce more profitable, healthier, and sustainable organisations in the long run, the representation of women in leadership positions in large companies globally, continues to lag. This is despite conscious and formal efforts being made at most large companies to improve diversity ratios through the inclusion of women on leadership teams. As we strive towards gender equality in the corporate world, it is important to understand the obstacles that women leaders encounter as they move up the career ladder. Let us explore some of the common challenges that women face at both, organisational and personal level, and look at ways in which they can overcome these challenges.

Organisational structure plays a vital role in supporting women as they balance personal responsibilities with professional commitments. To create career pathways that accommodate the breadth of responsibilities that women shoulder, organisations must rethink their policies and infrastructure. By providing flexible work arrangements, family-friendly policies, and supportive networks, organisations can create an environment where women and other minorities can balance personal and professional commitments and build successful careers. This can help in breaking down barriers that prevent women from advancing in their careers and promote greater gender equality in the workplace.

While several barriers that stand in the way of women's professional growth are based on organisational structures, there are others that women carry within themselves and can be overcome through support and building confidence. Women often question their ability to accomplish critical projects, compete for promotions, or undertake managerial tasks due to the discriminatory environment they face. This dynamic can perpetuate a cycle of self-doubt that undermines

their confidence in the workplace. Women often hesitate to take on a bigger role or a project unless they believe they have met all the requirements. Men, on the other hand, tend to take on challenges for which they may only meet some of the requirements. To break this cycle, it is crucial for women to be coached and mentored so that they are fully capable and deserving of opportunities for growth and advancement that present themselves. The right mentors can play a crucial role in the development and success of women leaders. By sharing their own experiences and expertise, mentors provide valuable insights into how to navigate the workplace and build valuable networks. They also coach women to make the strategic decisions that can help advance their careers.

It is important to acknowledge that networking is a strategic reality in today's world that can open doors for new opportunities and help women gain immense visibility. By connecting with mentors and leaders, they can receive guidance and support, enabling them to make the right choices and pursue a path towards success. Equally important is being seen and heard during the course of a career, which often times does not come naturally to women. They tend to hesitate to come forward and make themselves noticed, often for fear of being labelled aggressive or pushy. However, to be successful and build yourself into leadership roles, it is crucial to build a presence and a brand.

Also, women often come into the workplace with certain traits and mindsets that come in the way of their professional growth, such as the way they balance work and home, or how they look at traits such as the need to be liked as a leader. Even though leadership and likeability are not mutually exclusive, certain stereotypes dictate how 'likeable' attributes for women are different from that of men. For example, when male leaders are stern or strict, no one usually bats an eye. However, when a woman exercises authority, she can be labelled as 'aggressive' and 'demanding'. Therefore, unlearning these stereotypes and discarding such conditioning is a crucial step towards impactful leadership.

Dealing With Trust Deficit

The entire notion of the trust deficit shown towards women leaders is perpetuated through stereotypical assumptions that question their ability at every step. A workforce that may be predominantly weighted towards male employees, might

have questions like ‘will she be there for the long haul?’, which simply assumes that at one point or the other in ones work life, the woman might opt to prioritise personal responsibilities and may require a brief sabbatical or simply a pause for a short time. These assumptions further lead to more questions about her ability to lead and integrate a larger workforce.



When we delve deeper into how women look at providing value to the organisation, a common observation is that they tend to take on a lot of responsibilities and tasks in order to prove their worth. This is diametrically opposite to how men deal with their workload; they either ask for help, a team, or simply state that they have too much on their plate. While women are good at multitasking, it is important for them to learn to delegate and bring along others in order to achieve the desired goal and make an impact in the organisation.

In order to navigate this trust deficit, women need to be confident in their ability to lead, to question, and to delegate and just as importantly demonstrate this confidence.



Confidence, backed by capabilities, is what enables a leader to take smarter risks.

Showcasing and allowing these attributes to trickle down the organisation helps build a foundation of trust, and once this foundation is established, women would be ready to build a culture and business ecosystem that would stay intact for generations to come.

It is equally important for women to assess and analyse the opportunities that come their way. Sometimes, women are offered leadership positions when the organisation is going through a crisis. Being thoughtful about how certain roles would add to their professional journey and also to how they can add to the organisation in terms of building a good work environment is essential. Saying yes to every role is not the way to go.

What are the Values That ‘Women’ Leaders Should Bring?

For the longest time, it was believed that women leaders brought values like empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence into organisations. The expectations around these ‘soft’ traits have undergone a significant shift, driven by the pandemic and changing work patterns. These have now become elevated priorities for most leadership teams across the globe. It is now acknowledged that attributes like inclusivity, consensus building, empathy, and compassion are essential leadership traits that are non-negotiable. While we acknowledge women’s contribution in promoting these attributes, it is also important to encourage women to develop and nurture qualities like decisiveness, which are often associated with male leaders. By breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting gender-neutral leadership qualities, we can create a more diverse and effective leadership landscape, where individuals are valued for their skills and abilities rather than their gender.

The Way Forward

As a society, we must prioritise the creation of forums that support minorities coming into the work force or who are at a mid-point in their careers, providing them with the resources and guidance, necessary to move into leadership roles. This is crucial for building a future where leadership positions are not defined by gender. To make this shift towards gender-neutral leadership, we must address the challenges that women face much earlier in their careers and give them the opportunities that can give them the confidence, courage, and capability, which are the three C’s of leadership, to excel and inspire others in the organisation.

With continuous efforts, we can create a workplace that is more inclusive and equitable, where women are given the opportunities and support they need to reach their full potential as leaders.

Gauri Padmanabhan has over three decades of experience in leadership advisory, consulting, and research with large multinational corporations. Today, she works independently as a leadership advisor to Boards and CEOs and also sits on the boards of several companies. Gauri’s sectors of interest are FMCG, life sciences, and education. She is passionate about driving DEI initiatives in organisations.