17 Truths about Women’s Leadership
Insights from the 12th Annual Women’s Leadership Conference
June 16-17, 2016 | New York

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”
– Eleanor Roosevelt

Progress is stagnant for women in the workplace, particularly in US-based S&P 500 companies—only 4.6 percent of CEOs are women, and women hold only 19.9 percent of board seats.1 We need to make cultural changes both in the workplace and in society, or nothing will change. In the meantime, women need to help other women succeed, and seasoned women leaders need to nurture and develop less experienced women. Companies can help by using employee resource groups (ERGs) to shape business strategy, lead diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives, disrupt views on aging, and engage men.

When more than 200 practitioners and experts met to talk about advances for women in the workplace, we took notes. Here are highlights.

Diversity and inclusion can no longer be nice-to-have functions.

In the past, companies viewed D&I as add-ons to their regular business strategy. Now companies are realizing that they need to weave D&I into all aspects of how the organization operates if they want to stay relevant. Leaders and employees need to look like their company’s customers, and a company’s products and services need to appeal to the populations in the countries where it operates.

1. D&I should inform all business strategy. One bank formed an enterprise-wide D&I council with members across many business functions and geographies—it uses this council as well as its ERGs to guide business decisions. For example, these groups help create solutions for stronger communities in locations where the bank operates (e.g., providing access to capital to populations with no or limited access to lending and banking services) as part of its corporate social responsibility strategy; help research where and how to market new products and services as well as speak with customers to find out what new products are needed; and help shape talent and acquisition practices (the best way to hire veterans) and learning and development initiatives (after discovering that Latina women leave after reaching a certain level, it created a development program to encourage them to stay).

2. Having diverse leaders and employees and building an inclusive culture where employees feel psychologically safe to speak up can lead to increased productivity and innovation.

Coaching is a powerful tool for advancing women.

Companies that are known for being great places to work—especially for helping women grow their careers—offer coaching through women-only leadership programs, one-on-one and peer coaching, and networking. Coaching is most frequently used for retention, preparing for a promotion, and transitioning to a new position.

3. An adept coach will ask targeted questions to help disrupt a woman’s way of thinking about herself. The right questions help the coachee unlock potential, own her own power, and banish self-doubt.

4. One coach said she has to work more closely with women on developing confidence than she does with men. She finds that the women she works with frequently express that they lack the confidence to take risks, be less than perfect, and ask for expanded roles and raises. She blends building up these traits with the elements of thinking strategically and developing business acumen.
5. The biggest issue: how to offer coaching to people in lower levels of the organization. Companies are finding cost-effective ways to reach large pools of employees through virtual learning, webcasts, and posting articles or other information in a centralized database, such as SharePoint.

For more information on coaching, stay tuned for our upcoming report, *2016 Global Executive Coaching Survey*, focusing on the state of executive coaching, which is constantly evolving to support dynamic business and leadership needs. This benchmarking study, delivered biennially since 2006, supports and informs the design of competitive executive coaching programs in organizations globally. The findings of the 2016 report are based on survey responses from organizations worldwide, expert interviews, and in-depth case studies of proven coaching practices of 11 companies from around the world.

Our insights will cover:

- Growth of targeted coaching methods
- Trends in coaching rates globally in a postrecession era
- Strategies for developing a coaching culture
- Growth of internal coaching practices

**Women have strong executive presence.**

Gaining executive presence is the one of the primary reasons people seek coaching. Executive presence can be defined as the qualities of a leader that engage, inspire, align, and move people to act.

6. Executive presence consists of three dimensions: character (integrity), substance (credibility, wisdom, and vision), and style (communication and interaction with others to get things done). Each of these dimensions includes five additional qualities (see Figure 1 on page 4).

7. According to an assessment on executive presence, peers, direct reports, and managers see little difference between men and women on 60 percent of 90 items measured. Where there are differences, women are often rated higher.² On average, women are viewed as stronger than men in the social-emotional and relational qualities (integrity, concern, humility, resonance, interactivity, and inclusiveness) as well as in appearance. Men are rated higher overall on traits such as restraint, practical wisdom, and vision.³

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³ Bates, p. 200.
8. There is no significant difference in how others perceive the confidence of men and woman as measured by the assessment. In fact, the peers, managers, and direct reports who completed the assessment viewed women the same or higher in confidence than men, in most instances. So, while a woman’s view of her own level confidence may hold her back, others likely don’t share that view.⁴

9. Women CEOs and other top female executives have four traits in common: resilience, innovation, persistence, and empathy, according to extensive research for a forthcoming book.

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⁴ Bates, p. 213.
Don’t forget about the men.

Most leadership in corporate America is white, male, and apparently heterosexual. As a result, men who belong to all three categories are often overlooked in D&I. Involve men in D&I conversations because they can help create inclusive workplaces.

10. There is an assumption that men don’t care about diversity. They are often not involved in D&I because they lack information on gender equality or aren’t aware of the ramifications of gender bias.

11. Companies should make a concerted effort to engage men in D&I because even in groups that appear to be homogeneous, such as white males, there are differences—they just may not be visible, such as religion, schooling, and backgrounds.

12. Men often retreat to the sidelines because they are afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, are afraid of reverse discrimination, and fear losing the approval of other men. Instead of alienating men, companies should try to empathize with them because it can be very hard for them to break out of their traditional male norms. Because they are subject to gender conditioning, they often feel they have to live up to certain stereotypes, such as viewing asking for help as a weakness, having to hide their feelings and empathy for others, and feeling the need to act tough, “man up,” and enjoy only stereotypically male things. These stereotypes have become so ingrained in society that they are viewed as male norms.

13. Men can help remove barriers to gender equality by defying the aforementioned traditional masculine norms and visibly supporting a sense of fair play.

14. Men who were mentored by women are much more aware of gender bias and tend to have a greater sense of empathy.
It is time to disrupt society’s views on aging.

Ageism is rampant, and women get the brunt of it. Women leaders need to disrupt society’s views on aging.

15. Don’t just accept your age—own it. Fight to change the perception of aging so we can change the culture. This is important because people are living longer, and the fastest-growing age segment is people over 85.⁵

16. Many older people want to work beyond the traditional retirement age because work gives their lives meaning. Therefore, it is up to women in the workplace to change society’s view of older people, and help everyone realize that more seasoned workers are as competent and able to do the job as anyone else.

17. People used to say: “Can I work for a woman?” Now they’re saying: “Can I work for a younger person?”—as in, “Will I be able to mentally accept having a boss who is twenty years younger than me?”

These insights represent highlights from discussions held by 200 senior executives who attended the Women’s Leadership conference. The views expressed are those of the presenters and participants of the conference. Presenters include executives from a cross-section of companies and industries:

Jimmie Paschall  
**Wells Fargo**  
EVP, Enterprise Diversity and Inclusion

Lisa Shipley, PhD  
**Merck**  
VP, Pharmacokinetics, Pharmacodynamics & Drug Metabolism

Bobbi Dangerfield  
**Dell, Inc.**  
Vice President, IT Integration Office

Sharonne Hayes, MD  
**Mayo Clinic**  
Director, Diversity and Inclusion, Professor of Medicine and Cardiovascular Diseases

Sonya Holt  
**US Government**  
Implementation Lead, Director’s Advisory Group

Luann Pendy, PhD  
**Medtronic**  
SVP, Global Quality

Joann Lublin  
**The Wall Street Journal**  
Management News Editor

Denise Kasper  
**Capital One**  
Executive Coach

Elizabeth Moran  
**ADP**  
Senior Director, Global Talent & Development

Cindy Pace  
**MetLife**  
Assistant Vice President, Global Diversity & Inclusion

Gisele Garcia Shelley  
**The Conference Board**  
Program Director, Executive Coaching Council

Sheryl Robinson  
**BD**  
Worldwide Director, Regulatory Affairs

Renee Johnson  
**Booz Allen Hamilton**  
Director, Diversity & Inclusion

Michelle Kilroy  
**Southern Company**  
Director, Talent Management and Workforce Intelligence

Deborah Kullman  
**Eaton**  
Vice President and General Manager, Chassis Driveline Controls

Eileen Simon  
**MasterCard**  
Chief Franchise Integrity Officer

Gretchen Stroud  
**Hilton Worldwide**  
Vice President, Global Learning and Talent

Elizabeth Salib, PhD  
**Catalyst**  
Director, Research

Sophia Muirhead  
**The Conference Board**  
SVP, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary

Lavanya Sayam  
**Because a Girl Can Write - Standing Tall in an Unequal World**  
Author

Leezel Tanglao  
**CNN Money**  
Assistant Managing Editor

Yvonne Wolf  
**GSK Vaccines**  
Sr. Director, Enterprise Organizational Development Talent, Leadership and Organisation Development Centre of Excellence

Suzanne Bates  
**Bates**  
CEO

Jo Ann Jenkins  
**AARP**  
CEO

J.P. Pawliw-Fry  
**Institute for Health and Human Potential**  
President and Founder

Pamela Wagoner  
**WR Grace**  
(former) CHRO

Tacy Byham, PhD  
**DDI**  
CEO

Dawn McGinley  
**3M**  
Diversity & Inclusion Strategic Leader

Sarita Soldz  
**Ashland Inc.**  
Director of Marketing, Valvoline Instant Oil Change

Stephanie Linnartz  
**Marriott International**  
EVP and Chief Marketing and Commercial Officer
SNAPSHOT

Coaching corner: advice from the experts

Here are highlights of some practical advice offered to women throughout the conference.

- Rely on the courage of your convictions. Don’t listen to the negative and judgmental comments of others—do what your heart tells you to do.

- Look for a chance to innovate in your new management role. Play to your strengths, and be sure to have a fallback plan, such as a promise from an executive that you can move to a new position (instead of being fired) if the risk doesn’t work out.

- Never give up, even when you’re turned away repeatedly, and don’t be afraid to take a less-than-desirable job once you get that “yes.” One woman who wanted to switch from a career in theater to one in television wouldn’t take “no” for an answer from a television executive, and took a job as a production assistant at a start-up cable station. Thirteen years later, she was named CEO of the cable conglomerate.

- Don’t let setbacks get you down. They build backbone and make you stronger. Use them to leapfrog to the next thing.

- To get to higher roles, you don’t need to work harder—you need to delegate more, let go of the need to be perfect, and stop mentally rehashing things that went wrong (because everyone else has moved on).

- Stop living in the mindset of: “What do they (the company, family members) want?” Instead, take the mindset of “What do I want?” Put your needs first, much like when airlines say parents should put on their oxygen masks before their child’s.

- We all have self-doubt and insecurities. We need to learn how to shut these down and acknowledge them differently.
SNAPSHOT

You can perform well under pressure by changing your thought patterns

Pressure ruthlessly diminishes judgment, decision making, creativity, attention, and performance for everyone—even retired professional basketball superstar Michael Jordan. He’s able to perform so well when the game is on the line because he has learned methods to ensure these abilities are diminished less.

1. When we’re under pressure, our brains pump more cortisol—the stress hormone—into our system. When this happens, we become more sensitive to failure and mistakes, our short-term memory is impaired, and our focus becomes narrow.

2. Viewing pressure as a crisis changes our brain behavior and therefore our physiology. You can remedy this by viewing pressure as an opportunity—doing so lowers cortisol and changes your brain chemistry.

3. It is a myth that you need to be perfect to be successful. You just need to go into the pressure moment knowing it won’t be perfect, be prepared for the inevitable mistake, and not let mistakes affect you negatively.

4. Women react differently than men in stressful situations because of biology. Women have a bigger hippocampus than men do, so there is greater blood flow to their brains when under duress. Women also have a more fully developed prefrontal cortex. As a result, when they are under pressure, they weigh more variables, consider more options, see more context, and visualize a wider array of solutions to a problem than men do.
SNAPSHOT

The role of inclusion in fostering innovation

Inclusion and innovation are indeed correlated, according to the report *Inclusion + Innovation: Leveraging Diversity of Thought to Generate Business Growth* by The Conference Board. Researchers surveyed more than 200 D&I leaders and those who lead innovation around the world and determined that inclusion drives innovation by creating diversity of thought.

Other report highlights include:

- The most innovative companies were four times more likely to be highly inclusive than those with sporadic innovation.

- Making sure employees feel psychologically safe—they feel free to be themselves and voice their unique perspectives without fear—is a prerequisite for creating an inclusive environment. The most productive teams at a technology company had one thing in common: team members felt psychologically safe. Foster diversity of thought by making it safe for everyone to speak up.

- D&I and innovation leaders share some goals and use similar language; however, they mean different things when they talk about inclusion. D&I leaders focus on demographic differences such as race, gender, and age. Innovation leaders focus on inclusion related to geography, function, organizational level, and skill. Each group should broaden its definition of inclusiveness to include the other’s definition.

- To spark diversity of thought, D&I leaders focus inside the organization. Innovation leaders also look outside, including crowdsourcing, contractors, and joint ventures. Both groups of leaders need to work together to tap into internal and external sources.

- At most companies, D&I and innovation leaders have limited contact. But at the most innovative companies, they collaborate often and their strategies are aligned.

- Both D&I and innovation leaders see eye to eye on the need for coaching, training, and development to increase inclusion, diversity of thought, and innovation.

- Most sources of differences are not visible (i.e., languages, learning styles, family status, life experiences, and talents). Companies need to broaden the definition of diversity to include the unseen things.

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continued from page 10

- If D&I and innovation are not aligned and don’t collaborate, companies may be less innovative.
- Start the conversation between D&I and innovation leaders. Here are some questions:
  - What kinds of differences contribute to innovation?
  - Which kinds of differences are associated with the best teams?
  - Can you have too much difference on one team?
  - Does it help to have more homogenous teams as a project nears its close?
  - Which managers are better at creating an inclusive environment?

SNAPSHOT

An insurance company starts a global women’s initiative

One insurer started a 14-month development program to boost the leadership aspirations of women. It focuses on the intersection of building business acumen and confidence and is conducted in cohorts of 20 to 24 people.

- The program begins with a four-day, in-person intensive. On the fourth day, participants partake in a work simulation, with a prompt such as “You’re head of a German business unit. You have encountered XYZ issues. What do you do?” The simulation provides a baseline for what needs to be developed through coaching.
- The intensive is followed by coaching pods, each of which includes two coaches and two senior executives who teach business acumen and corporate strategy. Part of the business education piece includes having participants listen to calls with shareholders and about earnings, accelerating value, and developing business models.
- Only high-potential employees are eligible to participate. They are often promoted six to nine months after completing the program.
SNAPSHOT

Practice inclusive leadership by using specific behaviors

Employees feel more included when they feel a sense of uniqueness and belonging. Leaders who are the most inclusive have four traits in common:

1. **Empowerment** They enable all direct reports to develop and excel, and they trust direct reports with mission-critical work. Direct reports feel like they belong and are an essential part of the team.

2. **Accountability** They demonstrate confidence in their direct reports by holding them responsible.

3. **Courage** They put personal interests aside to do what needs to be done and act on their convictions even if it’s risky.

4. **Humility** They learn from criticism and admit to and learn from their mistakes. Leaders who own up to their mistakes appear more human.

Inclusive leaders can practice these behaviors by supporting employees both openly and behind closed doors, creating a coaching culture, sharing their own struggles and challenges, displaying emotions, and helping to reframe problems as opportunities.
SNAPSHOT

How to start a women’s leadership employee resource group

A women’s leadership or empowerment group will be an asset to any company. Starting one is easier than you think. Here’s how:

1. **Determine whether there is a need for a women’s group** Use metrics to make your case for why the organization needs such a group, because measurement and numbers are the common language that will get the attention of top leadership. For instance, a chemical company used engagement and inclusion metrics to indicate a need for a women’s ERG.

2. **Make the group official** Find an executive sponsor, draft a charter, list how the new ERG will provide value to the organization (it will help with retention and grow the succession pipeline), have a mission (e.g., “For the inclusion and advancement of women”), create guidelines, and form a steering team.

3. **Partner with HR to help grow your program** HR can provide metrics on employee retention, promotions, and leadership as well as membership and retention for the ERG. One company used metrics to help it make the case to launch a leader accelerator program for women. You don’t need all the metrics at first. Just figure out which metrics will work best for your company.

4. **Build the ERG’s credibility** Make sure the ERG will have a business impact and not merely serve as a social and networking group. Use metrics to show how the group has benefited the company as a whole. A women’s group at a packaged products company worked with HR to launch workplace flexibility as a perk for everyone, and not just as a women’s issue. Once it was able to show its positive impact, it was able to ask for further resources.

5. **Make sure the group has external visibility** This will help you recruit women because they will see that your company is a great place for women to work.
BENCHMARKS

Conference attendees were polled on the following questions:

Chart 1
**What is the biggest challenge in your organization with respect to advancing women?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attracting high-potential women</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaining high-potential women</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of flexible work arrangements</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meritocracy</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 2
**Do you participate in women's networking groups?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat, when asked</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once per month</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annually</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 3
**How often do you use social networking communities (like LinkedIn) to provide professional updates?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each week</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once per month</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annually</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 4
**Which program would you most likely use in your organization in the upcoming year?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership training</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women-led networks</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 5
**Which flexible work arrangement would you consider to be most important?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrangement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work at home</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity leave</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time hours</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabbatical</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
ACTIONS TO TAKE

What actions will participants take after the conference? A postconference “action survey” highlights a range of objectives.

Leadership

- Research employee resource groups (ERG) because my current company doesn’t have one
- Leveraging ERG groups to not only network, but impact business results
- Use our women’s ERG to help with business strategy
- Have an ERG play a stronger role in disrupting aging
- Add agenda items to our women’s council, such as where to find available support within the organization
- Push for a formalized women’s leadership program; build a strong women’s leadership network
- When designing executive presence training, avoid the one-size-fits-all approach
- Offer leadership development to women at levels in the organization with high turnover
- Recommend that we use group coaching as a cost-effective means of continuing leadership coaching in the face of shrinking budgets
- Develop specific skills in people we’re planning to promote
- Organize a tiger team to identify specific activities for younger women to help expand their potential as emerging leaders
- Identify clear goals and objectives for troop leaders within my service unit; personally send them an invitation for next year’s kickoff meeting (August)
- Focus on executive presence for women
- Provide young women with advancement potential the support they need to make it to the next level
- Reevaluate our metrics; add more metrics

D&I

- Support our new VP-HR in driving our new D&I strategic initiative through the organization
- Tie our diversity & inclusion programs to our business metrics for sustainability
- Build defined communications and mentoring programs to include our male employees and leadership in D&I
- Engage men differently (men’s inclusion) as part of our women’s network
- Network with male peers to change their [perception of] female advancement
Start a Men Advocating Real Change chapter at my company
Address the male perspective in our new Integrated Leadership for Success program
Coach men when they unconsciously act exclusive

Personal development
Lean into my diversity
Use my experiences, challenges, and successes to mentor others
Set up three lunch meetings before end of July
Study/learn/observe/track other highly successful woman executives
Consider interviewing an executive sponsor
Focus on my executive presence
Implement ways of dealing with pressure and stress
Observe/capture my emotions/experiences when I’m under pressure
Respond to pressure differently: acknowledge to myself that I will not be perfect and use visualization prior to “big” pressure situations
Don’t worry about being perfect when under pressure, act anyway with no regrets
Let go of the perfectionist in me
Know that asking does not hurt; don’t be afraid to ask for things
Avoid drama in the workplace to get ahead
Plan and live for my advancing years
Related Resources from The Conference Board

Publications
Inclusion + Innovation: Leveraging Diversity of Thought to Generate Business Growth
To understand the enablers and barriers to leveraging inclusion to capture new ideas, The Conference Board conducted a global survey of leaders responsible for either innovation or diversity and inclusion.

Future-Skilling Your Workforce: Leveraging People Strategies for Developing Future Capabilities
Companies need to future-skill their talent to increase agility and better position themselves for a volatile future. The key is having a people ecosystem that focuses on integrating talent management systems holistically.

2014 Executive Coaching Survey
External and internal coaching are being used to develop critical skills. This report focuses on both practices and allows organizations to benchmark against more than 140 respondents.

Webcasts (on-demand)
The Do’s and Don’ts of Corporate Women’s Networks
As the title suggests, this webcast focuses on the do’s and don’ts of corporate women’s networks and how to ensure they support, rather than undermine, gender progress.

Book Discussion: All the Leader You Can Be
In this webcast, executive coach Suzanne Bates identifies 15 traits associated with strong executive presence to help viewers become all the leaders they can be.

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Big Data Working Group
Career Development Practitioner Council
Chief Human Resources Council
Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability Council
The Conference Board Diversity & Inclusion New Leaders Academy
Data & Analytics Working Group
Diversity & Inclusion Executives Council
Diversity & Inclusion Leadership Council
Diversity & Inclusion in Business Council
Executive Coaching Council
Global Business Women Leaders Council
Global Business Women Leaders Council II
Global Diversity & Inclusion Executives Council
Global Human Resources Council
Human Capital Analytics Council
Human Capital Analytics Council II
Leadership Council on Advancing Women
Leadership Council on Advancing Women II
Leadership Development Council
Leadership, Talent & Learning Council
Talent Management Executives Council
Workforce Analytics Institute Council
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