

It's lonely at the top

Organizational challenges for female executives

Discussions of gender diversity often focus on biology and family responsibilities. For many people these are the predominant reasons why so few women reach the top in business. But while they are no doubt important, these issues siphon attention away from other important factors.

ONE OF THE most significant and most neglected of these factors is the minority situation many women find themselves in when they reach the middle-manager level and beyond. Women's lonely status represents a major structural challenge for the corporate world, but it can be addressed through greater inclusiveness and sensitivity.

Many executive women today lead a double life. At home, they typically are the project manager of the family and the primary caregiver. They are anything but lonely. At work, however, they enter a male-dominated culture when they get promoted. Generally speaking, the higher a woman rises in the corporation, the more likely she is to be the only female member of her immediate peer group. This creates a high degree of visibility that may make her the envy of others. But it also can create a strong feeling of loneliness that can negatively affect her motivation, behavior, and work.

The feeling of loneliness stems from being "other" than the dominant group. The solo woman in a group is expected to represent all women – a very heavy burden to carry. Indeed, most executive women – and men, for that matter – are rarely perfect representatives of traditional gender behavior. Today, both women and men need a special mix of qualities to climb to the top, and traditional behaviors fall short.

The lonely, minority experience can be daunting for many women. The feeling of loneliness usually disappears when the minority exceeds 30 percent of the peer group, but until then, executive women must struggle to overcome its damaging effects on motivation and performance. Some women come to feel part of the group. But many never do. As a result, we see far too many talented women leave a promising career at the point when they experience this feeling of otherness most acutely. Often, it's at the middle-manager level, but it also can occur later in a woman's career. No matter when women opt out, their departures contribute to the female brain drain and perpetuate the glass ceiling.

The American researcher Wanda Wallace published an

interesting study in 2008 that focuses on the organizational challenges and informal dynamics surrounding executive women in the workplace. Wallace identifies five dynamics that affect women's career progression and professional happiness, often resulting in feelings of loneliness.

Peer relationships. We all know the importance of personal networks in the workplace. As students and practitioners of executive search, we often see that the higher an executive rises in an organization, the more important peer relationships become. Peers provide access to relevant information and a path for successful execution. Wallace's research shows that men invest more time and energy in building peer relationships than women, whose networks tend to be smaller and less strategic. That's largely because many women feel the pressures of family responsibilities more intensely than men. Women often rush home from work instead of investing that extra critical hour with colleagues to share information and develop relationships.

One key mentor relationship. Girls and women often gravitate toward a single best friend, whereas men grow up playing on teams and developing a large network of looser affiliations. This dynamic usually translates into women having one key mentor relationship rather than a coterie of advisers. Typically, that mentor is the first boss, who jumpstarted a woman's career, developed her confidence, and stoked her ambitions. While a first boss may play a similarly influential role for men, the difference is that most men quickly add new mentors to their network. Women's more intimate relationship with a single mentor can serve them well for a while, but it's a risky strategy in the medium to long term. Businesses may be acquired by other companies, and mentors may get fired, retire, or leave for other reasons. The sudden loss of a mentor hits women hard, leaving them without access to information or career guidance. They feel vulnerable and marginalized in the organization and may make a quiet exit, perhaps without anybody even noticing.

Credibility. Leadership requires credibility, but women may not make the right choices to earn the credibility that will advance their careers. The problem may stem from the solo woman's high level of visibility in the male-dominated peer group. Many women are completely overwhelmed by the sudden burst of attention their visibility causes. This can lead them into two possible career traps. Some women react

with an uncompromising results-driven approach that may leave others feeling run over or bullied. Other women worry about making mistakes and stay narrowly focused within their comfort zone. This reaction will take them down the specialist career path instead of broadening their experiences and putting them in line for the C-suite. Both reactions are understandable and natural behavior for people in the minority. But neither is likely to earn women a promotion beyond the middle-manager level.

Authenticity. Both colleagues and subordinates expect authenticity from leaders. But in trying to escape their high visibility and fit in comfortably with their peer group, some women may unconsciously abandon their normal style of behavior and adopt new ways of acting. This can produce strong negative feelings in the peer group.

Loneliness. The inauthentic behavior and its consequences are likely to reinforce the final dynamic: the feeling of loneliness within the group. Research has shown that stress is generated not only by heavy workloads, but also – and perhaps most acutely for women – by feelings of exclusion and loneliness. The loneliness exacerbates the already high stress level of executive women, who tend to be highly energetic, organized individuals managing complex family logistics, along with their demanding jobs.

Overcoming the female exit challenge

Most executive women can survive – even thrive – with one or two of these dynamics affecting their daily lives. But when the five dynamics start to interact and reinforce each other, the feelings of loneliness and exclusion usually become too painful. This may lead a woman to resign and pursue her ambitions elsewhere – not because she is unhappy with her family situation, but because she feels excluded in the workplace.

This loneliness factor presents a long-term challenge to employers. But they can start to deal with it if they better understand how it develops, its dangers, and some of the potential remedies. Firstly, it helps to look at the structural context. Women start their professional careers full of enthusiasm and ambition in a more balanced world of men and women. But this environment changes dramatically when women succeed and get promoted. They find themselves in a new and unfamiliar situation with a different peer group. Suddenly, they have become a minority.

Secondly, companies need to realize that solo women in a peer group of men become “at-risk” employees. They find themselves thrust into an uncomfortable position and may decide to quit. Even if your company can report an overall good gender balance, it needs to analyze the gender distribution at different levels of the organization and offer support to women who are alone in their peer group.

Thirdly, it’s important to be aware of how communication styles can reinforce women’s feelings of loneliness and exclusion. Men often view a conversation as a contest, while many women hope to build community. Women in minority situations also tend to communicate differently than the men who dominate the peer group. Because these solo women are extremely visible, they don’t want to appear too dominant and seek to build rapport. The men in the majority face a different challenge. They need to differentiate themselves and don’t understand why women ask questions instead of taking a clear stand. Many men perceive such women as lacking confidence or being uninformed – a typical unconscious gender bias. The dominant men who define the rules regard the minority women as less capable simply because they are different. Therefore, it becomes imperative to differentiate communication from competence and performance.

Fourthly, companies need to develop a culture of inclusiveness to make women feel like a welcome and valued member of the team, thereby reducing the loneliness factor. Such a culture will benefit not only female executives, but also other groups who are in the minority and struggling to fit in. Finally, you should take a hard look at your own leadership style and the dynamics in your team. You may need to diversify your own team and create an inclusive atmosphere that doesn’t leave anyone feeling lonely or excluded. Change may not be visible at first glance. But you will be amazed by how much a new and inclusive approach can increase your team’s effectiveness and happiness – and bring added value to the business.

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