# How To Overcome Bias and Support Women in the Workplace



Organizations with a higher percentage of women in leadership positions tend to have higher profits, margins and shareholder returns, according to numerous studies cited by the personal finance website The Balance. Yet many studies have also shown that women are bearing the brunt of the pandemic in terms of burnout and job loss.

To retain and support women in your organization, start with these four steps:

- Be intentional in your decisions to develop and promote women.
- Institute workplace policies that benefit female employees.
- Encourage women to create and join employee resource groups (ERGs).
- Assess your records and culture to ensure fairness in pay and career progression.

# Intentional decisions

Women are more burned out than they were pre-pandemic. One in three has even considered reducing their role or leaving the workforce altogether, according to the report Women in the Workplace 2021 by the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company.

When organizations lose female employees, they lose voices and perspectives that are vital to their cultural and business growth. The business magazine Forbes notes that many of the reasons behind the burnout and departures — including women taking on more caregiving duties outside of work and missing out on opportunities in the office — are deeply ingrained in workplace cultures at large.

These issues won't be solved with an unplanned or one-off approach. Companies must be intentional about their decision to change, with forethought and follow-through on workplace training and policies.

**Implicit bias and gender discrimination**

According to a Yale Insights study of almost 30,000 employees, there are fewer women in executive positions because of mistaken beliefs about their leadership skills. The data showed that women consistently received higher performance ratings but were cited as having lower leadership potential than men.

The McKinsey report showed similar findings, with women receiving fewer promotions to managerial levels compared to men. In that data, 86 women were promoted to a managerial position for every 100 men.

The results of these biases lead to fewer high-level opportunities for women and increased wage disparities.

Here are some actions you can take to address implicit bias and gender discrimination:

- Create an inclusive culture that encourages women to provide ideas and perspectives, with opportunities for meaningful work and career development.

- Train employees and managers at all levels about implicit bias and how to overcome it, including promoting self-awareness and understanding of bias through implicit association tests and gender diversity workshops.

- Encourage managers to reflect on hiring and promotion decisions before finalizing them. According to the nonprofit organization Lean In, only 19% of companies require unconscious bias training for hiring managers. And only 4% require it for employees who give performance reviews.

- Host open discussions about gender and diversity, with safe spaces for people to share their viewpoints and learn from each other.

- Mandate that senior leaders, both men and women, support gender diversity efforts through words and actions. Efforts can include town hall discussions, gender diversity committees, recognition programs and mentorships.

# Workplace policies

In addition to professional challenges, many women are also performing more duties at home — an issue that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nearly 1 million women left the workforce during the pandemic to care for children, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, women tend to have greater responsibilities for elder care and household duties.

Workplace policies that improve flexibility and care options can help. Because of the varied experiences of women, it's important to survey your workforce to identify what types of policies would be most beneficial.

Workplace policies to consider include:

- Remote work
- Flexible schedules
- Job shares
- Part-time options
- Child care or elder care support

**Setting boundaries**

These policies aren't of the set-it-and-forget-it variety. Though many women left the workforce, millions more remain employed and are struggling to balance the duties of work and home.

According to the early childhood and family well-being survey Rapid-EC project, levels of emotional distress (measured by stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression) among parents are 10 to 15 points higher now than before the pandemic.

Along with workplace policies that address flexibility and care options, ask your leadership to set boundaries so that employees don't increase their risk of burnout by working long hours or feeling like they must be on call 24/7.

Potential actions include:

- Telling employees to set aside nonurgent requests that come in outside core work hours
- Granting permission to block off personal time on work calendars
- Encouraging time off
- Basing performance evaluations on results, not time in an office setting

Managers and executives should model this behavior by avoiding after-hours communications with their teams and regularly checking in with employees about their well-being.

# ERGs

ERGs are safe spaces created by employees to share their experiences and learn from each other. Participation is completely voluntary. ERGs can be informal, but best practices suggest formalizing the process and allowing employees to meet in a dedicated space during work hours on a set basis — for example, once a quarter. Often, ERGs will appoint a staff leader to share insights from their discussions with company leadership.

Organizations should identify workplace champions who can encourage female employees to form ERGs and share their ideas for creating an equitable and inclusive workplace. On top of fostering diversity, ERGs can also increase employee engagement and allow employees to develop leadership skills outside of their core job responsibilities.

In terms of ERGs, research again shows the importance of tapping into female leaders in your organization. According to the McKinsey report, high-level women spend more time than high-level men supporting ERGs and recruiting underrepresented employees.

In addition, women in leadership positions are twice as likely as their male counterparts to help their teams:

- Manage workloads and avoid burnout

- Improve work-life balance and overall well-being

Female executives also are more likely to take time to learn about workplace challenges and tackle issues of discrimination.

To help increase participation in ERGs, recognize their efforts and ask participants to share their ideas with the organization, including during team discussions and all-staff meetings.

# Equity and culture assessments

Just as self-reflection is important for individuals, it is also vital for organizations. Despite the importance of assessments for lasting change, the McKinsey report revealed that fewer than one in four companies recognize managers for supporting employee well-being and promoting diversity in their performance reviews or other formal evaluations.

The following strategies can be used to assess equity in your organization:

- Track gender data for hiring and promotions.

- Examine starting pay and bonuses across job levels to make sure wages are equitable.

- Look at mentorship and career development programs to make sure women are receiving equal opportunities.

**Set and review hiring targets**

More than two out of three companies lack diversity targets in their hiring practices. And more than three in four don't use tools to reduce bias when looking at resumes.

The need for these mechanisms is underscored by a Lean In study which showed that placing a man's name on a resume in place of a woman's name improved the chances of being hired by 71%.

You can take the following steps to reduce this type of bias:

- Ensure female candidates are considered for open jobs and promotions by creating gender diversity goals at all levels of your organization, including entry level, managerial and executive positions.

- Use automated screening tools to reduce bias when reviewing resumes.

- Develop standard evaluation criteria used by all hiring managers.

- Review hiring and salary data to identify areas for improvement and make sure you are hitting your goals.

# Prioritize support for women

Study after study demonstrates the importance of gender diversity in high-performing organizations, yet women are facing increased challenges at work and at home in the wake of the pandemic. Now is the time to evaluate how you are supporting your female employees.

Talk to your broker or benefits adviser about policies that can help ensure an equitable workplace where women are supported and encouraged to thrive.

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