

**Fiona Dent** and **Viki Holton** detail how organisations can help more women to become business leaders

# How women can navigate to become global leaders



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**I**t is clear to us from our own and others' research that organisations and senior teams within them increasingly recognise the importance of the role of women in business and, indeed, see it as a key business imperative.

There is growing media interest and there has never been a better time to grasp the nettle and move to action. The role of the individual in this area is admittedly vitally important. But organisations could and should be doing much more to bring about significant change.

This article draws upon the evidence collected from our recent research at Ashridge Business School. We highlight several areas where organisations could contribute to improving the current landscape for women in business, allowing them to be leaders in the field. True, some organisations are forging ahead but these are the exception rather than the rule. There is still much more to be done to ensure true equality.

Our focus is on two main areas:

- Key career phases
- Organisational solutions

In our research we heard many stories of derailment and disenchantment. Many of these stories highlighted a clash between the competing demands of parenthood and organisational life. It led to frustration and often the curtailment of a woman's career.

Some of the examples illustrated organisational stereotyping in relation to the working mother, for example:

- Once women have children they are no longer ambitious
- Working mothers do not want promotion
- Working mothers are not interested in taking on operational roles or in stretch or international assignments

Providing development opportunities to help women into leadership roles is important at all phases of their career. In the early stages it is about making them aware of their own skill set and abilities and providing them with opportunities to experiment and practise in a supportive environment.

As they begin to move into higher levels it involves helping them to gain experience that will prepare them for more senior appointments.

Should women survive the early and the mid career phase then the next stage – senior and director-level appointments – is the most challenging of all. Many commentators have highlighted the lack of women at senior levels in organisations and the recent controversy over the severe lack of women on boards has been a key media issue since the UK based Davies Report in 2011.

So, what can organisations do?

First, and most importantly, they must recognise that this is an issue and examine the current situation for women in their own organisation.

For example, they could develop simple metrics to illustrate the gender pattern in different organisational situations, such as:

- Women at different management levels
- Women in the talent pipeline who have been identified as high potentials
- The number of women applying for promotion to more senior-level appointments
- Women attending senior-level executive development programmes
- Women leading key strategic projects

Gaining chief executive and senior-level commitment to these issues is vital if change is to take place. Rhetoric from the boardroom is not enough. Action is required and, in addition to good diversity policies and practices, senior leaders must model behaviour and show genuine willingness to lead and bring about change for women in their business.

At the heart of this is the recognition that for true equality and diversity the topic must be treated in the same way as any other business issue. Senior leaders should ensure that the issue of diversity features in any performance framework, for example by setting key performance indicators.



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In our research many people mentioned the importance of role models. Having only one or two women at senior or board level is regarded by many as tokenism and serves to illustrate the lack of commitment from the top. Quotas are one way to deal with this situation and this approach has been used in some countries and organisations.

We believe that there are better ways. Getting to the top should always be on merit and it is only by providing women with appropriate experiences at key career phases that this can happen. More opportunities to be involved in senior-level work and on key assignments would help women gain this experience and develop a business reputation among senior colleagues.

It is also important that women are involved as decision makers in the talent-management process, identification of high-flyers and succession planning. The three career phases are illustrated in Figure 1 together with examples of who can help and approaches that can be used.

There is no doubt that we have come a long way over the past ten years, not least in the numbers of the new generation of women managers who are entering the business world. However, the evidence from our Ashridge research emphasises how much more action needs to take place. We need more organisations that are willing to set the example for others to follow.

Earlier campaigns and networks clearly illustrate how important this approach is. Some examples are:

- EFMD's generous sponsorship helped establish and build the European Women's Management Development network. Martine Plompen ran the secretariat – hosted at EFMD's headquarters – and many of the early activities and annual conferences were only possible thanks to the help from EFMD and the support of a number of leading employers.





Figure 1. Three Phases of Women's Careers

	Early career phase	Mid career phase	Senior career phase
<b>Who</b>	Boss Role models Colleagues	Boss Family	Boss More senior colleagues willing to be mentors or sponsors
<b>How</b>	Job shadowing Mentoring Development workshops	Coaching and mentoring Professional associations and other networks Stretch assignments Taking international opportunities	Reverse mentoring, where younger women act as mentors to more senior directors and/or board members Strategic/senior networks Acting as mentor for younger, less experienced colleagues

• Opportunity Now in Britain (which was launched as Opportunity 2000) similarly benefitted from company support and the efforts of Business in the Community (the charity trust led by Prince Charles).

If more organisations would step forward and lead the way this would help encourage others. It could be within certain sectors or a profession or a country – as shown recently in Denmark with a campaign that includes Danfoss and others.

Companies that have developed their own women for senior positions will quickly become employers of choice and will be leaders in the field of diversity. In addition, research suggests that those organisations with greater diversity in their management and senior teams achieve better business results and overall performance.

As one woman we interviewed said: "The teams that I've worked on that are more balanced, more diverse in terms of gender, culture and experience, have invariably delivered better results and created a great team environment to work in with a good degree of challenge and support and, importantly, become places that others want to come and work in". gf



Of the 1,400 survey replies received, 69% were from senior managers, directors or chief executives

We also interviewed 20 women business leaders to help us appreciate what it means to be a woman manager in the 21st century



RESEARCH APPROACH & FURTHER INFORMATION

Our research invited women who had attended programmes at Ashridge Business School to complete an on-line survey and asked them to contact others who might also take part in the research study. Over 1,400 replies were received, including 69% from senior managers, directors or chief executives. We also interviewed 20 women leaders to help us appreciate what it means to be a woman manager in the 21st century.



A book, *Women in Business: Navigating Career Success* by Viki Holton and Fiona Elsa Dent, detailing the research findings, was published in April. There is also an executive summary report; for a copy of this please contact either:

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