

Women and Leadership Series: Part 2

DEVELOPING WOMEN LEADERS

What Successful Women Have to Say ...

PRADCO has been evaluating people for positions all along the employment continuum for 55 years. Our mission is to understand people and to determine their fit with a particular work culture and job requirements. We also provide executive coaching and leadership consulting to prepare high-potential leaders to operate successfully as they rise through each level of their organization.

Although a female is as likely as a male to be recommended for a leadership or executive position, women account for very few of the participants we engage in the coaching relationship. That observation sparked two key questions: Why were women less likely to be offered an opportunity for coaching to help them succeed and advance? And if companies sponsored more women for coaching opportunities, what would be the best way to support and accelerate their development?



In December 2010, PRADCO completed a year-long study to identify the behaviors that characterize successful female leaders. [Part 1](#) in this series, published in January 2011, detailed the work competencies, leadership and interpersonal behaviors that correlate with strong performance in female leaders. [Part III](#) will compare women's leadership styles to those of their male colleagues.

In this paper we share what we learned from interviewing successful female leaders about the factors they believe support women's leadership aspirations and what barriers hold them back. The women who participated were in executive or C-level positions in fields as diverse as sports and education, financial services and catering. What follows are the 5 questions asked and a summary of responses.



1. What do you believe is needed for women to have successful careers as leaders today?

The availability of some kind of network to support women's development is key. This network could take the form of a single mentor or a group of other professionals as long as it provides support, encouragement and honest feedback in a non-threatening atmosphere. As one of our participants put it, "When women find ways to collaborate and network, they excel." Many women suggested that having both male and female mentors was advantageous to them. One woman stated, "Network with successful women as confidants and mentors, but also with men so they see you as an equal and consider your value." Having male mentors was also seen as helping female leaders relate to and understand where their male counterparts are coming from.

"When women find ways to collaborate and network, they excel"

The other factor mentioned by most of the women interviewed is the necessity for aspiring women professionals to be proficient at their jobs. Add to this the confidence and presence to have their good work noticed. Other assets are the ability to make decisions effectively, have a thick skin when taking criticism, and be versatile to show their value to the company. Two participants put it succinctly when they said, "Know your job, be good at your job," and "Be present, not shy. Show up."

2. What are the key qualities or behaviors women need to display to achieve visibility and success?

To be visible and succeed, women need to advocate for themselves and be assertive. Women need to be authoritative and communicate that confidence in a way that is effective. Being ethical and culturally aware were also reported as important aspects of women's leadership. "Be mindful of where you are. Be aware, learn; let people see you as a resource."

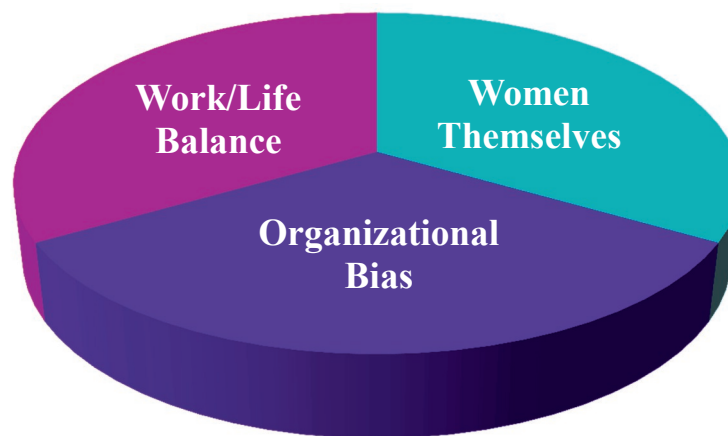
3. What are some of the barriers that stand in the way of women's leadership aspirations?

About a third of the women reported balancing work and home life responsibilities as the most significant barrier to their own success. Juggling home demands with the need to be available after work hours as a corporate leader is a struggle for many women. One participant reported, "Because of outside demands, we pull ourselves out. We have to make a choice. It is hard to have it all."



Another third cited **organizational bias**, as the major barrier they had to overcome. Many agreed that it is still common for women who are assertive and display leadership behaviors to be judged differently than men who, displaying similar behavior, are seen as confident and powerful.

The final third of our sample reported that **women themselves** are the greatest barrier to leadership success. There are times when women expect and even perceive barriers that do not exist. They tend to back down too easily when faced with pushback, assuming organizational bias. They recommended that women need to push harder and become better negotiators so that they get the salary and schedule they need to balance their responsibilities to be successful both at home and at work.



4. In what ways does the culture of your organization support women's advancement?

Participants commonly reported that their companies were **blind to gender**, determining promotions based on concrete results and performance. They also said that company **programs providing leadership coaching and mentoring** were inclusive of high-potential women as well as men. These organizations also placed a high value on diversity in general, and actively sought out women for positions at all levels, including the Board of Directors.

5. What advice would you give to high-potential candidates for leadership as they climb the ladder of success? What tips would you give to those coaching or mentoring them?

Know Your Business: Women who are good at their jobs and get the kind of results that can't be overlooked have the best chance of breaking through barriers.

Learn From Everyone: Women need to think ahead and take advantage of any and all available training opportunities. Ambitious women can seek a mentor or successful leader whose style and behavior she wants to learn from and emulate.

Don't Limit Yourself: Women need to be well-rounded. They would do well to consider advice like; “Take advantage of rotational opportunities so you can add value.” and “Try things you are afraid to try” to expand their experiences and increase their visibility in the company.

CALL TO ACTION

In comparing our interview findings to the data gathered in our earlier study, we find a good deal of consistency. Successful women leaders are assertive, ambitious and take initiative. They carry themselves with confidence, making sure that their results get noticed and their ideas are heard. Attuned to the dynamics of the workplace, they are flexible to its changing demands.

“A balanced support system does not happen by accident. Women must think through all the pieces and how they will manage them.”

Both sets of results support the need for companies to make the development of high-potential women a top priority. Mentoring and coaching programs should focus attention on overcoming organizational barriers and dealing with life-work issues as well as leadership skills and styles. Women who aspire to rise in their careers need to take stock of their situations and assess the barriers to advancement, as well as the opportunities and supports that exist. Strong, high potential women need to:

- Assess their motivation and identify the risks and sacrifices they are willing to make.
- Make sure their job skills and work approach will help them excel.
- Identify a network, mentor or supportive leader to provide models and support.
- Take advantage of training across functions; know what is required for success.
- Develop leadership and decision making skills; seek training and coaching.
- Declare themselves; let people know where they are headed.



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ABOUT PRADCO

PRADCO has delivered visionary, comprehensive methods for evaluating and developing success formulas for HR departments, leadership teams, and executives. PRADCO is intensely committed to providing the highest quality products and service that will improve organizational and employee performance through research, evaluation and development. High potential leaders, as well as more seasoned individuals, find themselves faced with challenging performance expectations. They can struggle to balance their own impact with the importance of empowering teams, developing talent and inspiring loyalty.

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