




Fixing the Broken Ladder for Future Women Leaders

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When climbing the corporate ladder, women are encountering many broken rungs. How can companies identify these broken rungs, and what can be done to fix them?

Though they represent more than 54% of the U.S. workforce, women hold just 35% of senior leadership positions, according to a study cited by career experts at Zippia.

On the positive side, women CEOs running Fortune 500 companies reached an all-time high of 44 women, according to a May 2022 article in *Fortune* magazine—but the article’s authors note that this number represents just 8% of the total.

According to McKinsey’s *Women in the Workplace 2022* report, the problem exists early on in women’s careers. While 60% of men transition from entry level to first-level management, only 40% of women do the same. For every 100 men who are promoted from entry-level roles to manager positions, only 87 women are promoted and only 82 women of color are promoted, with only 1 in 20 C-suite executives being a woman of color. And for every woman at the director level who is promoted to the next level, two women directors are choosing to leave their company.

“As a result, men significantly outnumber women at the manager level, and women can never catch up. There are simply too few women to promote to senior leadership

positions,” McKinsey experts write. They also note that companies are struggling to hold onto the relatively few women leaders they have, and all of these dynamics are even more pronounced for women of color.

McKinsey found that women managers are more likely to experience microaggressions, with women leaders twice as likely as men leaders to be mistaken for someone more junior. Women leaders are also more likely to report that personal characteristics, such as their gender or being a parent, have played a role in them being denied or passed over for a raise, promotion, or chance to get ahead.

Although women leaders are doing more to support employee well-being and foster inclusion, experts state that this critical work is spreading them thin and going mostly unrewarded, with 40% of women leaders saying their DEI work isn’t acknowledged at all in performance reviews.

Women of color face even more microaggressions and barriers to advancement. McKinsey reported that Latinas and Black women are less likely than women of other races and ethnicities to say their manager supports their career development, and that they experience less

psychological safety. “If companies don’t take action, they risk losing not only their current women leaders but also the next generation of women leaders,” McKinsey experts note. “Young women are even more ambitious and place a higher premium on working in an equitable, supportive, and inclusive workplace. They’re watching senior women leave for better opportunities, and they’re prepared to do the same.”

LACK OF SUPPORTIVE FOOTING

These kinds of stresses create more broken rungs when it comes to engagement and support, a lack of which AMA’s Women’s Leadership Center believes is further holding women back. In late 2022, AMA conducted a nationwide survey on workplace engagement with more than 330 AMA members and seminar participants. The responses clearly show that men and women do not feel engaged or supported at the same level.

For example, compared with 67% of men surveyed, less than half of the women surveyed (49%) believed their companies provided enough training. When asked if they agree that their manager supports their career growth, while 72% of men said yes, only 57% of women agreed. And in looking at their career paths, 49% of women said they were unclear, compared with just 35% of the men surveyed.

According to AMA, workplace engagement means employees:

- Fill a role where they showcase their strengths
- Find their work challenging yet interesting
- Feel their opinions are valid and their voice is heard
- Drive customer satisfaction that leads to achieving business outcomes
- Visualize growth opportunities within their current organization
- Earn recognition for their contributions to the team’s success
- Have the tools and resources they need to succeed

“Imagine how the organization might benefit from training each of its entry level associates consistently, all the while enlisting supportive managers who make growth opportunities clear to the entire team from the start,” AMA experts say. “Training must go beyond the new professional to also reach managers responsible for the support and engagement at every step of the ladder.”

By enhancing workplace engagement, companies can fix the broken rung and prepare a clear path for more women in the future.

WHEN THE SUPPORT ISN’T THERE

AMA experts maintain that without a multitiered learning and development strategy—one that trains both the employees and the managers training them—an organization opens itself up to unnecessary turnover and related hiring costs, among other challenges.

In its survey, AMA found that only 25% of women, compared with 47% of men, agreed that job promotions are administrated fairly. And 53% of women, in contrast to 34% of men, agreed that there is favoritism and everyone is not treated fairly.

Quantum Workplace, in “15 Employee Turnover Statistics to Shape Your Retention Strategy,” shared how 37% of employees

According to the American Management Association's "Workplace Engagement: Fixing 'The Broken Rung' Requires Engagement at Every Level".



Agree that their organization provides enough training



Agree that their manager supports their career growth



Agree that job promotions are administrated fairly

left their organization due to a lack of career growth, and 27% of employees left because they felt undervalued or underappreciated for their work.

“When leaders provide career support and clear career paths, employees feel seen and heard, and they’re far more likely to stay with the organization,” AMA states.

REPAIRING THE RUNGS

To bolster women’s career paths and better support them in the organization, AMA suggests including women in the decision-making process throughout the employee lifecycle—specifically, they should be an integral part of recruiting, retaining, and professional development conversations. “When more women are added to decision making scenarios, organizations improve processes, increase innovation and achieve greater organizational performance,” AMA experts wrote in a recent white paper.

Additionally, female respondents told AMA that it’s common to do work outside of the job description but not as common to speak up about it as a concern. “When employees engage in organizational cultures where they can speak up, address concerns and suggest new ideas, they have greater organizational commitment and higher job satisfaction,” AMA says.

But if women are doing someone else’s job—without ample training or recognition—they won’t feel valued enough to participate in meaningful and courageous conversations that solve real problems and drive positive change.

In fact, more than one-third of these disengaged employees are actively applying to new jobs, compared with only 5% of engaged employees, according to Toby Marshall Egan and Zhaoli Song in “Are Facilitated Mentoring Programs Beneficial? A Randomized Experimental Field Study,” which was published in 2008 in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*.

By investing in training for employees at all levels, organizations can build and sustain engagement while also staying ready for the future. AQ

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