

Women in Leadership Initiative

How to promote more women: Strong sponsorship and debiased evaluations
Promotion Roundtable | September 16, 2019

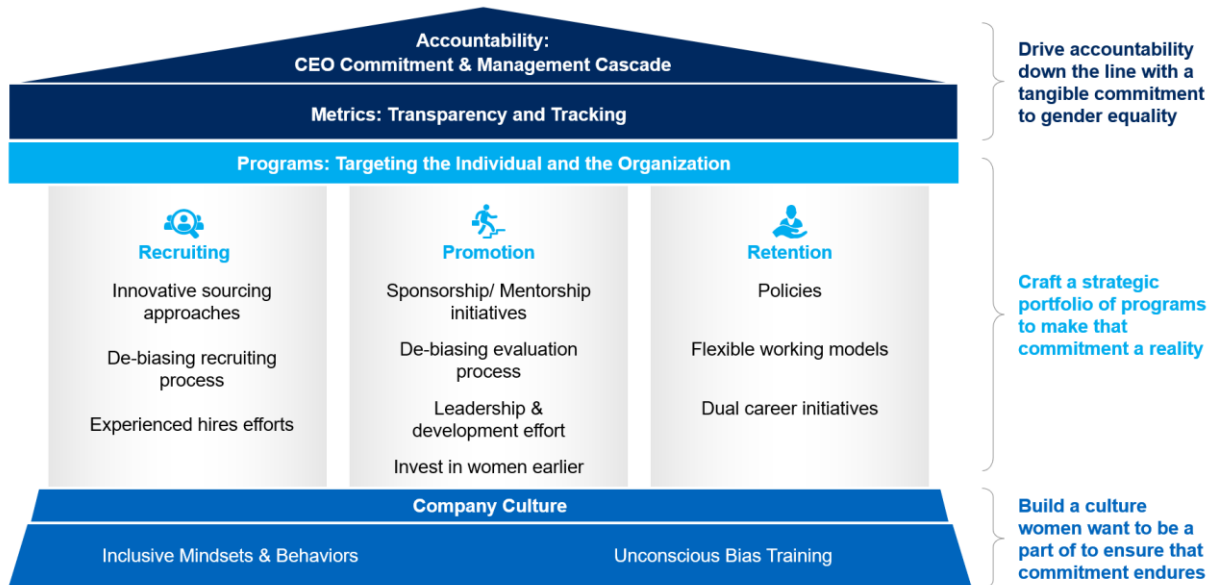
CONVENING LEADERS TO FIND SOLUTIONS AND TAKE ACTION

For organizations that drive our economy, improving women’s opportunities to advance to leadership roles is a key priority. With one of the highest concentrations of technology companies in the US, Massachusetts has a diverse base of both emerging and established technology enterprises. However, the tech workforce needs more gender diversity. To encourage more women to pursue careers in technology, a team of [Massachusetts High Technology Council’s](#) directors developed a [Women in Leadership](#) program to guide the recruitment and promotion of women to leadership positions in the technology sector. Exhibit 1 illustrates the gender diversity framework used for our Women in Leadership roundtable discussions. This paper focuses on the middle pillar of this framework: opportunities to improve the advancement and promotion of women.

On September 16, 2019, the Massachusetts High Technology Council, together with [reacHIRE](#) and knowledge partner [McKinsey & Company](#), held a roundtable hosted by [PTC](#) to discuss the particular challenges of promoting and advancing women within organizations. Below we share practical steps to address common obstacles to gender diversity and inclusion in the promotion and advancement process. These ideas, based on our roundtable discussion and on findings from the 2018 [McKinsey and LeanIn.org Women in the Workplace \(WIW\) study](#), can be applied well beyond high tech.

Exhibit 1: Gender diversity framework

Gender diversity should be a strategic business imperative



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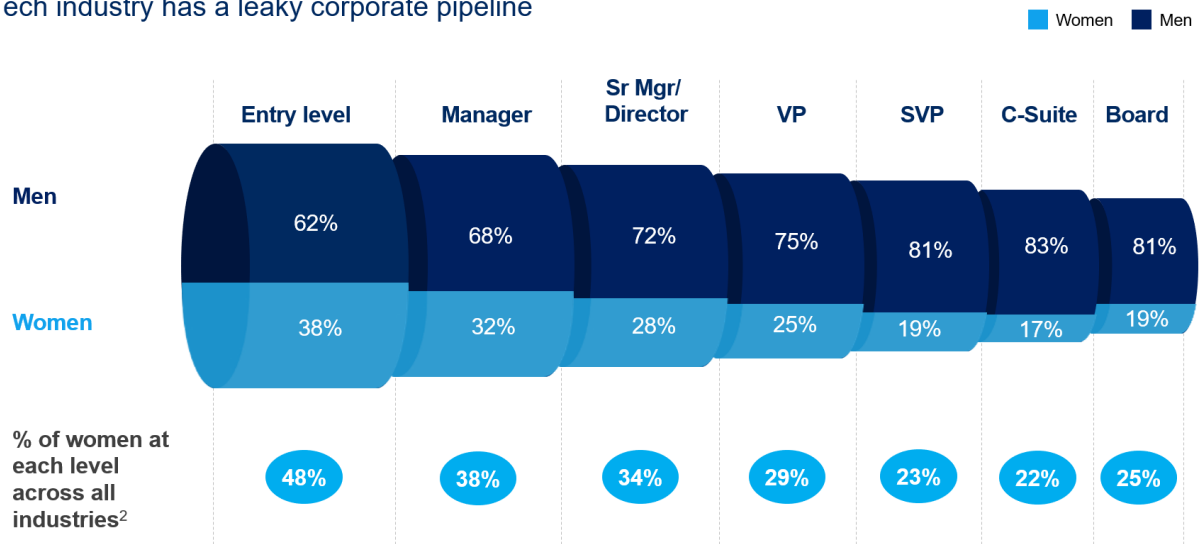
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THE STATE OF PROMOTING WOMEN IN HIGH TECH

According to the 2018 [WIW study](#) results, corporate America has made negligible progress toward increasing women's representation. Women remain significantly underrepresented at all levels of organizations, with hiring and promotion two key drivers of women's underrepresentation. Women are not advancing at the same rate as men, leading to a leaky corporate pipeline. Within the tech sector specifically, the ratio of women declines from 38 percent at the entry level to 17 percent at the C-suite.

Exhibit 2: 2018 Tech industry pipeline

Tech industry has a leaky corporate pipeline



Note: Numbers may not add exactly to 100% due to rounding

1 Aggregate results from participating companies in Tech Industry Benchmark (45 companies submitted pipeline data);

2 Aggregate results from 279 participating companies, averaging each company's results and weighting by industry to the F500 to avoid a skew toward industries overrepresented in our sample

SOURCE: 2018 Women in the Workplace study

Female attrition is not necessarily the problem, despite common misconceptions. Women plan to stay at their current company at a similar rate to men; for those that do plan to leave, they cite the same reasons as men – to take a role at another company. Furthermore, women are as ambitious as men and typically ask for promotions and raises at the same rates.

Balancing the promotion rates of women to be on par with men is one critical step on the journey to gender parity. To do so, organizations need to: 1) cultivate advancement through sponsorship and 2) debias the evaluation and promotion processes. Below we outline best practices of what has worked at other organizations. Each organization should decide which initiatives would be most effective within their organization.

CULTIVATING ADVANCEMENT THROUGH SPONSORSHIP

Cultivating the advancement of junior female colleagues requires targeted approaches to sponsorship, especially in technology fields that need to overcome the compounding effects of fewer women entering tech. Without sponsors, 43 percent of men and 35 percent of women will ask managers for a stretch assignment or role; with sponsorship, the numbers rise to 56 percent

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and 44 percent¹. Women's advancement should to be driven by senior leaders actively sponsoring women and guiding them on the path to promotion.

What works

- **Develop and train sponsors**
 - **Distinguish between mentorship and sponsorship:** Mentors are trusted counselors who serve as a sounding board and give advice and support, whereas sponsors are senior leaders who commit to supporting the progression of junior colleagues and actively helping them navigate key transitions. Sponsorships require a higher level of mutual responsibility than mentorship. Men and women are equally likely to have mentors, but men are 46 percent more likely to have sponsors – which results in different opportunities for promotion¹.
 - **Train sponsors:** Ensure that all leaders know what distinctive sponsorship looks like, including opportunity creation and ongoing guidance (e.g., connect sponsorees to other senior leaders, set up regular check-ins, etc.).
- **Implement a sponsorship process**
 - **Assess existing sponsorship levels:** Run surveys to determine levels of sponsorship, identify areas of improvement, and develop action plans for unsponsored individuals.
 - **Institute formal sponsorship programs:** For a structured approach, create formal sponsorship programs with strong governance and regular evaluations. Heighten awareness of the sponsorship program so it reaches all junior women and potential senior-level sponsors.
 - **Proactive sponsorship pairing:** Conduct matching surveys to pair managers and junior employees in sponsorship relationships. Pairing can also be done by creating mentoring circles to foster mutual selection for sponsorship. It is important that sponsors have senior positions that enable them to provide meaningful opportunities and guidance. Make sure that senior male leaders are involved in sponsor programs and that regular 360-degree feedback is collected that should be used to refine the process.
 - **Follow an existing approach, such as the Sponsor's Process²:** Equip sponsors with resources for how to build and nurture a strong sponsorship relationship with their sponsorees (see Exhibit 3).

¹ Harvard Business Review: The Real Benefit of Finding a Sponsor

² Rania H Anderson, The Way Women Work

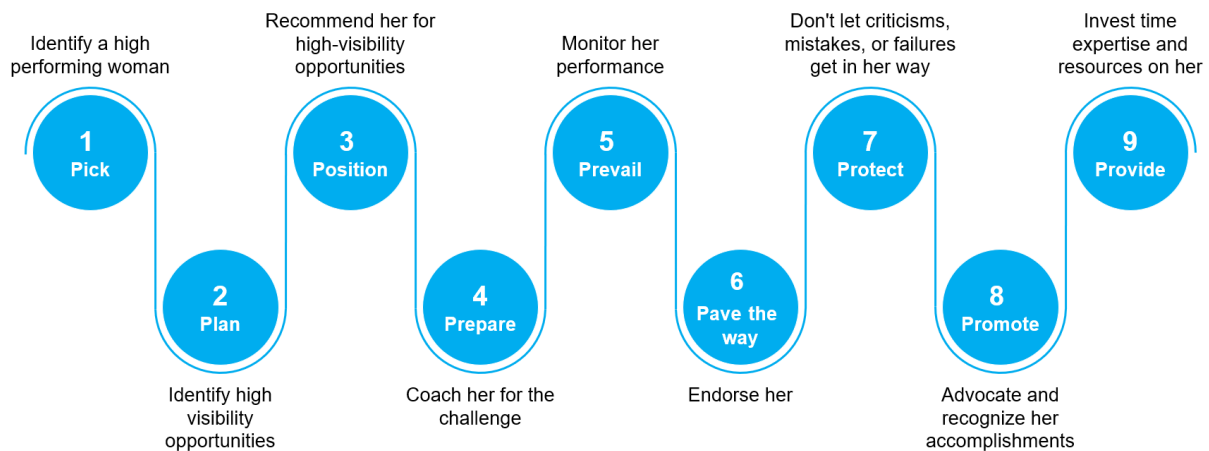
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Exhibit 3: The Sponsor's Process

The Sponsor's Process



Source: Rania H. Anderson, The Way Women Work, Harvard Business Review: The Real Benefit of Finding a Sponsor

- **Hold sponsors accountable**

- **Evaluate:** Incorporate sponsorship activities for women and other diverse employees into the evaluation process of senior leaders. For example, integrate sponsorship-related executive KPIs to show that it is valued by the organization.
- **Incentivize sponsorship efforts:** Publicly recognize and reward leaders who sponsor women.

DEBIAS THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Women are asking for promotions at similar rates as men. **Error! Bookmark not defined..** To make the promotion process equitable, companies need to train evaluators, conduct end-to-end tracking, and implement processes that ensure fairness.

What works

- **Train all stakeholders**

- **Implement conscious inclusion training:** Create awareness of unconscious bias with formal training programs. Ensure that those involved in the promotion process take the training and that the training groups are diverse enough to create meaningful discussions. Implement systems to debias evaluation and promotion decisions.
- **Host communication style training:** Research shows that women may be less direct than men in asking for promotions, so their requests may be discounted by their managers³. To help eliminate this as a potential barrier, train women on how to communicate their desire for advancement. Complement the training with sessions for managers that raise awareness of the way women discuss performance, merit, and promotion to further reduce potential obstacles in these conversations.

³ McKinsey & Company: Women Matter: Time to Accelerate

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- **Update policies and procedures**
 - **Debias the process:** Set clear, consistent evaluation criteria before the evaluation process begins. Criteria should be aligned with the skills and competencies necessary for the role in question, including program-management skills as well as technical skills. Consider anonymizing performance, removing identifying information (e.g., names, pronouns, pictures) from promotion cases to avoid bias.
 - **Deepen the pool:** Require diverse groups of candidates to be included in promotion discussions.
 - **Create bundled promotion decisions:** Research shows that bundled promotion decisions – promoting a portfolio of people, as opposed to individuals – increases diversity⁴. Creating an annual schedule for bundled promotions can also help companies advance diversity.
 - **Debias the promotion interview:** Promotion interviews should consider asking “why not?” instead of “why?” and consider eliminating or decoupling self-evaluations to avoid anchoring evaluators on language used by women in discussing advancement.
 - **Debias the evaluation committee:** Ensure that promotion evaluation committees are diverse and contain women, as research shows that women supervisors are more likely to promote women than male supervisors⁴. These committees need to focus on performance, behaviors, and impact to avoid promoting people on the basis of likeability. During evaluation discussions, committees should have a “bias catcher” in the room to provide feedback and call out bias in real time. Semantics matter: Committees should be meticulous about word choice and adjectives used to describe female promotion candidates.
 - **Increase representation at higher ranks:** Female representation in leadership is shown to narrow the gender gap of promotions at lower levels⁵. A greater emphasis on hiring women for upper-management positions could increase women’s opportunities for promotion at every level of the organization.

- **Measure and share progress**
 - **Set an inclusion baseline:** Set a baseline for promoting women and measure progress toward achieving promotion parity.
 - **Set inclusion targets:** Create targets for promoting women to senior positions, track them consistently, share results, and hold leaders accountable to them.
 - **Trust your data:** Track and analyze your outcomes to note bias, regularly review data with decision makers, and refine your process to support the identified outcomes, share data for accountability.

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For questions, input, or further information, please get in touch with [Megan Ann Greenfield](#). For the recently launched 2019 WIW results, please visit <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>. Many thanks to Sherry Heffner, Jacquie Hudson, Rachel Groh, Peter Jacobson, and Elizabeth Pears who contributed significantly to the Women in Leadership Initiative and this paper.

⁴ Forbes: Men and Women aren’t promoted by the Same People: Here’s the Difference

⁵ Women Helping Women? Evidence from Private Sector Data on Workplace Hierarchies

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