

Here's what's really blocking black women's path to advancement

By: SANDRA FINLEY June 08, 2015

To understand how well professional black women are faring in the workplace, you need only look at the abysmal statistics reported annually as the “gap” between white and black women in corporate leadership. Black women working to build their careers struggle to avoid being forced into the gap by institutional practices that effectively suppress their career development. With the exception of a rare few outliers, most are trapped in the lower regions of the corporate pipelines, off the critical leadership grids for succession planning.

For our newest [survey](#), “Daughters of the Dream: Their Lack of Sponsors, Support and Promotions,” the League of Black Women asked 273 professional black women—nearly 75 percent of whom hold advanced degrees—about their experiences as they try to cross the bridge to leadership opportunity at work.

More than 72 percent told us the greatest barrier to advancement was lack of sponsorship and access to senior leaders who can advocate for their advancement. As a result, 35 percent said they hadn't been promoted in five years or more.

Our survey reveals that the prospects for upward mobility for black women are grim—and that is a real problem for them and the companies they work for. Today, we still have just one black female CEO in the Fortune 500, Ursula Burns of Xerox. Women of color make up just 3.2 percent of corporate boards. In 2012, just 5.3 percent of black women were employed in managerial and professional roles, while white men made up 70 percent of executive teams and 68 percent of corporate directors.

Black women respond to the barriers by redoubling their efforts to reach for leadership opportunity by pursuing advanced degrees more than ever, and taking on the mounting debt that goes with them. However, lack of support for advancement, especially in positions with profit and loss responsibility, will impede ROI on work experience and those degrees. That affects long-term wealth creation if corporations continue to suppress the economic gains that would result from removing institutional barriers to leadership opportunity for black women.

ACCESS TO SPONSORSHIP

Interestingly, white men came in second (21.5 percent) behind other black women (41 percent) as most supportive mentors of black women. While mentorship is important, it is not the same as sponsorship— influential senior corporate leaders who publicly endorse proteges. We need access to sponsorship because it affords access to the protected privilege that powers the way corporate America works. To move up to leadership opportunity, that must be tapped.

Savvy CEOs will step up and send a warning to their executive reports. “Here's your bottom line: Black women with advanced degrees, the requisite number of years and manner of experience, are stuck in our pipelines while others advance around them. Eventually, we will lose them. And the business intelligence and competitive advantage that they distinctively contribute here, every day, follows them out the door to our competition.”

For companies, it comes down to this: If diversity and inclusion are such modern imperatives, why are black women so egregiously undersponsored? It is illogical to expect talented, highly educated black women to remain anyplace that does not meet their leadership ambitions with deliberate talent development investment, access to executive sponsorship and a transparent measurement for success that supports the talent pool of

succession planning.

The majority of our respondents said they do not share their career plans with senior leaders. Black women, for their part, must eschew outdated advice to keep our heads down, work hard and hope for the best. We are the best of the best, and we require the challenge and reward of leadership opportunities with critical assignments that will reveal that we are the women who have come to make the decisions that shape our world.

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