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Social Support Sets Women Up for Success at Work

Organisations are investing heavily to level the playing field for professional women, but they often lack a systematic approach.

The current data on women's representation in top leadership tell a story that, in light of educational achievement, makes little sense. In nearly all OECD countries, women have for some time comprised **the majority of university graduates**, and tertiary education **enrollment rates in China** are higher for women than men—to name just two examples. Businesses do hire these talented women, who are well represented in the workforce in many **entry-level positions**.

However, we've yet to observe a significant narrowing of the gender gap in areas such as **C-suite representation** and **wages**. Women are nearly equally represented in the labour force at large, but the higher you look in the corporate hierarchy, the fewer women there are. Important as they are, non-discrimination policies alone have not levelled the playing field.

Prevailing gender imbalance at the top, coupled with the traditionally male-dominated nature of many industries, creates unwritten, often invisible obstacles to women's success. Negotiating these barriers exposes women to psychological stresses that their male colleagues are spared. For example, women working in male-dominated professions commonly report experiencing stereotype threat, i.e. concern that they might confirm negative

stereotypes about women's professional abilities, which is associated with stress that leads to lower workplace satisfaction, engagement and performance.

As part of their toolkit for developing gender balance, organisations should consider adopting interventions that fall under the general headings of culture change, improving organisational processes and supporting women. The purpose of such interventions is to give women social tools for organisational success and the same sense of psychological safety that men automatically receive. These are fundamentally stop-gap measures, but they also have the potential to shift organisations into more virtuous cycles around gender balance because they can enable more women to "make it".

Large organisations know that social support is key to enable women to work at their best. They're keenly aware of what they stand to lose if they allow stress and resultant disengagement to stifle their best women talents. Their efforts, however, are often made without systematic assessment of effectiveness. In many cases, what's missing is a clear idea of how best to tailor the strategy to obtain the desired results.

Social support interventions

Before offering suggestions for prioritising approaches to building social support, we need to do some research-based unpacking. The leading sources of social support in organisations are:

Peer support – Strong peer social networks have been described as "sticky webs" that can anchor the resolve of people who might otherwise become discouraged or disengaged. Yet for a multitude of reasons, women in professional contexts appear to have weaker networks than men do. Providing extra networking opportunities is a simple intervention with demonstrated efficacy. A recent study found that professionals who attended a **women-only networking conference** were twice as likely to receive a promotion, and three times as likely to receive a pay rise of ten percent or above, than women who registered for a future conference but had not yet attended. Plus, over 70 percent of the attendees reported feeling optimistic and "more connected to others" post-conference.

Formal and informal mentoring and sponsorship – Formal mentoring relationships are arbitrated by organisations as part of a talent management programme to help early-career employees develop. Informal mentoring relationships arise organically out of relationships formed between junior and senior employees. And sponsorship goes beyond the development of mentees to also involve advocating on behalf of these more junior employees. Although both formal and informal mentorship and sponsorship can be beneficial, the evidence for **informal mentorship and sponsorship** helping women is particularly strong.

Role models – For members of under-represented groups, there is demonstrated value in simply seeing other people like themselves succeed. It reinforces their well-being and motivation, giving reassurance that it is possible for them to surmount the challenges of their context. For example, a 2012 study found that **rural, impoverished villages in India** that were randomly selected by the state to reserve their chief councillor seat for a woman saw dramatically improved results for adolescent girls in terms of educational achievement and career aspirations. Further, INSEAD professors **Maria Guadalupe** and **Lucia Del Carpio** recently showed that adding a role model to online ads for a **software coding training programme** more than doubled application rates among low-income young women in Latin America.

Even leaders need role models

The benefits of role models aren't restricted to inexperienced and disadvantaged women. Take the women respondents to a recent online survey of INSEAD alumni – nearly one-quarter of whom held C-suite or CEO/president positions in their organisation. The participating alumnae represented 72 countries (with no one country accounting for more than 15.6 percent of the sample), and the majority described their professional role as regional or global in scope. Survey questions covered, among other topics, the alumnae's current experiences with stereotype threat, as well as whether they had received social support from any of the sources listed above. We also asked alumnae about work satisfaction, which is both a general gauge of psychological well-being and a factor known to reduce turnover.

As described in an invited paper under review at *APA's Archives of Scientific Psychology*, our survey analyses revealed that nearly all the social support sources had a positive impact on work satisfaction. Having role models, however, was the only one associated with a reduction in stereotype threat. In other words, of all the options in the social support toolkit, role models alone did double-duty for alumnae, fuelling both greater work satisfaction and stronger psychological resistance to negative stereotypes. And this makes sense: Seeing visible and inspiring examples of successful women can be reassuring for women faced with the burden of disproving negative stereotypes.

Takeaways

Mentoring, sponsorship and peer support are beneficial for both men and women. In masculine contexts, however, women can find it harder to gain access to these key resources. Intervention may be necessary to prevent women from becoming disproportionately isolated and marginalised, or leaving the organisation altogether.

Regarding mentoring and sponsorship, our study of INSEAD alumnae showed that only the informal variety increased work satisfaction. Being paired with a mentor or sponsor through official channels had no discernible benefit. Prior studies have yielded **similar conclusions** about the comparative virtues of formal and informal mentoring. It isn't surprising that freely chosen mentor-mentee relationships can be more valuable than obligatory ones. The disparity in results implies that organisations may need to walk a fine line, encouraging and enabling mentoring and sponsorship without forcing the issue.

However, for the alumnae in our survey sample who were entrepreneurs (founders, co-founders and self-employed), formal mentoring did predict satisfaction. We infer that in the extremely ambiguous and uncertain world of entrepreneurship, a more clearly defined mentoring relationship provides a sorely needed sense of structure.

For organisations invested in shielding women from stereotype threat and eventual disengagement, role models may be the single most impactful source of social support. But it may present a Catch-22: Many organisations also have limited examples of success stories available to spotlight. A large multinational bank recently shared with us that it addresses this challenge by facilitating connections between its own female high potentials and women leaders in more senior roles at competing banks. The role models are found through women's associations in cities where the bank does business.

Our findings from the alumni survey, viewed in light of prior research, suggest that companies lacking gender balance should utilise the entire social support toolkit wherever possible, putting extra emphasis on highlighting the success of their female role models. Social support interventions should not be used alone, but rather in concert with other methods for countering systemic bias, such as **values-based self-affirmations,** setting hiring and promotion targets, and shifting any norms that disproportionately exclude women.

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