
Study: Women Get Fewer Game-Changing Leadership Roles

By [Herminia Ibarra](#)

Many studies have shown that the representation of women in the senior ranks has been virtually unchanged for years, despite considerable organizational investment in talent management systems. Because leadership development begins early in careers, could inequality in development opportunities explain the gender gap that also emerges so early?

To answer this, the [most recent Catalyst research](#) analyzed responses from [1,660 high potentials \(PDF\)](#) about the myriad ways they are developed to become future leaders, including formal development programs and on-the-job experiences that build skills and demonstrate competency. Based on this data, we have determined which experiences predict advancement and where organizations may be unwittingly creating leaks in their pipeline.

In the 70/20/10 model, scholars contend that 70% of development happens on the job, 20% happens through critical relationships, and only 10% occurs through formal training programs. Our current research on leadership development supports this model. We found that big roles — more than formal programs — were the game changers when it comes to career advancement. High potentials got ahead further and faster when they worked on highly visible projects, held mission-critical roles, and took international assignments.

Among the high potentials whose careers we have been following, men got more of the game-changing experiences that ultimately predicted advancement than women did. The projects men reported working on had budgets that were more than twice that of women's projects and more than three times as many employees staffed to them. In addition, about one third of men reported getting C-suite visibility to a very great extent while working on projects compared to only one quarter of women. And men felt their

projects involved a higher level of risk to their companies than did women.

Men also had greater access to mission-critical roles than women. More men than women held positions involving:

- Profit and loss responsibility (56% of men, 46% of women).
- Management of direct reports (77% of men, 70% of women).
- Budget responsibility of greater than \$10 million (30% of men, 22% of women).

Finally, among those who had worked in at least one multinational company post-MBA, men also received more international experiences than women.

- More men worked on global teams requiring extensive travel without relocation (88% of men, 77% of women).
- More men had international relocations (28% of men, 17% of women).

When studying high potentials' experiences in formal leadership development programs, we found that women entered leadership development programs earlier in their careers and remained in them longer. More women than men had a formal leadership development program opportunity by the end of their first year post-MBA, while more men than women participated in programs two to four years post-MBA. And more women attended programs lasting a year or longer, while more men were in programs lasting less than six months. These programs can provide high-potential women and men alike with access to the career-changing experiences that can get them ahead. Within 18 months of participating in leadership development programs, 43% were given a cross-functional assignment, 39% received a high-visibility assignment, 30% received a stretch assignment, and 30% saw their number of direct reports increase. However, missed opportunities are also evident in the outcomes. After development programs, men were more likely than women to:

- Get an international assignment (23% of men, 14% of women).
- Receive profit and loss responsibility (13% of men, 7% of women).
- Have their budget oversight increased by 20% or more (22% of men, 15% of women).
- Receive a promotion within a year (51% of men, 37% of women).

There was one outcome that women were more likely than men to receive — being assigned a mentor (47% of women, 39% of men). This supports [our past findings that women feel “mentored to death,”](#) receiving endless development without subsequent advancement opportunities. Those findings also showed that having more mentors didn’t lead to advancement; rather, having *senior* mentors who are in a position to provide sponsorship did. Organizations need to clarify their goals for development programs to ensure that outcomes align with objectives and that talent is developed equitably. Rather than developing high potentials for the sake of ticking a box, companies should do so intentionally and strategically. Is the goal simply the development of skills, or is it advancement? If the goal is advancement, what signals that someone is ready for the next level? Organizational clarity on these questions could help ensure more effective and equitable execution of leadership development initiatives.

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/study-women-get-fewer-game-changing-leadership-roles>

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