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# A New Game: Shifting the Leadership Culture to Close the Gender Gap in Corporate America

Deborah F. Koland

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A New Game:

Shifting the Leadership Culture to Close the Gender Gap in Corporate America

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP AND COUNSELING OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS  
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Deborah F. Koland

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2015

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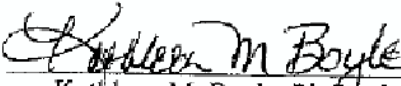
## UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA


## A New Game:

## Shifting the Leadership Culture to Close the Gender Gap in Corporate America

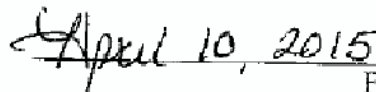
We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

## Dissertation Committee

  
Kathleen M. Boyle, Ph.D., Committee Chair

  
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Sarah J. Noonan, Ed.D., Committee Member

  
Final Approval Date

## Abstract

*This research sought to answer the questions, “Why does the leadership gender gap persist in Corporate America? How does the corporation bring gender parity to the executive suite sooner than 70 years from now” (Catalyst, 2005)?*

The Fortune 500 (i.e., the largest publically held companies in the United States in terms of revenue) represented the data pool for this qualitative grounded theory study. Data gathering took place through in-depth interviews held with 22 women leaders (i.e., director, vice president, senior vice president, executive vice president, president, chief executive officer, and chief operating officer levels). Because only women understand the particulars of leading as a female in Corporate America, only women participated in the study. This approach allowed for the exploration of real life observations and anecdotes regarding the lack of gender diverse values and perspectives at the executive level.

With respect to why the leadership gender gap persists, four thematic categories arose from the data including (a) the gap is real, (b) it is still a man’s world in the executive suite, (c) on culture/off culture, and (d) trade-offs too high. *It is still a man’s world in the executive suite* surfaced as the root cause of the continued loss of talented women as they progress through the leadership pipeline. Many talented women no longer want to behaviorally adapt to the male dominant and masculine defined leadership culture; therefore, they choose to broker their human capital equity outside of the four walls of Corporate America. Therefore the leadership gender gap persists.

Women bring unique values to the leadership equation, ones that lend themselves to different points of view on how to earn and use power, as well as how to have an enriching professional life and personal life. To manage the leadership pipeline, corporations need to look

at things differently. Four thematic categories arose from the data pointing to the unique values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table. These values and perspectives include (a) money and status not primary motivators; (b) earn your way to the top; (c) relationship is key; and (d) work and family harmony.

With respect to closing the leadership gender gap, three thematic categories arose from the data including (a) shift the leadership culture, (b) initiate as a business level strategy, and (c) manage through talent infrastructure. *Shift the leadership culture* surfaced as the core strategic management technique for bringing gender parity to the executive suite. Because it is taking so long for women to reach the tipping point in the executive suite (33% representation), the point where women's unique values and perspectives become self-sustaining, corporations must intentionally shift the leadership culture to one that values, models, and rewards the uniqueness of both genders in equal measure.

Three major conclusions arose from the data including (a) shifting *from* counting numbers of women in the executive suite *to* intentionally bringing gender balanced values and perspectives to fruition within the executive suite; (b) shifting *from* managing compliance *to* strategically focusing on building gender diverse talent capacity; and (c) shifting *from* thinking it is a woman's responsibility to resolve the leadership gender gap problem *to* leading from the top of the organization. Based on these conclusions, the research brought forth an emerging change model—EQUIPOISE—for closing the leadership gender gap.

The frameworks used to validate the data-driven findings included constructivist and cultural theories with research by Bolman and Deal (2003), Goffman (as cited in Collins, 1994), and Kivisto (2011), gender theory with research by Brizendine (2006), Chodorow (1999), DeBoer (2004), Gilligan (1993), and Rosener (1990), double bind theory by Bateson (2000),

acculturation theory by Berry (1997), significance of numbers theory by Simmel (as cited in Kanter, 1997), and strategic diversity theory by Chun and Evans (2014).

*Keywords:* acculturation theory, constructivist theory, critical mass theory, diversity compliance, diversity theory, double bind theory, gender and competition, gender and leadership, gender and power, gender biases in the workplace, gender stereotyping in the workplace, gender theory, glass ceiling, leadership and gender, leadership culture, leadership gender gap, leadership pipeline, leadership theory, lean in, on-ramp/off-ramp, opting out, organizational culture theory, strategic talent management, talent capacity building, women and men in leadership, women and the economy, women in business, workforce diversity, working mothers, workplace gender equality

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to three of the most important women in my life. To my mother Mae from whom I got my appreciation for learning, determination to get things done, and faith foundation; you are no longer with me physically, but I feel your presence in spirit. To my sister Diane the person who watched over me from day one of my life, without you I would not be who I am today. To my niece Rebecca, my soul mate in the sisterhood, whether near or far away you are always in my heart and on my mind.



## Acknowledgements

Many amazing women, who achieve their goals and help others to do the same, fill my life. Several of these women contributed to the successful completion of my doctoral dissertation. For this reason, I pause to practice gratitude.

To the women who participated in my study, your generosity in sharing time and wisdom provided me with valuable data. I believe the insights gleaned through analysis of the data shed new light on closing the persistent leadership gender gap in Corporate America. Many thanks for your dedication to women in leadership.

To the women colleagues who listened to me talk ad infinitum about the need for reaching gender parity at the tables of power, you listened patiently and challenged insightfully. Thank you.

To Dr. Boyle, my dissertation chair, you guided me through the research process, encouraged me when I got stuck, shared your expertise on women and leadership, and became my friend. Thank you my friend.

To Dr. Larsen and Dr. Noonan, my dissertation committee, you challenged me to focus and develop my research findings, analysis, and writing. Thank you for your support on the road to delivering a finished product.

To the women leaders I admire most, you taught me to leverage wisdom rather than pure facts in decision-making, lead authentically through self-acceptance, and serve others rather than self to fill the soul. Thank you for being roles models.

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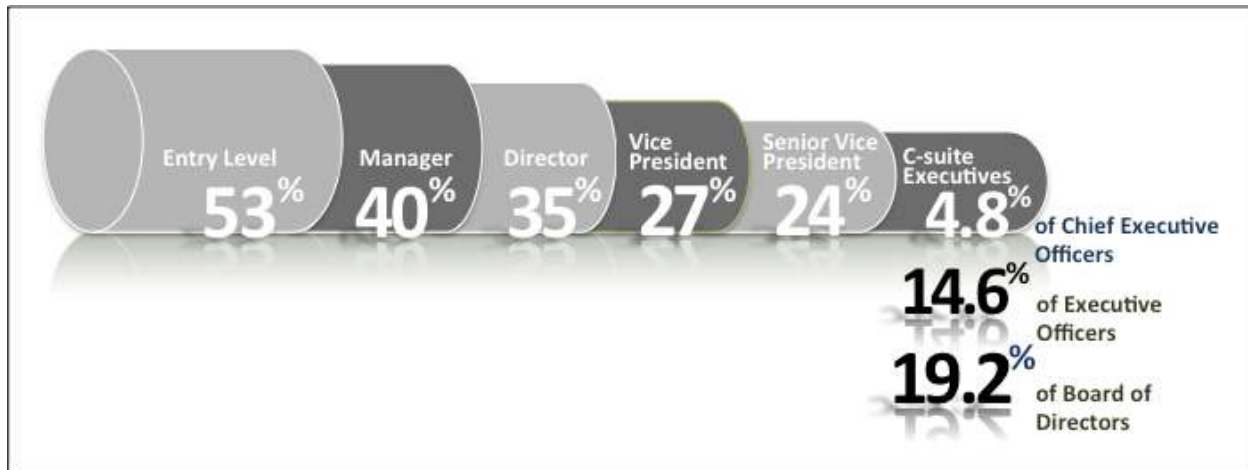
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## CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH TOPIC

Based on the accomplishments of women leaders, the Corporate American executive suite appears to represent gender equality as a reality. In 2009, for example, the first female chief executive officer (CEO) handoff occurred as Anne Mulcahy of Xerox passed her position to Ursula Burns while she stayed on as chairman of the board (Sellers & Shambora, 2009). This groundbreaking move shattered ideas that women executive officers are one-off occurrences and “women generally don’t help other women on the way up” (Sellers & Shambora, 2009, para. 2). In 2012, the appointment of a pregnant Marissa Mayer to CEO at Yahoo challenged the “contradiction in having a full personal and a full professional life” (Vanderkam, 2012, para. 3). This progressive decision by Yahoo’s board of directors set a precedent for the advancement of women in business.

Despite major accomplishments, women holding executive officer positions in Corporate America remain few in number (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014). Fifty-five years after the onset of second wave feminism when women sought gender equality on many fronts including the workplace (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005), a profound divide in power and authority still separates women from men in the executive suite (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Although women made significant gains at the pre-executive level (i.e., entry level, manager, director, vice president, and senior vice president), women hold only 4.8% of CEO, 14.6% of executive officer, and 19.2% of board of director positions (see Figure 1.1; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014). At this rate of change, it could take 70 years to achieve gender parity in the C-suite (Catalyst, 2005).



*Figure 1.1.* Women in the leadership pipeline by level. Entry level, manager, director, vice president, and senior vice president percentages represent an average calculated from data collected at 60 of the Fortune 500 companies (Barsh & Yee, 2012). C-suite percentages represent all Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014).

My research sought to answer the questions, “Why does the leadership gender gap persist in Corporate America? How does the corporation bring gender parity to the executive suite sooner than 70 years from now” (Catalyst, 2005)? [Note the anthropomorphic word usage in referring to a corporation as a person. I do this because I believe it helpful to think of a corporation as a system of people rather than bricks and mortar. This word usage continues throughout the document.]

### **Opening Reflexive Statement**

I am a business strategist. I identify innovative growth opportunities for large corporations and lead large-scale strategic initiatives through implementation. I am particularly proud of my work synchronizing the people, process, and system components of change to ensure a strategic initiative achieves its projected results and leaves behind sustainable work environments. In fact, I constructed my Master in Business Administration (MBA) program to reflect this union of strategy and organization. Although my MBA concentration was strategy development, I built a secondary focus around organizational alignment.

For more than twenty years, I called Corporate America my home. I worked for two international consulting firms bringing strategy and organizational expertise to large corporations, and served on the strategic leadership team in a Fortune 500 company. I spent my days delivering results, developing my expertise, and building my reputation as a business strategist and organizational alignment specialist. More often than not, I worked on teams heavily weighted toward a male composition. I admit I did not think much about the lack of women in the executive suite.

In 2004, a strategic opportunity popped onto my radar screen, one focused on women and leadership within the context of the organization where I worked. Because the initiative sought to deliver business results, as well as connect women across the organization, I thought it innovative and worth my time to ensure its success. Although several men participated in the initiative, and our male CEO sponsored and funded it, 90% of those involved were women. I quickly became aware that women brought unique values and perspectives to the leadership table. Holding to positional power disappeared, working as a team to help the organization succeed became paramount, and supporting one another in our professional and personal lives seemed the norm, all while delivering business results that surpassed the CEO's expectations.

Greene (1988) encouraged people to look for openings in their lived experiences, to look at things as if they could be otherwise, and to take action on what they found. I started to imagine how leadership, organizations, and the world might change if women held 50% of the seats at the tables of power in all facets of life. In 2009, I heeded Greene's counsel to take action. I decided to leverage my experiences as a businesswoman and strategist to research and write about women and leadership. Ultimately I wanted to serve as a catalyst for bringing



gender parity to the executive suite in Corporate America and beyond. To round out my pedigree for achieving this goal, I pursued a doctoral degree in leadership.

In 2012, halfway through my doctoral work, I attended a women's leadership conference at the Omega Institute in New York. The event attracted 500 women from across the globe to spend three days discussing women and power. While working within this group, I once again experienced unique leadership values and perspectives playing out amongst the women. The conversations centered on the tremendous social responsibility that comes with leadership and use of power to effect positive change in the world. I thought, "If this group of women stayed together for one year, they would change the world." It was my "aha" moment. I felt it negligent to allow 70 years to pass before Corporate America experienced the benefits of women sitting in parity with men in the executive suite. I found the focus for my doctoral research.

People choose to do research because they aspire to have the insights they uncover and the understandings they bring forward to make a difference in the world (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I believe my research sheds new light on closing the leadership gender gap in Corporate America, and serves as a model for other public and private organizations to do the same.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Corporate America is nowhere near leveraging the full potential of women in the executive suite (Barsh, 2014; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2005, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). Although women fill the front end of the leadership pipeline in equal numbers to men, the number of women dwindles as they move closer to the back end of the leadership pipeline. This is an interesting phenomenon considering that women comprise 53% of management, professional, and related occupations (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Rosin, 2010), aspire to lead at all levels of the organization (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Haas, Hwang, & Russell, 1999;

Stone, 2008), hold 50% of the business degrees awarded (i.e., Bachelor of Arts and MBA; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), and possess decades of pre-executive level business leadership experience (Barsh & Yee, 2012).

Education and experience represent essential qualifiers for talented individuals looking toward the executive suite (Carter & Silva, 2011; Harvard Business School, 2013). Therefore it seems logical that a correlation should exist between reaching the tipping points (i.e., 33% representation of women; Gladwell, 2002) for gender parity in education and experience, and the number of women in executive officer positions (Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). However no correlation exists (see Figure 1.2). The percentage of women holding executive officer positions moved only marginally since 1996 when Catalyst started recording these statistics. Though the pump seemed primed for gender parity in the executive suite, it just is not so.

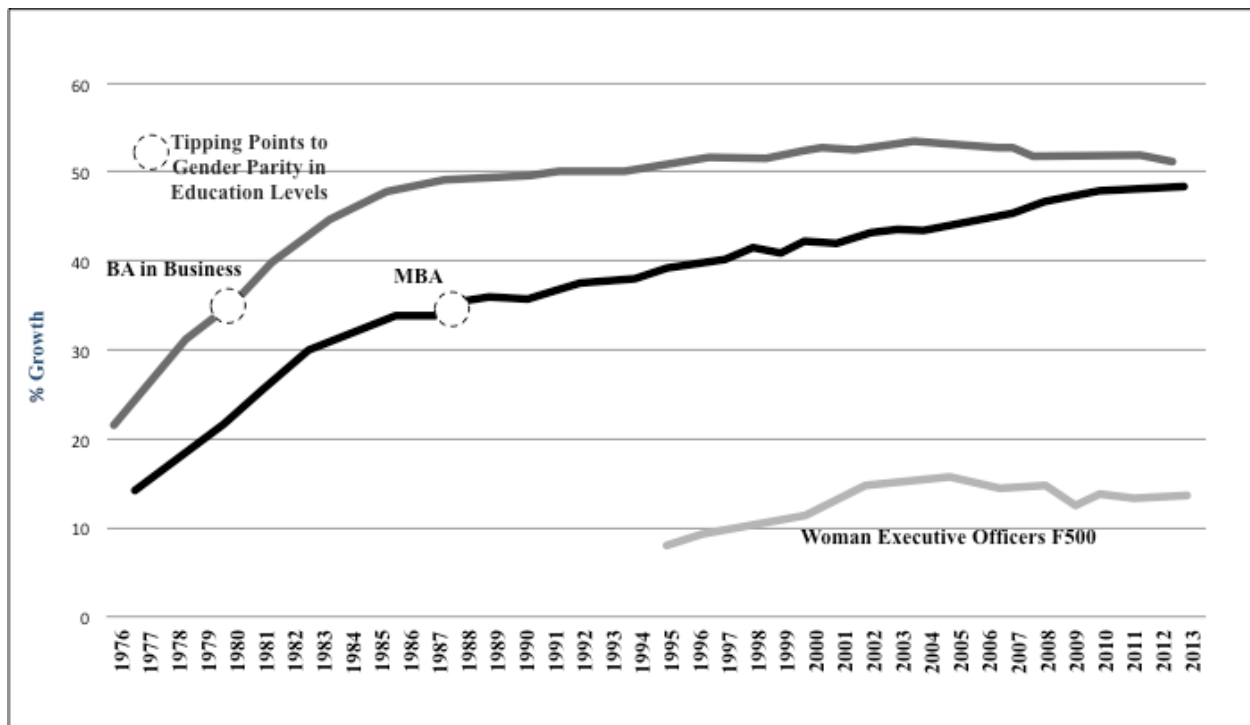


Figure 1.2. Education and experience to number of women executive officers (Catalyst, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

### **Significance of the Problem**

Corporate American executive officers determine how to operate and grow their businesses, establish priorities, and make decisions that set their companies' futures all with an eye on providing profitable returns for shareholders (Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). Due to the power and wealth of the Fortune 500, the socioeconomic effects of executive actions taken within the four walls of these large organization reach far beyond to influence actions taken and norms established within financial markets, government, and society at large (Bakan, 2004; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Kelly, 2003). When qualified women do not occupy at least 33% of the positions in the executive suites of the Fortune 500—that magical number when social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire (Gladwell, 2002)—the benefits of women's diverse ideas, solutions, and approaches to leadership and business are lost (Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). This hampers the possibility of opening up different options to replace sometimes outmoded or even counterproductive ways of doing business.

During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, American's trust in large corporations eroded substantially (Bakan, 2004; Barsh, 2014; Kelly, 2003). Barsh (2014) said, "Putting more women in charge is a key to a better future for business" (p. 1). This researcher pointed out that it might be the solution for bringing trust back into the socioeconomic equation. The American public seems to agree.

When Gerzema and D'Antonio (2013) surveyed 64,000 people in 13 nations, the researchers found two-thirds of the participants claimed that the world would be a better place if men thought more like women because it would lead to a more flexible and sustainable way of living and leading. The participants called for corporations to blend the gifts and abilities that both genders bring to leadership, and for women and men to learn from one another (Gerzema &

D'Antonio, 2013). In a Pew Research Center (2008) survey of 2,250 adults, Americans indicated that women make better leaders when it comes to measures of honesty, intelligence, work ethic, ambition, compassion, communications, and creativity. The majority of the survey participants (69%) claimed women and men make equally good leaders, while one in five respondents (21%) said men make better leaders.

Further women are good for the financial success and long-term viability of Corporate America. Kent (2011), CEO of Coca-Cola Company pointed out that women represent the most dynamic and fastest growing economic force in the world controlling over \$20 trillion in spending power worldwide—a combined economic force larger than the United States, China, and India combined. Other researchers showed corporations with more women in their executive suites performed better financially by 50% or more on measures of profitability (Catalyst, 2005; Fairchild, 2014; Rosin, 2010). With such impressive economic indicators tied to more women in the executive suite, it is easy to understand why Lang (as cited in Catalyst, 2005), president of Catalyst said, “Increased globalization and shifting demographics dictate that diversity and the advancement of women on corporate boards [and in executive suites] are strategic imperatives that 21<sup>st</sup> Century companies cannot afford to ignore” (para. 3).

### **Need for the Study**

When working with 60 Fortune 500 companies, Barsh and Yee (2012) found that 80% of the CEOs thought gender diversity was critical to the success of their organizations and represented a better match to their consumer demographics. However few in Corporate America win the game of retaining and promoting a greater number of women to the executive suite (Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014). After completing a review of scholarly literature

focused on the leadership gender gap, I found the bulk of the research concentrated on individual and system level gender stereotyping within corporations.

At the individual level, researchers concentrated on better preparing women to compete for executive positions alongside of their male counterparts (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002; Stone, 2008). However Carter and Silva (2011) showed that “even when women used the same career advancement strategies—doing all the things they have been told will help them get ahead—they advanced less than their male counterparts and had slower pay growth” (p. 2).

At the system level, researchers concentrated on how system biases and barriers to women’s advancement might be removed, thereby allowing more women to reach the executive leadership level (Acher, 1990; Bowen, 1999; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Haas et al., 1999; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kolb, Fletcher, Meyerson, Merrill-Sands, & Ely, 1998; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Stone, 2008). However Bowen (1999) stated that systems tend to be static due to the comfort of “what works” and are difficult to change organically. Further Hogue and Lord (2007) claimed that reductionist approaches targeting only one level or process are likely to be ineffective in closing the leadership gender gap due to the complexities inherent in systems steeped in gender biases.

Rhode and Kellerman (2007) suggested turning to a broader reform agenda. They claimed that it was time for women who made it to the top of organizations to use their "unique opportunities and corresponding obligations to promote changes that make leadership accessible to others [women]" (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007, p. 26). With Rhode and Kellerman’s approach, the goal shifts from eradicating individual and system level gender stereotyping to intentionally

creating a leadership environment that works well for women and men alike. The path to the executive suite becomes a pull from the top versus a push from the bottom of the organization.

Simmel (as cited in Kanter, 1977) claimed that when numerical shifts occur, as from underrepresented status to closer to equality status, social dynamics and interactions transform. By pulling more women into the executive suite, women's ability to influence the leadership culture becomes easier due to sheer numbers alone (Kanter, 1977). However I found scant literature focused on pulling a critical mass of women into the executive suite. My research followed this path.

Although not a zero-sum game of women versus men (i.e., one person's utility gain is balanced by another person's utility loss; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.), I believed it was important for my study to be framed as feminist research. I made this decision based on the fact that only women understood firsthand the particulars of leading as a female in Corporate America. Therefore only women's lived stories contained the answers to closing the leadership gender gap. Twenty-two highly experienced female leaders provided the data for my study.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following list provides definitions for business terminology used throughout the document:

- *Board of Directors/Board Directors*: A group of individuals elected as representatives of a corporation's shareholders to establish corporate management related policies and make decisions on major company issues; this group establishes corporate governance. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Bottom Line Growth*: A corporation's income after deducting expenses from earnings on sales of products and/or services; typically increased by taking cost out of the system. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Chairman of the Board*: The most powerful member on the board of directors who provides leadership to the firm's officers and executives, and ensures the corporation

fulfills its duties to its shareholders by acting as a link between the board of directors and upper management. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)

- *Chief Executive Officer*: The highest ranking executive in the company whose main responsibilities include developing and implementing high-level strategies, making major corporate decisions, managing the overall operations and resources of a company, and acting as the main point of communication between the board of directors and corporate operations. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Chief Operating Officer*: The senior officer responsible for managing a company's day-to-day operations; this position reports directly to the chief executive officer. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Consumer Confidence Index*: A distinctive indicator of the relative financial health, spending power, and overall confidence of the average American consumer, which is measured monthly through a survey of 5,000 households by a non-profit business group. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Corporate Governance*: The system of rules, practices, and processes set by the board of directors and C-suite executives to direct and control corporate operations. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *C-suite*: A corporation's most senior executives whose titles start with the word chief; comes with high-stakes decision-making, a more demanding workload, and high compensation. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Executive Suite*: C-suite leaders plus leaders available for promotion to the C-suite including senior vice president and executive vice president levels. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Fortune 500*: The largest public companies in the United States in terms of revenue; companies on the list command immense power and wealth, thereby defining American business. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Gross Domestic Product*: The monetary value of all finished goods and services produced on an annual basis within a country's borders. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Human Capital Equity*: An individual's education, knowledge, experiences, and skill sets that equate to their economic value as a human resource within a corporation. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Innovation*: New products or services that provide more effective and efficient solutions to meet existing or unarticulated customer needs; anything that substantially changes the way management carries out their work or significantly modifies

customary organizational forms to the advantage of organizational goals. (Hamel, 2000, 2007).

- *Line Management*: Revenue generating departments responsible for achieving an organization's main objectives. (Business Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Market*: A place where forces of supply and demand operate, and where buyers and sellers interact to trade goods. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Profit and Loss*: A corporation's revenues, costs, and expenses incurred during a specific period of time; financial performance. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Shareholders*: Any person who or organization that invests money in a corporation to fuel its growth; these investors have the potential for profit on or loss of the initial money they invested. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Stakeholders*: Anyone affected by an organization's actions, objectives, or policies. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)
- *Top Line Growth*: A corporation's income before deducting expenses from earnings; typically increased through the creation of new products or service offerings, or by expanding into new markets. (Investopedia Dictionary, n.d.)

### **Overview of Dissertation**

This dissertation provides a detailed review of topical and theoretical scholarship to inform my research, an explanation of my study methodology, and the findings, analysis, and conclusions drawn from the data.

In Chapter Two, I provide a short history of women in Corporate America. Then I summarize scholarly literature regarding the leadership gender gap, and identify literature tensions and gaps. Next I detail theoretical frameworks used to understand the leadership gender gap, and document their limitations and leverage points for future research. Finally I propose a new theoretical approach for examining the leadership gender gap.

In Chapter Three, I present my study methodology. First I describe the particulars of completing research using a qualitative grounded theory approach, and discuss the philosophical assumptions I bring to the role of researcher. Then I document the interview questions, describe



the study participant demographics, and define the selection process used to secure participants. Next I summarize the data collecting, analyzing, and writing processes. Finally I present tactics used to ensure data validity, generalization, ethics, and confidentiality.

In Chapter Four, I present the data gathered through in-depth interviews with the 22 women leaders who participated in my study. Specifically the chapter addresses the question of why the leadership gender gap persists in Corporate America. Four thematic categories arose from the data including (a) the gap is real, (b) it is still a man's world in the executive suite, (c) on culture/off culture, and (d) trade-offs too high.

In Chapter Five, I present the data gathered through in-depth interviews with the 22 women leaders who participated in my study. Specifically the chapter details the unique values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table. Four thematic categories arose from the data including (a) money and status not primary motivators; (b) earn your way to the top; (c) relationship is key; and (d) work and family harmony.

In Chapter Six, I present the data gathered through in-depth interviews with the 22 women leaders who participated in my study. Specifically the chapter addresses the question of how to close the leadership gender gap in Corporate America. Three thematic categories arose from the data including (a) shift the leadership culture, (b) initiate as a business level strategy, and (c) manage through talent infrastructure.

In Chapter Seven, I present the data analysis completed on the data findings as discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. The frameworks used to validate the data-driven findings included constructivist and cultural theories with research by Bolman and Deal (2003), Goffman (as cited in Collins, 1994), and Kivisto (2011), gender theory with research by Brizendine (2006), Chodorow (1999), DeBoer (2004), Gilligan (1993), and Rosener (1990), double bind

theory by Bateson (2000), acculturation theory by Berry (1997), significance of numbers theory by Simmel (as cited in Kanter, 1997), and strategic diversity theory by Chun and Evans (2014).

In Chapter Eight, I assess the theoretical approach I proposed for examining the leadership gender gap as I started my research, present the major conclusions derived from the data-driven findings and analysis, compare the conclusions to my theoretical assumptions, and document the data-driven theory on how to close the leadership gender gap. Three major conclusions arose from the data including (a) shifting from counting numbers of women in the executive suite to intentionally bringing gender balanced values and perspectives to fruition within the executive suite; (b) shifting from managing compliance to strategically focusing on building gender diverse talent capacity; and (c) shifting from thinking it is a woman's responsibility to resolve the leadership gender gap problem to leading from the top of the organization. Then I present an emerging change model—EQUIPOISE. Next I address study limitations and implications for future research. I conclude with a summary and closing reflections.

### **Summary**

Despite making major advances on the Corporate American leadership front, women remain few in number in the executive suite. Although women have the educational credentials and possess the pre-executive level leadership experiences needed to serve in the C-suite, and aspire to be in the executive suite as much as their male counterparts do, the leadership gender gap persists. Regardless of the public's call for more women in the executive suite and financial benefits to corporations when more women hold executive officer positions on their executive leadership teams, the leadership gender gap persists. At the current rate of women reaching the executive suite, it could take 70 years to close the leadership gender gap (Catalyst, 2005).

The bulk of scholarly literature focused on removing individual and system level gender stereotyping from organizations to push women through the leadership pipeline from the front end to the back end. A few researchers alluded to the need to pull women into the executive suite. This pull approach required women who made it to the top of organizations to promote changes that make leadership accessible to more women. There was scant literature focused on pulling a critical mass of women into the executive suite. This was the focus of my research.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORY

To determine whether a proposed research topic is worthy of further academic study, a researcher completes a critical literature review and an applied theoretical review. These activities allow the researcher to understand the body of research completed to date and the epistemological foundation upon which the study findings were based (Creswell, 2013; Machi & McEvoy, 2009). What follows is my review of the critical literature and applied theory focused on the leadership gender gap in Corporate America. It provides the foundation to substantiate my claim that innovative research is needed to understand why the leadership gender gap persists and how to resolve it sooner than 70 years from now (Catalyst, 2005).

I begin this chapter with a historical depiction of women's movement into Corporate America. I address how a woman's place and position within the corporation developed and morphed over time. Next I summarize current scholarly knowledge on the leadership gender gap organized by causation factors along with solutions employed and outcomes achieved, identify literature tensions and gaps, and discuss their ramifications on the continued existence of the leadership gender gap. Last, I detail three theoretical frameworks historically used to examine the leadership gender gap, discuss their limitations and leverage points for future research, and propose an innovative approach for understanding and closing the leadership gender gap based on the significance of numbers, system tension of change, and power of social cohesion.

### **Historical Context**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, women in professional and non-farm related managerial positions were few in number, considered insignificant, and rendered almost invisible in the workplace (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). World War II increased the number of women in the workforce, albeit mostly in unskilled labor, and expanded their

occupational distribution as they substituted for men who were off fighting the war. This arrangement did little to change society's functionalist perspective on gender roles: a man's place was at work, and a woman's place was at home.

Post World War II, men threw themselves back into the paid workforce and women refocused on unpaid domestic work, while consumer confidence drove exponential economic expansion (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). This bode well for men allowing them to capture close to 100% of corporate leadership positions. Men proceeded to construct workplace structures, policies, and procedures, and defined the rules for leadership success all based on masculine experiences, values, and behaviors (Acher, 1990; Kanter, 1977). Because the corporate social order emulated overall social order—a functionalist perspective on gender roles—it became the de facto standard for leadership.

### **The Early Years**

In the 1960s, second wave feminism mobilized around the premise that women's absence in leadership positions contributed significantly to their continued unequal status in society (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). Women flooded higher education institutions in pursuit of business degrees and workplaces seeking to find their stature alongside of men in the leadership ranks of Corporate America.

During this period, governmental legislation focused on policy barring gender discrimination in the workplace (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in the workplace. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) started to enforce these laws when the National Organization for Women (NOW) brought political and legal pressures to the local, state, and federal levels in the late

1960s and early 1970s. In 1972, Title IX of the Educational Amendments Acts became law barring discrimination because of sex in education and activities funded by the Federal Government including organized sports. It is interesting to note that people speculated that women's participation in organized sports better positioned them for the competitive environment of Corporate America (DeBoer, 2004).

By the mid-1970s, proposed legislation shifted from barring discrimination to affirmative action policy requiring employers to give hiring and promotional preferences to women and minorities (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). According to Giele and Stebbins (2003), "the goal and timetable in affirmative action was to try to move the race or sex distribution of the employed population closer to the ratio in the supply population" (p. 62). In 1973, the American Stock Exchange adopted an affirmative action hiring policy setting the bar for other large organizations to do the same (Giele & Stebbins, 2003).

### **Women are Here to Stay**

Motivated by a goal of greater participation by women, companies focused on organizational interventions to alleviate the individual gender differences and system biases keeping women from ascending the corporate leadership ladder in equal numbers to men (Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). Although these efforts appeared promising in their goals and made a difference in the lives of many women who worked outside of the home, they were largely ineffective in closing the leadership gender gap.

A huge loss on the gender equality front came when the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the United States Constitution expired on June 30, 1982 without passing legislation (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). From its original creation by Alice Paul in 1923 and subsequent presentation to Congress that year, women worked for decades to get the bill

passed in both houses. In 1972, the ERA passed in Congress and moved to the state level for ratification. Over the next five years, 35 states voted for ratification of the ERA. The bill failed to retain the three extra votes needed to pass legislation before its mandated expiration date.

### **Gender Differences**

As work to eradicate discrimination between the sexes moved forward, the social sciences discovered gender differences between men and women (Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 1993). Theories once considered gender neutral in their scientific objectivity appeared to reflect observational and evaluative biases. This discovery gave way to the recognition of human constructed knowledge and how accustomed society had become to seeing life through men's eyes. In her groundbreaking book, Kanter (1977) first exposed the idea of gendered workplace experiences:

Something has been holding women back. That something was usually assumed to be located in the differences between women and men as individuals: their training for different worlds; the nature of sexual relationships, which make women unable to compete with men and men unable to aggress against women; the "tracks" they were put on in school or at play; and even, in the most biological reductionist version of the argument, "natural" dispositions of the sexes. (p. 261)

Building on Kanter's (1977) assessment, Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) coined the term glass ceiling, which denotes that women experienced an impenetrable barrier based on gender at some point in their careers. This barrier, mostly invisible and based on organizational cultures favoring men, prevented women from landing the most powerful, the most prestigious, and the highest-paying jobs in corporations (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005).

The United States Department of Labor (1991) passed the Glass Ceiling Act as Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 and established the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission to oversee operations. This diverse, bipartisan group conducted research and prepared recommendations for eliminating artificial barriers, such as attitudinal and organizational biases, keeping women

and minorities from advancing to management and decision-making positions within the business world. In 1995, the United States Department of Labor completed a study, which confirmed that "the world at the top of the corporate hierarchy did not yet look anything like America" (p. iv) where the working population consisted of 57% women and minorities. During this time, the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 passed which required corporations to allow for 12 weeks of unpaid leave to care for family (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005).

### **Measuring Progress**

In 1995 at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women conference, a group of 50,000 people representing 189 governments set a goal to increase the number of women in leadership positions within their respective countries. This action became known as the Beijing Declaration. In 2006, the World Economic Forum (WEF) created the Gender Gap Index to assess participating countries on their progress toward gender equality based on four measures including (a) economic participation, (b) education attainment, (c) health and survival, and (d) political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2015). The same year, the WEF issued its first global report on how countries' progressed toward gender equality.

Nine years later, out of 142 countries measured, the United States ranked 20<sup>th</sup> (World Economic Forum; 2015). For comparison, Nicaragua ranked sixth, Burundi 17<sup>th</sup>, and South Africa 18<sup>th</sup>. The Nordic countries led the pack holding positions one through five including Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, respectively, making substantial gains toward the goal of gender equality in leadership.



### **Current Scholarly Knowledge**

Individuals exist within social spheres where they rely on categorization to make sense of the complexity embedded in each sphere (Barreto, Ellemers, Cihangir, & Stroebe, 2009; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). One strategy for categorization involves stratification along gender lines, also known as gender stereotyping. A significant number of scholars pointed to the construal of three socially identifiable groups—women, men, and leaders—as the common denominator for gender stereotyping within the workplace (Acher, 1990; Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Heilman, 2001; Pai & Vaidya, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2002).

Eagly and Sczesny (2009) argued that the disadvantages women face as leaders reflect the similarity and dissimilarity between the socially constructed stereotypes of women, men, and leaders. Society sees men as being natural leaders and women as being less capable of filling leadership roles, especially roles at the C-suite level. Further society holds men responsible for providing monetarily for the family and women responsible for raising the children. When Wellington, Kropf, and Gerkovich (2003) surveyed successful women executives in Fortune 500 companies, they found that 72% agreed or strongly agreed with the claim that gender stereotyping regarding women's roles and leadership abilities continue to make it difficult for females to advance to senior level leadership positions in Corporate America.

Eight themes emerged from my review of the critical literature examining the leadership gender gap in Corporate America (see Figure 2.1). Gender stereotyping represents an overarching theme embedded in all the other themes. Gender stereotyping occurs at both an individual level and system level creating barriers to women moving into the executive suite (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kolb et al., 1998).

Individual level gender stereotyping focuses on how gender based differences, from leadership styles to work values, contribute to the leadership gender gap (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Fiske et al., 2006; Rapoport et al., 2002; Stone, 2008). Two themes surfaced for individual level gender stereotyping, namely leadership traits (i.e., perceptions regarding leadership fit and ability), and career commitment (i.e., perceptions regarding loyalty to work versus family).

System level gender stereotyping considers how organizations themselves shape gender biases (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Three themes surfaced for system level gender stereotyping including structure, policy, and procedure (Kanter, 1977). Structure focuses on the organization as a culture, policy focuses on employee benefits to make work and family easier to manage, and procedure focuses on hiring and promoting processes.

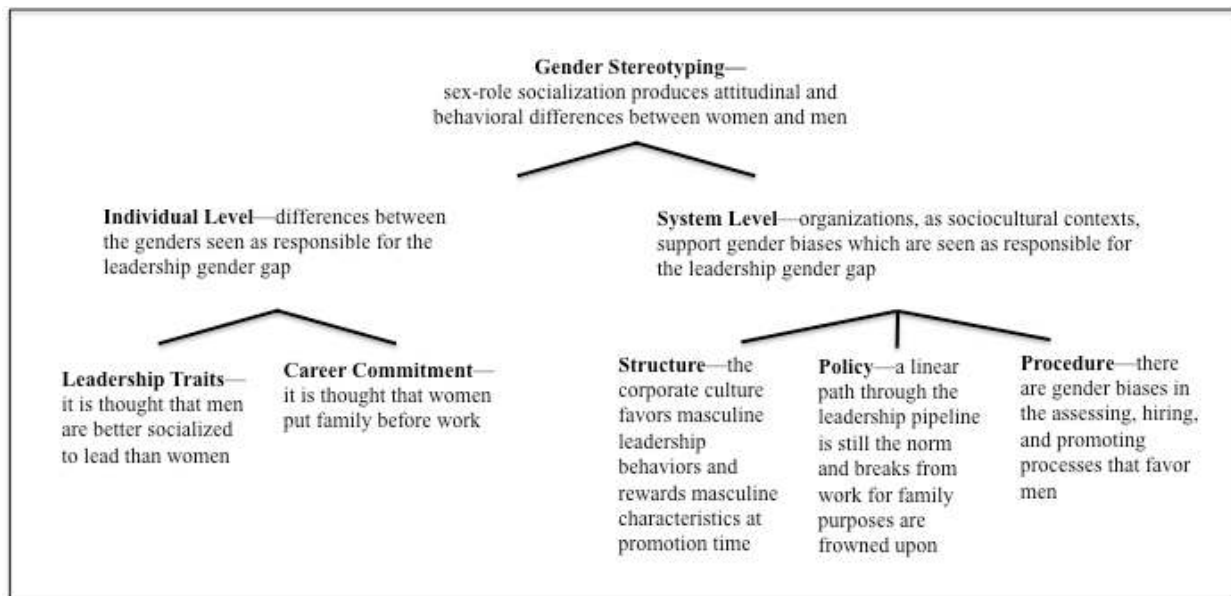


Figure 2.1. Themes in the scholarly literature.

### Individual Level Gender Stereotyping

Individual level gender stereotyping as description (i.e., how women and men differ), and prescription (i.e., how women and men behave), create a mismatch between the attributes ascribed to women and men, and the attributes believed necessary for success in the role of

executive leadership (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Heilman, 2001). The underlying assumption behind individual level gender stereotyping holds attitudinal and behavioral differences between women and men as responsible for workplace inequalities (Acher, 1990; Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Carter 2005; Pai & Vaidya, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2002).

**Leadership traits as individual level gender stereotyping.** According to researchers, men possess agentic characteristics such as aggressiveness, forcefulness, independence, and decisiveness, while women possess service-oriented characteristics such as kindness, helpfulness, sympathy, and concern for others (Denmark, 1993; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Giscombe, 2007; Heilmen, 2001; Hoyt, 2010; Meyerson & Ely, 2003; Rapoport et al., 2002). Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2006) added communal and warmth to the list describing women, and achievement-orientation and competitive to the list describing men. Because the descriptors for men fit the paradigm of successful leadership according to the corporate framework created by men, it is no surprise that women encounter a disadvantage from the “get-go” as they move into and through the leadership pipeline.

**Solutions.** A common organizational belief stemming from liberal political theory indicates that individuals rise and fall based on their own merits (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kolb et al., 1998). As a result, a widespread response to individual level gender stereotyping is to fix the woman (Fondas, 1997; Statham, 1987). The premise is if women develop agentic characteristics like their male counterparts, then women can compete on an equal playing field with men when vying for executive level positions. To accomplish this end, corporations create development programs focused on helping women build masculine leadership traits, and assign male mentors focused on coaching women in the use of power,

emotions, negotiations, politics, and competition (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007).

**Outcomes.** Although development and mentoring programs help women obtain valuable leadership skills and develop high-level networks to augment their educational accomplishments and work experiences, researchers show these efforts do not guarantee women advancement to the same leadership levels as equivalently educated and performing men (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Heilman, 2001; Hesse-Biber, 2005). Despite evidence that women perform as effectively as men in leadership roles, a substantial number of researchers indicate that women face greater difficulty in establishing their capability and credibility (Ridgeway & Correll, 2000). Carter and Silva (2011) showed that while doing all the “right things” to move up the corporate ladder, as advised by conventional wisdom, worked for high potential men, this approach did not work as well for high potential women. These things included seeking high-profile assignments, getting influential mentors, networking, self-managing career, self-promoting, seeking new opportunities, working the political landscape, and negotiating.

Further women leaders encounter cross-pressures that men do not experience. Women need to possess the agentic characteristics associated with men to move up the corporate ladder, but as women they need to be "not too manly" or risk others seeing them as unladylike (Eagly, Makhijani, & Konsky, 1992; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007; Rudman, 1999). Atwater, Brett, Waldman, DiMare, and Hayden (2004) claimed that when women engaged in leadership roles incongruous with their gender roles, no matter how well they performed, negative implications entered the picture and affected assessments of their performance. As a result, aspiring women

leaders risk being liked but not respected, or respected but not liked when in reality, they need both to succeed as corporate leaders.

**Career commitment as individual level gender stereotyping.** According to researchers, women are as likely as men to be in the labor force and possess a desire to engage in a full range of occupations at all levels of the organizational hierarchy (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Haas et al., 1999; Stone, 2008). Of the 120 CEOs (almost all males) and 705 high-level female executives surveyed by Wellington et al. (2003), less than one-third of the respondents indicated "lack of desire to advance to senior levels" (p. 19) as a barrier to women's advancement. Of the executive women not at the most senior levels of leadership at the time of the survey, 55% said they aspired to reach that level someday. However when female leaders take a hiatus from work to focus on family, the corporation often identifies them as lacking commitment, ambition, and the dedication to attain and hold an executive level leadership positions (Hewlett, 2007).

Several researchers indicated that women and men experience work and family choices differently as they moved through their careers (Haas et al., 1999; Rapoport et al., 2002; Sabatti & Crosby, 2009; Stone 2008). Men's careers remain linear while women's careers experience short-term interruptions. Although 60% of professional women work past their first child, nearly 4 in 10 white, college-educated, married, professional women choose to take a career break from paid work to care for family for a period of several years (Hewlett, 2007; Stone, 2008). Hewlett (2007) found 1 in 3 women with a MBA, the coveted degree of corporate leadership, did not work full-time compared with 1 in 29 men with the same degree.

According to Haas, Hwang, and Russell (1999), gender equity exists when women and men hold equal responsibility for providing the family income and caring for children. Bowen

(1999) stated, "If paid work and family work were explained by choice alone, it would seem that men and women would be equally likely to perform these tasks and to experience similar levels of success and gratification from role performance" (p. 84). Yet today's world of working professionals still considers work and family linkages as a "woman's issue." This premise singles out women in a way that leads to discriminatory practices in recruiting for and promoting to the executive level.

Northcraft and Gutek (1993) claimed that this form of gender stereotyping, considering work and family linkages as a woman's issue, represented the single biggest impediment to attaining a discriminatory-free environment for women seeking executive leadership positions. Further linking family to women contributes to the pursuit of the "mommy track", a strategy where women stay in a position that underutilizes their abilities or qualifications to allow time for family responsibilities. Once their children start school, these women get back on the leadership track, but often find they cannot reenter the workforce at the same level at which they left the workforce.

***Solutions.*** One solution presented by researchers to the work and family balance conundrum focuses on the creation of organizational policies that make work and family life more manageable for women (i.e., a great place for women to work; Hewlett, 2007; Stone, 2008). These policies focus on "accommodation" by creating programs such as flextime where a woman sets her own work schedule to take care of her family, job sharing where two women employed part-time share one full-time job, and onsite child care facilities (Bowen, 1999; Haas et al., 1999; Rapoport et al., 2002; Sabatti & Crosby, 2009).

***Outcomes.*** Many women who leave the workforce to focus on children do so only after numerous attempts to reconfigure their work responsibilities to allow them to continue with their

careers (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). Although formal workplace policies reside on the books in large corporations, most aspiring women leaders use them only as a last resort because doing so renders them invisible leaving these women in an “out of sight, out of mind” status (Hewlett, 2007; Rapoport et al., 2002). Women who pursue a non-linear career path often find their high-level responsibilities taken away (Stone, 2008). Because of these ramifications, many talented women choose to return to work soon after giving birth.

The majority of women who opt out of work to care for children return within two years, but they pay a price (Hewlett, 2007). According to a survey by Hewlett (2007), 93% of “opt out for family” women wanted to return to work because their careers filled them with satisfaction. Yet only 74% of them were able to get back into the corporation at the same level from which they left. For example, an executive with 12 years of international experience and a MBA degree from a top-tier school thought returning to the job market would be easy. However a hiring manager felt differently stating, "Yes great resume, but she's taken time off. I have an equal number of great managers who haven't taken time off" (Hewlett, 2007, p. 411). When women do find a position equal to their qualifications upon returning to the workforce, their annual earnings fall by up to 28% when out for less than three years and jumps to 37% when out for three or more years (Hewlett, 2007).

### **System Level Gender Stereotyping**

System level gender stereotyping considers how organizations themselves shape gender differences (Acher, 1990; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kanter, 1977; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000). Ridgeway and Correll (2000) claimed that these socially constructed systems produce the appearance of two different kinds of people—women and men. The overriding premise is masculine behaviors better equip one to lead. Once established,

gender as a system of differences appears in multiple mutually reinforcing arenas such as hierarchies, work practices, and the meanings and identities people enact as individuals within the system. Haas et al. (1999) claimed that these system factors might be more critical in determining women's positioning within corporations than individual leadership characteristics.

**Structure as system level gender stereotyping.** According to researchers, structure places the issue of gender and leadership in the broader context of organizational culture where social structures and interactions reinforce one another (Acher, 1990; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kanter, 1977; Kolb et al., 1998; Powell, 2000; Ragins et al., 1998; Statham, 1987). Schein (1990) defined culture as (a) a pattern of basic assumptions; (b) developed by a closely related group of people; (c) as they learn to adapt internal and integrate external to the group; (d) working well enough to be considered valid; and (e) taught to new members of the group as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and act. In Corporate America, where men still hold well over 80% of the executive level positions, the leadership culture is masculine. Therefore the way to act as a leader is masculine in attributes and behaviors.

Within the culture of an organization, gender biases operate at various levels of visibility. Although outward visible discrimination toward women is rare today; invisible discrimination proves very detrimental to their advancement to the executive suite. This discrimination represents deeply held beliefs residing at the subconscious level, beliefs that filter out women in favor of men when it comes to leadership hiring and promotion. Ragins, Townsend, and Mattis (1998) indicated that successful female executives experience a "constant background static that is distracting, debilitating, and a constant reality for many of these female executives, but that is often not heard by their male bosses" (p. 35).



**Solutions.** Diversity training and consciousness raising programs make people aware of the differences in women and men's behavior in an effort to encourage the recognition and reward of a full range of contributions to the organization (Meyerson & Ely, 2003; Ragins et al., 1998). However the leadership role model remains masculine, and therefore no amount of talking about the feminine difference will actually change the leadership culture. Kolb, Fletcher, Meyerson, Merrill-Sands, and Ely (1998) indicated that cultural initiatives must be strategic in nature representing an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation, and learning to lead to systemic change. Further, Bowen (1999) stated that successful cultural change needs to align strategically with drivers of business growth.

**Outcomes.** According to Haas et al. (1999), an organizational culture represents a static state that typically resists change. Many individuals within an organization have a stake in the traditional ways of doing things and the behaviors of some became so habituated they cannot imagine doing something different. Bowen (1999) claimed the comfort, chemistry, and collaborative elements of culture are more difficult to sustain when those who seem different enter into the system. Therefore the existing culture digs in deeper to hold onto current norms.

When women set their sights on the executive suite, they represented the "difference 'difference' makes" in Corporate America (Rhode, 2003, p. 3). In response, the incumbent leadership cultures choose to fix the woman rather than to fix the system to keep existing norms in place. More often than not, organizational change agents find it easier to make cosmetic changes than to take on large-scale cultural changes. For example, they often "add a woman and stir" or place a "token" woman in the C-suite. This situation only serves to mask structural level gender stereotyping (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kanter, 1977; Schmitt, Spoor, Danaher, & Branscombe, 2009).

**Policy as system level gender stereotyping.** Although mothers and fathers both work away from the home for large portions of the day, women put in a second shift caring for the family at the end of the day (Haas et al., 1999; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kolb et al., 1998). Typically work and family duality burdens the wife more than the husband, which in turn burns her out and reinforces the notion that women cannot handle the executive suite. This situation becomes increasingly more difficult for single mothers where there is no alternative, but to take sole responsibility for dual work and family roles.

Long hours continue to be the routine expectation for anyone seeking or already occupying the executive suite, and new technology keeps executives tied to the corporation 24/7. Researchers pointed to hourly requirements having increased dramatically over the last two decades, especially for executive leaders who often put in seventy plus hours per week (Rapoport et al., 2002; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007; Sabatti & Crosby, 2009; Stone, 2008). This arrangement does not work well for anyone who is equally committed to raising a family and reaching the executive suite. Ragins et al. (1998) talked of a successful female leader who described work and family balance as:

Workdays that begin at 4:00 a.m. with several hours of predawn reading before the children awake, late night business calls and faxes to homes fully teleconnected to the office, and travel schedules and after-hours business obligations that keep them away from home several evenings a week. (p. 30)

**Solutions.** Most large corporations proudly tout family-friendly work policies providing their employees with the flexibility to manage work and family responsibilities simultaneously (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hewlett, 2007). Although researchers showed this arrangement to be good in theory, the idea that an executive leader might take extended time to focus on family rather than on work is not the norm in Corporate America (Bowen, 1999; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2002; Stone, 2008). Today chief executives and boards push the notion of

extreme loyalty to work in fact, even lower into the organization rather than an expectation of executives alone. This situation makes it exponentially more difficult for women to stay the course in the leadership pipeline when they have babies early in their careers.

**Outcomes.** Researchers showed that a wide gap exists between formal work and family policies, and those actually practiced within corporations (Rapoport et al., 2002; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). Mandel (2003) stated that the benefits did not represent change; rather, their effect more than likely supported established patterns of power because they encouraged women to break their work engagements, while men stayed for the long haul. It is a near certainty that a CEO does not arise from a job sharing or flexible schedule arrangement (Hewlett, 2007; Stone, 2008).

Stone (2008) showed that many high-caliber females doubt that their organizations supported work and family flexibility. Few women in her study felt able to take advantage of flexible work benefits because they believed a reduction in visibility and availability jeopardized their prospects for advancement. Hewlett (2007) talked of a new mother who described flexible work arrangements as "toxic" (p. 422). At the technology company where she worked, one that claimed exemplary work and family policies, flexible work arrangements were so poisonous that women routinely quit rather than take advantage of the offered benefit. Further a young woman interviewed by Orenstein (2000) indicated "having a baby before you reach the vice-president level is death" (p. 33).

**Procedure as system level gender stereotyping.** Perry, Davis-Blake, and Kulik (1994) indicated that individuals hold assumptions about gender attributes that influence their hiring and promoting decisions. Because people make positive evaluations on and decisions about people they see as similar to themselves, when persons primarily of one gender occupy the job under

consideration, typically men when hiring for the executive suite, gender assumptions became more prevalent (Schein, 1990). Kanter (1977) called this phenomenon "homosocial reproduction" arguing that corporate decision-making primarily works on minimizing uncertainty where it has an influence on situations of significant importance. Thus, women have a difficult time entering the C-suite as male decision makers subconsciously close the doors to the "difference" women represent (Rhode, 2003).

Eagly, Makhijani, and Konsky (1992) claimed that once women secure executive positions, gender-based performance expectations often act to create a self-fulfilling prophecy as evaluators engage in cognitive distortion enabling them to see precisely what they expect to see in women's performance. This situation creates a predisposition toward negativity colored judgment and prevents the recognition of women's leadership competences and achievements (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Fagenson, 1990; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005).

Because gender stereotyping prescribes acceptable behaviors for women and men, women who display masculine leadership characteristics represent a further violation of the norm. In an overview of more than 100 studies involving evaluations of leaders, results indicated that women receive lower ratings when they adopt masculine authoritative styles (Denmark, 1993).

***Solutions.*** Strategies used to counter gender procedural biases include formalizing hiring processes and expectations, monitoring employee evaluations for adverse gender stereotyping, placing greater reliance on objective outcome-related evaluation criteria, reviewing leadership assignments to ensure equal opportunities for career development, and educating leaders on how to give and receive effective performance assessments and hiring interviews (Heilman, 2001; Powell, 2000; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007).

**Outcomes.** Because of a lack of consensus on “measures of success” for senior teams, less than optimal evaluation criteria exists for assessing potential candidates during the hiring process or when reviewing internal candidates for promotions. (Heilman, 2001; Powell, 2000; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). In addition, most senior level job descriptions remain written in masculine terms. The absence of a structured process and gendered language encourage the use of subjectivity, including gender-based expectations, as a filter for reality when completing interviews or evaluations. Even with structured hiring and evaluation processes, individual cognitive distortion creeps into the picture. Eagly et al. (1992) stated the gender social conditioning that assigns leadership characteristics may be so strong that similar elements of performance receive different weight when judging women versus men regardless of structural procedures put in place to remedy the situation.

### **Tensions in the Literature**

Although other tensions exist in the scholarly literature focused on the leadership gender gap in Corporate America, I believe one tension stands above the rest. This tension, which troubles me the most as a businesswoman, is the continued debate as to “where” the barriers to women’s advancement reside.

As the debate goes, researchers question whether the barriers are internal to women with the problem partly attributable to something concerning women themselves. Several researchers and authors refer to this in the literature on individual level gender stereotyping (Acher, 1990; Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Hoyt, 2010; Pai & Vaidya, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2002; Ridgeway, 1997; Stone, 2008). The alternative view is that barriers are external to women with the problem enmeshed in the gender biases, discriminatory practices, and inadequate work

and family policies of an organization's structure. Researchers refer to this in the literature on system level gender stereotyping (Acher, 1990; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kanter, 1977; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Stone, 2008). Sandberg (2013), who is currently one of the most prominent catalysts for closing the leadership gender gap in Corporate America, called it a "chicken and egg" situation (p. 8). In Sandberg's analogy, the chicken represents internal barriers and the egg represents external barriers.

Depending on the researcher's perspective as to causality, the solution to the leadership gender gap problem is quite different. If the barriers exist internal to women, then the resolve is to develop women's abilities to emulate masculine leadership behaviors so they can compete successfully with their male counterparts when vying for executive leadership positions (Acher, 1990; Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Hoyt, 2010; Pai & Vaidya, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2002; Ridgeway, 1997; Stone, 2008). The theory goes that once at the top of the organization, women can remove system barriers that keep other women from the executive suite. Further when enough women hold seats at the tables of power, feminine persuasion becomes self-sustaining.

If the barriers exist external to women, then the resolve is to remove biases in the organizational structure, specifically modifying culture, policies, and procedures that adversely affect women (Acher, 1990; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kanter, 1977; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Stone, 2008). Again the theory goes that once at the top of the organization, women can remove system barriers that keep other women from the executive suite, and when enough women sit at the tables of power, feminine persuasion becomes self-sustaining.

Siding with system barriers, Rhode and Kellerman (2007) suggested turning to a broader reform agenda in order to achieve gender equality in the executive suite. These researchers pointed out that women receive endless advice about how to find the right mentors and how to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). However, they pointed out, women's changes of doing so are slim unless institutional and societal mindsets change (Kanter, 1977; Tar-Whelan, 2009).

### **Ramification of the Tensions in the Literature**

I find the debate futile as to whether internal or external barriers keep talented women from reaching the Corporate American executive suite in equal numbers to men. The fact that multiple efforts leveled at both individual and system infractions applied over several decades made minimal progress toward closing the leadership gender gap contribute to this perception; they did not even come close. Continuing to focus on this tension keeps researchers from opening up to new information, is essential to finding a solution to the leadership gender gap once and for all.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

There is no scholarly literature focused on how women might insert themselves into the talent management process to bring more women to the executive suite immediately, thereby creating the critical mass needed for women's perspectives on leadership to take hold in the executive suite. This type of research does away with the notion of women waiting around patiently for their numbers to reach critical mass in the executive suite in order to change the leadership culture (Kanter, 1977; Tar-Whelan, 2009). Researchers need to explore how women currently in the executive suite use or can use their power and position to bring more women up the leadership ladder.

Rhode and Kellerman (2007) argued that it is time for women who made it to the top of corporations to use their "unique opportunities and corresponding obligations to promote changes that will make leadership accessible to others" (p. 26). Because men dominated the Corporate American executive suite for hundreds of years, tension needs interjected into the system to jar the existing power base loose (Morgan, 2006). Current women executives represent this tension.

### **Ramification of Gaps in the Literature**

Because the strength of the masculine power base is so strong in Corporate America, women cannot afford to wait patiently to reach parity with men in the executive suite to impart feminine persuasion on the leadership culture (Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Morgan, 2006; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). It will take too long. Further there is another risk to consider with the waiting approach. The feminine perspective on leadership may be lost forever as women take on the behavioral traits of masculine leadership in order to reach the executive suite (Quindlen, n.d; Rhode, 2003). Quindlen (n.d.) said:

I know what I don't want for the future of women: I don't want it to consist of the old familiar model. By its very nature women's leadership has been about redefinition, while men's leadership has been about maintaining the status quo. That's how it works when one group has all the power and wants to keep it and another has none and wants some righteous parity. Take that dichotomy down the road most traveled, however, and what you could eventually wind up with is a new status quo, jealously protected by a power structure that includes female leaders working with the psychological equivalent of ties and wingtips. (para. 1)

It is time to find the root cause of the leadership gender gap to open up new information leading to an innovative solution for understanding and closing the leadership gender gap.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

The study of women's leadership predominantly relied on three theoretical approaches including gender-centered, organizational structure, and gender-organization-system theories



(GOS; see Figure 2.2; Atwater, Brett, Waldman, DiMare, & Hayden, 2004; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Fagenson, 1990; Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hogue & Lord, 2007). In this section, I summarize the theories, provide examples of their use in literature, and describe limitations and leverage points for research.

Theory	Premise	Characteristics	Effect
<b>Gender-centered Theory</b> (i.e., sex-role socialization, differential gender identity formation, construction of reality)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women and men differ in traits, cognitions, and attitudes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sex-role Socialization—differences between genders created through cultural norms and sociological interactions</li> <li>Differential Gender Identity Formation—women mature into an identity of relationship and community</li> <li>Construction of Reality—women base moral decisions on the situation and speak of “we” in relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Barriers internal to woman responsible for the leadership gender gap</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational Structure Theory</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizational systems contribute to gender role establishment through status identity and positional power</li> <li>Opportunity structures shape behaviors in such a way that they confirm their own prophecies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Men represent the majority in the corporate leadership pipeline resulting in more men being promoted to the executive suite</li> <li>Women represent the minority in the corporate leadership pipeline resulting in fewer women being promoted to the executive suite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural barriers external to women responsible for the leadership gender gap</li> </ul>
<b>Gender-Organization-System Theory</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Combines gender-centered and organizational structure theories</li> <li>Adds culture, historical ideology, and policy to existing theories</li> <li>Adds impact of larger sociological and institutional systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizational behaviors dependent on interactions and feedback</li> <li>Individuals change the organization and organizations change the individuals</li> <li>People, situations, and systems must be examined jointly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>GOS represents an “and” situation responsible for the leadership gender gap (i.e., Gender-centered and Organizational Structure Theories)</li> </ul>

Figure 2.2. Theoretical approaches in the scholarly literature.

### Gender-Centered Theory

The first theoretical approach used to examine how gender affects leadership was gender-centered theory (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely & Padavic, 2007). Gender-centered researchers work from an underlying assumption that women and men act and behave differently in various situations or roles (Atwater et al., 2004; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Fagenson, 1990; Hogue & Lord, 2007; Statham, 1987). Among these differences is the ability to serve as a leader at the tables of power. Men supposedly possess traits, cognitions, and attitudes seen as specific to the role of

executive leadership, while women possess them to a lesser degree (Barreto, Ellemers, et al., 2009; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Schein, 1975). These social assumptions position men to move into executive leadership roles with ease, while women experience the opposite.

According to Fagenson (1990), gender-centered theorists attribute gender differences to a variety of causation factors including sex-role socialization (Eagly & Wood, 1999), differential gender identity formation (Chodorow, 1999) and construct of reality (Gilligan, 1993). Sex-role socialization deems it necessary to train women in “the ways of masculine leadership” so they can compete side-by-side with men for executive leadership positions (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). Differential gender identity formation and construct of reality embrace both feminine and masculine characteristics as appropriate for leadership, thereby promoting a new leadership model based on the best of both genders (Fondas, 1997; Rhode, 2003; Statham, 1987).

**Sex-role socialization.** The most common approach to gender-centered theory is sex-role socialization (Fagenson, 1990). According to Ely and Meyerson (2000), one's biological status is an individual's first gender mark. Eagly and Wood (1999) said:

Evolutionary psychologists believe that females and males faced different pressures in primeval environments and that the sexes' differing reproductive status was the key feature of ancestral life that framed sex-typed adaptive problems. The resolutions of these problems produced sex-specific evolved mechanisms that humans carry with them as a species and that are held to be the root cause of sex-differentiated behavior. (p. 408)

Although evolution positioned women and men within the social structure, culture and family influences serve to reinforce the positions (Atwater et al., 2004). There is an expectation from society that differences exist between genders. This is true when evaluating leadership qualifications. Masculine behaviors represent strong leadership, and if women want to lead they should emulate masculine behaviors. These social expectations place the onus for women's

limited representation in upper-level leadership positions on factors internal to women themselves (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

**Differential gender identity formation.** Differential gender identity formation represents an approach to gender-centered theory based on the premise that egos and social role identities of girls and boys develop differently due to their incongruent ways of attaching to their mothers. According to Chodorow (1999), a leading psychoanalytic feminist theorist, children arrive in the world as bisexuals and their mothers represent the object of their first sexual attachment. Boys tend to break the mother-son attachment easily taking on the freedom of agency associated with their fathers. As boys progress toward manhood, their ability to love becomes dyadic in nature manifesting in egos based on justice and individualism. These characteristics carry over into their leadership styles (Fagenson, 1990).

Girls find transforming from their mothers more difficult (Chodorow, 1999). Although girls eventually form an attachment with their fathers, they never quite let go of the strong mother-daughter bond due to the identity connection shared between the two. As a result, a girl's capacity to love becomes a triangular relationship between mother, father, and self. As girls progress toward womanhood, their ability to love manifests in egos based on relationship and community. These characteristics carry over into their leadership styles (Fagenson, 1990).

**Construction of reality.** Construction of reality represents an approach to gender-centered theory based on the premise that women think and speak differently than men when confronted with moral dilemmas. According to Gilligan (1993), another leading psychoanalytic feminist theorist, psychologists want to think of women as men by portraying women as "wrong" when they take a different path to achieve an endpoint including in leadership. Gilligan claimed

that the idea that women do not reach the same level of moral development as men represents a flawed theory.

The disparity between women's experience and the representation of human development, noted throughout the psychological literature, has generally been seen to signify a problem in women's development. Instead the failure of women to fit existing models of human growth may point to a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of human condition, an omission of certain truths about life. (p. 1)

Gilligan (1993) criticized Kohlberg's (1973) six stages of moral development that measured progress from childhood to adulthood. The six stages include (a) obedience, (b) self-interest orientation, (c) interpersonal accord and conformity, (d) authority and social-order orientation, (e) social contract orientation, and (f) universal ethical principles. Gilligan argued that girls/women do not measure up to boys/men because the scoring mechanism favors a principled way of reasoning common to boys/men over a moral argumentation concentrating on relations, which is more amendable to girls/women. It is not a matter of measuring women against men as better or worse at leading in Corporate America; rather, it is about the realization that there are different ways to succeed at leading.

**Example of gender-centered theory in the literature.** Atwater et al. (2004) used sex-role socialization to examine the extent to which specific leadership sub-roles were gender-typed by women and men in business. When the researchers surveyed 263 United States business students to get their reaction to 13 leadership sub-roles, the respondents identified seven as more feminine in nature and six as more masculine in nature. Respondents associated providing corrective feedback, planning and organizing, developing and mentoring, recognizing and rewarding, motivating and inspiring, and communicating and informing with women. They associated allocating resources, delegating, disciplining, making strategic decisions, solving problems, and punishing with men.

## **Organizational Structure Theory**

Gender-centered theory dominated the study of women and leadership for almost two decades before researchers started to study organizations as sociocultural contexts that shape gender differences (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Fagenson, 1990). Although feminist sociologists previously established a well-developed theoretical and empirical baseline linking organizational features to gender, they focused on inequality rather than on gender differences as the outcome. Organizational structure theory, on the other hand, focuses on gender as a system, an identity, and a power. This allows researchers to examine the extent to which work environments shape people's attitudes and behaviors (Acher, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Fagenson, 1990; Kanter, 1977; Kolb et al., 1998).

Kanter (1977), the most notable proponent of organizational structure theory, claimed that an individual's position in the organizational opportunity structure, the amount of power an individual exerts on the job, and the distribution of women in these positions represent critical variables to consider when examining the disparity of women to men in executive leadership roles. According to Kanter, advantageous and disadvantageous situations exist within organizations. Advantageous situations provide occupants with access to higher-level opportunities and greater power. Bestowal of these positions typically goes to individuals with a social category of the majority, namely men. Disadvantageous situations hinder an occupant's access to higher-level opportunities and greater power. Bestowal of these positions typically goes to individuals with a social category in the minority, namely women.

Kanter (1977) pointed out "opportunity structures shape behaviors in such a way that they confirm their own prophecies" (p. 158). Individuals set on a "fast track" develop attitudes and behaviors, such as high work commitment, greater aspirations, and upward orientation propelling

them up the leadership ranks quickly. The exact opposite happens for individuals placed in low-mobility situations. Here individuals become indifferent, which in turn, affirms their initial placement in the organization as correct. Because women hold most of the disadvantageous positions within corporations, Kanter identified the need for a "reinterpretation of familiar findings about sex differences in work behavior: that men are more ambitious, task-oriented, and work-involved, and women care more about relationship at work" (p. 158).

**Example of organizational structure theory in the literature.** Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) used an organizational structure approach to explore why so few women occupy executive leadership positions in organizations and why so many women fail to reconcile ambitious career aspirations with having a family. Specifically the researchers wanted to discover how executive level female leaders develop coping strategies in response to the dual career and family demands placed on their time and attention. Ezzedeen and Ritchey addressed coping strategies pertaining to structural changes in women's career domains (e.g., leaving an executive position to stay at home), as well as in women's home domains (e.g., postponing motherhood in lieu of career aspirations).

Three significant outcomes arose out of Ezzedeen and Ritchey's (2009) research. The first is the notion that achieving success in career and family requires embracing a certain belief system regarding the placement of each variable within one's life. Noteworthy among these beliefs is the "fallacy of choice," which claims women can "have it all." The second significant outcome is the importance of social relationships and support systems to women's advancement and well-being. Concerning professional support, peers and support networks within the organization and industry worked well as resource-enhancing mechanisms. The third significant outcome is the need for a professional woman to have a planned "life course" strategy where

career and family decisions unfold over time. Life course strategies focus on making choices regarding career shifts, slowing career advancement, putting career before family, putting family before career, and negotiating partner support in parenting to provide more time to focus on career.

### **Gender-Organization-System Theory**

GOS theorists agree gender-centered and organizational structure theories contribute to women's attitudes and behaviors, and their underrepresentation at upper echelons of Corporate America (Acher, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Fagenson, 1990). However GOS theorists believe it is an “and” situation rather than an “either/or” situation. GOS theorists expand the definition of organizational context beyond the position, power, and distribution factors of organizational structure theorists such as Kanter (1997). They add culture, history, ideology, and policy to the mix claiming these variables need attention when examining the influence of organizational context on women and leadership.

GOS theorists also broaden gender-centered and organizational structure theories by adding the examination of the larger social and institutional systems within which corporations operates (Fagenson, 1990). Because corporations exist in societies with particular cultural values, histories, practices, ideologies, expectations, and stereotypes regarding appropriate behaviors and roles for women and men, these external variables affect the internal structures and processes of organizations (Martin, Harrison, & Dinitto, 1983). Martin, Harrison, and Dinitto (1983) stated that organizations function in a larger context in which "societal inequities are enacted or constituted, and reconstituted" (p. 20). For example, affirmative action laws affect the perception of women who secure executive leadership roles because of established quotas.

Others internal to the organization often claim the women's promotions come because of regulation rather than from the women's abilities to lead (Fagenson, 1990).

GOS theorists use an interactionist approach to analyze women and leadership (Fagenson, 1990). The first premise of GOS theory tells us that behavior in organizations represents a continuous interaction of feedback between individual characteristics, such as gender, and situational characteristics, such as culture (Martin et al., 1983). The second premise of GOS theory states that individuals in the process experience change due to situations and systems, while also changing the situations and systems (Terborg, 1981). The third premise of GOS theory states that the need for examining characteristics of people, situations, and systems jointly as determinants of the individual attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors influencing one another over time.

**Example of GOS in the literature.** Hogue and Lord (2007) used principles from multi-level theory, complexity theory, and constructionist theory to gain a broad and integrated understanding of the factors limiting the emergence and acceptance of women into the executive suite. Multi-level theory focuses on the macro- and micro-level interdependencies within a system. Complexity theory focuses on the ability of systems to change and adapt to their environments. Constructionist theory focuses on how structures learn over time.

Hogue and Lord (2007) devised this GOS approach because they believed "there are many levels of analysis involved in the problem of leadership gender bias, and reductionist approaches targeting only one level or process are likely to be ineffective" (p. 358). The researchers indicated cross-level influences within organizations constrain both bottom-up emergence (i.e., events occurring through uncoordinated interventions of those involved) and top-down (i.e., guided by central authority) contextualization. Hogue and Lord adhered to a



systems approach (i.e., how things influence one another within a whole) where the solution application occurred at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

Hogue and Lord (2007) identified three practical points flowing from the individual cognitive and social processes addressed in their research on gender and leadership. First individual perception, and group or organizational structures, emerge over time making it difficult to point to a particular practice or unit to be changed to reduce gender bias. Second the dynamic nonlinear effects of changes in leadership gender biases compound in larger organizations and, therefore even when ameliorative practices work well, they do not seem to be working at all until a point of adverse discontinuity. Third acting as an agent of change requires the recognition and acceptance of the different leadership styles in self and others.

### **Limitations of the Current Theoretical Approaches**

Gender-centered theory provides insights into the differences between women and men, and how these differences contribute to the shortage of women in executive leadership positions (Atwater et al., 2004; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Fagenson, 1990; Hogue & Lord, 2007; Statham, 1987). Although it is insightful in understanding the differences between women and men, it is only beneficial when understood in the context of what women bring to the leadership table rather than in the context of what women are missing compared to men when serving as executive leaders. I believe others incorrectly applied the theoretical findings of brilliant gender theorists like Chodorow (1999), Gilligan (1993), and Kanter (1977) to the leadership gender gap problem. These women never meant to prove that women were less able to sit at the tables of power. They meant to show that women and men are fully capable leaders; they just use different approaches to leadership.

Organizational structure theory provides useful insights into corporations as systems of “power and identity” that shape people's attitudes and behaviors within their work environments (Acher, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Fagenson, 1990; Kanter, 1977; Kolb et al., 1998).

Although this theoretical approach shifts the gender gap causation factor from a focus "internal to women" to a focus "external to women," it does little to dislodge the practice of molding women to fit into the masculine based leadership model of Corporate America.

### **Leverage Points of the Current Theoretical Approaches**

GOS theory holds many points of applications in “going forward” research. First it focuses on a strategic and systemic approach to closing the leadership gender gap, rather than a reductionist approach where several tactical changes made one at a time seek to make the world of Corporate America more amenable to women. The masculine leadership model is hundreds of years old and, therefore it is going to take strategic work to open it up to women’s perspectives. Second GOS theory focuses on a constructionist platform showing a combine of bottom-up and top-down actions across an organization effects change. This means that nothing in the organization has to be static. Although change may be difficult to enact, it can occur. Third acting as an agent of change requires the recognition and acceptance of the different leadership styles in self and others, especially for those at the top of the organization. The focus is on changing only what is not broken.

### **Innovative Theoretical Approach**

Because theory serves as a framework to help explain why things are the way they are, one must consider new theoretical approaches when others referred to no longer serve their purpose. As validated by the tensions and gaps in the literature (and their ramifications, and the

gaps, limitations, and leverage points in applied theory), the time seems ripe for a new theoretical approach to understanding and closing the leadership gender gap in Corporate America.

If considering an approach to bringing a critical mass of women to the executive suite through the collective action of inter-company women serving as change agents. In this collective action approach, women executives use their power and position to fill the leadership pipeline with talented women from the front end to the back end. Thus there is a need to consider the use of critical mass theory (Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whalen, 2009), chaos and complexity theory (Morgan, 2006; Wheatley, 1999), and collective behavior theory (Blumer, 1946; Shibutani, 1970) to accomplish this end.

### **Critical Mass Theory**

Simmel's (as cited in Collins, 1994) classic analysis of the significance of numbers in social life argued that numerical shifts, as in a shift from under representation to 33% representation, transforms social dynamics and interactions. Thirty-three percent is an important number to reach for closing the leadership gender gap. When the number of women sitting in the executive suite reaches this tipping point to critical mass (Gladwell, 2002), their voices will resonate fully allowing women's values and perspectives to permeate the masculine dominant leadership culture (Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009).

Kanter (1977) first identified the importance of critical mass more than thirty years ago in her theoretical treatise on gender and organizations. She described four group types defined because of the proportional representation of certain kinds of people:

- Uniform groups consist of one kind of people, and one significant social type.
- Skewed groups hold a large preponderance of one social type in a ratio of 85:15. In this situation, the dominant group controls other groups and the organizational culture.

- Tilted groups have a less extreme distribution in a ratio of 65:35. The dominant group still represents the majority, however the voices of the less dominant group start to resonate and have an impact on setting priorities and making decisions (Tarr-Whelan, 2009). Often tilted groups form coalitions with co-optable groups. Although their interests differ, compatibility unites them, thus providing benefits to both parties when pooling their strengths to accomplish an end both want to materialize.
- Balanced groups hold a ratio of 60:40 to 50:50. Here culture and group interactions reflect a balance between subgroups.

Until the onset of second wave feminism, uniform group status represented corporate leadership, where men occupied 100% of the executive positions. Today skewed group status reflects the situation in the executive suite, with women holding only 4.8% of CEO positions (Fairchild, 2014), 14.6% of positions (Catalyst, 2013), and 19.2% of board of director positions (Catalyst, 2014). Tilted group status represents the tipping point toward critical mass for women at the tables of power. Tilted group status sits at the center of my research, which focuses on bringing enough women to the tables of power for feminine persuasion to become self-sustaining within the leadership culture. Ultimately balanced group status is the goal of my research where equal gender representation allows for the realization of the benefits of both the feminine and the masculine in leadership.

Because driving for critical mass constitutes an active approach taken by women leaders to close the leadership gender gap in Corporate America, change theory is beneficial in assessing the situation. Chaos and complexity theory provides an interesting framework for accomplishing this task because it focuses on using powerful change agents (i.e., women Fortune 500 executives) to jar existing systems (i.e., male dominant leadership culture) out of equilibrium (Kanter, 1977; Morgan, 2006; Tarr-Whelan, 2009), before meeting in the middle with a balance of feminine and masculine behaviors that serve as the role model for leadership.

## **Chaos and Complexity Theory**

Morgan (2006) and Wheatley (1999) encouraged the use of metaphors to understand and shape organizational life. In doing so, both researchers claimed that a leader is able to take a reading of a situation from a different viewpoint to find fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping it. The researchers spoke of trying to understand an organization as one undergoing "flux and transformation" by focusing on the logic of change, and its effect on shaping social life. Complex nonlinear systems like ecologies experience both ordered and chaotic interaction. Because of this internal complexity, random disturbances produce unpredictable events and relationships that reverberate throughout the system creating novel patterns of change. The amazing thing is that, despite all the unpredictability, coherent order always emerges out of the chaos.

Wheatley (1999) spoke of nonlinear systems as representing a world where slight variations, things so small as to be indiscernible to people observing, often amplified into large results. Utilizing feedback loops, repetition within a nonlinear system feeds the change back on itself, and causes it to amplify and grow. After several iterations, a variance too small to notice has enormous impact, and the systemic change suddenly takes off in amazing ways.

Another approach to understanding an organization as flux and transformation uses chaos and complexity theory to view organizational life through a lens of competing attractor patterns—the status quo and the change (Morgan, 2006; Wheatley, 1999). The status quo attractor pulls a system into states of equilibrium or near equilibrium, and the change attractor pushes a system into a new configuration. When members of an organization push a system far from its equilibrium, it encounters bifurcations points leading to different futures. At such points, the energy within the system self-organizes into different system states. If the existing,

dominant attractor dissipates the change energy and instability, potential changes dissolves, and the system reverts to a variation of its former state. On the other hand, if the non-dominant change attractor gains the upper hand, it attracts the energies into a new configuration.

Ultimately the two systems meet somewhere in the middle as the best of both worlds meld together.

By proposing an innovative approach, critical mass theory (Kanter, 1977) provides a framework for bringing women to the tables of power, which in turn brings feminine behaviors into the leadership model. Further chaos and complexity theory (Morgan, 2006) provides a framework for moving from one extreme (i.e., status quo of masculine-based leadership) to the other (i.e., need for feminine based leadership) to eventually meet in the middle (i.e., balanced leadership). Blumer's (1946) collective behaviors theory provides a framework for constructing a strategy to make it all happen.

### **Collective Behavior Theory**

Park first used the expression collective behavior (as cited in Shibutani, 1970). However Blumer (1946) definitively employed the theory to research social processes and events that did not reflect existing social structures (e.g., laws, conventions, and institutions). "Although many transactions seemingly recur in institutional form, novelties are constantly arising necessitating collective adjustment of one sort or another to problematic situations" (Shibutani, 1970, p. vii). By holding onto conceptual schemes designed to analyze static structures, Blumer (1946) claimed societies miss opportunities to interact and work more efficiently and effectively

Blumer (1946) defined collective behavior as action that is neither conforming (i.e., actors followed prevailing norms) nor deviant (i.e., actors violated prevailing norms). Rather collective behavior takes place in the absence of norms, with unclear definitions of norms, or

when norms contradicted one another. Blumer's analysis of concerted action insisted each transaction builds in communication as the participants combined their respective contributions. He pointed out repetition sometimes results in the formation of habitual modes of cooperation—social institutions. Blumer referred to this as circular reaction where individuals reflected one another's states of feeling and, in so doing, intensified these states (p. 170).

With collective behavior theory, Blumer (1946) presented a radical critique of the overwhelming bulk of sociological schemes. He claimed that sociologists treated actors as passive and controlled by social forces acting upon them as physical stimuli acted upon an organism. To Blumer, social forces were not really forces. Blumer believed actors existed as active players who created interpretations of the acts of others and based their actions on these interpretations.

According to Turner (1970), a proponent of Blumer, a collective behavior approach to action uses one of three power strategies:

- Bargaining happens when a movement has control over some exchangeable value a target group wants and offers some of that value in return for compliance with its demands. For example, in a democratic society constituents exchange votes for support of a candidate in return for support of a movement.
- Coercion represents the manipulation of a target group's situation in such a fashion that the pursuit of any course of action other than the one sought by the movement meets with considerable cost or punishment. Coercion represents negative bargaining.
- Persuasion uses a strictly symbolic manipulation without substantial rewards or punishment under the control of the movement. The basic procedure of persuasion is to identify the proposed course of action with values held by a target group, and to call attention to rewards and penalties ensued by a target group on the basis of various courses of action taken. Calling attention to potential rewards and penalties not manipulated by the movement distinguishes persuasion from bargaining or coercion. This is the course I propose for bring more women to the tables of power, that being the corporation realizes financial benefit.

## Summary

This chapter provided a review of the critical literature and theory applied to understand and resolve the leadership gender gap in Corporate America. Gender stereotyping sits at the center of scholarly literature focused on the leadership gender gap in Corporate America and exists on two levels—individual and system (Acher, 1990; Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Heilman, 2001; Pai & Vaidya, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2002). The claim is that social stratification along gender lines keeps women from reaching the executive suite in equal numbers to men. Society assigns roles to women and men along with associated words and symbols, and these descriptors carry into the workplace. These decade-old images of female and male roles still permeate the corporation (e.g., women are mothers first, women are not tough enough for business, and women do not possess the agentic characteristics for executive leadership).

At the individual level, gender stereotyping focuses on how women and men differ in their ability to lead (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Fiske et al., 2006; Rapoport et al., 2002; Stone, 2008). Gender-centered theory provides the foundation for individual level gender stereotyping analysis (Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 1993; Kanter, 1977). The resolve is to train women in agentic traits, such as aggressiveness, forcefulness, independence, and decisiveness, so they can compete side-by-side with men for executive leadership positions (Bowen, 1999; Haas et al., 1999; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Hewlett, 2007; Rapoport et al., 2002; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007; Sabatti & Crosby, 2009; Stone, 2008).

At the system level, gender stereotyping focuses on organizations themselves as the cause of gendered assumptions (Acher, 1990; Bowen, 1999; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Haas et al., 1999; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Kolb et al., 1998; Ragins et al.,



1998; Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Stone, 2008). Organizational structure theory and gender-organization-system theory provide the foundation for system level gender stereotyping analysis (Acher, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Fagenson, 1990; Kanter, 1977; Kolb et al., 1998). The resolve is to remove biases in an organization's culture, policies, and procedures to allow women to lead in a man's world (Heilman, 2001; Hewlett, 2007; Powell, 2000; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007).

The tension between causation factors—individual or system—seem futile because solutions implemented under the tutelage of both have not closed the gender gap in any significant way after decades of trying to do so. It is time to look at the Corporate American leadership gender gap through a new lens. My study does just that, representing a women-led effort to understand how the significance of numbers, movement from the status quo, and social cohesion work together to bring more women to the executive suite.

## CHAPTER THREE: STUDY DESIGN

Whether completing qualitative or quantitative research, it is important for the researcher to develop a study design before starting to gather data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Charmaz, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005). A solid research framework defines how the researcher plans to work with the details in the data and interpret the findings into a theoretical construct. Because of the empirical nature of a qualitative study (i.e., verification through observation and experience versus controlled experiment; Brown, 2010), many things happen in the data gathering and analysis stages that are beyond the ability of the researcher to predict. While keeping the need for flexibility in mind, an upfront study design promotes successful functioning of the study and increases the likelihood of its completion (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

This chapter details my research study design. First I present my methodology—qualitative research applying a grounded theory approach. Then I discuss the philosophical assumptions that represent who I am as a researcher—pragmatism, constructionism, and symbolic interactionism. Next I present the interview questions, describe the demographics of the study participants, define the selection process used to secure participants, and detail the data collecting, data analyzing, theory building, and dissertation writing processes. Finally I present the tactics I used to ensure validity of the data and generalization of the findings to organizations beyond Corporate America, and address ethical and confidentiality considerations from initiation of the study to published work.

### **Qualitative Research**

Methodologically quantitative research involves tests and statistics that provide researchers with what they need to predict and control phenomena (Brown, 2010). Conversely,

qualitative research involves interacting with the richness and depth of people's lived experiences to identify patterns and themes that provide researchers with empirical data to understand the phenomena being studied better (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Brown, 2010; Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005). Although qualitative research and quantitative research hold equal importance in studying social phenomena, McCracken (1988) said:

Every social scientific study is improved by a clearer understanding of the beliefs and experiences of the actors in question.... Without a qualitative understanding of how culture mediates human action, we can know only what the numbers tell us. (p. 9)

For example, a study focused on counting the number of women in the executive suite shows whether or not Corporate America made progress on closing the leadership gender gap (i.e., a quantitative study). Yet a study focused on understanding why women pursue or do not pursue the executive suite (i.e., a qualitative study) greatly improves the significance of the numerical findings from the quantitative study.

Qualitative research serves as the foundation of the doctoral program in leadership at the University of St. Thomas. The faculty requires that doctoral candidates use this methodology for completing their dissertation research or some derivative of qualitative research in a mixed method format. Sans this requirement, I knew a qualitative study served as the best platform for my research because the corporation represents a large social system where people interact within a defined culture to make sense of and bring meaning to their work lives (Kivisto, 2011; Charon, 2010). To gain fresh systemic perspectives on the persistent leadership gender gap in Corporate America and how to close it sooner than 70 years from now (Catalyst, 2005), it seemed only natural to tap into the stories of the women leaders who interact daily within this staggeringly imbalanced system.

For qualitative researchers, five approaches to inquiry exist including narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 2013). All approaches to qualitative research have a commonality in their general process, which begins with defining a research problem and conducting participant interviews, proceeds to analyzing the data and constructing a theoretical explanation, and ends with writing a research report. However the five approaches differ in their primary research objectives (Creswell, 2013). A narrative study explores the life of an individual, a phenomenology study seeks to understand the essence of an experience, a grounded theory study develops a new theory from empirical data, an ethnography study describes and interprets a cultural group, and a case study develops an in-depth description and analysis of a common situation in one location or across multiple locations.

### **Grounded Theory**

Because I desired to identify new perspectives on why the leadership gender gap persists in Corporate America and how to close it sooner than 70 years from now (Catalyst, 2005), I selected grounded theory as my approach to qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using grounded theory, I sought to understand how the abstractions in the data built as the particulars gathered grouped together, thereby grounding the theory in the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) used a metaphor for this inductive approach to data analysis saying, “You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts” (p. 6).

The basic premise of grounded theory is to start with as few assumptions as possible (Brown, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theorists typically do not create problem statements, perform literature and applied theory reviews, or identify theoretical assumption

before starting to gather their empirical data (Brown, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Rather grounded theorists start with topics of interest (Brown, 2010), and allow the problem definitions to arise and the hypotheses to develop out of the empirical data they gather from participants in their studies (Charmaz, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Even when completing a grounded theory study, the University of St. Thomas doctoral program in leadership requires a doctoral candidate to define a problem statement, and complete a review of literature and applied theory before starting to gather empirical data. As a final step in my data analysis process, I returned to assess how the empirical data proved to be the same or different from my going in theoretical assumptions regarding how to close the leadership gender gap. This step allowed me to identify key conclusions and develop the grounded theory emerging from the data.

The beauty of grounded theory is that it is never really complete (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Theory developed from any research is only as good as the data collected in its ability to explain a phenomenon. Beveridge (1963) summarized the ongoing nature of grounded theory saying, “The most proactive scientists have not been satisfied with clearing up the immediate question but, having obtained some new knowledge they make use of it to uncover something further and often of greater importance” (p. 144). As the researcher collects and analyzes new data, it either holds up to the theory developed in the original study or modifies it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The unfolding process of grounded theory appealed to me because it allowed me to build macro-level theory through my dissertation research (i.e., strategic with high-level executable components; Brown, 2010) and to build micro-level theory in the future (i.e., further definition of the executable components of the strategy; Brown, 2010). Using this approach to research, I built the foundation for continued action research to develop fully the grounded theory emerging

from my empirical data (i.e., actively participating in an organizational change initiative while conducting research; Maxwell, 2005).

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Whether consciously or unconsciously, researchers bring philosophical assumptions to their work, which shape how they formulate a study problem, compose the research questions, seek information, hear information, analyze the data, and develop theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013). From an ontological perspective, I bring a penchant for pragmatism to my work. From an epistemological perspective, I bring a belief in constructivism to my work.

#### **Pragmatism**

Pragmatism centers on the ontological tenet that reality is what is useful, practical, and works, and the function of thought is to serve as an instrument for problem solving and accomplishment (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013). Therefore the pragmatist focuses on outcomes—the actions, situations, and consequences of inquiry. Pragmatists believe that all philosophical theory should focus on practical uses and successes, and concern itself with finding solutions to problems rather than just understanding problems.

**Application in my research.** As a business growth strategist and innovator by trade, I understand the importance of finding the right balance between ideal (i.e., what can be; Hamel, 2000) and reality (i.e., what is realistically achievable; Hamel, 2000), and I factored both potentialities into my research. It is only through the interweaving of these polar positions that strategic change gains traction through short-term wins that ultimately lead to long-term sustainability (Hamel, 2000). Maraniss (as cited in Bernstein, 2008) cautioned the strategist that:

When you lead in an idealistic direction, the most important thing to do is to be highly pragmatic about it. And when necessity forces upon you a problem of great pragmatism, you need to use idealism to find your way out of the thicket. [One must focus on]

interweaving ends and means, pragmatism and idealism, lofty goals and getting there. (p. 170)

## **Constructivism**

Constructivism operates under the premise that epistemologically there is no reality waiting for discovery (Corbin & Straus, 2008; Maxwell, 2005). There are no right or wrong answers. There is no narrowness of meaning. There is only the complexity of views of those involved in any given situation; there are only the participants' perspectives of reality. Schwandt (1998) said:

In a sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experiences and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in light of new experiences. (p. 237)

Empirical science, under the principle of universal causality, claims that every object of scientific scrutiny has an anterior cause (Charon, 2010). This is the construct of symbolic interactionism, which states that people actively participate in life and the creation of meaning, rather than passively wait for meaning to be imprinted upon them (Creswell, 2013). The constructivist understands that together humans shape their societies and social institutions; that together humans create the world around them through action and interaction (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Dewey (1938) said:

If what is designated by such terms as doubt, belief, idea, conception, is to have any objective meaning, to say nothing of public verifiability, it must be located and described as behavior in which organism and environment act together or inter-act. (p. 32)

The constructivist believes that within a given social unit, such as a corporation, people operate in accordance with a defined culture and, if they do not, risk being seen as a cultural misfit (Morgan, 2006). Goffman (as cited in Charon, 2010) claimed the processes of social interaction begins with a rather simple observation:

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. (p. 170)

Within the context of social interaction, people play different roles to create personal fronts to manage the impressions and decisions of others. This role-playing often requires people to behave contrary to their natural inclinations in order for others to view them as on culture. The same is true in reverse. Whenever people interact they are not only a performer, but also serve as an audience for the performances of other people.

**Application in my research.** As a constructivist change agent within Corporate America, I hold strongly to three constructivist beliefs. First I believe that nothing in culture is static. If people create the signs, symbols, structures, and language of an existing culture, then people can recreate what no longer works. Second I believe that individuals who want to move up the leadership ladder must play a role to get there, and the role to imitate is that projected by the executive leadership team. Third I believe one cannot underestimate the power of structure. Therefore activating major strategic change works best when the leaders at the top of the organization understand the business case behind the change and play a large role in effecting the change if not driving it completely.

There is a collision of the forces of leadership going on [when trying to bring gender parity to the executive suite in Corporate America]. This is a story about moving power from bureaucrats to inspired people. That is hard to do. You have to move power, and power doesn't give up easily. (Fortune 500 CEO speech at women's conference, 2014).

I factored each of these three beliefs into the data gathering and analyzing processes of my dissertation research.



Further as a researcher known for being particularly adept at taking large quantities of data, and synthesizing and choreographing the data into an easily understood story, I followed this “tried and true” constructivist path with my dissertation research. I used open-ended discourse to gather participants’ perspectives, and presented the data in an interesting easy to understand storyline (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Questions**

My research sought to answer the questions, “Why does the leadership gender gap persist in Corporate America? How does the corporation bring gender parity to the executive suite sooner than 70 years from now” (Catalyst, 2005)? To get at the why and how, I asked the participants two strategic questions including:

1. What are the reasons talented women burn or opt out of, stall out in, or have others hold them back from leadership just as they near the point where they gained the experience necessary for executive positions, the point where they influence Corporate American governance?
2. What actions worked in the past or might work in the future to keep qualified women in the leadership pipeline long enough to reach the tables of power in Corporate America in equal numbers to their male counterparts?

I asked two ancillary questions of the participants, which aimed at determining how much things changed over the past fifty-five years since women entered Corporate America in large numbers (i.e., second wave feminism; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005) with an eye on the executive suite. The two questions were:

1. What are the rules for making it to the top of Corporate America?
2. How do these rules change when gender parity exists at the tables of power?

### **Participants**

With grounded theory, the researcher works to generate results that are understandable and experientially credible to the people studied and to others through a general explanation of a

process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of people (Maxwell, 2005). I chose the Fortune 500 as the main data pool for selecting my study participants because these large corporations have enormous influence on economic, political, and social systems (Bakan, 2004). In fact, 300 multi-national corporations control 25% of the world's assets (Bornstein, 2007), and money talks. If the largest corporations solve the leadership gender gap problem, their success stories serve as powerfully visible examples to change perspectives on women and leadership across the board within the United States and perhaps across the globe.

### **Demographics**

All participants in my study were women—22 experienced business executives (see Tables 3.1). I felt this sample size sufficient because it was large enough to be generalizable (i.e., broad-based applicability of study findings; Maxwell, 2005), but small enough to ensure collection of saturated data (i.e., no new data emerging from interviews; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) at the macro-level. I chose to include only women because I believed they held the answers for bringing gender parity to the executive suite in Corporate America. Although men need to collaborate with women to close the leadership gender gap, only women understand firsthand the particulars of leading as a female in Corporate America.

Table 3.1

#### *Study Participant Demographics*

	Position	Industry	Size
Abbey	Senior Vice President	Transportation	\$1-100M
Adrienne	Chief Operating Officer	Management Consulting	< \$1M
Alexandra	Chief Operating Officer	Healthcare	\$800-900M
Carmen	President	Communications/Media	\$100-200M
Carolyn	Senior Vice President	Agriculture	\$1-100B
Charlotte	Vice President	Retail	\$1-100B
Dallas	Chief Operating Officer	Restaurant	\$1-100M

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	Position	Industry	Size
Diana	Executive Vice President	Banking/Financial Services	\$1-100B
Eleanor	Director	Software and Services	\$1-100B
Hadley	Senior Vice President	Agriculture	\$1-100B
Jacqueline	Director	Management Consulting	< \$1M
Jessica	General Manager/Vice President	Agriculture/Commodities	\$100-200B
Lesley	Chief Executive Officer	Food/Entertainment	\$1-100M
Lexis	Vice President	Retail	\$1-100B
Linda	Chief Executive Officer	Management Consulting	< \$1M
Madeline	Director	Retail	\$1-100B
Maya	Chief Executive Officer	Consumer Products	\$1-100M
Nora	Vice President	Financial Management	\$1-100B
Reese	Director	Retail	\$1-100B
Sheryl	Senior Vice President	Banking/Financial Services	\$1-100B
Stella	Senior Vice President	Retail	\$1-100B
Tessa	Chief Executive Officer	Healthcare	\$1-100M

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Nineteen of the participants in my study work or worked at some point in their careers for a Fortune 500 company. I selected two participants who led large non-profit organizations specifically in healthcare. I solicited their participation to understand if their perspectives on the leadership gender gap problem differed from those in the for-profit world. I selected one participant who led a medium-size for-profit company. I solicited her participation because she made a conscious decision not to work for a large corporation. I wanted to understand what about Corporate America turned her away. I targeted a swath of women from across the United States and in different industries to improve generalizability of my research findings.

Participants in my study hold or held at some point in their careers a high-level leadership position (i.e., director, senior director, vice president, senior vice president, executive vice president, chief executive officer, and chief operating officer). I identified this demographic because of the women's longevity in leadership and thorough understanding of what occurs as women move through the leadership pipeline. Further these women serve as visible change

agents within their organizations and across organizations due to the respect they garner as experienced leaders.

The participants in my study hold or held at some point in their careers a profit and loss leadership position. I knew it important to have profit and loss owners in my data pool because these individuals keep the corporation alive by generating revenue and profit. Therefore these individuals have intimate perspectives on the “ins and outs” of the executive world. Four participants moved into executive level positions in the human resources functional area after holding profit and loss positions. Two participants previously held human resources positions before moving back into line management positions. I knew it important to have representatives from the human resources functional area because this group plays a large role in developing and implementing talent management strategies.

### **Selection Process**

To recruit participants for my study, I tapped into my professional network secured from working for over 20 years as a strategy and organization consultant for two international consulting firms, and as a member of the leadership team in a Fortune 500 company. Although filling my data pool with women I personally knew was an option and a much shorter path to securing participants, I chose only seven women falling into this category. To ensure my research did not turn into groupthink (the more alike the group, the more similar the reasoning; Janis, 1982), I selected 15 women leaders to participate whom I did not know prior to starting my study. To identify potential candidates for the “women I did not know” category, I asked women leaders within my network to recommend one or two women they thought an excellent fit for my study and to make an introduction for me.

Once I identified a potential participant, I contacted her via email with an invitation to participate in my study. Because of the level of leader recruited, I crafted and attached an executive summary for my proposed research (see Appendix B). If a potential participant indicated interest in the study, I set up a one-hour meeting with her to discuss the problem statement, align on the research objectives, and answer questions. This time together allowed each participant to be acquainted with my academic qualifications, as well as my business and strategy expertise. This interaction established a level of credibility that allowed for brutally honest and open dialogue during the data gathering process. At the end of our time together, a potential participant accepted or rejected participation in my study. If a potential participant agreed to be in my study, she signed a consent agreement before engaging in the interview process (see Appendix C).

### **Data Collection**

The goal of completing participant interviews is to gather enough data to reach saturation and allow a new theory to elaborate itself in all of its complexity (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In grounded theory research, this process refers to theoretical sampling (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005). Theoretical sampling often serves to refine the interview questions as the researcher learns more about the study topic, thus requiring returns to the field to collect more data. I chose to conduct in-depth interviews to ensure macro-level saturation without multiple trips to the field. In-depth interviews allowed for full contextual development of the research topic because each participant had sufficient time to articulate their stories, and I had time to interject with probing questions. My interviews averaged two hours in length.

Predominantly, I held in-person interviews at locations selected by the participants. Eight of the interviews took place in public spaces, four in corporate offices, and two in private homes.

Six interviews took place via phone due to distance. Take note that the total equates to 20 interviews, yet I had 22 participants. This is because I conducted one interview session with three participants together. I decided on this approach because two of the women served as the CEO and chief operating officer (COO) for a company they created together, and the third served as their talent director. Their stories played off and built upon one another allowing for insights into how an executive leadership team comprised of all women might differ in their approach to leadership.

Other than posing the two main and two ancillary questions to the participants, I held unstructured interviews. I let the conversations go in the direction of the participants' concerns, and asked exploratory questions as appropriate. I trusted that the participants held the answers to solving the leadership gender gap problem and knew they would identify the long-term direction for my research (i.e., beyond my dissertation work). Because personal, societal, and institutional narratives have tremendous influence on leaders (Noonan & Fish, 2007), I encouraged the participants to answer the interview questions with their own stories. This process helped me to grasp the natural progression of their lives as corporate leaders and understand the contexts that influenced their perspectives on being a woman leader in Corporate America.

I transcribed the interview recordings myself. Although this was a time consuming process due to the number of participants in my study and the in-depth interview process, I decided to do the transcribing versus hiring it out because my dissertation work served as the foundation for years of future research on women and leadership in general. I wanted to know the data intimately and thought transcribing it ensured that I achieved the goal. Further transcribing the data gave me one more experience with the emotions (e.g., passion, anger,

doubt, joy, and disbelief) that the participants conveyed during the interviews, which is something that adds nuances to the raw data itself (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

Theory construction is a long process made up of many technical steps (i.e., the science behind the data analysis; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and reflective thinking and constructing (i.e., the art behind the data analysis; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I completed an in-depth analysis, digging deeply beneath the surface of my data and being theoretically sensitive to subtle clues that inferred or pointed to meaning. I used three activities to develop my grounded theory including coding the raw data, categorizing the data and integrating the data into theory, and writing the qualitative dissertation. I discuss each in turn.

#### **Coding the Raw Data**

Coding sits at the heart of data analysis. It consists of breaking data apart and regrouping it to delineate meaningful concepts (i.e., words for groups of similar objects, events, and actions that share common properties; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I constantly interacted with and compared my data throughout the coding process, a practice Creswell (2013) called the “constant comparative” method (p. 86). I questioned my data using different lenses to identify core messages. This allowed me to expand concepts into properties (i.e., characteristics that define and describe concepts; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and define property dimensions (i.e., variations along a range; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In doing so, I took my data concepts from mere labels to completely new sets of ideas. In essence, I created a workable language to talk about the data.

I used HyperRESEARCH software to store and manipulate my data. I chose this program because it was one of the top, recognized qualitative research tools on the market, and it ran on an Apple platform, my technology of choice (Researchware, n.d.). As a data management

tool, HyperRESEARCH allowed for coding data, retrieving data, conducting analysis, and building theory. Although I found the tool useful for coding and retrieval of data, I set it aside quickly as I moved into data analysis and theory building because the tool was too cumbersome and elementary for these processes. Corbin and Strauss (2008) claimed, “Even with computers, the researcher must take the time to reflect on data and write memos. Thinking is the heart and soul of doing qualitative analysis” (p. 163).

### **Categorizing Data and Integrating into Theory**

Hage (1972) defined theory as a well-developed set of categories interrelated through statements of relationship to form a framework that explains some phenomenon. Concepts alone do not constitute theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). If theory building is the research goal, the researcher must group lower-level concepts into higher-level categories by looking for similarities and patterns that form themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Concepts that reach the status of a category are abstractions (i.e., ideas versus events; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), representing the stories of the participants reduced into and depicted in highly theoretical terms. When all categories are identified, the researcher must conceptualize how the elements of an abstract whole fit together to tell a story.

I manually worked my data as I moved through the categorization and integration processes. I spent hours brainstorming, trying out different ideas, eliminating some, and expanding others before arriving at conclusions. I considered the context (i.e., structural conditions; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that shaped the nature of situations and circumstances, and questioned how it might cause individual participants to respond differently to the leadership gender gap conundrum. I used a strategy development tool called “creating a canvas” (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) to represent the developing storyline visually, papering Post-it



notes across the walls in my office. Through it all, many “aha” moments occurred where I grasped the nuances in the participants’ stories resulting in a stack of “memos to self” to record my thoughts about the developing storyline and what it might mean theoretically (Creswell, 2013).

Integration is the final step in theory building (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Here the researcher identifies the central category representing the main theme of the research. The central category stands above the rest in explaining the what, how, when, where, and why of a problem, and has the highest potential for linking all of the other categories together in a coherent story. A central category has analytic power in its ability to explain theoretically what the research is all about. To integrate all categories into a unified theoretical explanation, I created process diagrams (see Figure 4.1, Figure 5.1, and Figure 6.1) to show the interaction and intersection of all categories to the central category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Writing the Qualitative Dissertation**

Because analysis and interpretation closely intertwine throughout the qualitative research process, researchers have some latitude in how they design their research reports (Futrell & Heddesheimer, n.d.). I chose to present my research by first by writing about the data findings sans theoretical interpretation (see Chapters, Five, and Six). Then I added theoretical meaning to the data findings by supporting them with well-established theories for triangulation purposes (i.e., using different sources to provide corroborating evidence; Creswell, 2013) and extrapolating the data findings into new theory (see Chapters Seven and Eight). I chose this approach because I wanted readers to understand the empirical data to judge for themselves whether my theory build held true (i.e., grounding the theory in the data; Charmaz, 2009).

When writing my dissertation, I took Nash's (2004) advice to write as a public intellectual. This means taking complex ideas and communicating them in readable English without compromising the integrity of the data. I attempted to write in a style that academicians, as well as business leaders would understand, value, and use (Futrell & Heddesheimer, n.d.). I wanted to produce a dissertation that encouraged further research within the Academy and spawned interest for action research within the business community.

### **Validity and Generalization Considerations**

Although thematic categories emerge from the data, theory does not just build itself (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the end, theory is a construction built by the analyst from the data. Therefore it is critical to create a solid study plan before diving into interviewing, analyzing, and theorizing to ensure a valid research process (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005). Although I followed this edict, I do not know whether the academic and business communities will accept my research as having a sound basis in logic, fact, and reasoning. As proxies, I took a select group of participants' approval of the data analysis and theory build as granted business validation, and my committee's approval of my dissertation as granted academic validation.

According to Maxwell (2005) generalizability has two forms—internal and external. Internal generalization refers to the study conclusions being acceptable to those who provided the data. I believe I satisfied this requirement through the participant review process I used to validate my study findings, and by sourcing a large data pool with participants from across the United States, multiple companies, and different industries.

External generalization refers to the study conclusions being applicable to a broader group, in this case leadership gender disparity in other organizations beyond Corporate America (e.g., education, entertainment, healthcare, and public service). I believe I satisfied this

requirement by presenting my data findings at a large cross-professional women's leadership conference held on October 10, 2014 in Minneapolis, Minnesota (i.e., 1,200 in attendance with live video streaming to all 50 states and seven countries). The feedback I received was positive as to the validity of the findings and the applicability across sectors. For example a young leader said to me after the presentation, "This is a paradigm shift. It is liberating to know that I am not doing anything wrong; rather, the leadership culture needs to open up to female values—ways of leading that feel very natural to me."

In addition to presenting at the conference, I presented my data findings and analysis in one-on-one coffee meetings with several women business leaders from across professional fields. Again the reaction was very positive as to validity and generalizability with comments such as, "We have to get this information in front of more women."

### **Ethical and Confidentiality Considerations**

There were no challenging ethical concerns associated with my study. All participants were consenting adults fully capable of making a decision to participate. The participants provided their insights outside the constructs of their place of employment, so there were no risks of tying a particular interview story to a particular organization. From a confidentiality perspective, I agreed not to mention the names of the participants or their employers in any documentation. This agreement extended to all recordings, documentation, and presentations associated with my research in perpetuity unless I request and receive the participant's permission to modify it. I used pseudonyms for participant names throughout the document.

My research data resides on my home computer. The data is backed-up hourly to a second hard drive. I protect the data from hackers using a network-based firewall. All data recordings, transcriptions, and documentation will reside on my hard drive ad infinitum. If at

any time a participant wants access to their data, recorded or transcribed, I will grant this upon request.

Only the participants in my study, my dissertation chair, and my dissertation committee saw the raw data during the collection, analysis, and composition stages of my dissertation. All participants signed a consent agreement (see Appendices B). I put a great deal of time into creating the consent form to ensure legality. In fact, one CEO ran it by her legal counsel before signing the document, and it passed scrutiny.

### **Summary**

Creating a study design represents a major hurdle for a researcher to overcome (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005) before starting their research. When taking on a qualitative study, the design task gets more difficult because this type of research represents an ongoing process of moving back and forth between the different design components to assess the implications of goals, theories, questions, methods, and validity threats for one another throughout the study (Maxwell, 2005). Therefore a qualitative researcher cannot borrow an implementation strategy from another researcher and follow it faithfully to successful results. The qualitative researcher must create a consistent and workable study design according to the logic of their research. With an upfront coherent study design in hand, the researcher's odds of producing valid results beneficial to those studied and others beyond increases exponentially.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA FINDINGS: WHY THE GAP PERSISTS

As a white male, I am not sure I can ever fully appreciate how challenging it has been—and remains—for women to shatter old barriers. But I can say that as a participant in American public life for more than three decades, I am convinced that women are the equals of men in all fields of endeavor, starting with leadership. I say that as a father, I want to be damned sure that my daughter, just like my son, has an untrammelled opportunity to become all she wants to be. (Gergen, 2005, p. xv)

In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I present according to major thematic categories the data gathered during in-depth interviews held with 22 women leaders who have substantial experience in Fortune 500 companies. In Chapter Four, I present the participants' observations regarding why the leadership gender gap persists in Corporate America. In Chapter Five, I present the participants' observations on the unique values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table. In Chapter Six, I present the participants' observations on how to close the leadership gender gap in Corporate America.

I believe it beneficial to visualize each participant while progressing through the data findings. Therefore I ask the reader to review the participant demographics before proceeding to the data chapters (see Table 3.1). The experiential breadth and depth of these 22 women leaders allowed them to provide robust observations and anecdotes shedding new light on the lack of gender diversity at higher levels of leadership.

Within the context of why the leadership gender gap persists, four thematic categories emerged from the data including (a) the gap is real, (b) it is still a man's world in the executive suite, (c) trade-offs too high, and (d) other options exist.

### **The Gap is Real**

The participants in my study indicated that the leadership gender gap prevails the closer a woman gets to the C-suite in Corporate America. "Yes there are more women leaders around, but not at the level where the decisions are made, not in the quantities they should be at"

(Charlotte, vice president). “I think there is still so much decay through the female executive curve [leadership pipeline] that it is going to take way longer [to achieve gender parity in the C-suite] than anyone imagined, probably another generation” (Maya, CEO).

The participants pointed out three significant reasons why the leadership gender gap should not continue to linger in Corporate America.

First women make good leaders. The participants unwaveringly stated that the women they know are highly capable and confident.

I see nothing that women cannot do. I mean zero. The women that I know, the women that I have seen, [and] the women that I am raising, there is not a single opportunity or position that they cannot do better [or] cannot do as well as any highly qualified male. (Stella, senior vice president)

Second a continued imbalance of women to men in Corporate American C-suites keeps women’s values and perspectives from being imparted on the decisions that affect how these large corporations operate. Because Fortune 500 corporations have so much power beyond their four walls, the lack of gender parity at the executive level also keeps women from influencing actions taken and norms established within society at large.

Frankly there is just nothing like corporations to have the power of tremendous resources deployed at things. Decisions get made under corporate influence all the time. Corporate decisions shape our culture; their impacts are huge. If women leave to go entrepreneurial or non-profit or into other types of roles that are not going to get them to the CEO seats in big companies, we lose the influence of women on the world at least for the foreseeable future. It does not matter how many women we have at lower levels of leaderships, if they do not stay around long enough to make it to the executive suite. (Carolyn, senior vice president)

Third there is a need to make the executive suite more accessible to a new generation of confident women entering the leadership pipeline.

Well I was thinking about that this morning, and I look at my daughters. These girls are competing. My daughter is a great example. Her best friend is an all-American, three-sport athlete who won two different state championships, is a valedictorian of her class, and is going to a [top East Coast university]. I look at that girl, I look at my daughters,

similar from athletics and academics, and these are women who are already saying, “I am going to be the best.” There are six valedictorians and six salutatorians in my daughter’s high school graduating class this year, and all six valedictorians are girls and four of the six salutatorians, which my daughter is one. So ten of the top academic students are females out of 250 kids. They are used to winning all the time. You talk about critical mass. What we do not want to do is we do not want to lose some of that. (Stella, senior vice president)

### **Needs Airtime**

The participants talked about the need for corporations to regroup around closing the leadership gender gap.

It does not make sense from a how would I go about solving a problem perspective to think the problem will solve itself. If the CEO shakes his head and says, “I do not know what to do,” it is bullshit. I am done hearing that at every level from any man. Mr. CEO, just fix it. (Madeline, director)

We are so behind the curve that it is laughable to some extent. In a multi-billion dollar international company that touts its diversity policy, it is only in the last ten years women made it to the business unit leader level. We do not know how to change that? Really? (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

The leadership gender gap problem “needs some airtime, and it needs some airtime in non-judgmental ways” (Eleanor, director).

[We need to] cut through the noise, rather than add to the noise. I think that is what is going to be different [about this research]. [It is] not so much of just do this, and you will get ahead ... that sort of looking for a crazy silver bullet versus seeing the reality. (Stella, senior vice president)

### **It is Still a Man’s World in the Executive Suite**

The participants claimed that the leadership gender gap persists because it is still a man’s world in the executive suite of Corporate American companies.

I was talking to a woman with whom I started in business 30 some years ago. I was telling her about my recent interview experience for a senior vice president position and that it was such a male dominant place ... She said, “I remember in the 80s thinking that in 25 years things would be so different, but now we are 30 years past and there is no significant difference whatsoever.” It just amazed us. (Charlotte, vice president)

Lower in the organization (i.e., the front end of the leadership pipeline; see Figure 1.1) there is a 50:50 split between women and men.

So there is this culture of it is “all good.” We are recruiting at the university level at a very representative rate of both genders. Yet we cannot manage to retain female talent. I would say we have a loss rate of somewhere in the neighborhood of 50% to 60% in the five to eight year range of experience and then ten years plus it is much, much lower numbers that we have retained. (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

The more positional-senior a woman becomes (i.e., the back end of the leadership pipeline; see Figure 1.1), the more the leadership distribution becomes heavily weighted toward men. “All of a sudden you are off culture, and you are alone” (Maya, CEO).

Most women at the front end of the pipeline do not know what all the fuss is about because gender parity exists there. What they do not realize is one day you wake up as a vice president, and things look and work very differently. From a certain level down it is completely a different company because men and women run it together. (Maya, CEO)

I was promoted to vice president, and there were two other women at that level in my department as opposed to the 50% women at the manager and director levels. It did absolutely change the dynamics and all of a sudden, yes, the expectations felt really different. (Hadley, senior vice president)

The participants did not blame men for the gender gap problem; rather, they pointed to the archetypal masculine defined organizational structure.

There is just so little feminine influence at the top of the Fortune 500 that things are still operating under the assumptions of the 1950s. Structurally organizations are not set up to drive gender parity. Everyone’s intentions are good; so there is something structurally getting in the way.... It is really about transforming the culture for diversity in leadership. I think there are ... people aren’t creating cultures that exclude because they are evil, they are doing it because they do not know any better. [Corporations need to ask,] “What are we missing in our cultural build that is causing women to leave before their time?” (Maya, CEO)

### **On Culture/Off Culture**

The participants claimed that to get invited to the tables of power, to get hired or promoted to such high-level positions in Corporate America, it is greatly dependent upon those currently sitting at the tables of power seeing potential candidates as being on culture.



The more culturally different a person is upon joining an [embedded leadership team], the less comfortable it is for everybody there. It comes down to what women want and what they are willing to do to get to the executive level. (Maya, CEO)

The participants spoke of having to adapt to the male dominant and masculine defined leadership culture or risk being seen as off culture for the executive suite and, thus not being invited in. “Authenticity is bullshit in today’s corporation. You need to adapt to the leadership culture, and the culture is male dominant and masculine defined as you get closer to the top” (Carmen, president). “To be successful, you have to show up with male-like attributes” (Sheryl, senior vice president).

If you do not understand the need to adapt and then do it, you will not get invited to the table. This requires behavioral adaptation on the part of any female who wants to make it to the executive suite.... This gets back to my point about cultural fit. If you are the only woman there, the only woman in the boardroom, the only woman on the executive team, if you are the only woman, then you either have to greatly compromise who you are to be there culturally because there are no females there, no female traits in the culture, or you have to be a flaming tomboy. In which case, it is a very small compromise for you to be there. In my case, it was a very small compromise for me because I am a tomboy. (Maya, CEO)

You are not going to break the rules because your peers who follow [the rules] get the attention. You can have all the fundamental beliefs and philosophies you want, but if [the] people next to you follow the rules, then they get promoted. You are seen as difficult. (Reese, director)

### **Trade-offs too High**

The phrase I heard frequently from the participants was “it is exhausting.” Not exhausting because of the demands to deliver financial results or to manage people or the long hours at the office or being away from home and family, but exhausting because of the behavioral compromises required of women if they want to reach the executive suite.

There is an extra-added burden [on women leaders], and it is sort of like we are all trudging through still trying to pave the trail, and it is just harder work overall. If we have more women [at the executive level], some of those extra-added burdens go away. The burden is not as great because you are not paving the ground anymore. (Stella, senior vice president)

“Going against one’s natural inclinations is not only exhausting; it is stifling and limiting” (Carolyn, senior vice president). “There is a discontinuity within ourselves” (Hadley, senior vice president). “That is what happens when we have to be somebody that we are not; when we have to try on something that we are not” (Stella, senior vice president).

You know twenty years ago I came into a male dominant industry knowing it was going to be a challenge working my way to the top. I was warned from people that I should take heed to that because at some point it was going to make me really angry. Interestingly enough, though, I think it really never has made me that angry until the last few years, which is when I made it to the vice president level.

In the early years, I never thought about energy. I was very much focused on the goal that I was going to make it in this male dominated society, almost to the point of rebuffing anything that would identify me as female because I wanted to win fair and square. I spent more time on the competitive nature of scratching and clawing my way to the position I wanted to be in, and my main competitors were men. So I had this competitive energy to move up the ladder. Today it is kind of bewilderment and disappointment ... It is difficult to do, to fight the fight as a lone person. It saps my energy. Yet I am absolutely devoted to my job. I spend an inordinate amount of time away from my family for the job. Is this really worth the effort or would I be as happy, satisfied, and fulfilled doing something different?

Energy is a huge deal for me right now. I have the best job I have ever had in my life, more decision rights and accountability than I could ever have imagined I would have had on this path, and I have never had less energy. It should fuel me. I should be passionate. I should be jumping out of bed every morning to do the job I have because it is so great. But I am dragging myself out of bed and not because I do not like my job. It is just that I am exhausted. I mean it is mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting when you are fighting the leadership culture versus fighting the competition. (Jessica, general manager /vice president)

“It can be exhausting because you have no ally in the fight” (Carolyn, senior vice president). “Things are just more challenging when you are in the battle alone, that one person who thinks differently than the nine guys on the executive team. Eventually you get tired.” (Abbey, vice president).

Women are not seen or listened to the same way men are. I am not heard in the same way as the men are heard. They are not bad guys. I just think there is something in their

relationships or their perceptions of each other that is just more connected. (Abbey, senior vice president)

I have a nice relationship with my male counterparts, but they are not like the relations they have with one another. I have never really experienced the feeling of a teammate totally having my back, [or] talked openly about stuff with someone who gets me in a way that I am never going to have with the guys. Men just get fed more at work. (Abbey, senior vice president)

I would love to have some more females at my table because I will make my opinion known, and I have to do it with some diplomacy. I have to watch exactly how I say things because I don't want to be perceived as too pushy or too abrasive or too closed-minded. So you have to be very self-aware. But it would be wonderful to have more women who have an opinion and a voice that could push things along a little further because now I have to go about it in a way that takes too much time. (Dallas, COO)

“The added stress of working these two end points [behaviorally adapting to the masculine lead and leading authentically as a woman] overtime wears at the subconscious level until it stresses you to the point of doing something else” (Madeline, director). “It keeps us [women leaders] from being effective and having more confidence that there are lots of different ways to get there and at the same time recognizing that we really do need to [adapt]” (Stella, senior vice president). “So you try to fight the fights you can, and it is really a daily choice of where you are going to create the impact” (Jessica, general manager/vice president).

### **Cost/Benefit**

The participants said it comes down to assessing the cost/benefit of aspiring to reach the executive suite. Most women go through a cost/benefit analysis, as they progresses through the leadership pipeline, to determine if the costs of moving up the corporate ladder outweigh the benefits.

What is the cost/benefit? Are the trade-offs too high? How much am I willing to do for it? How long can I live with this much behavioral adaptation? Can I do it until I have earned the stripes to start to change things? Will I be able to change things when I reach that point? How long can I live being a cultural misfit? (Maya, CEO)

There seems to be questioning with regard to, “Gosh really, is this it? Is it all that great? What am I doing this for” (Jessica, general manager/vice president)? “For me it is not even a parenting thing, it is the question of whether money or time is more important. Why should this one woman show care” (Reese, director)?

Even if I get to the tables of power, which I know I am capable of doing, and it is something that I have been working on forever, is it really providing the return on the investment for everything I put into it? How much of yourself, how much of your identity, how much of your individualism do you have to put into this effort relative to what I am going to get back at this point? It is just a different conversation all together, and it is odd because there has never been any of that kind of conversation except go, do work, climb higher, and do well. (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

I made all the trade-offs and still got stuck. Now I will not take just anything ... She [a colleague] fought like a guy to get to where she was and made all sorts of sacrifices, but it was not sustainable. You are not going to get systemic change by doing that. (Charlotte, vice president)

### **Other Options Exist**

The participants indicated that many women choose to broker their human capital equity outside the four walls of Corporate America by seeking positions that align better with their leadership values and perspectives.

Talented women are smart enough not to keep throwing good money after bad or good time after bad. They are saying, “I am going to invest it [my talents and energy] in my own effort for things that really make my heart sing—the things that I care about, the things I want to do.” Their patience just runs out. (Carolyn, senior vice president)

I think we [women] say, “I have gotten this far, I have done this much, now do I want to [continue to] rise here [in Corporate America] on this ladder that I have [been climbing], and I can see where that is [heading] or do I want to explore other areas, other options, other places to be?” It is not like I said, “I do not want a seat at the table.” Rather I wanted to use my accumulated power to do something that I had a directive toward. I wanted to see how it [my experiences and accomplishments] traded in the market. (Stella, senior vice president)

I think more and more women at the senior levels are just seeing that, again, they do not have to do this. They can either start their own businesses or make more money being consultants. When we see what we are paying internally to consultants, it is like why in the world would I want to do this if I can just go become a consultant, make the same

amount of money, and have a lot more control and influence. Maybe I am not going to work with huge corporations right away, but I can influence a lot of small to mid-sized businesses, or I can influence a lot of startup companies. (Diana, executive vice president)

I can do whatever I want to do, but there are dynamics going on [within the leadership culture of large corporations]. I know I can play the game. I just find places where I do not have to operate in a traditional male defined culture. (Lesley, CEO)

The participants pointed out that many women start their own businesses when they leave Corporate America. “[They are] starting businesses to have more control over their lives and how they work. It won’t be balance, rather [it will be] harmony or integration of the two [work and family]” (Sheryl, senior vice president).

If I am going to do it, I am going to do it for a company that maybe has more flexibility about when I work the 60 hours, or I am just going to do it for myself. I am going to start my own business. That is why women are opening more small businesses than ever now. I think a lot of them are just sick of trying to fight the corporate environment. There was a time there, as recent as six or seven years ago, I felt like I was putting on a suit of armor every morning. It was like I was going to war. I think it just gets really old, and women are thinking they are not seeing the change fast enough. Women are saying, “I am just sick of it, I am out of here, there are other things I can do to influence differently.” (Diana, executive vice president)

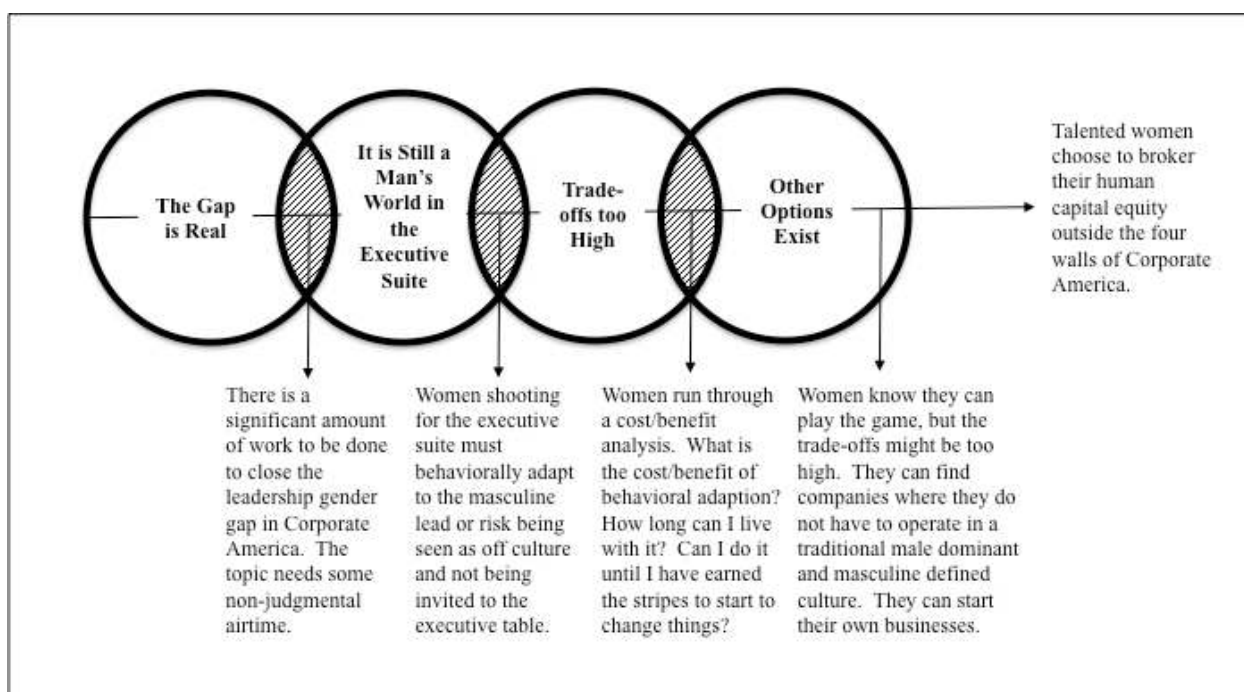
I know that to do well, I have to work harder, be smarter, and be more effective than a guy in the job. If I am going to go work harder, be smarter, and deliver better results, I am going to do it for my own account. I am going to start my own business. (Carolyn, senior vice president)

### **Summary**

According to the data, the reason the leadership gender gap persists in Corporate America is structural—it is still a man’s world in the executive suite. The top of the organization remains male dominant and masculine defined with respect to leadership values and perspectives. Women who want to rise to the top of the organization must behaviorally adapt to the masculine lead or risk being seen as off culture for the executive suite.

Women must decide if they are willing to make this trade-off, or if the cost/benefit of doing so is too high. It appears the costs may outweigh the benefits because many talented women are choosing to broker their human capital equity outside of Corporate America. These women are choosing to work in organizations where the leadership culture aligns better with their values and perspectives, or to start their own businesses where they can create the leadership culture from the ground up.

Figure 4.1 integrates the thematic categories regarding why the leadership gender gap persists in Corporate America.



*Figure 4.1.* Process map conceptualizing why the leadership gender gap persists. Circles provide context for interaction, horizontal line indicates evolving interaction, and intersections of circles describe actions taken to keep things flowing. Framework adapted from "Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory," by J. Corbin and A. Strauss, 2008, p. 99. Copyright 2008 by Sage Publications, Inc.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DATA FINDINGS: UNIQUE VALUES AND PERSPECTIVES

The workplace is a second home for most executives, managers, and employees, providing financial security, emotional connection, self-esteem, and at a very deep level, much of our sense of meaning and purpose. Into this workplace walk not only people, but also women and men. A business can't maximize its productivity, profit, and outreach unless it understands from top to bottom what make [females and males] tick. (Gomez Gil, as cited in Gurian & Annis, 2008, p. 1)

The participants in my study indicated that the qualifications (i.e., experiences and accomplishments) for attaining an executive leadership position apply equally to women and men. "If they did not, I would have stepped out of the leadership equation years ago.... You must know your stuff, work hard, have a presence, inspire confidence in others, and deliver results" (Maya, CEO).

You must have held a key decision-making position in a profit and loss role where you had responsibility for mission critical results and making market calls [concerning] where we [the company] are going to place a bet on this [product or service], or [if] we are going to physically open [in] this [market]. You must be able to articulate a point of view, defend it, and speak with authority ... Corporations are built on the concept of competition. If you are not built for competition, if that is not something that you thrive on, you will not make it as an executive leader. (Stella, senior vice president)

Although the qualifications for executive leadership are gender agnostic, the participants pointed out that masculine values and perspectives still permeate the executive suite as the model for leadership behaviors (see Chapter Four). However women bring unique values to the leadership equation, ones that lend themselves to different points of view on how to earn and use power, as well as how to have an enriching professional life and personal life. "Women figure out how to adapt to the cultures they are in and modify their approaches, but not their values" (Hadley, senior vice president).

Therefore "to manage the leadership pipeline, you [corporations] need to look at things differently" (Carmen, president). If corporations work to recognize and reward the unique

values and perspectives women bring to the leadership equation, the leadership pipeline might start to shift toward gender-balanced representation.

Why focus on the number of females [making it to the executive suite] when it is really about the realization of feminine behaviors [values and perspectives] and understanding the impact on [the] business results of bringing feminine characteristics to the leadership culture? It is not so much that we need more women, but we need more feminine. If we do it that way, it becomes less of a “she/he” thing or an “us/them” thing. It becomes more of an embracing of these traits [gender unique values and perspectives on leadership]. (Eleanor, director)

Further the participants questioned, “Are we [women] actually hurting ourselves by leaning into [behaviorally adapting] the current system [masculine leadership values and perspectives]? Do we perpetuate the engineering of the organization as a patriarchy” (Sheryl, senior vice president)?

I am realizing for myself that so much of what I have been culturalized with [by the organization] is that you have to show up this way. I think that if we were to turn it on its ear, the hyper-extroverted executive type—big talker, really direct, all those things that we see, that particular style—and called it incorrectly identified as effective leadership, I think we would all benefit. Even when you are going to top business schools, there is such a strong cultural norm around how everybody has to be extraverted. It is just the way it is ... We are creating all these people who are pretending. (Stella, senior vice president)

In Chapter Five, I present the participants’ observations on the unique values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table. Four thematic categories emerged from the data including (a) money and status not primary motivators, (b) earn your way to the top, (c) relationship is key, and (d) work and family harmony.

### **Money and Status not Primary Motivators**

Fifty percent of the participants indicated they do not measure their worth in terms of money and status. Although these women enjoy earning attractive salaries and holding high-level leadership positions, they said the rewards of executive leadership must exceed money and status alone.



It is not that our identities are not tied to what we do and who we are, but I think the money piece is not as important. I could be totally wrong, but I kind of think that it is true. I have never cared about what I made. (Carmen, president)

Females do not need the ego stroke of title, power, and prestige to feel accomplished ... I do not need a stroking ... I tell myself I am the best. I want a challenge rather than praise. Either you need to have the ego and desire for prestige and the big life to sacrifice personally, or the work has to be intellectually stimulating and results need to be driven without all the drama. If I am going to give my life to this company, the corporate bullshit has to go away. It is exhausting. I need to see benefit at the end of the day. The company has to be worth the sacrifices. (Reese, director)

Often the participants spoke of the organizational problems caused by a focus on money and status. "Money is just not a motivator; actually, it is a de-motivator" (Carmen, president).

"If money did not enter the picture, it would drive more collaboration and flexibility across the organization" (Adrienne, COO).

You know a lot of the choices that we have made on how we manage our business and how big it gets and how we manage our individual lives, we talk about this pretty frequently ... One of the things that we started [when we created this company together as women executives] was that between the two of us [the CEO and COO] we would always put all of our income into one pot and divide it in half so that we are never individually motivated.

We do the same with our team. Everybody earns the same base salary, and then we put all of our commissions into a bucket and divide them evenly. So people who want to come [into the organization] and individually succeed based on some financial metric, they will not work here. We are all focused on the team. We are not looking for individual cowboys or individual superstars. We really want to succeed or fail as a team. (Linda, CEO)

"[Individualism] leads to a focus on money and position at the expense of others, rather than with others" (Hadley, senior vice president). "Women take a collective approach to acquisition" (Eleanor, director). "Women tend to have a size of the pie outlook. I win if we expand the entire pie and everyone gets more versus I win if I get a bigger piece of the pie for myself" (Hadley, senior vice president).

Because “women do not make their entire identity about the job title, they can make quality of life decisions” (Sheryl, senior vice president) as they assess the cost/benefit of being an executive leader in the Fortune 500.

I turned down a senior vice president offer. It was a position I had been striving for my entire career. My husband said, “Wow I would have taken it even though I understand why you did not. I would have taken it because it was a growing company, and I could have been on the cover of *Fortune*.” Yet it was not a good fit for me. The power thing [and] the visibility thing did not motivate me. After giving my all for twenty years, I realized how important fit was for me. I was not willing to fight the battle again at a point in my life where I just did not want to do so. During the interviews with the executive team, it was obvious that it was male dominant in numbers and behaviors [values and perspectives]. I did not want to sell my soul building stuff. I did not want to fight with anyone. The cost/benefit was not there. (Charlotte, vice president)

I can let my ego go, consult at a lower level, not manage a team, and make more money without working 24/7. I have no title and no status, but all the other perks are there—time for self, money, intellectual connection, and no politics. (Reese, director)

### **Earn Your Way to the Top**

Fifty-eight percent of the participants pointed out that women judge themselves ready to take on the next level leadership role based on capabilities rather than potential. “Women are just more realistic ... I followed the path of building my experience” (Lexis, vice president). “You have to be able to articulate what you want and tell your story. Then you need to be able to define how what you have done applies to the next job you want” (Jessica, general manager/vice president).

The participants spoke of women “generally being more appreciative” (Nora, vice president) than “self-aggrandizing of their accomplishments” (Jacqueline, director). “Women are just more grateful for their accomplishments than thinking they deserve them” (Lexis, vice president). “Women assume people notice how hard they work” (Tessa, CEO). “They think performance will get them what they deserve” (Charlotte, vice president). “Women look to meritocracy in seeking who is best for the job” (Madeline, director) rather than relying on

“gaming, schmoozing, and networking to position one’s self ... or on individualism with its politics trumping performance” (Eleanor, director).

Often times women’s desires for reaching a “sense of competency and mastery” (Stella, senior vice president) before moving to the next level position and “unassuming ways of promoting themselves” (Lexis, vice president) represent blind spots through the eyes of corporate structures steeped in masculine leadership values and perspectives. “So what if women do not negotiate for themselves the way men do. Take the variation out of the system” (Carolyn, senior vice president).

“It behooves organizations to stop pointing at women and saying, ‘Well they should ask for it [money and positions]’.” If there are gender differences, then [Corporate America] be more on purpose and ask them [women to apply for higher-level positions] or offer it up [job promotion or salary increase]” (Madeline, director). [The] human resources function needs to think long and hard about this” (Carolyn, senior vice president).

You know it is not just about managing legal compliance and risk. It is about thinking about talent development for this company, and I really think we need more women to have better perspectives on our customers, the things we do, and how we interact with our customers. We need to get more women to the top, and if it takes pushing, shoving, and leveraging, I am going to do it. (Carolyn, senior vice president)

### **Relationship is Key**

The participants talked about relationship as being key to success in leadership. “I pride myself on building relationships with direct reports” (Charlotte, vice president). “Trust building is critical. People need to feel like they can approach you and be honest with you” (Lexis, vice president).

In my role as general manager of my segment, of course I am accountable for my business, aligning my team around the strategy for that business, getting that stuff done, and delivering to the organization what we have promised. But our role as senior leaders

should have at the highest priority the people aspect of the business. (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

My impact on people keeps me up at night. If I make the wrong move with one of those key players, then I lose the game and not only that, but also the person suffers. This applies to both work and home players. That is what causes me personally the most conflict—doing what is right. (Dallas, COO)

Women believe in open, honest communication. When the company was going to hell [during a downturn in sales], it was difficult for me to play the company role, and tell them [direct reports] it was okay and to stick it out. Do we really mean it when we say people first? (Charlotte, vice president)

The participations spoke of fostering relationship in three ways including (a) flatten the hierarchy, (b) collaborate, and (c) empower people to profits.

### **Flatten the Hierarchy**

Forty-one percent of the participants talked of the leader's need to steer the ship; however, these women disliked using a command and control approach to achieve an end goal.

You have to take a command and control attitude as a top leader, but women use it as a backup plan rather than a primary move.... If you have a command and control personality, being at the top is awesome. But if not, there is not a lot of gratification. Men may think they are not command and control, but the truth is it is the way they govern. They might be slightly more benevolent than in the past, but men are still command and control at the end of the day. (Carmen, president)

“All hierarchy does is depersonalize the workplace” (Lexis, vice president). “Collectivism is more conducive to efficient and effective business. It takes everyone to make things happen.

We are a team, and no one is more important” (Hadley, senior vice president).

Women bring an innovative energy without rank order to the workplace, sort of a middle ground for leading. I am not military. I am not going to salute you. [Yet] I am not a free for all. I need people to get organized and focused ... there are other ways [to lead] that fit my core values better. (Madeline, director)

The participants indicated they look beyond personal power and prefer to work across divisions, departments, and functional areas in a networked arrangement—it is “the power of the enterprise” (Stella, senior vice president). These women spoke of unity at the team level as very

important to being an effective leader. “Women want to function well as a leadership team”

(Jessica, general manager/vice president).

I need to be part of doing it more effectively or efficiently. That is my passion versus bringing everyone in and saying, “This is what we are going to deliver now go have fun, and I am going home,” ... but if you cannot ever see the rubber hit the road, it would be hell. It is just a glorified picture of being more senior. (Carmen, president)

To see that [the organization] as the beginning, not my own department or division, but to imagine an aspiration where we could together take this [project/work] here [to results], and it does not matter if you hold onto individual power defining yourself sitting over the top of your division, the top of your power base in terms of the people who sit underneath you because a leader’s power comes in achieving corporate results ... My paradigm is to look at what sits before me, not what sits underneath me. Women are much more willing to be pliable. [They] do not worry about what is that [completing a certain task/taking on a certain role] going to do to diminish my status. Rather they ask, “What do you need from me, what can we do together, [and] how can I bring what I have to bare against that centralized focus?” If we are going there, then here is what I can do not what I won't do. (Stella, senior vice president)

Who is in charge was a topic of much discussion. We women were saying, “It does not matter. Let's just get the work done.” But the guys had to identify who was the face of the company. They wanted to know who is in charge and who is making the decisions. Did we really want to sit and talk about the face of the company? We had many hours of discussion about how we wanted to market to our clients. In that number of hours, I could have marketed individually to every single person across the country. Let’s try with ten [hours of discussion], then do and learn. Let's try something out and then come back to the table. (Adrienne, COO)

## **Collaborate**

Forty-five percent of the participants indicated women are collaborative and compete as a “we” to win together as a team. “They [women] are so connected and about helping others to succeed” (Linda, CEO). “I find it powerful that women are natural givers of advice and perspective” (Stella, senior vice president). “A woman supports other women more than she support herself” (Charlotte, vice president).

We [women] allow for each other to be the winner. You win this time, it is your turn, and I will support you. We do not say, “I told you so.” If things do not work out, we

help fix it and make you feel better. We are the first ones to help you dig out. (Adrienne, COO)

However meritocracy plays a role in women choosing to support other women in the same way it does for judging themselves ready for a promotion.

Women support other women, but the women need to be competent [to garner the support]. I have never supported a woman just because she was a woman, but I might have to do so for the cause because things are not getting better. (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

The participants spoke of women building teams around strengths and weaknesses, and what each person enjoys doing. “I can do your job, you can do my job, but we do what we get energy from [most of the time] and flex to fill the [work] gaps and to take care of life—yours and mine” (Linda, CEO). “The best position I ever had was with a boss where we complemented one another versus competing. I saw results. That is what makes me work my ass off” (Reese, director).

We [women] reward the results. We reward the ability to get work done in a more collaborative fashion. We see individuals. We don't see jobs. I mean we see how individuals are contributing, and we are not so caught up in this strict roles and responsibilities or fiefdoms that happen [within organizations].... But as you begin to pull women out of that, you kind of lose it [the collaboration]. (Stella, senior vice president)

You need to be able to cultivate, you need to be able to create cultures that esteem and cultivate talent development. A leader needs to be more collaborative. It is a different sort of leadership style that still belongs at the tables of power, you know, that has credibility there. (Stella, senior vice president)

Every conversation is combative, and I am collaborative. I deal with conflict. I am not conflict adverse. It is my job to go out there and figure out the problem, find a solution, and to hear the views of the people who do not agree with me. [But] I should not have to win with my boss. My god, it is exhausting. (Lexis, vice president)

### **Empower People to Profit**

Although driving financial results is the purpose of a corporation and the end goal of all executive leaders, 41% of the participants spoke of setting people up for success to achieve

financial results versus focusing on achieving the numbers at any cost. “Money is good, but as a leader you need to set people up for success. People want to feel valued, included, trusted, empowered, and set up for the future” (Tessa, CEO). “If people have clear direction, the results will come” (Lexis, vice president).

I want people to use their talents fully. I am a conductor. What motivates me the most is providing people with good jobs. I love running the business, but the people stuff is my favorite. I measure my job satisfaction by how much the staff enjoys what they do. (Lesley, CEO)

The participants said that women nurture their teams to empower them, while being sticklers for holding direct reports accountable for delivering the expected results.

I believe our creative strengths, in terms of nurturing and perception, are very important if the combined team is one that is built around collaboration, trust, and transparency. I see men bringing trust, transparency, and collaboration, but not nurturing or having the perception to read situations and people as women do. (Alexandra, COO)

I think women tend to be, again my experience tells me, nurturing of their teams. That was something I took great pride in. Not only nurturing, but then accountability. This is one of my characteristics, expecting a lot from my team [and] holding them accountable. I always got positive feedback on that. My team would say, “You were the hardest person I have ever worked for, but I have learned the most and feel the most supported of anybody I have ever worked for.” (Charlotte, vice president)

### **Work and Family Harmony**

All the participants talked about the time commitment of an executive leadership role, and the need to make trade-offs between professional life and personal life to manage the time commitment.

Every time you move a step further up the corporate ladder, you assume more responsibility. This requires a larger time commitment to the organization. The higher you rise, the more the entire leadership experience becomes 90% of your life, and you sacrifice other things beyond the realm of work. Pure and simple you make some pretty big life choices when you shoot for the executive suite and every choice you make comes with a trade-off. No one can have it all, it is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. (Carmen, president)

“Young women need to be told that there is no balance. There are always consequences [attached to every trade-off]. I feel very strongly about this needing to be communicated to younger women” (Nora, vice president).

Although understanding and accepting the time demands of executive leadership, the participants claimed that caring for family is part of a working mother’s reality. The responsibility for family care “still falls mainly on women” (Eleanor, director) no matter how enlightened the parenting arrangement might be. “My husband and I had a 50:50 mentality when we raised our daughter, but I still ended up doing more” (Charlotte, vice president).

Sixty-four percent of the women leaders participating in my study were mothers. None of these women opted out of the professional world when they had their children.

Work was equally as important ... once you realize that, it is almost embarrassing to admit it sometimes as a woman, but I came from a very strong work ethic family, and I got my sense of importance by doing a good job at work. (Dallas, COO)

The answer is not being a stay at home mom because that is not for me. I can understand why women want to stay home and raise their children, but for me it is not a seven-day a week job. I need to connect. I need to drive my mental state a bit more. (Reese, director)

Flexible work arrangements helped the participants who were mothers to manage work and family, yet it was not the critical factor that kept them in the leadership pipeline. “If I needed to leave work, I did because I was working all the time anyway. If I was home by 6 p.m., I was doing emails and making calls by 8 p.m.” (Charlotte, vice president).

Flextime helps, but it is not the answer. I had children later in my career by choice. I had the credibility to use the flextime, to feel I was not being harmed by it, but younger women do not have this luxury. (Reese, director)

The participants who were mothers indicated that the key to success in having an enriching professional life and personal life was dropping the notion of work and family balance, and replacing it with the idea of work and family harmony. “Sometimes it is work first and



family second. Sometimes it is family first and work second” (Nora, vice president). The work and family harmony equation also includes finding the right balance between self and spouse with respect to home and family responsibilities. “My husband does over sixty percent of the house stuff. That is the only way I have the job I have” (Nora, vice president).

I think that difference, and I don't know what it is, but I think that difference might be I didn't let myself get burned out early on because of the balance issue. I had somebody. My husband was on my side helping me pull, not pulling me. This helped me feel like I could move further up with my battery charged rather than fried. I just did not survive these years; they were awesome. Maybe that is the difference [compared] to people who just hung on and slugged it out. I do not know? It gets back to trade-offs. What were the trade-offs and did they just eat you up that you had to make those trade-offs? (Carolyn, senior vice president)

### **False Assumptions**

What does present a problem with respect to having a fulfilling professional life and personal life are “all the false mothering assumptions dumped on women” (Eleanor, director).

“There is a perception that women will, after a corporation invests in them, that they will opt out at a critical time, that they cannot make up their minds about work or family” (Dallas, COO).

Many times there are assumptions made that women do not want to consider taking on a challenging or time consuming positions even if they are believed to be capable of handling it because it will take them away from the family. (Maya, CEO)

When I was promoted the question came up as to whether or not I was still going to be willing to travel, to do whatever it took to be successful. It was not asked in the same way as it was asked of my male counterparts. It was clearly aimed toward will she attend this meeting versus her kid's birthday? Is she going to come through on what we need? This was not that many years ago. (Stella, senior vice president)

“We [corporations] put too much focus on can a female fill the role because of her children when we should focus on accountability for business results [instead]” (Stella, senior vice president). The fact is “women have to have the babies or civilization ceases to exist, so there will be maternity leaves and career breaks” (Carmen, president). “[Do not make] having a

baby the worst decision a woman makes in her career life. Men would not have children if they got penalized like this” (Eleanor, director).

**Career path.** “Women are punished for moving ahead at a different pace [through the leadership pipeline] to accommodate life” (Eleanor, director). “Breaks are seen as impediments to women being leaders because it appears that they are not committed to their careers, that they will always put family first” (Sheryl, senior vice president). “This [a non-linear path to the top] was not part of the past male [leadership] experience, so career breaks are seen as bad” (Sheryl, senior vice president).

The continuity, the uninterrupted experience, and the rigidity of if you do not follow this particular path you will not move up the leadership ladder, it is the rigidity of the path that undermines what women see as natural flexibility in career advancement. (Stella, senior vice president)

“There are many alternative models out there” (Hadley, senior vice president). “Let’s turn this assumption on its head [and] say that continuity is not important, rather capability, performance, and accountability are critical, and see the impact on results” (Stella, senior vice president). “[Let’s] build professional pathways for [women] to come in and engage to have a long-term career versus having to leave” (Alexandra, COO).

Why is weaving in and out of work for balance not seen as a positive healthy environment? We take people and move them from one division to another division all the time. So what if we moved them from a division to a break and then back to a different division. It would be easy, and the company would not lose all that historical knowledge and intellectual property with these women” (Hadley, senior vice president).

**Sacrifice does not equal loyalty.** “The other one of the assumed rules would be this idea of sacrifice [of time] and [that sacrifice equates to] loyalty” (Stella, senior vice president). “I have been in the industry for 31 years, and companies make decisions around whether or not a person is really in front of them. You can call it discrimination, but it is certainly the way companies make decisions” (Alexandra, COO).

However, mothers who are executives are going to instinctively focus their work time attention on activities directly related to business outcomes” (Maya, CEO), and shy away from extracurricular activities such as happy hour and golf. I only have so much time for work and so much time for family” (Eleanor, director).

I have been to a million golf events in my life and it is fine, but for me personally, I look at my husband who has been to a huge number of golf events. I do not think he looks at it like I am going to go play golf and that is taking three hours away from me being a parent. He is not socialized to think that way, whereas I think I work 60 hours a week and if I go play golf for three hours that is three more hours that I am taking away from being a parent. I do not think that men and women think the same. (Adrienne, COO)

“There are lots of, there are all these companies that have not gotten themselves set up to actually have 50% of the workforce balanced between women and men because they run like something from the dark ages still” (Maya, CEO).

If we could just acknowledge and say, “That is just old school [thinking].” ... We just need to have the flexibility and resources that are provided for people to manage a fulfilling personal life and an effective professional one at this level [of leadership] because all of us have that longing to participate in those things [work and family] ... extra sacrifice does not mean loyalty. (Stella, senior vice president)

“Work is as important to me as family, yet I need my children to know that I am part of their lives on a regular basis. But this does not mean that I do not want to be an executive” (Reese, director).

### **Share the Wisdom**

The participants talked about how they informally shared “little bits of wisdom” with younger women to keep them in the leadership pipeline long-term. Sharing little bits of wisdom keeps younger women from feeling alone as they harmonize work and family, and from second-guessing their decisions to stay in the leadership pipeline.

I always have a collection of women that I am talking with that I do not think of so much as mentees; rather, I think of them as people I am talking with that I want to invest my time in ... We have these conversations where I laugh and tell them crazy things my Mom used to tell me to get me through this or that stage. (Carolyn, senior vice president)

For example, “Let go of perfect ... kids are resilient to what you build as long as you are okay with it. If dad is the primary caretaker ... let him decide how to get things done [at home]” (Carolyn, senior vice president). “You might miss baby’s first steps or first words. You will live” (Charlotte, vice president). “Figure out what needs attention and when, and then live with your decisions” (Nora, vice president). “Invest in your career by coming back [to work] after [you have your] baby ... while you may not be making much [money] after paying childcare costs, you are continuing on your path [to the executive suite]” (Carolyn, senior vice president). “Say yes as long as you can because sometimes you need to say no ... to save time, develop your ability to make decisions quickly and not rethink them both personally and professionally” (Dallas, COO).

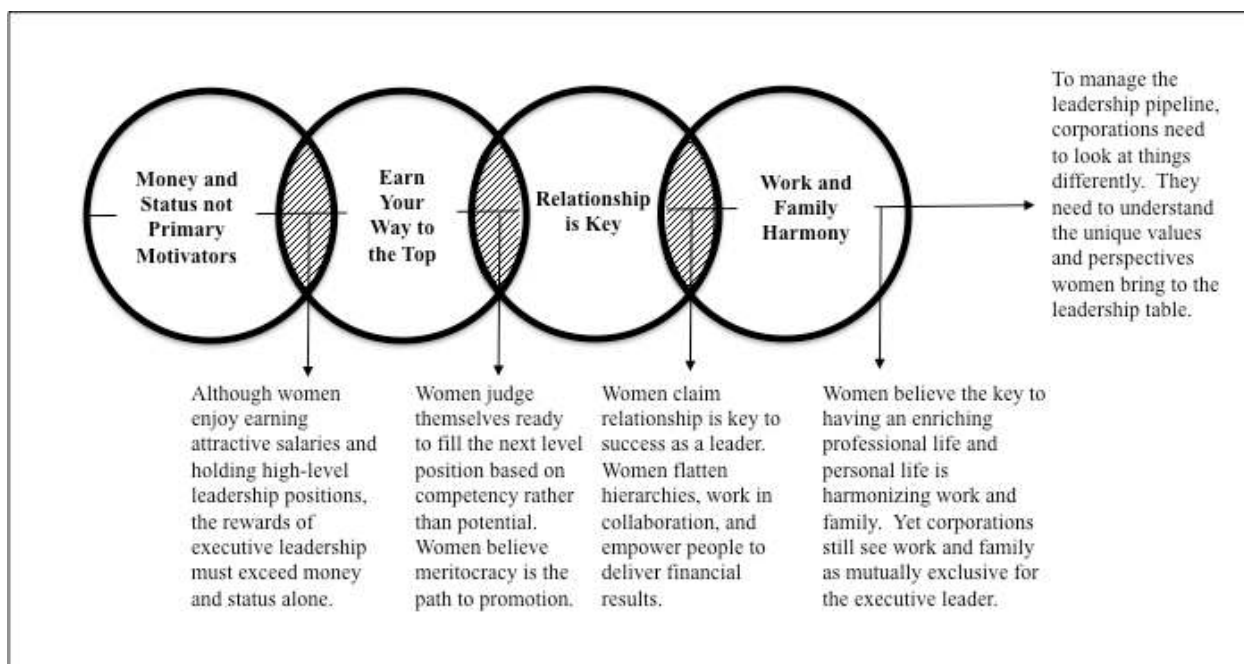
### **Summary**

While the qualifications (i.e., experiences and accomplishments) for executive leadership apply equally to women and men, the behavioral model in the executive suite remains defined by masculine values and perspective. Women bring unique values to the leadership table, ones that lend themselves to different perspectives on how to earn and use power, as well as to have an enriching professional and personal life. Women figure out how to modify their approaches to leadership to be seen as on culture for the executive suite, but not their values. To manage the leadership pipeline successfully, corporations need to understand the values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table, and how to recognize and reward this uniqueness.

The first of women’s unique values and perspectives pertained to money and status not being primary motivators. While women enjoy earning attractive salaries and holding high-level positions, the rewards of leadership need to exceed these two value propositions. The second pertained to earning one’s way to the top. Women manage their career progress based on

achieving positional competency. It is about meritocracy—earned reward based on accomplished abilities. The third pertained to relationship being a key to success in leadership. Women prefer to flatten hierarchies, work in collaboration, and empower people to deliver financial results. Women prefer to look beyond personal power, preferring to work across the organization focused on the power of the enterprise. The fourth pertained to harmonizing work and family. Women see this harmony as natural, though corporations still see work and family as mutually exclusive.

Figure 5.1 integrates the thematic categories regarding the unique values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table.



*Figure 5.1.* Process map conceptualizing women's unique values and perspectives. Circles provide context for interaction, horizontal line indicates evolving interaction, and intersections of circles describe actions taken to keep things flowing. Framework adapted from "Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory," by J. Corbin and A. Strauss, 2008, p. 99. Copyright 2008 by Sage Publications, Inc.

## CHAPTER SIX: DATA FINDINGS: HOW TO CLOSE THE GAP

Organizations can be considered as modes of attention: what is attended to routinely can be thought of as what is valued ... Diversity work involves the effort of putting diversity into the places that are already valued so that diversity can come into view. (Ahmed, as cited in Chun & Evans, 2014, p. 1)

In Chapter Four, I presented the data findings indicating that if women want to make it to the executive suite in Corporate America, they must behaviorally adapt to masculine leadership values and perspectives to be seen as on culture. Many talented women do not want to engage in this chameleon behavior because it goes against their values and squelches their ability to lead authentically. Therefore they leave Corporate America to broker their human capital equity elsewhere, and these women leave before their time. The leadership gender gap persists.

In Chapter Five, I presented the data findings indicating that women bring unique values and perspectives to the leadership equation, values and perspectives that lend themselves to different points of view on how to earn and use power, as well as how to have an enriching professional life and personal life. To manage the leadership pipeline successfully, corporations need to understand the values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table, and how to recognize and reward this uniqueness.

What we find here is sort of the unmet need of this market [women leaders in Corporate America wanting their unique values and perspectives recognized and rewarded in equal measure to those of men], and if you understand it you would go okay [let's address it] just like you would for any other kind of consumer market [served by the business]. So that is what I think is more hopeful to me to be able to not have to second guess even more that women are thinking about whether or not it is discrediting them to be more female. But to be female and to be more powerful and to focus on a broad set of issues and not filter ... These are the women who will become the role models [for more women to stay the course to the executive suite] versus specific sponsors within their company. This is what will draw more women to the tables of power. (Stella, senior vice president)

In Chapter Six, I present the participants' observations on how to close the leadership gender gap to address this unmet market need. Three thematic categories emerged from the data

including (a) shift the leadership culture, (b) initiate as a business level strategy, and (c) manage through the talent infrastructure.

### **Shift the Leadership Culture**

The participants spoke of the need for a structural fix to close the leadership gender gap in Corporate America—intentionally shifting the leadership culture to one that rewards the unique values and perspectives of both genders in equal measure, and for women and men to learn from one another. “We are putting too much focus on women” (Madeline, director). “[We focus on] what women need to do versus what corporations need to do” (Sheryl, senior vice president). “Can the company lean in” (Dallas, COO)?

“We can have gender conversations to understand one another better as female and male. But until the culture changes, we [women and men aspiring to reach the executive suite] will work toward the leadership role model, and the leadership model is still masculine” (Sheryl, vice president).

Early in my career I transferred from a very masculine dominant industry to one that seemed to welcome more diversity. That was when I started to understand the power of supporting a cultural palette, and the need to focus on building it. (Maya, CEO)

It is about instilling behavioral changes that foster a desire to play differently as a leadership team, but structure and accountability need to be in place for people to play differently, to really want to participate in a new game. (Reese, director)

The participants indicated that it is not a zero-sum game of women versus men. “No single approach to leadership is better than another, and running anything by one dominant set of rules stifles and limits” (Lesley, CEO). “The idea of working in an all female environment would be no better for females than working in today’s predominantly male environment” (Abbey, senior vice president). “It is the strength of having both, to be skilled at both” (Sheryl, senior vice president). “A leadership environment [with a balance of gender diverse values and

perspectives] would absolutely have people who looked at things more holistically about employees and engagement, and careers and patterns” (Hadley, senior vice president). “It provides a broader set of perspectives” (Abbey, vice president).

“Rather than focusing on gendered behaviors, the focus becomes bringing together a group of talented people who have the skills to lead, as well as the shared values and desires to build trusting transparent relationships” (Alexandra, COO).

Process is where you bring your different leadership styles to the table. The product—the accountability for financial results—is the thing not sacrificed for [the] process—how one leads. As long as the accountability stays clear for the long-term health of an organization, then how one leads, what process one uses to get there should not matter. I think that is when we are really going to see fertile ground for all people to be effective [as leaders]. (Stella, senior vice president)

### **Initiate as a Business Level Strategy**

The participants’ pointed out that “women’s support networks, councils, and infinity groups are not the answer for closing the leadership gender gap” (Charlotte, vice president). “I stopped funding for the women’s network because only women from the entry level of the pipeline were involved. So no help was getting to those who needed it at all” (Carolyn, senior vice president).

Women’s councils or groups are not the answer. They do nothing. I personally did not want to be part of it. It is not strategic. What are they accountable for delivering to the organization; something that translates into financial results? They [women’s councils or groups] need to be led by an executive officer [if they are going to make sustainable change]. It just identifies women as some kind of group that needs support to function. (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

Seventy-three percent of the participants indicated that shifting a leadership culture requires a strategic focus. “It [closing the leadership gender gap] needs to be a systemic versus separate effort. The women’s group thing does nothing” (Charlotte, vice president). “It takes a strategic approach to make this kind of change [embrace in equal measure the values and



perspectives both genders bring to the leadership table]” (Maya, CEO). “This must be driven by a business level strategy” (Dallas, COO) and represent a “systemic versus a separate effort” (Diana, executive vice president). “If it is not, it will not get recognized or sanctioned” (Dallas, COO).

Further shifting the leadership culture needs executive level clout and a strong business case to get traction and remain relevant for the long-term.

Most organizations are clear and intentional about the cultures they want to create. Most talk about the desire for a more diverse team. But they don’t often adhere to that message. Therefore we perpetuate the male dominated and defined style of leadership. It is not that anyone is ill intended; it is just that changing culture is difficult because the entire organizational structure is built upon it. (Maya, CEO)

### **Start at the Top**

The participants indicated that often a corporation expects women executives to fix the leadership gender gap problem for the company; however, they do not have the time to give this effort the focus it needs. Just like their male counterparts, women leaders are busy run their businesses and delivering financial results. Additionally women contend with behavioral adaptation. “Women are expected to do the guy thing, but not vice versa” (Abbey, senior vice president).

There is a portion of their jobs from a cultural perspective that they are banging against this wall every day, as well as doing the jobs that their male counterparts are doing. Now you are saying that they have to be the advocates for women. They have to do this. Come on. I am sorry. I am doing all this work. I cannot be this role model—see me. But if you want to make this a great place to work, if you want more women, you are going to have to find someone to own it. I will talk about it, but I cannot do it. (Maya, CEO talking about her perspective before making CEO)

They [women] are still working so hard on fitting in amongst that group [male dominant and masculine defined leadership culture] at that level [executive leadership] that they are not really, they don't, and justifiably so I guess [take on the cause of bringing more women to the executive suite]. If we had more of those [women at the tables of power], then maybe people would find more energy to make bigger changes because they are not today. One of the most senior women in this company told me very candidly, “You are

not going to find any women in this company that actually advocate for women because they are too busy trying to survive themselves.” (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

“The leadership culture trumps all in organizations and serves as the role model for the behaviors that lead to the executive suite” (Maya, CEO). Therefore the CEO and other high-level executives must own and model gender balanced values and perspectives in their day-to-day leadership. “They [C-suite] need to understand it and visibly practice what they preach” (Maya, CEO).

I can push women up to levels, but if he [the CEO] does not believe it, is not asking about it, is not holding profit and loss managers accountable for it, and he is not telling other people that he supports what I am changing, there is only so much traction I am going to get. Until we get enough male CEOs who really want their legacy to be, “I changed the way this company thinks about gender and leadership; I changed the results of what we have and how this works,” you are only going to get so far. (Carolyn, senior vice president)

### **Create the Business Case**

The participants claimed that to launch a business strategy one needs a strong business case showing how a “failure to move in a particular direction hampers business growth” (Eleanor, director).

[Corporations] need to define the financial incentives to disrupting the norm of a masculine based leadership culture. There is evidence that companies with more women on-board perform better financially, but what are the feminine behaviors that are linked to this statistic (Eleanor, director)?

“How do you create that influence? Mandate to measure it, report it to Wall Street, and things will change” (Carolyn, senior vice president).

There is no constructive dissatisfaction with the current state of business results so everything is [perceived as working fine]. We doubled the size of the company threefold or fourfold over the last 30 years or so, and we continue to grow. We have struggled a bit in the past few years, yet not enough to create the kind of constructive dissatisfaction needed to modify the current leadership [culture] because why would there be? It is all working fine ... so, there is no burning platform to work toward diversity of leadership other than the fact that our board of directors wants it to happen ... Our board of directors

is looking at us [our company] and saying, “We are not representative of the talent pool out there. So what is your plan” (Jessica, general manager/vice president)?

### **Manage through the Talent Infrastructure**

Sixty-percent of the participants talked of the importance of the talent management function for bringing gender diverse values and perspectives to the executive suite. “[The] human resources function can influence the entire company. A business unit leader reaches fewer people” (Diana, executive vice president). The participants felt strongly about the need to “provide robust development plans and track progress by name for high potentials” (Diana, executive vice president). If corporations seek to close the leadership gender gap, proactive career tracking and management is especially important for high potential females.

Once the feminine and masculine behaviors that are critical to leadership and the success of the organization are defined, the organization needs to measure, hire, promote, plan, and sponsor high potential talent to that definition all the way through the leadership pipeline. (Eleanor, director)

It is critical to manage women to the top of the [leadership] pipeline in my company, because it is still so male dominant. I work in a 150 year-old business with no females at the corporate leadership level, which is the top of our company’s leadership structure. (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

Additionally the participants identified two innovative tactics for rebalancing the leadership pipeline, while the executive team works strategically to create a leadership culture where gender balanced values and perspectives are recognized and rewarded in equal measure. These ideas included sponsoring women’s peer coaching circles and working to recapture high potential women who left the company.

### **Sponsor Peer Coaching Circles**

Because the number of women decreases the farther a woman moves through the leadership pipeline, the participants claimed a need for women’s peer support circle to provide a

safe space to work through issues not experienced by their male counterparts. “You are lonely. It all stops with you, and there is no one to talk to, no one to ask” (Carmen, president).

Being a high-level female in a very male dominant culture, I did not know any other way. Myself at the vice president level, I am maybe one of a couple dozen within the organization of a couple hundred thousand employees. I kind of made up my own demons because I did not know anything else, and getting the perspectives of people from different companies and different organizational cultures helped me to understand that it was not just my issue ... I joined a coaching circle for women leaders, and I found out it is bad everywhere and, the issues are the same. So the coaching circle has really been my answer ... I do not think I would have stayed in my position if not for that group of those women. They bring the truth. (Jessica, general manager/vice president)

### **Recapture High Potential Women**

The participants indicated there is a large information gap regarding where high potential women go when they leave Corporate America. Yet recapturing these resources is one of the fastest ways to increase the number of women available for promotion to higher levels of leadership in any particular company. In addition, recapturing high potential women is financially prudent for organizations because they already invested money and time into them, and the women possess valued experience within the company.

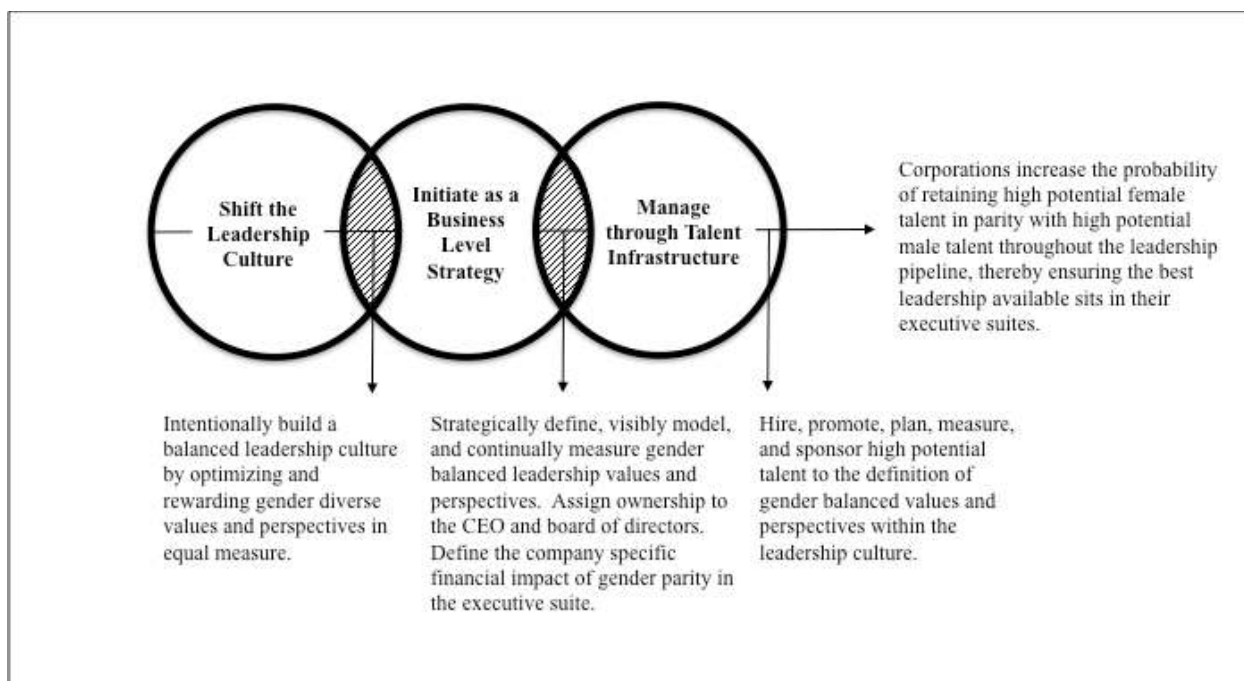
If you were to say, “Who are the women who have been in that pipeline that left?” You look at the women who left during that critical point, but they did not necessarily leave because they did not want to take that step [into the next level of leadership], they left because they decided to spend their equity in other places doing other things. If you were to look at the women that exist out in the market or at home or wherever, and really examine what are the barriers for those women to get back to, come back into the fold ... you would say ... why would we think these women wouldn't be capable? Think of all the comebacks we see in the world. We are a comeback society [so it should appeal to corporations]. (Stella, senior vice president)

### **Summary**

A structural fix seems the answer to closing the leadership gender gap in Corporate America. This structural fix requires shifting the executive leadership culture to one that recognizes, rewards, and models the values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table

in equal measure to the values and perspectives men bring to the leadership table. Intentionally shifting a leadership culture is a big job that demands a strategic focus led by the CEO and the board of directors, and a strong business case tying the move to the financial health of the organization. Once a business-level strategy is in place to support reaching gender parity in the executive suite, the talent management function owns the important job of managing high potential talent through the leadership pipeline to ensure gender diverse values and perspectives permeate the culture.

Figure 6.1 integrates the thematic categories regarding how to close the leadership gender gap in Corporate America.



*Figure 6.1.* Process map conceptualizing how to close the leadership gender gap. Circles provide context for interaction, horizontal line indicates evolving interaction, and intersections of circles describe actions taken to keep things flowing. Framework adapted from “Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory,” by J. Corbin and A. Strauss, 2008, p. 99. Copyright 2008 by Sage Publications, Inc.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DATA ANALYSIS

Increasingly the management of people is a “marketing job.” And in marketing one does not begin with the question: “What do we want?” One begins with the questions: “What does the other party want? What are its values? What are its goals? What does it consider results?” (Drucker, 1998, para. 85)

Corbin and Strauss (2008) said, “Not every qualitative researcher is interested in building theory” (p. 103). Yet theory building was my goal as I started my doctoral research, and the reason I selected grounded theory as my implementation approach. Hage (1972) defined theory as a well-developed set of categories interrelated through statements of relationship to form a framework that explains some phenomenon. My research sought a new explanation for the phenomenon of the persistent leadership gender gap in Corporate America to find direction on how to bring gender parity to the executive suite sooner than 70 years from now (Catalyst, 2005).

When researchers seek to build theory, they identify a central category in the empirical data, one that stands above the rest in helping to understand the problem being studied, integrate all other thematic categories, and theoretically explain the problem being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). My data required the identification of two central categories because of the dyadic nature of the research topic—why the leadership gender gap persists and how to close it. Once researchers identify a central category, they use well-established theoretical constructs to substantiate the new theory (i.e., framework) emerging from the data-drive insights.

In this chapter, I present the two central categories coming out of the empirical data including *it is still a man’s world in the executive suite* and *shift the leadership culture*, and integrate the remaining thematic categories underneath each central category. I provide summary scenarios for all categories and validate each with relevant well-develop theoretical constructs. These included constructivist and cultural theories with research by Bolman and Deal (2003), Goffman (as cited in Collins, 1994), and Kivisto (2011), gender theory with

research by Brizendine (2006), Chodorow (1999), DeBoer (2004), Gilligan (1993), and Rosener (1990), double bind theory by Bateson (2000), acculturation theory by Berry (1997), significance of numbers theory by Simmel (as cited in Kanter, 1997), and strategic diversity theory by Chun and Evans (2014).

### **Central Category: It is Still a Man's World in the Executive Suite**

I selected *it is still a man's world in the executive suite* as the central category for explaining why the leadership gender gap persists in Corporate America. With every participant the claim prevailed so strongly in the data, that I believed it to be the root cause of the continued loss of talented women as they progress through the leadership pipeline. The definition of root cause is the most basic cause that can reasonably be identified that management has control to fix and when fixed will prevent or significantly reduce the likelihood of the problem's recurrence (Paradies, 2005). Within the context of this central category, I integrated the *trade-offs too high* and *other options exist* thematic categories (see Figure 4.1), as well as all thematic categories pertaining to the *unique values and perspectives* women bring to the leadership table (see Figure 5.1).

### **Central Category Scenario**

As revealed in the empirical data, getting hired or promoted into an executive level position is greatly dependent upon those currently in the executive suite seeing a potential candidate as being on culture. "The more one is off culture [upon joining an embedded leadership team], the less comfortable it is for everyone [there]" (Maya, CEO). Because the Corporate American executive suite remains male dominant and masculine defined, women who want to reach the executive leadership level must follow the masculine lead, or risk being seen as

off culture and not receiving an invitation to the table. “If you [women] do not understand the need to adapt and then do it, you will not get invited to the table” (Maya, CEO).

**Theoretical validation.** Constructivists claim that within any given social structure, such as a corporation, people operate in accordance with a defined culture (Collins, 1994; Kivisto, 2011; Morgan, 2006). Deal and Kennedy (as cited in Bolman and Deal, 2003) defined culture as “the way we do things around here” (p. 243) or the way one should behave to be seen as on culture. Bolman and Deal (2003) stated that culture is an important determinant for establishing organizational behaviors. These researchers pointed out that culture represents the glue holding an organization together through interwoven patterns of beliefs, values, and practices. People who want to be part of any given culture must mold their behaviors to established norms to fit in.

Goffman (as cited in Kivisto, 2011) used a drama metaphor to describe people’s interactions within social structures. This theorist claimed that people take on different roles in order to adhere to the rules of the organized structures of their everyday lives (e.g., home and work). Goffman (as cited in Collins, 1994) described this role-playing within social life as a “series of front stages and backstages: a kind of theatre of everyday life (p. 104). Goffman spoke of the front stage as including those persons who set the rules for other persons in the backstage to follow to be seen as on culture.

In the case of Corporate America, the behaviors (i.e., values and perspectives) of the executive leadership team serve as the model (i.e., the front stage) for aspiring leaders (i.e., backstage) to follow to the top of the organization. A deviation from this behavioral adaptation is a risky career move for women because the further they move through the leadership pipeline, the more they become the minority (see Figure 1.1).



You are not going to break the rules because your peers who follow [the rules] get the attention. You can have all the fundamental beliefs and philosophies you want, but if [the] people next to you follow the rules, then they get promoted. You are seen as difficult. (Reese, director)

### **Category Scenarios: Trade-offs too High/Other Options Exist**

As revealed in the empirical data, behavioral adaption comes down to a cost/benefit analysis for talented women as they defined what they want from their careers and what they are willing to do to get to the executive level. Women ask the questions, “Are the trade-offs too high? Can I do it until I have earned the stripes to start to change things? Will I be able to change things when I reach that point” (Maya, CEO)?

It appears the trade-offs associated with behavioral adaption might be too high because many talented women choose to leave the four walls of Corporate America to broker their human capital equity elsewhere. “Talented women are smart enough not to keep throwing good money after bad or good time after bad” (Carolyn, senior vice president). “I think more and more women at the senior levels are just seeing that, again, they do not have to do this” (Diana, executive vice president). “I know I can play the game. I just find places where I do not have to operate in a traditional male defined culture” (Lesley, CEO). “[Women are] starting businesses to have more control over their lives and how they work” (Sheryl, senior vice president).

In 2014, the number of women-owned companies in the United States equated to 9.1 million, employing nearly 7.9 million workers and generating \$1.4 trillion in revenues (American Express, 2014). Between 1997 and 2014, women-owned businesses grew at one and one-half times the national average, and revenue and employment grow within women-owned companies at a higher rate than other companies—except the largest publically traded firms. Although it is good for women to start and own businesses, it leaves feminine persuasion amiss

at the tables of power in the Fortune 500 where decisions are made that affect our world the most.

Frankly there is just nothing like corporations to have the power of tremendous resources deployed at things. Decisions get made under corporate influence all the time. Corporate decisions shape our culture; their impacts are huge. If women leave to go entrepreneurial or non-profit or into other types of roles that are not going to get them to the CEO seats in big companies, we lose the influence of women on the world at least for the foreseeable future. It does not matter how many women we have at lower levels of leaderships, if they do not stay around long enough to make it to the executive suite. (Carolyn, senior vice president)

**Theoretical validation.** Double bind theory helps to explain why the leadership gender gap persists in spite of women's qualifications to lead. A double bind represents a symbolic interaction in which an individual deals with two or more conflicting messages that require action, and action taken on one message negates the action taken on the other message (Bateson, 2000). This creates a situation in which a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other and vice versa. Often the solution is to adapt to or opt out of the paradoxical situation.

In a double bind, a problematic situation exists for which the only solution is denied by a circumstance inherent in the problem. The double bind situation that exists in the empirical data plays out like this (a) the *problematic situation* is that more women aspire and are qualified to serve in executive leadership positions than actually make it to the executive suite; (b) the *only solution*, as the corporation stands today, is for women to stay the course in the male dominant and masculine defined leadership culture until they reach the executive suite in large enough numbers to effect feminine persuasion on the corporate governance structure; and (c) the only solution is *denied by the circumstance inherent in the problem*, that being many women no longer want to engage in this chameleon behavior because it goes against their values and

scupelches their ability to lead authentically. Therefore many talented women leave Corporate America to broker their human capital equity elsewhere, and they leave before their time.

The resulting effect of the double bind situation is a “bring them in, lose them, cannot plug the front end of the leadership pipeline with enough women to replace them” cycle that cancels itself out on a continual basis. The leadership gender gap persists in Corporate America.

### **Category Scenario: Unique Values and Perspectives**

As revealed in the empirical data, women bring unique values to the leadership table; values that lend themselves to different perspectives on how to earn and use power, as well as to have an enriching professional and personal life. Because women had no experience leading in Corporate America when they entered the system fifty-five years ago (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Giele & Stebbins, 2003), they accepted the masculine lead as the definition of successful leadership. Today’s women have the educational credentials and pre-executive level business leadership experiences needed to lead side-by-side with their male counterparts in the executive suite (see Figure 1.2; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). These talented women want to make it to the executive suite because of not in spite of their unique characteristics as women leaders.

“Women figure out how to adapt to the cultures they are in and modify their approaches, but not their values” (Hadley, senior vice president). “[Yet] the behavioral adaptation often offends our sense of fairness” (Maya, CEO). Acknowledging these data-driven observations leads one to conclude that the cultural adaptation required of women to be seen as on culture for the executive suite “shrinks the pool of people who can do it” (Hadley, senior vice president). “[Therefore] to manage the leadership pipeline, you [corporations] need to look at things differently” (Carmen, president).

**Theoretical validation.** Although we know that all women are not alike as leaders, over the past three decades social scientists found that women lead very differently than men when allowed to be authentic (Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 1993; Rosener, 1990). Further medical research gathered over the past decade proved complex and widespread brain-behavior differences exist between women and men, and these differences affect the life experiences of each gender including the experience of leadership (Brizendine, 2006).

Although it is insightful to understand the differences between women and men, this understanding is only beneficial when applied in the context of optimizing and rewarding what women uniquely bring to the leadership table rather than in the context of judging women's ability to serve as high-level leaders (Gilligan, 1993). Gender differences are not about measuring women against men as better or worse at executive leadership; rather, they are about the realization that there are different ways to succeed at leadership.

***Sociological perspective.*** About three decades ago, social scientists started to gather data on gender differences. Gilligan (1993) alluded early in women's Corporate American experiences that:

At a time when efforts are being made to eradicate discrimination between the sexes in the search for social equality and justice, the differences between the sexes are being rediscovered in the social sciences. (p. 6)

According to Gilligan (1993), psychologists thought of women as men by portraying women as inadequate when they took a different path to achieve an endpoint. Gilligan claimed this mindset flawed because measuring women against men's behaviors always puts women in a disadvantaged position.

The disparity between women's experience and the representation of human development, noted throughout the psychological literature, has generally been seen to signify a problem in women's development. Instead the failure of women to fit existing

models of human growth may point to a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of human condition, an omission of certain truths about life. (p. 1)

Kanter (1977) concurred with Gilligan (1993) by pointing out that in the context of the corporation women and men need some gender-neutral measurement or scale of leadership performance. The better option is to bring together the best of what women and men bring to the leadership equation—to shift the leadership culture to one that embraces the values and perspectives of both genders in equal measure.

Rosener (1990) found that women describe themselves in ways that characterize transformational leadership, a process that changes and transforms people. This researcher said women ascribe their power to personal characteristics such as charisma, interpersonal skills, hard work, and personal contacts rather than to positional power. Northouse (2010) described transformational leadership in this way:

As its name implies, transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals. It includes assessing followers' motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings. Transformational leadership involves an exceptional form of influence that moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them. It is a process that often incorporates charismatic and visionary leadership. (p. 171)

When Gilligan (1993) asked women to describe themselves, she found that they defined who they were by describing relationships and the use of “we” statements. Rosener (1990) claimed that this concept of relationship focuses women leaders on getting subordinates to integrate their own self-interests into the interest of the group through concern for a broader goal—the power of the enterprise. In her meta-analysis of women and competition, DeBoer (2004) found most researchers claimed women tend to be communal, encourage participation, and believe people perform best when they feel good about themselves and their work. DeBoer

described women's leadership style as inclusive indicating that women focus on collaborating with others to the betterment of decision-making.

***Biological perspective.*** For a good portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, scientists knew little about the brain-behavioral differences between women and men because men represented the archetype for all medical research (Brizendine, 2006; Gilligan, 1993). During the 1990s, medical researchers started to pay a great deal of attention to the female physiology, neuroanatomy, and psychology separate from that of a male (Brizendine, 2006). Brizendine (2006) pointed out:

More than 99% of male and female genetic coding is exactly the same. Out of the thirty thousand genes in the human genome, the less than one percent variation between the sexes is small. But that percentage difference influences every single cell in our bodies—from the nerves that register pleasure and pain to the neurons that transmit perception, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. (p. 1)

Although our distinct female and male brain-behavior operating systems are equally compatible and adept, they perform and accomplish the same tasks and goals using different circuits (Brizendine, 2006). In other words, the female and male brains process stimuli, hear, see, sense, and gauge what others are feeling in different ways. “[While] we all know from experience that women and men can be astronauts, artists, CEOs, doctors, engineers, political leaders, parents, and childcare providers” (p. 9), we can now start to factor in the uniqueness that each gender brings to various occupations and define a benchmark for effective leadership based on the best of both genders' values and perspectives.

Some of the unique brain-behavior statistics coming out of Brizendine's (2006) research included (a) women trigger more brain pathways linked to visual identification and spend more time picturing objects in their minds during cognitive activity, (b) women have outstanding verbal agility with 11% more neurons in the brain centers for language and hearing, (c) women

have the ability to connect deeply in friendships, and (d) women have larger brain hubs for emotions and memory formation and, therefore on average are better at expressing emotions, remembering the details of emotional events, and understanding others.

### **Central Category: Shift the Leadership Culture**

I selected *shift the leadership culture* as the central category for explaining how to close the leadership gender gap in Corporate America. With every participant the claim prevailed so strongly in the data, that I believed it to be the core strategic management technique for bringing gender parity to the executive suite. The definition of strategic management is the name given to the most important, difficult, and encompassing challenges that confront any organization regarding how to lay the foundation for tomorrow's success while competing to win in today's marketplace (Fahey, 1994). Within the context of *shifting the leadership culture*, I integrated the *initiate as a business level strategy* and *manage through the talent infrastructure* thematic categories (see Figure 6.1).

### **Central Category Scenario**

As revealed in the empirical data, closing the leadership gender gap is not a woman's issue. "We are putting too much focus on women" (Madeline, director). "[We focus on] what women need to do versus what corporations need to do" (Sheryl, senior vice president). "It [bringing gender parity to the executive suite] is really about transforming the culture [of the leadership team] for diversity in leadership [gender balanced values and perspectives]" (Maya, CEO).

Nor is the leadership gender gap a man's issue. Rather it is a structural issue. The executive suite remains steeped in archetypal masculine descriptors, measures, rewards, and modeled behaviors. "[The] structure and accountability need to be in place for people to play

differently, to really want to participate in a new game” (Reese, director). It is time to fix the leadership culture rather than to fix the woman (Fondas, 1997; Statham, 1987). “It is about instilling behavioral changes that foster a desire to play differently as a leadership team” (Reese, director).

If you are going to be successful these days, you cannot just respond to the marketplace. You need to be relevant as defined and determined by your strategic stakeholders and this includes your top talent. The corporation needs to understand the unmet needs of a specific talent pool—high potential women within the leadership pipeline—and address their needs as a portfolio of talent. The corporation needs to understand what it takes to keep this talent pool segment around for the long-term to maximize their value. (Stella, senior vice president).

While not a zero-sum game of women’s values and perspectives against men’s values and perspectives, the empirical data indicated women want to see their uniqueness modeled at the executive level if they are going to stay in the leadership pipeline for the long-term. “No single approach to leadership is better than another and running anything by one dominant set of rules stifles and limits” (Lesley, CEO). “It is the strength of having both, to be skilled at both [feminine and masculine leadership values and perspectives]” (Sheryl, senior vice president).

I am realizing for myself that so much of what I have been culturalized with [by the corporation] is that you have to show up this way. I think that if we were to turn it on its ear, the hyper-extroverted executive type—big talker, really direct, all those things that we see, that particular style—and called it incorrectly identified as effective leadership, I think we would all benefit. Even in the business schools, there is such a strong culture of the alpha male behaviors being the best when there is proof that other leadership styles are equally, if not more, effective ... This is what will draw more women to the tables of power. (Stella, senior vice president)

**Theoretical validation.** Bateson (2000) suggested that the double bind situation drives all evolution whenever cultural circumstances change. This researcher claimed that if any environment becomes toxic to a species that species will die out unless it transforms itself into another species, in which case that species becomes extinct anyway. Because talented women who want to make it to the executive suite follow the lead of the existing male dominant and



masculine defined executive culture, Corporate America essential could lose the benefits associated with the unique values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table. “Are we [women] actually hurting ourselves by leaning into [behaviorally adapting] the current system [masculine leadership values and perspectives]? Do we perpetuate the engineering of the organization as a patriarchy” (Sheryl, senior vice president)?

Berry’s (1997) acculturation theory presents a solution to the double bind evolutionary dilemma. According to the work of this researcher, there are two desirable outcomes of acculturation (i.e., bringing someone new into an embedded culture)—assimilation and integration. Assimilation equates to new entrants submitting to the receiving culture, while integration allows for a combination of the best of both cultural worlds. If Corporate America starts to integrate the best of both genders’ values and perspectives into the executive leadership culture, then high potential women and men alike have a role model that works.

### **Category Scenario: Initiate as a Business Level Strategy**

As revealed in the empirical data, shifting a leadership culture is a tough job that requires a strategic focus to be successful in achieving sustainable change. “[Therefore] this [closing the leadership gender gap] must be driven by a business level strategy. If it is not, it will not get recognized or sanctioned” (Dallas, COO).

To make the magnitude of change required to shift an embedded leadership culture, the empirical data pointed to two critical success factors for long-term sustainability including (a) assigning ownership for the leadership cultural shift to the CEO and board of directors, and (b) building a business case for the change, one that presents how diversity in leadership values and perspectives contributes to the long-term financial success of the organization. The corporation needs a “a group of leaders who believe in their heart of hearts that it [bringing gender parity to

the executive suite] will make a difference in the success of the company” (Carolyn, senior vice president), backed by a strong business case showing “how not moving in this particular direction hampers business growth” (Eleanor, director).

**Theoretical validation.** As pointed out in the review of literature (see Chapter Two), differential gender identity formation and construct of reality theories embrace both feminine and masculine characteristics as appropriate for leadership, thereby promoting a new leadership model based on the best of both genders (Fondas, 1997; Rhode, 2003; Statham, 1987). Although these theoretical constructs shifted the gender gap causation factor from a focus internal to women to a focus external to women, they did little to dislodge the practice of molding women to fit into the masculine based leadership structure of Corporate America. This is because the role model for the executive suite remains male dominant and masculine defined.

Morgan (2006) stated that when change gets interjected into a complex system, such as an organizational culture, the energy within the system self-organizes into one of two system states. If the new set of influencers takes hold, in the case of this research women entering the world of Corporate American leadership, it results in a new cultural configuration. On the other hand, if the existing dominant influencers are too strong, in the case of this research hundreds of year of male dominance in Corporate America leadership, the change dissipates and the culture reverts to a small variation of its former state.

When women entered the corporation some fifty-five years ago, they did not have the educational credentials or business experiences to challenge the masculine way of leadership. It took several decades for these two qualifiers to equal out between the genders (Catalyst, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). By that time, the male dominant influencers retained their hold on the

executive leadership culture keeping it firmly planed in masculine defined values and perspectives as the model for executive leadership.

According to Simmel (as cited in Kanter, 1977), a cultural shift only happens when the underrepresented reaches 33% representation or the tipping point to critical mass (Gladwell, 2002; Kanter, 1977). Because the Corporate American executive suite is not even close to reaching the tipping point for women's representation at the executive level, with current statistics at 4.8% of CEO, 14.6% of executive officer, and 19.2% of board of director positions (see Figure 1.1; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014), the values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table cannot become self-sustaining. Therefore shifting the leadership culture requires a strategic approach to intentionally interject gender balanced values and perspectives into the executive suite to serve as a role model for aspiring leaders of both genders. Chun and Evans (2014) claimed a clearly articulated strategic vision as the sine qua non for building a diverse leadership culture.

***Start at the top.*** While the financials represent the impetus for making a strategic move (i.e., the business case), numbers alone do not break down cognitive hurdles across the organization that stop strategic implementation dead in its tracks (Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Therefore every strategic cultural change in a business requires personal passion and role modeling from the senior leadership team, and gender diversity is no exception (Schein, 2004). Schein (2004) claimed that leadership and culture are “two sides of the same coin” (p. 1). If the rigidity and inflexibility of a culture that remained too long is to shift, the top of the organization must drive the change. This means the CEO and the boards of directors. Barsh, Devillard, and Wang (2012) agreed with Schein claiming a wholly committed senior leadership team is essential to closing the leadership gender gap.

Chan Kim and Mauborgne (2005) spoke of an approach called “tipping point leadership” where top executive leaders take on the role of disproportionate influence to get people to see and experience the harsh reality of not making a strategic change. Research in neuroscience and cognitive science shows that people remember and respond most effectively to what they see and experience—seeing is believing (Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Positive stimuli change attitudes and behaviors, and lead to the path of constructing a new reality (Charon, 2010). The CEO needs to be the stager and the storyteller to get the entire executive team to believe that the story matters and something different is about to happen (Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

***Support with business case.*** Chun and Evans (2014) claimed that diverse leadership cultures affect an organization’s performance in a positive way, thus influence an organization’s financial performance in a positive way. Therefore a business case for shifting the leadership culture to optimize and reward a diversity of values and perspectives must detail how bringing gender parity to the executive suite correlates with better financial returns and the future growth of the organization (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2004; Rosin, 2010). To get the process started, there are many global statistics for all corporations to consider.

Longitudinal research indicates that it is prudent for corporate leaders to resolve the leadership gender gap problem from a financial perspective. The statistics show that corporations with more women on-board performed better financially by 50% or more on most measures of profitability (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2004; Rosin, 2010). Goldman Sachs (as cited in Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2008) referred to this situation as “womenomics” using the term to “sum up the force women represent as guarantors of growth” (p. 3). Womenomics breaks down women’s spending and investment power, and translates them into positive top line and bottom line financial returns for organizations (Catalyst, 2004).

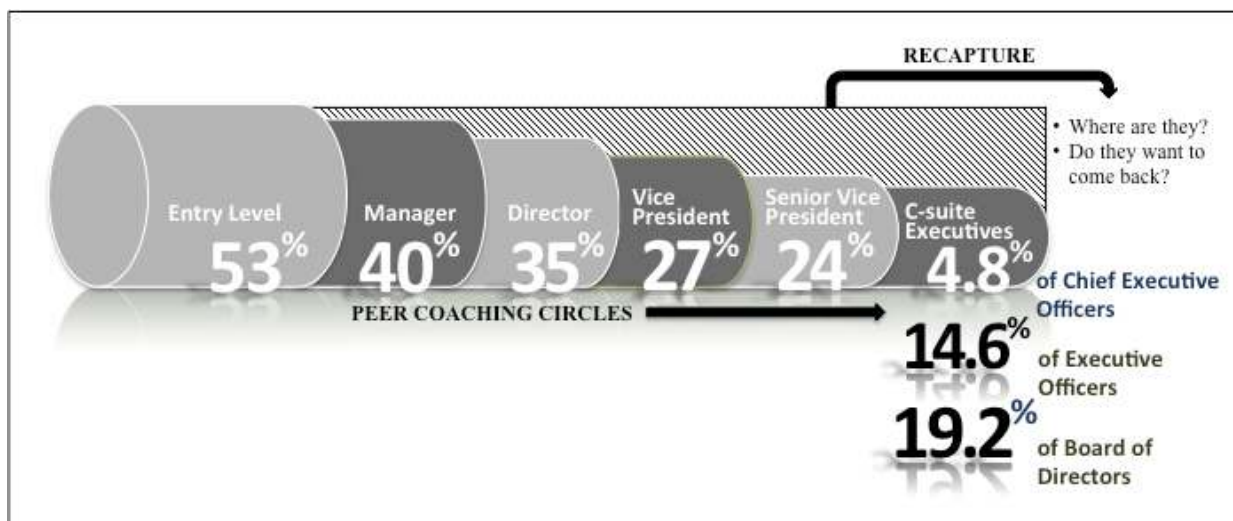
Women represent the most dynamic and fastest growing economic force in the world controlling over \$20 trillion dollars in spending power worldwide (Kent, 2011). This amount of spending power equates to an entity larger than the United States, China, and India combined. In the United States alone, the number of women earning \$100,000 or more tripled in the last decade, and women make 83% of all consumer purchase decisions including 91% of homes, 60% of new cars, and 80% of healthcare (Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2008). Because women tend to make purchase decisions, spend, and experience shopping differently than men, having a balance of women and men in key decision-making roles gives organizations the insights they need to understand their customers' needs correctly and, thereby fuel corporate growth.

Women represent 90% of the growth in private wealth since 2008 (Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2008). They may choose to invest this money in the stock market to fuel the growth of large corporations. What happens when women use their financial power to encourage Wall Street to measure progress on closing the leadership gender gap? What happens when women decide to invest or spend their dollars in ways commensurate with their values, and one of their values is gender parity in the executive suite? What happens when women business owners ask their large corporate suppliers, "Where are the women leaders in your executive suite?" What happens is the commotion gets the attention of CEOs and boards of directors as women stop purchasing from or investing in their companies, and stock prices drop. It is prudent for corporations to get on top of the situation before it becomes a reality and financial performance declines. Corporations must shift their leadership cultures to synergize the values and perspectives both genders bring to the leadership equation to the financial benefit of their organizations.

### Category Scenario: Manage Through Talent Infrastructure

As revealed in the empirical data, the talent management function plays a key role in supporting the executive team as they work to shift the leadership culture. Talent management acts as an architect to drive gender balanced leadership values and perspectives deeply within and widely across the organization. “[Knowing that the] human resources function can influence the entire company” (Diana, executive vice president), it points to the criticality of having “a business level strategy [in place] to set up diversity building efforts for long-term success” (Jessica, general manager/vice president).

Further the empirical data pointed to the need for innovation in talent management practices to identify short-term ways to keep talented women in the leadership pipeline for the long-term. For example, two innovative ideas surfaced from the empirical data, namely sponsoring peer coaching circles and recapturing high potential women (see Figure 7.1).



*Figure 7.1.* Innovate to keep women in the leadership pipeline. Entry level, manager, director, vice president, and senior vice president percentages are an average calculated from data collected at 60 of the Fortune 500 companies (Barsh & Yee, 2012). C-suite percentages represent all Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014).

The first idea speaks to the need for sponsoring a safe place for high potential women to have vulnerable conversations around the manifestation of women's unique values and perspectives within the corporate leadership culture, and to discuss issues their male counterpart do not experience. The second idea points to the benefits of recapturing high potential women who left the company for one reason or another. These are women who proved to the company that they had what it took to lead, and in whom the company invested considerable time and money. It is more efficient and monetarily astute to actively bring these high potential women back into the fold than to try to replace them.

**Theoretical validation.** According to Chun and Evans (2014), the expertise of the talent management function serves as a credible activist for fostering new mind-sets, and establishing new norms and values to enhance the status quo leadership culture in Corporate America. When the CEO and board of directors provide a clear understanding of the starting point for shifting the leadership culture—a corporate level diversity strategy—the talent management function acts as the social engineer to manage and monitor the ongoing process of embedding gender balanced values and perspectives into an organization's leadership DNA.

Chun and Evans (2014) pointed out that innovative organizations “do not squander the valuable resources of knowledge and creativity that can differentiate their performance. And they consciously design talent acquisition and retention programs that support a climate of participatory inclusion and empowerment” (p. 17). Hamel (2007) concurred with these researchers when he pointed out anything that substantially changes the way management carries out their work or significantly modifies customary organizational forms to the advantage of organizational goals represents business innovation.

## Summary

In this chapter, I detailed the two central categories coming out of the empirical data. The first central category—it is still a man’s world in the executive suite—represents the root cause of the persistent leadership gender gap in Corporate America. Today’s women are as educated and experienced as men when it comes to leading businesses; therefore, many women no longer want to behaviorally adapt to the masculine lead to reach the executive suite. The second central category—shift the leadership culture—provides insights into how to close the leadership gender gap by initiating a business level strategy to intentionally bring gender diverse values and perspectives into the executive suite.

I used several well-established theoretical constructs to substantiate the insights within the data-driven categories. Constructivism theory and cultural theory validated the insight that talented women must follow the masculine lead to be seen as on culture for the executive suite. Gender theory validated the insight that women do indeed bring unique values and perspectives to the leadership table. Acculturation theory validated the insight that women want to lead authentically. Integration of women’s unique values and perspectives into those of the historically masculine executive suite accomplishes the task.

Double bind theory validated the insight that women face a conundrum as they shoot for the executive suite—to behaviorally adapt to the masculine lead to be seen as on culture or to lead with values and perspectives authentic to women and risk being seen as off culture. Because the cost to benefit of this behavioral adaptation might be too great for many talented women, they leave Corporate America to broker their human capital equity elsewhere. This double bind situation solidifies the persistence of the leadership gender gap with a cycle of “bring them in, lose them, cannot plug the front end of the leadership pipeline with enough



women to replace them” that cancels itself out on a continual basis. Therefore the leadership gender gap persists.

Significance of numbers theory validated the insight that there are too few women in the executive suite to allow female persuasion to become self-sustaining. Because it is taking so long to reach 33% representation of women in the executive suite, strategic diversity theory validates the insight that it will take a business level strategic initiative to shift the Corporate American leadership culture. To be successful in the long-term, the CEO and the board of directors must lead the cultural shift and support the change with a business case pointing to the financials rewards to the company of moving in a new direction for leadership.

Using these well-established theoretical constructs to validate my data findings allowed me to identify the key conclusions from the research and diagram an emerging change model (i.e., theory building). I present this model in Chapter Eight.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: STUDY CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

We need women who are so strong they can be gentle, so educated they can be humble, so fierce they can be compassionate, so passionate they can be rational, and so disciplined they can be free. (Ramdas, 2013, para. 18)

My research sought to answer the questions, “Why does the leadership gender gap persist in Corporate America? How does the corporation bring gender parity to the executive suite sooner than 70 years from now” (Catalyst, 2005)? I worked with 22 highly experienced women leaders from across the Fortune 500 to secure data for my study. I used a qualitative grounded theory approach to interpret, integrate, and substantiate the theory that emerged from the empirical data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2009).

A grounded theorist typically does not identify theoretical assumptions before starting to gather data for a research project (Brown, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Rather a grounded theorist starts with a topic of interest (Brown, 2010) allowing the data to define the problem and build the theory (Charmaz, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The University of St. Thomas doctoral program in leadership requires a doctoral candidate to document theoretical assumptions regarding how to examine the topic of interest before starting dissertation research. I complied with this requirement, while still letting the empirical data define the root cause of the leadership gender gap problem and provide direction for closing it.

I began this chapter by summarizing the study findings, restating my theoretical assumptions prior to research, documenting the study conclusions, and stating the data-driven theory (i.e., change model) resulting from the study. Next I diagram the change model that emerged from the data-driven theory—EQUIPOISE. This change model represents a starting point for future research to build the framework into a robust strategic approach for closing the leadership gender gap in Corporate America and potentially beyond. I conclude by presenting

the study limitations and recommendations for future research, a summary, and closing reflections.

### **Summary of Study Findings**

The empirical data from my study indicated that the reason the number of women dwindles as they move through the leadership pipeline is because it is still a man's world in the executive suite. Women aspiring to reach the top of the corporation must behaviorally adapt to the masculine lead to be seen as on culture for receiving an invitation to the table. "If you do not understand the need to adapt and then do it, you will not get invited to the tables [of power in Corporate America]. This requires behavioral adaptation on the part of any female who wants to make it to the executive suite" (Maya, CEO).

Today's women have the educational credentials and pre-executive level business leadership experiences needed to lead side-by-side with their male counterparts in the executive suite (see Figure 1.2; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2013, 2014; Fairchild, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Therefore many women no longer want to engage in the chameleon behavior of adapting to the male dominant and masculine defined executive leadership culture. These talented women want to make it to the executive suite because of not in spite of their unique characteristics as women leaders.

It really comes down to a cost/benefit analysis. "What is the cost/benefit of behavioral adaption? How long can I live with it? Can I do it until I have earned the stripes to start to change things" (Maya, CEO)? It appears the costs outweigh the benefits for many talented women because they choose to broker their human capital equity outside the four walls of Corporate America seeking positions that align better with their leadership values and

perspectives. “I know I can play the game. I just find places where I do not have to operate in a traditional male defined culture” (Lesley, CEO).

The resulting effect of this double bind situation—behaviorally adapting to the masculine lead while trying to lead authentically as women—is a “bring them in, lose them, cannot plug the front end of the leadership pipeline with enough women to replace them” cycle that cancels itself out on a continual basis. “The added stress of working these two end points [adaptation and authenticity] overtime wears at the subconscious level until it stresses you to the point of doing something else” (Madeline, director). “I think it just gets really old, and women are thinking they are not seeing the change fast enough” (Diana, executive vice president).

Women bring unique values to the leadership table, ones that lend themselves to different perspectives on how to earn and use power, as well as to have an enriching professional and personal life. “Women figure out how to modify their approaches to leadership to be seen as on culture for the executive suite, but not their values” (Hadley, senior vice president). “[Therefore] to manage the leadership pipeline, you [corporations] need to look at things differently” (Carmen, president).

The empirical data revealed a new perspective on how to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline all the way to the executive suite, that being to shift the leadership culture. It is a structural fix. It is about transforming the leadership culture for gender diversity in values and perspectives.

I think there are ... people aren't creating cultures that exclude because they are evil, they are doing it because they do not know any better. [Corporations need to ask,] “What are we missing in our cultural build that is causing women to leave before their time?”  
(Maya, CEO)

Because women are not even close to reaching 33% representation in the executive suite, the point where women's unique values and perspectives become self-sustaining, corporations must intentionally shift the leadership culture to one that recognizes and rewards gender diverse values and perspectives. Shifting a leadership culture is a big job. It requires a strategic focus led by the CEO and the board of directors, and strong business case showing the financial benefits of moving in a new direction. When a corporate level strategy is in place to support reaching gender parity in the executive suite, the talent management function owns the important job of managing high potential talent through the leadership pipeline to produce a gender diverse leadership team across the organization.

[Note that Figure 4.1, Figure 5.1, and Figure 6.1 provide pictorial representations of the integrated data findings used to develop the data-driven theory.]

### **Theoretical Assumptions Prior to Research**

Based on Rhode and Kellerman's (2007) analysis, I believed Corporate America needed a broader reform agenda to understand and close the persistent leadership gender gap. These researchers asked that women currently in executive level leadership positions use their unique privileges to make higher-levels of leadership available to more women (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). I proposed increasing the number of women in executive leadership positions (critical mass theory; Kanter, 1977) by encouraging current women executives to exert pressure on the corporate system (chaos and complexity theory; Morgan, 2006) working in collaboration across business organizations and industry sectors to generate significant change to the gender mix in executive suites across the Fortune 500 (collective behavior theory; Blumer, 1946).

As a goal for my theoretical assumptions, I set reaching the tipping point for women's representation in Corporate American executive suites (Gladwell, 2002). At 33% representation,

the diversity of women's ideas, solutions, and approaches to business and leadership resonant fully opening up new options to replace sometimes outmoded or even counterproductive ways of doing business (Barreto, Ryan, et al., 2009; Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). I arrived at this premise because I thought the debate over causation factors futile—individual and system level gender stereotyping (see Chapter Two). Solutions implemented under the tutelage of both theories did nothing to close the leadership gender gap in any significant way after decades of application. I believed that a continued focus on this tension kept researchers from finding innovative solutions for closing the leadership gender gap.

### **Study Conclusions**

During the process of substantiating the theory coming out of the data findings, I identified three major conclusions that warranted a modification to my theoretical assumptions prior to research. These conclusions include (a) shifting from counting numbers of women in the executive suite to intentionally bringing gender balanced values and perspectives to fruition within the executive suite; (b) shifting from managing compliance to strategically focusing on building gender diverse talent capacity; and (c) shifting from thinking it is a woman's responsibility to resolve the leadership gender gap problem to leading from the top of the organization.

### **From Counting Numbers to Realizing Gender Balanced Values and Perspectives**

Going into my research, I claimed there was a need for establishing a critical mass of women in the executive suite to allow women's values and perspectives to become self-sustaining in the leadership culture due to sheer numbers alone (Kanter, 1977). With the end goal still being a 30:50 gender split in the executive suite, my study participants claimed that it was more important to focus on optimizing and rewarding the unique values and perspectives

women bring to the leadership table. “Why focus on the number of females when it is really about the realization of feminine behaviors [values and perspectives] and understanding the impact on business results of bringing feminine characteristics to the leadership culture” (Eleanor, director)? By intentionally shifting the executive culture to embrace gender balanced values and perspectives, the corporation opens the pool of women seen as on culture for the executive suite and encourages those women already on the path to stay the course knowing they no longer represent a lone wolf in a sea of masculinity.

### **From Managing Compliance to Strategically Building Gender Diverse Talent Capacity**

Going into my research, I claimed there was a need for women executives to act as change agents by interjecting a bit of chaos and complexity into the corporate system to jar the existing male dominant and masculine defined leadership culture out of equilibrium, thereby making room for more women at the top (Morgan, 2006). However my study participants claimed that trying to resolve the leadership gender gap problem by continuing to focus on current gender strategies only encourages minor changes to manage compliance.

“We can have gender conversations to understand one another better as female and male. But until the culture changes, we will work toward the leadership role model, and the leadership [role] model is still masculine” (Sheryl, vice president). The participants claimed the need for a more significant structural change, one that focuses on intentionally shifting the leadership culture to optimize, reward, and model the unique values and perspectives women bring to the leadership table—strategically building gender diverse talent capacity.

### **From a Woman’s Responsibility to Ownership at the Top of the Organization**

Going into my study, I claimed that bringing more women into executive suites across the Fortune 500 was about women executives collaborating inter-organizationally to drive

toward the goal. However my study participants pointed out that corporations should not hold women executives responsible for closing the leadership gender gap because they do not have time to provide this strategic work with the focus it needs and deserves. Women executives are busy managing people and delivering financial results just like their male counterparts and, additionally contending with behavioral adaptation. “There is a portion of their jobs [women] from a cultural perspective that they are banging against this wall every day, as well as doing the jobs that their male counterparts are doing” (Maya, CEO). Men aspiring to lead at the executive level do not have to deal with behavioral adaptation because they are on culture. “Women are expected to do the guy thing, but not vice versa” (Abbey, senior vice president).

After hundreds of years of male dominance in the Corporate American executive suite (Morgan, 2006), it will take push to jar loose the strength of the existing power base to make room for feminine persuasion. A change of this magnitude requires the attention of those sitting at the top of the organization to make it sustainable—the CEO and the board of directors. “The CEOs needs to think it is their job. If delegated, sooner or later that person will run into a power limit” (Maya, CEO).

### **Data-Driven Theory**

Based on the study conclusions, a new theory emerged for closing the leadership gender gap in Corporate America: *The persistent leadership gender gap problem represents a cultural issue for which the solution is to proactively optimize, reward, and model the unique values and perspectives that women bring to the leadership table. This requires the development and implementation of a corporate level strategy to build gender diverse talent capacity, first within the executive suite and, second throughout the organization. This strategy needs to be led by the CEO and the board of directors, supported by a solid business case, and cultivated across the*



organization through a robust talent management infrastructure and the use of innovative tactics for keeping women in the leadership pipeline.

### Emerging Change Model

After identifying the study conclusion, a change model emerged for closing the leadership gender gap in Corporate America (see Figure 8.1). This model affects how corporations understand and address the challenges of recruiting, supporting, and retaining women. Because the empirical data pointed to the need for creating a leadership culture based on the synergy of the unique values and perspectives both genders bring to the leadership table, I selected EQUIPOISE as the name for the emerging change model. Equipoise describes a condition where counterparts balance one another so that no one part is stronger or greater than the other (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.).

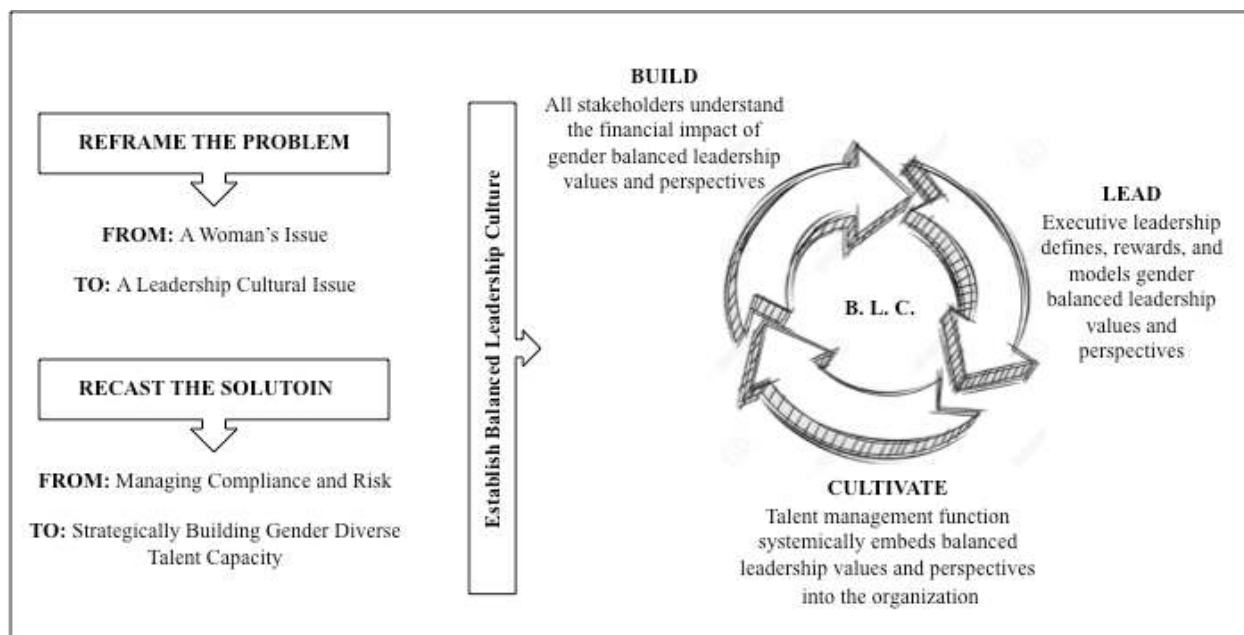


Figure 8.1. Emerging Change Model: EQUIPOISE

Hogue and Lord (2007) believed "there are many levels of analysis involved in the problem of leadership gender bias, and reductionist approaches targeting only one level or

process are likely to be ineffective” (p. 358). EQUIPOISE heeds this warning because the change model represents a strategic approach to closing the leadership gender gap (i.e., macro-level) and a tactical approach for implementing the strategy (i.e., micro-level).

At the macro-level, EQUIPOISE contains two components. First the model directs Corporate America to reframe the leadership gender gap from a woman’s issue to a leadership cultural issue. Second the model directs Corporate America to recast the solution from compliance (i.e., counting the number of women in the executive suite) to corporate level strategic management focused on building gender diverse talent capacity across the organization (i.e., realizing gender diverse values and perspectives). These actions take the focus off women and their need to behaviorally adapt to the masculine lead, and place the focus on the corporate structure. “[We focus on] what women need to do versus what corporations need to do” (Sheryl, senior vice president). “Can the company lean in” (Dallas, COO)?

Most organizations are clear and intentional about the cultures they want to create. Most talk about the desire for a more diverse team. But they don’t often adhere to that message. Therefore we perpetuate the male dominated and defined style of leadership.... changing culture is difficult because the entire organizational structure is built upon it. (Maya, CEO)

At the micro-level, EQUIPOISE contains three components focused on embedding gender diverse talent capacity within the organization including (a) building the business case for shifting the leadership culture, (b) leading the leadership cultural change from a CEO and board of director level, and (c) cultivating balanced leadership values and perspectives throughout the organization with a robust talent management infrastructure.

### **Build**

To make the future tangible requires the creation of a business case to show the correlation between bringing gender parity to the executive suite, and better financial returns and

future growth for the organization (Chun & Evans, 2014; Hamel, 2000). Although it is critically important for the business case to tell a story specific to an individual organization's specific financial environment, there are many global statistics available to get the process started. For example, corporations with more women on-board performed better financially by 50% or more on most measures of profitability (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2004; Rosin, 2010). Goldman Sachs (as cited in Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2008) referred to this situation as "womenomics" using the term to "sum up the force women represent as guarantors of growth" (p. 3).

Womenomics breaks down women's spending and investment power, and translates them into positive top line and bottom line financial returns for organizations (Catalyst, 2004).

### **Lead**

While the numbers represent the impetus for making a strategic move (i.e., the business case), numbers alone do not break down cognitive hurdles across the organization that stop strategic implementation in its tracks (Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). The numbers represent the "reason leading to the conclusion" that bringing gender parity to the executive suite is good for the financial health of the organization. On the other hand, "emotion is what leads to action" (Magee, 2009). Emotion needs to come from the CEO and the board of directors.

### **Cultivate**

Talent management involves the coordination of traditional human resource functions (e.g., hiring, promoting, and evaluating) and diversity programs that enhance the organization's ability to sustain a gender diverse talent building capacity for the long-term (Chun & Evans, 2014). The talent management and diversity functions, in partnership, serve as credible activists to foster new mind-sets, and establish new norms and values in leadership across the

organization. Further the talent management function serves as an innovation engine for ideas to keep women in the pipeline starting today.

### **Study Limitations**

Like all research, this study had limitations. I identified three that are critical for the reader to understand including (a) sample size, (b) single gender, and (c) scope.

#### **Sample Size**

My study had only 22 participants. Although this represented a sample size large enough to be generalizable (i.e., broad-based applicability of study findings; Maxwell, 2005) and small enough to ensure the collection of saturated data (i.e., no new data emerging from interviews; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), it did not come close to representing the entire Fortune 500 population (i.e., a mere 4% representation).

Further my study did not attempt to represent the entire Corporate American business population (i.e., corporations beyond the Fortune 500). I chose to limit my study to the Fortune 500 because these large corporations have enormous influence on economic, political, and social systems (Bakan, 2004). If these large corporations solve the leadership gender gap problem, their success stories will serve as powerfully visible examples to change perspectives on women and leadership across the board within the United States and perhaps across the globe.

#### **Single Gender**

All participants in my study were women. I chose to frame this research as a feminist study because only women understand firsthand the particulars of leading as a female in Corporate America. Although men need to collaborate with women to bring gender parity to the executive suite, I believed the lived stories of women leaders contained the answers to closing the leadership gender gap.

## **Scope**

As with any research project, whether qualitative or quantitative, financial resources, human resources, and time dictate the scope of the work, and the depth and breadth of the findings and analysis. When completing a dissertation, all three variables are limited. Therefore the findings and analysis derived from this study represent only the foundational tenets of EQUIPOISE. The research serves as a launch pad for additional research to develop the data-driven theoretical construct into a robust change model for closing the leadership gender gap sooner than 70 years from now (Catalyst; 2005).

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Even with its limitations, my research falls in line with the premise of grounded theory, that being the depth and breadth of the theory developed from any research is only as good as the data collected in its ability to explain a phenomenon. As future researchers collect and analyze new data, it either holds up to the theory developed in the original study or modifies it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I welcome other researchers to take my research to a new level of development.

Based on the study limitations identified, I recommend additional research to bring depth and breadth to and solid validation for EQUIPOISE. The two pieces of research I recommend include (a) increasing the sample size of women, and (b) bringing in men's perspectives. I suggest using action research to complete as much of the research as possible. This means researchers actively participate in Corporate American change initiatives while conducting their research. I believe this approach is beneficial for creating a robust change model because it allows for bringing together the rigor of theory and the practicality of "real world" Corporate America (Maxwell, 2005). Further action research encourages use of the data findings where needed the most—on the ground in Corporate America.

### **Increase the Sample Size of Women**

To increase the validity of my data findings and analysis, and to further develop the EQUIPOISE model, I recommend issuing an extensive survey to a large number of women within the Fortune 500 to challenge and add to the identified values and perspectives women bring to the leadership equation. Further I recommend completing additional one-on-one qualitative research across a larger population of women leaders within the Fortune 500 asking them the same questions presented to the 22 participants in my study. These questions include:

1. What are the reasons talented women burn or opt out of, stall in, or have others hold them back from leadership just as they near the point where they gained the experience necessary for executive positions, the point where they influence Corporate American governance?
2. What actions worked in the past or might work in the future to keep qualified women in the leadership pipeline long enough to reach the tables of power in Corporate America in equal numbers to their male counterparts?
3. What are the rules for making it to the top of Corporate America?
4. How do these rules change when gender parity exists at the tables of power?

### **Bring in Men's Perspectives**

I recommend repeating my research with an adequately sized group of men who hold or have held leadership positions within the Fortune 500. This will allow for a side-by-side comparison of the data findings from both genders to identify similarities and dissimilarities between women's and men's understanding of why the leadership gender gap persists and how to close it. I believe there may be discrepancies between the genders' perceptions of the problem.

For example, in an eBay survey of 1,700 leaders concerning gender diversity within the organization, the company found that the majority of women felt their male colleagues did not understand them very well, where as a majority of men felt well understood by their women

colleagues. Likewise women were significantly less likely than men to believe that their opinions were listened to and more likely to doubt that the most deserving people received promotions (Angier & Axelrod, 2013). John Donahoe (2013), eBay's CEO said, "These findings are based in sound reality" (p. 1). When recalling one of his wife's more challenging career experiences Donahoe concluded, "My god, she has a tougher row to hoe than me" (p. 2).

In addition, including the male perspective in future research may show changing demographics across the younger generation of male corporate recruits. For example, a Pew research study (as cited in Schulte, 2014) found that the number of stay-at-home dads doubled in the last 25 years, reaching a peak of 2.2 million in 2010. How do these statistics affect talented young men's aspirations to work toward executive leadership? If their values and perceptions on leadership align more closely with those identified in the empirical data, then corporations further shrink the number of talented individuals available for promotion to their executive suites.

### **Summary**

Prior to EQUIPOISE, researchers focused on individual level and system level gender stereotyping as the root cause of the leadership gender gap. Based on this perspective, corporations worked to teach women agentic characteristics (e.g., aggressiveness, forcefulness, independence, and decisiveness) so they could lead side-by-side with men in the workplace, and to eliminate structural biases that kept women from reaching the executive suite in equal numbers to men. The driving force behind these efforts was equity—managing compliance.

EQUIPOISE seeks to renew the leadership culture by optimizing, rewarding, and modeling in equal measure the unique values and perspectives that women and men bring to the leadership table. Using this approach, organizations create corporate level strategies and

intentionally work to build gender diverse leadership talent capacity within their executive suites to serve as a model for leadership across their organizations. The driving force behind this effort is to create a leadership culture that works well for women and men alike to the enhancement of organizational performance—building gender diverse talent capacity

It seems prudent for corporate boardrooms and executive suites to leverage the “difference that difference makes” (Rhode, 2003). This move allows the unique values and perspectives that women and men bring to the leadership table to unite for innovating, strategizing, solving problems, making decisions, empowering people, and driving business growth from a synergistic perspective. “Rather than focusing on gender, the focus becomes bringing together a group of talented people who have the skills to lead, as well as the shared values and desires to build trusting transparent relationships” (Alexandra, chief operating officer). When Corporate America reframes the leadership gender gap problem from a woman’s issue to a leadership cultural issue, and recasts the solution from compliance management to strategically building gender diverse talent capacity at the executive leadership level, women will fill the leadership pipeline in equal numbers to men.

### **Closing Reflexive Statement**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) said, “[We cannot] emphasize strongly enough that qualitative research can’t be rushed” (p. 245). Even with a solid a priori research plan, it took me longer than expected to complete my dissertation. Brown (2010) claimed that the process of taking data to meaning was a crazy time for the qualitative researcher. I concur. I put hundreds of hours into my study. I mulled over my memos, talked about my findings with many women, and thought about my data constantly. Yet the results proved to be worth the effort. I grew exponentially as a researcher and writer, and established a platform for future research.



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Appendix A: Raw Data and Calculations for Figure 1.2

Year	Total Under-graduate Business Degrees	Women Under-graduate Business Degrees	Women % of Total Under-graduate Business Degrees	Total MBA Degrees	Women MBA Degrees	Women % of Total MBA Degrees	Year	% Women in Executive Officer Positions
1976	143,171	28,185	19.7	42,592	4,938	11.6		
1977	152,010	35,616	23.4	46,505	6,653	14.3	* 1995	8.7
1978	160,775	43,672	27.2	48,347	8,123	16.8	1996	10.0
1979	172,392	52,627	30.5	50,397	9,631	19.1	1997	10.6
1980	186,264	62,625	33.6	55,008	12,264	22.3	1998	11.2
1981	200,521	73,723	36.8	57,888	14,477	25.0	1999	11.9
1982	215,190	84,497	39.3	61,251	17,021	27.8	2000	12.5
1983	226,442	94,991	41.9	64,741	18,754	29.0	2001	*** ND
1984	229,013	99,717	43.5	66,129	19,962	30.2	2002	15.7
1985	232,282	104,815	45.1	66,981	20,782	31.0	2003	**** ND
1986	236,700	108,285	45.7	66,676	20,749	31.1	2004	**** ND
1987	240,346	111,840	46.5	67,093	22,180	33.1	** 2005	16.4
1988	242,859	113,392	46.7	69,230	23,250	33.6	2006	15.5
1989	246,262	115,164	46.8	73,065	24,525	33.6	2007	15.4
1990	248,568	116,284	46.8	76,676	26,091	34.0	2008	15.7
1991	249,165	117,608	47.2	78,255	27,372	35.0	2009	13.5
1992	256,298	121,035	47.2	84,517	29,908	35.4	2010	14.4
1993	256,473	121,105	47.2	89,425	31,921	35.7	2011	14.1
1994	246,265	117,319	47.6	93,285	34,062	36.5	2012	14.3
1995	233,895	112,232	48.0	93,540	34,609	37.0	2013	14.6
1996	226,623	110,078	48.6	93,554	35,154	37.6		
1997	225,934	109,911	48.6	97,204	37,871	39.0		
1998	232,079	112,700	48.6	101,652	39,295	38.7		
1999	239,924	118,183	49.3	106,830	42,559	39.8		
2000	256,070	127,546	49.8	111,532	44,454	39.9		
2001	263,515	131,240	49.8	115,602	47,131	40.8		
2002	278,217	139,874	50.3	119,725	49,262	41.1		
2003	293,391	148,316	50.6	127,685	52,446	41.1		
2004	307,149	154,636	50.3	139,347	58,489	42.0		
2005	311,574	155,634	50.0	142,617	60,466	42.4		
2006	318,042	158,359	49.8	146,406	62,856	42.9		
2007	327,531	161,181	49.2	150,211	66,096	44.0		
2008	335,254	164,276	49.0	155,637	69,379	44.6		
2009	347,985	170,123	48.9	168,375	76,394	45.4		
2010	358,293	174,992	48.8	177,684	80,975	45.6		
2011	365,093	178,012	48.8	187,213	85,763	45.8		
2012	366,815	176,733	48.2	191,571	88,318	46.1		

\* Catalyst, the leading non-profit organization focused on expanding opportunities for women and businesses, started to record data on an annual basis to calculate and trend the percentage of women holding executive officer positions in the Fortune 500.

\*\* In 2005, Catalyst redefined executive officer positions from being company defined to those elected or appointed by the board of directors. Bias tests showed the resulting change in definition did not appreciably alter the number of women and total corporate officers identified.

\*\*\* Catalyst collected no data in 2001, so I calculated the percentage increase from 2000 to 2002 and halved the number to estimate the percentage of women holding executive officer positions in 2001.

\*\*\*\* Catalyst collected no data in 2003 and 2004, so I calculated the percentage increase from 2002 to 2005, divided by three, and distributed in equal increments to estimate the percentage of women holding executive officer positions in 2003 and 2004.

## Appendix B: Executive Summary sent to Potential Participants (2013)

### The Situation

Based on the accomplishments of women leaders of late, one could surmise gender equality is a reality in Corporate America. In 2009, the first female CEO handoff occurred as Anne Mulcahy, CEO at Xerox passed her position to Ursula Burns (Sellers & Shambora, 2009). This move shattered the stereotype that women in CEO positions are one-off occurrences. In 2012, the appointment of a pregnant Marissa Mayer to CEO at Yahoo challenged the “contradiction in having a full personal life and a full professional life” (Vanderkam, 2012, para. 3). The fact that Yahoo’s board of directors was progressive enough to make this decision bodes well for the advancement of women in business. Yet for all their accomplishments, women sitting at the tables of power remain few in number (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2011a; Catalyst, 2011b).

In 2013, a profound divide in power and authority still separates women from men in the executive suite (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Barsh & Yee, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Over fifty-five years after the onset of second wave feminism, when women sought gender equality on many fronts including the workplace, the number of women reaching the executive leadership level is alarmingly low (Giele & Stebbins, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). Although women made significant gains achieving parity with men in low- and mid-level leadership positions, research shows women hold only 4% of CEO positions, 14.1% of executive officer positions, and 16.1% of board of director seats (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2011a; Catalyst, 2011b; see diagram attached to this document). At this rate of change, it could take more than 70 years to reap the claimed benefits of gender parity in the executive suite (Catalyst, 2005).

Corporate American executive leaders occupy the tables of power where the future is determined as they set priorities, resolve problems, allocate resources, and strategize on how to provide growth and profitability for shareholders (Tarr-Whelan, 2009). When qualified women do not occupy an equal number of seats, the benefits of diverse ideas, solutions, and approaches to corporate governance are lost (Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009). This situation hampers the possibility of opening up different options to replace sometimes outmoded or even counterproductive ways of doing business (Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). Marie Wilson (as cited in Tarr-Whelan, 2009), president and founder of the White House Project, a non-profit organization established to foster women's entry into private and public sector leadership, spoke of this power deficit:

Picture this: A problem of vital importance emerges in your community, and you are asked to gather a team you deem essential to its solution. Then you are told you can't use half of the collected intelligence. That is basically the problem we face in politics and boardrooms across America—we systemically neglect one of our nation's most vital resources: women. (p. ix)

If something is not done to bring parity to the tables of power sooner rather than later, the benefits associated with gender balanced leadership teams are at risk of erosion through the assimilation of women into the historically, male dominant leadership model. Quindlen (n.d.), author, journalist and opinion columnist wrote:

I know what I don't want for the future of women: I don't want it to consist of the old familiar model. By its very nature women's leadership has been about redefinition, while

men's leadership has been about maintaining the status quo. That's how it works when one group has all the power and wants to keep it and another has none and wants some righteous parity. Take that dichotomy down the road most traveled, however, and what you could eventually wind up with is a new status quo, jealously protected by a power structure that includes female leaders working with the psychological equivalent of ties and wingtips. (para. 1)

Sheryl Sandberg (2013), CEO at Facebook said, "It is time for us [women] to face the fact that our revolution [gender parity at the tables of power] has stalled" (p. 7). Sandberg penned an excellent book, *Lean In*, and like most popular authors today identified actions for women to take to achieve success within the male dominant and masculine defined leadership environment of Corporate America. Taking a different perspective, Rhode and Kellerman (2007) suggested turning to a broader reform agenda to achieve gender parity in the executive suite. "Women receive endless advice to find the right mentors and maintain a healthy work-life balance" (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007, p. 20). Yet women's chances of doing so are slim unless institutional mindsets change (Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). In fact, Carter and Silva (2011) proved that "even when women used the same career advancement strategies—doing all the things they have been told will help them get ahead—they advanced less than their male counterparts and had slower pay growth" (p. 2).

Aligning with the idea that the answer to closing the leadership gender gap lies within a broader reform agenda, I developed my doctoral research around this claim. Rhode and Kellerman (2007) claimed it is time for women who made it to the top of corporations to use their "unique opportunities and corresponding obligations to promote changes that make leadership accessible to others [women]" (p. 26). Therefore my research seeks to answer the question, "How can women leaders collectively use their power and position to bring more women to the tables of power expediently, thereby creating the critical mass needed to modify the existing leadership model to the benefit of both genders?"

### The Research

This study represents a women-led effort to understand how the significance of numbers impacts the way corporations govern. Numbers make a difference in situations of change; several change agents working together can accomplish more than a few working alone (Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). At 33% inclusion of the underrepresented, the tipping point for critical mass, important things start to happen (Gladwell, 2002). As energy and momentum gain, they cause a ripple throughout the system adding powerful cumulative effects as others quickly follow the action. When the number of women sitting at the tables of power reaches 33%, their experiences, visions, and values reverberate fully, thereby impacting how decisions are made that most affect our world (Kanter, 1977; Sandberg, 2013; Tarr-Whalen, 2009).

Although not a zero-sum game of women versus men (i.e., one person's utility gain is balanced by the other person's utility loss; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.), I believe it is important for this study to be framed as feminist research. This is because women represent the "system tension" needed to jar the historically, male dominant and masculine defined leadership model out of the status quo (Morgan, 2006; Tarr-Whelan, 2009; Wheatley, 1999). I am not proposing what Rosin (2010) tagged an era denoting "the end of men" (p. 1). I am proposing an era that "goes beyond the traditional view of overvaluing predominantly masculine qualities and undervaluing predominantly feminine qualities" to create a leadership model based on the best of both genders (Tarr-Whelan, 2009).

To realize the benefits of gender balance at the tables of power, women need to stay in the leadership pipeline long enough to reach the executive suite (Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). Today's organizations are experiencing the exact opposite. Women "stall out" or "opt out" of corporate life just as they near the point where they gained the experience needed for executive leadership, the point where they can have advantageous effects on corporate governance. Perhaps women leaders desire something different in the world of executive leadership. Perhaps women want greater purpose in their work, to be able to use their creative energies authentically, or to advance their careers while still engaging in family and community. Meyerson, Ely, and Wernick (2007) said the recognition that many organizations' standard practices are not always best for women leaders or, for that matter, for the financial well-being of the corporation is nothing new. They pointed out what initially appeared to be a problem for women often pointed to a problem for the corporation in general. For example, the idea of "face time" equating to commitment and contribution sets up leaders to be measured against an "ideal worker" who subordinates all obligations to work and is available 24/7.

Regardless of the cause of the leaky pipeline, it is prudent for corporate leaders to resolve the issue as current statistics show corporations with more women leaders on-board perform better financially by 50% or more on measures of profitability (Catalyst, 2004; Rosin, 2010). According to Kent (2011), CEO at Coca-Cola, "The real driver [of economic growth] will be women: women business, political, academic, and cultural leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators" (p. 12). The following bullet points provide insight into why this is:

- One in 11 working-age women serve as entrepreneurs, and women-owned businesses account for \$4 trillion dollars in United States gross domestic product, equal to the fourth-largest economy in the world (Kent, 2011; Rosin, 2010). Women know how to innovate and corporations should want this skill set inside their four walls.
- Women represent the most dynamic and fastest growing economic force in the world controlling over \$20 trillion dollars in spending power worldwide. In the United States, women make 83% of all consumer purchase decisions including 91% of homes, 60% of new cars, and 80% of healthcare (Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2008). Who understands how to serve the needs of other women better than women leaders?
- The number of women earning \$100,000 or more tripled in the last decade, and women represent 90% of the growth in private wealth since 2008 (Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2008). This amount of spending power equates to a combined economic force larger than the United States, China, and India combined. Women purchase from and invest in companies that serve the needs of the female consumer and investor.

### The Process

Qualitative research serves as the underlying foundation for this study. Staying true to the principles of the qualitative approach, my intent is to capture data rich in the description of people and conversations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Grounded theory serves as the methodology for completing my qualitative work. The aim of a grounded theory study is to move beyond "off the shelf" descriptions of data to the discovery of a new theory, in this case, a new strategy for bringing qualified women to the tables of power in equal numbers to their male counterparts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). With grounded theory, the researcher works to generate results that are understandable and experientially credible to the people studied and to potential others through a general explanation of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a



large number of participants. Using a constructivist viewpoint I, as the researcher, construct new theory out of the participants' stories of how they explain and make sense out of their experiences as women leaders in Corporate America.

The women selected for participation in this research work for or have worked for a Fortune 500 corporation and hold or have held a leadership-level position (i.e., director, senior director, vice president, senior vice president, executive vice president, or C-suite executive). They have a passion for figuring out how to bring gender parity to the tables of power in Corporate America. I identified this demographic for inclusion in the study because of the women's longevity in leadership, and their ability to influence CEOs to take action on the strategy resulting from the research. Further these women serve as visible change agents within their organizations and across organizations due to the respect they garner as leaders in large organization. They can make change happen.

I need approximately two-dozen women leaders for the study with participants from the West Coast, Minnesota, and the East Coast. By targeting a swath of women from across the United States, I provide for triangulation (i.e., the need to have more than one source of information to establish fact; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and generalization (i.e., the applicability of findings from one setting or group of people to another; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) within the study. I chose to interview two-dozen women because this sample size is large enough to be generalizable, but small enough to ensure collection of rich, saturated data.

Each participant will be interviewed for approximately two hours during the summer/fall of 2013. Prior to the first interview, a consent agreement will be signed to protect the participants from exposure. Participants will receive four open-ended questions before their interviews so they can ponder their responses. All participants will answer the same questions. The interviews will be completed in person or via phone. The interview sessions will be recorded for transcription and analysis purpose. I, as the researcher, will complete data transcription, coding, analysis, and theory building. Once this is done, I will write an extensive research document that will be available to all participants before the general public—my doctoral dissertation.

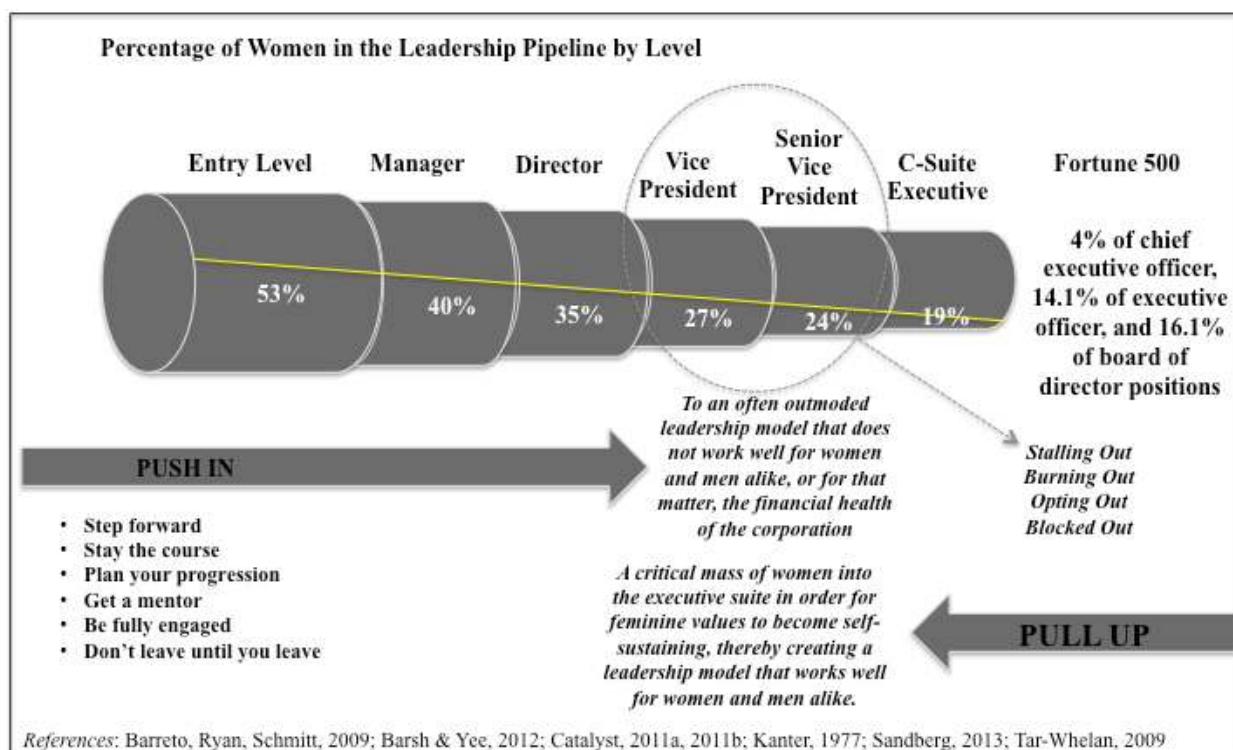
### Conclusion

In 1992, Aburdene and Naisbitt claimed it the “decade of women in leadership” (p. 61), predicting the breakthrough to top corporate posts for women. At that time, only one female leader held a Fortune 500 CEO position, Linda Wachner of Warnaco. Twenty years later, there are 20 women CEOs in the Fortune 500 (Leahey, 2012). Is this an impressive accomplishment? Yes. Is it acceptably expedient with respect to bringing gender parity to the tables of power and reaping the benefits of gender balanced leadership in Corporate America? No. I believe we should be further along, more than 50 years past women entering Corporate America in large numbers with their eyes set on leadership. I fear that if we continue to wait patiently for women to reach parity with their male counterparts in the C-suite, it will be a long time before the leadership gender gap closes (Rhode, 2003).

Two weeks ago I had a conversation with a male CEO of a Fortune 500 company who told me he had never met a woman CEO at his level who did not act just like a man. Then he went on to talk about what a loss this was because corporations were losing the benefits of diverse perspectives at the very place they were needed most—at the tables of power in

Corporate America. If we continue to use organizational interventions to fit women into the status quo model, the benefits of true gender balanced behaviors may be lost forever as women take on the perspectives of masculine leadership in order to get ahead (Quindlen, n.d.). We as women leaders cannot let this happen.

Greene (1988) encouraged people to look for openings in their lived situations, to look at things as if they could be otherwise, and to take action on what they found. I believe is time to define an innovative approach for positioning qualified women in executive leadership positions, thereby, bringing the perspectives of both genders to the tables of power in Corporate America (Barreto, Ryan et al., 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Rhode, 2003; Tarr-Whelan, 2009). It is time to move forward and meet the leadership gender gap challenge head on.



## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form (2013)

**CONSENT FORM****UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****Leadership Gender Gap in Corporate America: A Qualitative Study****IRB Log Number: 455371-1**

I am conducting a qualitative research study seeking to understand how to bring gender parity to the tables of power in Corporate America. I invite you to be a participant. You were selected because you hold or held a leadership position in a large organization, because of your extensive leadership experience, and because of your desire to close the leadership gender gap. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

Deborah Koland is conducting the study under the direction of her dissertation chair, Dr. Kathleen Boyle, in order to satisfy the dissertation requirement for completion of a doctoral degree in leadership at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**Background Information:**

- This is a qualitative research study focused on understanding how women leaders use or can use their power and position to bring gender parity to the executive suite in Corporate America (i.e., the tables of power). The premise is it can be done, women probably need to determine how to do it, and women need to take action on it. Although not a zero-sum game of women versus men (i.e., one person's utility gain is balanced by another's utility loss; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.), I believe it is important this research be owned by women because they represent the system tension needed to jar the historically male dominant and defined leadership model out of the status quo (Morgan, 2006; Tarr-Whelan, 2009; Wheatley, 1999). This study aims to develop a new theory for bringing gender parity to the tables of power through the collective insights of women leaders who understand the benefits of gender balanced leadership teams and care to bring them to fruition.
- An underlying assumption of this study is numbers matter in any situation of substantive and sustainable change. At 33% inclusion of the underrepresented (i.e., women executives)—the tipping point for critical mass (Gladwell, 2002)—important things start to happen. As energy and momentum gain, the 33% representation causes a ripple throughout the system adding powerful cumulative effects as others quickly follow the action. When the number of women sitting at the tables of power reaches a tipping point, women's experiences, visions, and values reverberate fully, thereby truly impacting how decisions are made that most affect our world (Gilligan, 1993; Kanter, 1977; Sandberg, 2013; Tarr-Whalen, 2009). It is too difficult for one or two women sitting in the executive suite to bring about this magnitude of change.
- This study represents an innovative approach to researching gender parity at the executive level. Research historically focused on helping women lean in from the bottom of the organization to reach the tables of power through individual action (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007; Sandberg, 2013). Although the lean in theory is necessary for women to move into and through the leadership pipeline, the researcher suggests that a top down theory is needed to pull women to the tables of power by giving group support to individual actions.

- Fifty-five years past second wave feminism's birth, when women entered the workforce with an eye on executive positions, the number of women sitting at the tables of power is shockingly low with only 4% of CEO, 14.1% of executive officer, and 16.1% of board of director positions in the Fortune 500 being held by women (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Catalyst, 2011a, 2011b). A profound divide in power and authority still separates women from men at the highest levels of corporations.
- At the current rate of bringing women to the tables of power, it could take more than 70 years to come close to gender parity (Catalyst, 2005). Under this scenario, Corporate America risks losing the benefits of diverse ideas, solutions, and approaches, hampering the possibility of opening up different options to replace sometimes outmoded or even counterproductive ways of doing business (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Kanter, 1977; Tarr-Whelan, 2009).
- Bringing gender parity to the tables of power represents sound financial acumen, a statement that should perk the ears of any CEO looking for business growth. The real drivers of the economy in the 21st Century are women as they represent the most dynamic and fastest-growing economic force today (Kent, 2011). Women control over \$20 trillion dollars in spending worldwide (i.e., an economic impact larger than the United States, China, and India combined; Wittenberg-Cox & Maitland, 2008). Women make 83% of all consumer purchase decisions in the United States and represent 90% of the growth in private wealth since 2008.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will do the following things:

- Participate in one two-hour interview session during the summer/fall of 2013 either in person or via phone. The interview session will be recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.
- Tap into your experiences as a woman leader and share your thoughts, insights, values, and visions—this is about your insights, anecdotes, and perspectives. No extra work is required of you beyond the interview. Because your name and place of employment remains confidential during the research and after the study is published, you are asked to be brutally honest in your responses to the interview questions.
- Review the findings of the study before they are published if you desire to do so.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

This consent agreement protects participants from having their names or companies of employment exposed in any transcription document, analysis document, dissertation document, presentation document, magazine article, newspaper article, published book, or when the researcher talks to any other person about the study and its findings.

Participants understand and accept the researcher's dissertation is available ad infinitum through the Academy with the potential to be used for the development and execution of further research on the topic. Participants understand and accept the study and its findings may be written about in published articles, referred to in newspaper articles, or published as a book at a future date. Participants understand and accept the researcher will make presentations and speeches regarding the study and its findings.

Participants benefit from being in the study by helping to identify new ways to bringing gender parity to the tables of power, and by adding like-minded women (i.e., those who are passionate about closing the leadership gender gap) to their professional networks. This network building is accomplished through an "opt in" introduction facilitated by the researcher.

### **Compensation:**

There is no monetary compensation for participation in this study.

### **Confidentiality:**

Data records for the study include: interview recorded files, Word documents, PowerPoint documents, Excel documents, and HyperRESEARCH database records. All data resides on the researcher's home computer, which is an iMac. The data is backed up hourly to a secure, on-site hard drive. The researcher protects data on the iMac from hackers by a network-based firewall. The researcher uses a MacBook to complete data collection, but downloads data to the iMac nightly so that no data resides on a mobile device for any length of time.

The researcher, Institutional Review Board, dissertation chair, and dissertation committee are the only people who have access to the study data. If a participant wants access to the transcribed note from their individual interview session, they can request a copy from the researcher prior to the study's completion data—May 2015.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and including December 31, 2013. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected from you to the point of withdrawal is considered useable data for compiling the study results. You are free to skip any questions asked during data gathering interviews.

### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Deborah Koland. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (651) 260-8035. You may also contact Dr. Kathleen Boyle, my dissertation chair, at (651) 962-4885. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at (651) 962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

**Signature of Study Participant**

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**Print Participant Name**

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**Signature of Researcher**

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**Date**

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