Simmons UNIVERSITY | **Institute for Inclusive Leadership**

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SURVEY 2020

FIVE INFLUENTIAL FACTORS:

WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP

Survey Report produced by
The Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership

Executive Summary

What practices and competencies can help advance women into leadership? We surveyed 4,510 people who registered for the 2020 Simmons Leadership Conference to find out what factors women considered most important in their ability to lead. The top five factors out of 31 options listed in the survey are:

1.
Learning to listen carefully to people in the workplace

2.
Learning how to take initiative to reach desired goals

3.
Learning to be resilient at work

4.
Having a sponsor advocate for my advancement

5.
Receiving useful feedback from numerous people

These findings offer pragmatic and actionable insights for women who want to build their leadership capacity because all of these factors are entirely or partially within their control. Three of the factors feature skills that women can work on individually and through corporate-sponsored learning opportunities. For the other two factors, women can proactively initiate and facilitate sponsorship and encourage feedback, in addition to participating in opportunities provided by their organizations.

For organizations that want to retain and advance women leaders, the survey results provide clear learning objectives for formal and informal training as well as other opportunities to support women stepping into leadership in the ways they find most helpful.

Introduction

To learn more about women's pathways to leadership, the Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership conducted a survey during our 41st Simmons Leadership Conference in April, 2020.[1] We asked participants to rate 31 competencies on a scale from "had no influence" to "highly influential," and discovered that five factors rose to the top:

1. **Learning to listen carefully to people in the workplace**

2. **Learning how to take initiative to reach desired goals**

3. **Learning to be resilient at work**

4. **Having a sponsor advocate for my advancement**

5. **Receiving useful feedback from numerous people**

Our findings point to specific actions that women can take to advance their growth and learning. We also recommend actions organizations can take to support women leaders in their learning and development.

1 Learning to listen carefully to people in the workplace

Listening is an essential communication and management skill[2] and a must-have leadership quality. Listening is an important component of being able to connect, engage and build relationships. Listening is also an important way of enacting inclusivity.[3] Outstanding leaders are outstanding listeners[4] because effective listening helps leaders:

- **Understand the needs of those they serve and lead**
- **Develop trusting relationships**
- **Accept and process feedback**
- **Acquire useful information and input**
- **Strengthen credibility**[5]

Read our overview of the Work of the Inclusive Leader™ here.

A word of caution, however—for women leaders, prioritizing listening skills may have a shadow side. Listening can be seen as passive, nurturing, and/or empathetic—stereotypically feminine traits that are just naturally part of being a woman leader. Not only does this run the danger of being overlooked, it also can be devalued as a "soft skill" that is seen as less important than so called "hard skills." Therefore, explicitly labeling listening as an important part of effective leadership for everyone will help counteract any potential negative implications.

"The key is to reflect, get feedback, LISTEN, and reassess in order to learn and grow."

— 25-34 YRS. OLD, ASIAN, AEROSPACE/MILITARY

"Active listening is what [has] influenced my career— connecting with people each [in] their unique way."

— 25-34 YRS. OLD, HISPANIC/LATINX, COMPUTER AND HIGH TECHNOLOGY

2 Learning how to take initiative to reach desired goals

The ability to see new opportunities and take effective action is a critical leadership skill. Initiating actions and consciously directing efforts toward reaching professional and career goals can provide additional visibility within the organization and lead to advancement.[6] This is particularly important for women given the systemic barriers that tend to impede their progress.

Women working in organizations with entrenched gender bias need to be aware that taking initiative might work against them. For example, it can be seen as misguided, it can cause tension among employees, and it can cause stress due to the time, energy, and other resources that may be required.[7] For Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) women, the intersection of bias based on both gender and race or ethnicity makes this awareness even more important. Women who suspect that these dynamics could be at play can mitigate the impact by:

- **Clearly communicating the benefits to the organization, and**
- **Making sure that their stakeholders are aligned before taking action**

One notable finding is that women in entry-level positions gave this competency a lower rating than women at higher levels. Although we didn't collect data to explain this difference, we hypothesize that those at the entry level may believe that they have less agency to take initiative, or they might lack clarity about their desired goals. Regardless of the motivation, women who take charge of their careers early are better positioned for long-term gain, benefitting not only themselves but also their organization.

"I have built upon opportunities and knowledge that came my way over the years."

— 55-64 YRS. OLD, BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN, AEROSPACE/MILITARY

3 Learning to be resilient at work

Resilience is typically understood as the ability to bounce back from adversity. Resilient people often see adversity as a temporary obstacle that can be overcome, not as a permanent barrier. Resilient people's personalities are transformed by experiences of hardships, which lead them to persevere even more.[8] As Diane Coutu, author of *How Resilience Works*, stated: "More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails...it's true in the Olympics, and it's true in the boardroom."[9]

In addition to resilience, some of our respondents also pointed to related factors like grit and not being afraid of failure as factors in their success. Given the inevitable setbacks and challenges that all leaders face, it isn't surprising that resilience is a predictor of leadership.[10]

"[I turned] a tragedy into an opportunity for spiritual, personal, and professional growth. The silver lining surfaced over time and re-energized my confidence muscles!"

— **55-64 YRS. OLD, WHITE, FINANCE/BANKING/INSURANCE**

4 Having a sponsor who advocates for my advancement

The Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership defines sponsorship as leveraging relationship capital to support the advancement of others. Sponsors use their influence with other decision-makers to provide their sponsees with opportunities to move up in the organization or participate in critical projects that put them in the spotlight. Since they are putting their reputation on the line, sponsors are very careful about whom they choose to sponsor.

The importance of sponsorship in women's path to leadership was captured in the responses to our survey's open-ended question. One respondent simply noted, "Sponsors are essential to move up the ladder," while others stated that having someone who advocated for them boosted their confidence to be leaders. One respondent went as far as saying that "sponsorship trumps leadership training."

For BIPOC women in particular, sponsorship is often their pathway into management or senior roles, which makes this relationship even more crucial for them.[11]

5 Receiving useful feedback from numerous people

Developmental feedback helps women pinpoint their opportunities for professional growth, and the strengths they can leverage and build on to further hone their leadership abilities. This kind of feedback helps women gain insights on their performance and clarifies expectations that the organization has for people who want to progress in their careers.[12]

Unfortunately, many studies have shown that women often get the short end of the stick when it comes to feedback.[13] They tend to receive:

- **Less feedback than men**

- **Feedback that is vague**

- **Developmental feedback focused on their communication style[14] or personal characteristing like being "aggressive" or "shrill"**

- **Feedback that is more negative or critical compared to that received by men[15]**

When women do receive useful developmental and constructive feedback, studies show they use it to strengthen their leadership abilities.

Black, Indigenous and Women of Color's Experiences

It's important to recognize that not all women's experiences in the workplace are the same. Besides marginalization based on gender, BIPOC women face additional barriers based on race and ethnicity, which result in distinct experiences not typically shared by white women.[16] Our findings from this study regarding the identity of role models and managers show some of these distinctions. For these two factors, the majority of white women said they had no influence, while many women of color found the factors to be influential.[17] These findings reinforce the importance of representation of different social identities to provide role models and awareness that can help support the advancement of women of color.

Conclusion: Next Steps

Our findings present concrete actions that women can take and competencies they can develop to maximize their leadership capabilities.

Tools You Can Use
Action Steps for Developing Your Leadership Capabilities

1. LISTEN WITH MINDFULNESS AND UNDERSTANDING. Be fully present when talking to someone so that you are able to listen deeply. One of the barriers to effective listening is our tendency to judge or evaluate what we are hearing. We can avoid this by listening with understanding; in other words, working to understand the other person's point of view and their frame of reference about the subject being discussed."[18] Listening is even more important as our workforce becomes more diverse and multigenerational,[19] and nuances of cultural backgrounds may not be readily apparent.

2. TAKE INITIATIVE TOWARDS YOUR STRATEGIC GOALS. From the very beginning of your career, it's important to establish goals. Spend time reflecting on your values and what's important to you so that you can align them with these goals. Once you've set your goals, determine what is in your control, and take action! If the overall goal seems too daunting, break it down into small, manageable steps and build your skills one step at a time. You can also look for support from peers, friends, your manager, and/or your mentors.

3. REFRAME ADVERSITIES AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH. Staying positive in the face of adversity is an attitude that resilient people practice.[20] Coaching can help develop resilience[21] but there are also cost-free methods that allow you to be hopeful, such as building strong relationships with others.[22] Developing resilience helps with dealing with all of life's challenges. Be optimistic and see any roadblock as an opportunity to learn and grow.

4. POSITION YOURSELF FOR SPONSORSHIP. Since sponsors put their reputations on the line on your behalf, you can better position yourself to be sponsored by:[23]
- Making sure you are performing well and that your efforts are visible in the organization
- Establishing relationships with people who are in a position to sponsor you. Get to know them and help them understand your strengths and future goals
- Participating in a formal sponsorship and/or mentoring program, if one is available

5. ASK FOR FEEDBACK. Use those initiative-taking skills and don't wait for someone to give you feedback. Instead, solicit it. This is especially true if feedback-giving isn't common in your organization. Ask for specific feedback on what you are doing right, what you can improve on (what we like to call "even better if"), and what it will take to advance to the next step on your leadership path. If you are getting vague feedback, ask for "advice" instead, since that has been shown to increase the effective input you receive.[24]

Conclusion: Next Steps

Tools You Can Use
Tools for the Organization

Our findings point to several steps organizations can take to increase the percentage of women in their leadership ranks:

Establish sponsorship programs with input from a diverse group of women seeking leadership roles, and provide a diverse pool of sponsors. This allows women to benefit from a variety of perspectives and increase their opportunities for advancement.

Reward frequent developmental feedback. Ensure that people who give feedback understand how women and BIPOC women specifically experience intersecting or overlapping marginalization and how that impacts feedback. This will help improve the quality and quantity of feedback that women receive.

Launch inclusive leadership programs. Gender, racial and ethnic, and other bias pervades all aspects of our organizational norms and processes. By helping leaders and decision-makers become more inclusive, we increase our organizations' chances of truly supporting and advancing women and BIPOC.

Assist leaders in building resilience through wellness programs and structures/ norms that develop it. Formalizing a regular wellness program for employees that emphasizes mindfulness and optimism is one way organizations can help employees develop resilience. Organizations can also create structures and processes that develop employee resilience by "(a) valuing employees by acknowledging their contributions and attending to their well-being, (b) developing proactive learning and networking capabilities through role-modeling, feedback, and participation, and (c) promoting collaboration and learning through systems that highlight the benefits of networking and knowledge sharing."[25]

Offer listening skills development. Given the benefits of effective listening for people at all levels of the organization, assisting leaders to develop these skills should be a priority for organizations. Micro-learning, role playing, and other kinds of formal and informal training can all be effective ways of increasing listening and other communication skills.
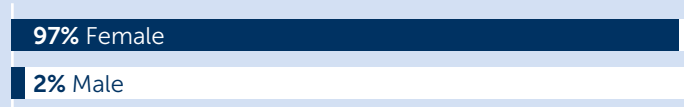
> "
>
> *Even as we continue to navigate work in a global health crisis, the findings from this study are practical and actionable. The steps leaders and managers can take to engage, retain and advance women can be made—even, and especially, as most of us are working remotely. I am encouraged by this study!*
>
> — SUSAN MACKENTY BRADY, Deloitte Ellen Gabrielle Chair for Women and Leadership, Simmons University; CEO, Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership
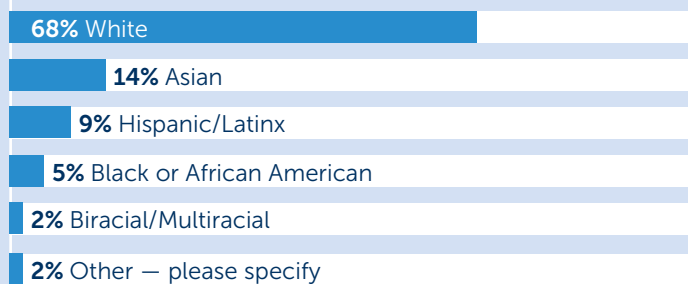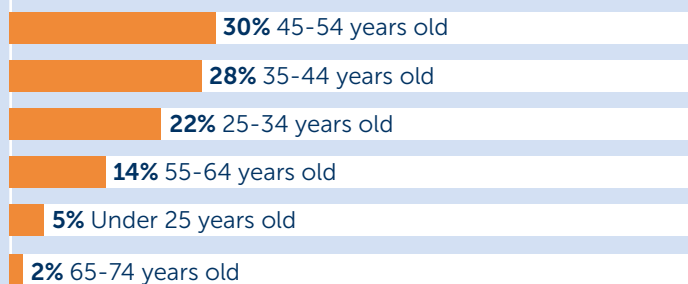
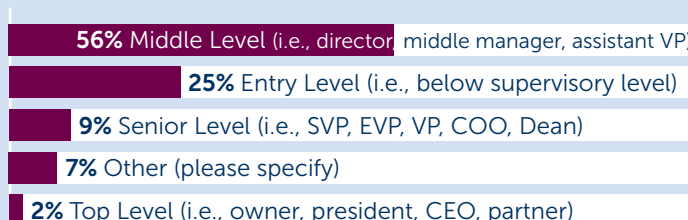## Appendices

Demographic Profile of Respondent

GENDER

- **97%** Female
- **2%** Male

RACE AND ETHNICITY

- **68%** White
- **14%** Asian
- **9%** Hispanic/Latinx
- **5%** Black or African American
- **2%** Biracial/Multiracial
- **2%** Other — please specify

AGE

- **30%** 45-54 years old
- **28%** 35-44 years old
- **22%** 25-34 years old
- **14%** 55-64 years old
- **5%** Under 25 years old
- **2%** 65-74 years old

JOB POSITION LEVEL

- **56%** Middle Level (i.e., director, middle manager, assistant VP)
- **25%** Entry Level (i.e., below supervisory level)
- **9%** Senior Level (i.e., SVP, EVP, VP, COO, Dean)
- **7%** Other (please specify)
- **2%** Top Level (i.e., owner, president, CEO, partner)

FUNCTIONAL AREA

- **24%** Technology
- **16%** Other (please specify)
- **12%** Marketing/Sales
- **11%** Operations
- **10%** Human Resources/Development
- **8%** Product/Project Management
- **7%** Finance
- **5%** General Management
- **5%** Research
- **1%** Accounting

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION

- **22%** Banking/Insurance
- **17%** Computer and High Technology
- **16%** Information Technology
- **9%** Healthcare/Medical
- **7%** Other
- **7%** Aerospace/Military
- **6%** Manufacturing and Retail/Wholesale Trade
- **6%** Biotechnology and Pharmaceuticals
- **6%** Education/Training
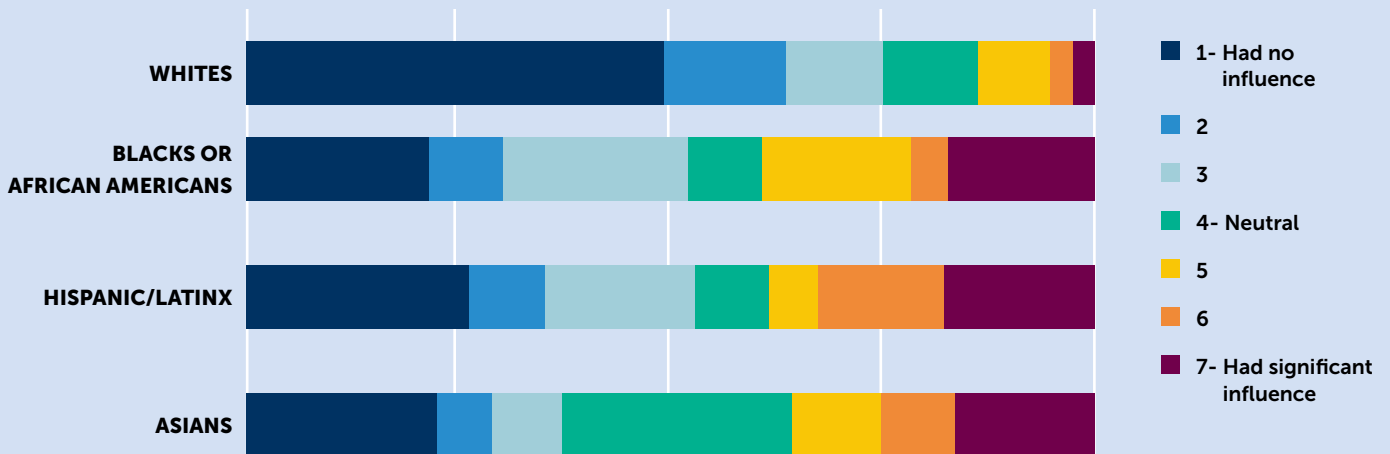- **2%** Non-Profit
- **1%** Media and Entertainment
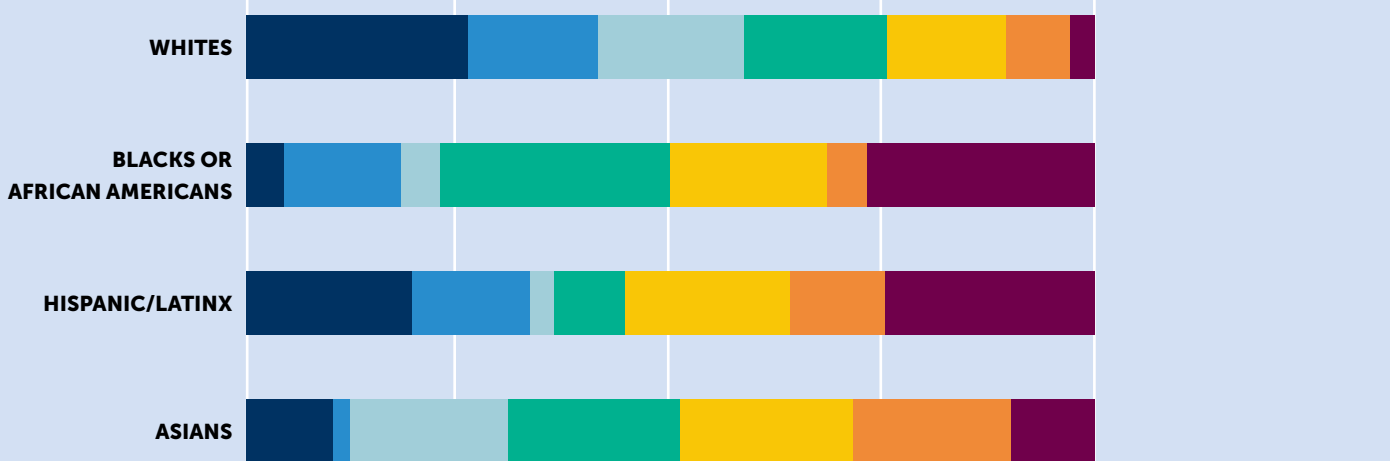
Appendices

Survey Results on Identity
(See discussion in Endnote 17)

IDENTIFYING WITH MY MANAGER BECAUSE THEY LOOKED LIKE ME

HAVING MULTIPLE ROLE MODELS WHO LOOKED LIKE ME

% of responses in group category

Legend:
- 1- Had no influence
- 2
- 3
- 4- Neutral
- 5
- 6
- 7- Had significant influence

Endnotes

1. The survey attained a response rate of 10% from 4,510 conference registrants. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents were women, and 56% identified as middle level managers. Seventy percent of the women identified as white; the 30% included (need population breakdown). (For more demographic information, see appendix below).

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16. Of course, not all WOCs have the same experiences in the workplace and in their pursuit of leadership positions. Asian-American women, for example, feel that they are the "forgotten minority in the glass ceiling conversation," as they are not 'leader material' due to the stereotype of being deferential (see Kramer, A. (2020). Why Asian-American Women Aren't Advancing into Senior Leadership Positions. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/andiekramer/2020/01/22/why -asian-american-women-arent-advancing-into-senior-leadership-positions/ #5458429973d2.) This explains the trend for Asian-American women not advancing to senior leadership nor being promoted to management positions (see Gee, B. and Peck, D. (May 31, 2018). Asian Americans are the least likely group in the U.S. to be promoted to management. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2018/05/asian-americans-are-the-least-likely-group-in-the-u-s-to-be-promoted-to-management). On the other hand, African American women experience more "emotional tax" in their everyday lives in the workplace due to the microaggressions that they experience (see Dnika J. Travis, D. and Thorpe-Moscon, J. (2018). Day-to-day experiences of emotional tax among women and men of color in the workplace. Catalyst. Retrieved from https://www.catalyst.org/ research/day-to-day-experiences-of-emotional-tax-among-women-and-men-of-color-in-the-workplace/#:~:text=Our%20findings%20show%20that%3A,men %20of%20color%20we%20surveyed). Beyond microaggressions, Black women feel that they do not have equal opportunity to be promoted and do not get as much support from managers and sponsors. These examples are only for two groups, but what this research tells us is that there are nuances in the experiences of women of color based on their particular racial identities and cultural backgrounds (see Leanin.org. (2020). Working at the intersection: What Black women are up against. Retrieved from https://leanin.org/black-women-racism-discrimination-at-work?utm _campaign=blackwomenatwork&utm_medium=social&utm_source =social#endnote34)

17. One striking finding from our survey concerns two factors that explore the influence of issues of identity on ability to lead: Having multiple role models who looked like me and Identifying with my manager because they looked like me. Of all the factors listed in the survey, these two were the only ones that rated lower than the neutral median of 4. However, when we look across different racial and ethnic identities, we see a significant difference between white and non-white respondents. For Having multiple role models who looked like me, 51% of non-white respondents considered this factor as having significant influence, rating it between 5 and 7. However, for white respondents, 58% essentially rated it as having no influence on their leadership capability, rating it 3 or below. A quite similar pattern is demonstrated in the factor "Identifying with my manager because they looked like me." Although only 37% of non-white respondents considered it as having a significant influence on their leadership, rating it between 5 and 7, the majority of white respondents considered this as having essentially no influence on their leadership capability, with 75% rating it 3 or below. See graphs in the appendix for illustration of these findings.

Endnotes

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