



The Underrepresentation of African American Women in Executive Leadership: What's Getting in the Way?

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Abstract

This article and subsequent exploratory study are designed to explore what barriers, perceived or real, prevent African American women from ascending to the C-suite within organizations. In addition, this study strives to provide tools that can be used to help in their ascension. As of March 2015, there were only four African American Chief Executive Officers in Fortune 500 companies according to a report by Berman (2015). Prior to this, there were five at the highest echelon of corporate America: Kenneth Chenault of American Express, Rodney O'Neal of Delphi, Kenneth Frazier of Merck, Arnold W. Donald of Carnival and finally, one single African American woman, Ursula Burns at Xerox.¹ As proud as one can be of Ms. Burns and all of her accomplishments and successes, one must wonder is she the only African American women capable of leading a top organization in America? There is no doubt that she is capable, smart and worthy. What makes her attractive to the decision-makers? How did she overcome barriers that seemingly hold others back as they try to ascend to that level? It is our hope to identify those barriers, to a limited extent, and to provide insights from those who have made it as well as tools that can assist others. It may be obvious to some that barriers exist for this group of people, but not so obvious to others. Cain (2015) in her study of this same group, addressed barriers encountered by African American women executives in U.S. corporations. Studies, reports and literature outline some of the barriers for African American women as being social, economic and interpersonal. These barriers easily stop African American women from reaching the higher levels in organizations. Although in 2014, women in general made up less than 16% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations; only 5.3% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were African American women. Clearly for women of color, the gap is wider according to Walker (2014). Obviously, women of color encompasses women of various races. Women of color make up 11.9% of managerial and professional positions, but African American women make up the a mere 5.3%. Women outnumber men on college campuses and have earned a third of law degrees since 1980; a third of them have entered medical school since 1990 and since 2002, they have outnumbered men in earning undergraduate business degrees (Walker, 2014). With these glaring numbers, one is forced to ask the questions: What are the barriers preventing this segment of the female population from advancing to the C-suite? What tools do they need to advance? According to Purdie-Vaughns (2015) CEOs, diversity officers and programs that nurture talent are a start. This study hopes to clear the way and provide concrete solutions for African American women seeking those higher levels of power and responsibility.

Key Words: Leadership, African American women, executive, management, professional, women of color, barriers

¹ Retrieved from www.money.cnn.com/2015/01/28/news/economy/mcdonalds-ceo-diversity

Introduction

The American workforce continues to diversify as we now have four generations in the workforce and an increased representation of minorities. However, there is one variable that has remained largely unchanged, the underrepresentation of African-American women in executive positions. Despite the great progress our nation has made in terms of gender and racial equality, there continues to be a pervasive lack of African-American women in senior leadership positions. The data is compelling and in some ways disheartening because despite legislation, diversity intervention programs and affirmative action, there has been no significant improvement. This study, however, has not been undertaken with a sense of despair, but rather with a strategic focus on better understanding the phenomenon in an effort to identify not only the structural barriers, but also proven models that have resulted in increased access and representation of African American women in senior leadership roles.

Rationale and Significance of Research

This study contributes to current and future studies on both African-American women in executive leadership and to a smaller degree, women in general. The current research on women and women of color state additional research is needed on the reason barriers still exists for African-American women in executive positions and the influence of stereotypes on their performance and ascension to the c-suite, as well as retention (McGee, 2009, Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Sanchez-Hucles & Davis (2010) stated, “Additional research must be conducted to explain the conundrum that women show advantages in leadership skills but are disadvantaged in actually securing and maintaining leadership roles” (p. 177). Since the 2010 publication of the previous research of Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, discrimination claims based on color and sex peaked in 2013 (EEOC.GOV). According to the EEOC tracking of all claims under Title VII, racial discrimination accounts for 35% of all charges filed with the EEOC in 2014, which resulted in \$75 million (EEOC.GOV). Current research also supports the need for further research to understand how African-American women overcome these challenges to assist other women in succeeding (Brown, 2004, Duehr & Bono, 2006, Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, Harris, 2011).

Further, 2013 showed a peak in EEOC claims for African-Americans and for women, in spite of the many barriers and advances made over the years to elevate women in the workplace to a level of equality (EEOC.GOV). Research indicates further study is essential to determine if the work completed to end discrimination has diminished or is no longer effective as it was initially (Bailey, Wolfe & Wolfe, 1996, Hughes & Dodge, 1997, Brown, 2004, Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010.). This research will help to determine if the work is in fact complete and will facilitate exploration of how the historical stereotypes and challenges influence current day barriers for African-American women as well as gain additional insight to tools for use to aid African-American in their career ascension. Moreover, this research and the related findings will assist in the development of career management models and diversity intervention strategies that result in an increased representation of African American women in senior leadership positions.

Workplace Practices and Societal Norms

Workplace practices, which are reinforced by societal norms, have contributed to the glass ceiling. Men have set the policies and established the norms currently being practiced in business. This has been exacerbated by societal norms about the role of women and men, which have not evolved to represent “the current state” and still reflect a woman’s role that is primarily domicile oriented.

The U. S. Department of Labor defined the glass ceiling as “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into senior-level positions” (U. S. Department of Labor, 1991). The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was created in 1991 to address the issue of inequity in the workplace that was adversely affecting women because an “invisible barrier” was limiting the access of this minority group to career opportunities and advancement within organizations. The Commission’s charge was to investigate organizational discrimination not only against women, but minorities as a whole and identify recommendations. The following details an excerpt of *Message from the Chair* by the Honorable Robert B. Reich.

Discrimination – the glass ceiling, in particular – remains another deep line of demarcation between those who prosper and those left behind. I repeat. It is not only a matter of fair play, but an economic imperative that the glass ceiling be shattered. It matters to the bottom line for businesses and to the future economic stability of America’s families. Independent research has shown that companies that go the extra mile in hiring and promoting minorities and women are more profitable. A study of the Standard and Poor’s 500 by Covenant Investment Management found that businesses committed to promoting minority and women workers had an average annualized return on investment of 18.3 percent over a five-year period compared with only 7.9 percent for those with the most shatter-proof glass ceilings (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995).

Meyerson and Fletcher (2000) argued that despite the gains made as a result of the women’s movement and litigation to remove overt discrimination as a result of the Commission’s work, significant systemic factors, including the glass ceiling, continued to remain for women to ascend to the highest levels of the organization. These limiting factors, while no longer necessarily openly displayed, lie beneath the surface and are still deeply embedded in corporate culture, work practices and norms; as a result, these insidious barriers persist and the results are disconcerting. This is reinforced by research conducted by Hartman (2005) and Hogan and Mallot (2005), which found that covert discrimination continued to persist despite the passage of anti-discrimination laws.

Moreover, Meyerson and Fletcher (2000) assert that even after women join the executive track for career advancement and approach the top rungs of the corporate ladder, they often decide to “jump off” due to frustration and disillusionment. At the time of the article’s publication, women comprised 10% of senior level positions in Fortune 500 firms and less than 4% of the highest ranks of CEO, president, executive vice president, COO and less than 3% of top wage earners. The data on women of color was even more stark. “While comprising 23% of the US women’s workforce, they comprise 14% of managerial roles. African-American women hold 6% of managerial roles” (p. 136). The authors assert that in order to shatter the glass ceiling, a small wins strategy based upon incremental change, which targets specific biases in order to

chip away at them, is the way forward. In doing so, barriers to the ascension of women can be removed through a structured three-step process: problem identification, diagnosis, and experimentation.

The root cause of the inequity is perpetuated in part due to the fact that men wrote many of the workplace policies, norms and practices, for men and out of the experiences of men. As a result of this one-sided perspective, the interests and needs of women continue to be underrepresented or ignored altogether because these “ways of doing business” are deeply entrenched, and in many respects have become a part of the organizational DNA. For example, how organizations define and evaluate leadership capabilities and competence are based largely upon male-dominated traits; moreover, societal presumptions about the role of men and women continue to persist where women are viewed as still primarily responsible for household matters and not matters of work. This is noteworthy because “organizational practices mirror societal norms” (Meyerson & Fletcher, 1999, p. 129). This does not mean that blame is being laid at the feet of men, but it is important to acknowledge the origin of the contributing factor in order to devise and implement a workable solution.

If we fast forward to 2015 and look at the composition of women at senior level positions in Fortune 500 companies and their representation at the highest ranks of CEO, president, executive vice president and COO, not much has changed. According to 2015 survey data from Catalyst, women of color comprise 16.5% of the workforce in Fortune 500 companies; they hold 9.4% of first/mid-level officials and managers; 3.9% of Executive/Senior level officials and roles and .4% of CEO roles. African American women hold 3.8%, 1.2% and .2% respectively for each of these categories related to leadership roles (Catalyst, 2015).

Challenges for African American Women: Contributing Factors

In addition to the glass ceiling being identified as a contributing factor to the ascension of women of color to leadership positions, the concrete ceiling is a unique identifier that describes barriers that cannot be penetrated by African women and minorities; the concrete ceiling constitutes a career limiting factor that affects not only the ability to ascend in an organization, but also the ability to co-exist. According to Catalyst, a comparative discussion of the concrete ceiling versus the glass ceiling reveals the fact that the former is a barrier that is almost unbreakable and adds additional complexity to upward mobility (2004b). In fact, according to a Catalyst survey, *Advancing African American Women in the Workforce: What Managers Need to Know*, the unique crucible faced by this demographic group is reiterated.

Even though African American women represent an important and growing source of talent, they currently represent only 1.1% of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies...Experiencing a double outsider status – unlike white women or African American men – African American women report exclusion from informal networks and conflict relationships with white women among the challenges they face (Brown, 2004, p. 46).

The complexity of upward mobility faced by African American women as compared to other employees is also supported by research conducted by Giscombe and Mattis (2002); survey results from 1735 African women in 30 Fortune 1000 firms revealed there are 4 primary obstacles affecting this demographic: high visibility assignments, informal networking with

influential colleagues, the lack of influential sponsors or mentors and company role models of the same ethnicity. A consideration of any of these obstacles could help to explain and better understand the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions as well as the effect of the glass ceiling.

Strategic Choices

A failure to make strategic employment choices based upon a career path and personal responsibility impacts the ascension of African American women to leadership positions.

Thomas (2006) research found that African-Americans as a group may not have effective career development plans; as a result, African Americans were contributing to their lack of opportunity. A lack of strategic career planning in terms of making job choices that align with short and longer-term personal organizational goals can limit individual readiness. As a result, making career decisions with a strategic intent, as opposed to necessity, becomes important for individuals with aspirations of climbing the corporate ladder. Based on Thomas' findings, it is recommended this group assume personal responsibility for gaining access to leadership development opportunities. This research builds upon previous findings where Thomas (2002) found that African Americans who were able to successfully advance from mid-level management positions did so as a result of the following: job commitment, purposeful career development, positive mentoring relationships, strong sponsorship and a diverse network.

Research conducted by Simmons (2009) provides additional perspective by making the following recommendations specific to African American women in the management of their careers:

1. Women must know what they want. After making this determination, women must develop a career plan and evaluate the cost of implementation.
2. Women must be willing to monitor their success to determine efficacy. If objectives are not being achieved, it's important to reevaluate and make necessary course correction(s).
3. Women must be willing to learn; this includes technology, processes, and procedures to have a systemic view and to better understand interdependencies.
4. Women must take responsibility for careers. Women should stop being passive by waiting on someone else to recognize their potential and expecting someone else to manage their career.
5. Women must be willing to accept leadership positions on special projects in order to demonstrate their competencies and skill to senior leaders.

Organizational Structures

Another consideration is the impact of organizational structures. It can be asserted that there are systemic challenges and these challenges exist due to internal processes and organizational policies.

The research of Wallner (2008) sought to explore this phenomenon by conducting a study intended to determine whether there was a correlation between diversity management interventions and the advancement of African Americans to leadership positions in U.S. firms. The research examined three specific strategies: affinity groups, mentoring, and training and

development initiatives. While there was no statistically significant relationship between the first two initiatives, the findings suggested that training and development was an effective approach for leadership advancement programs.

Despite the findings regarding the first two interventions, Wallner (2008) puts forth a conceptual model, noted in Figure 1, which asserts

Affinity groups/networks, mentoring programs, and training and development programs that focus on the positive use of power and influence, on building strong relationships (sic) with supervisors, on the practice of leadership skills in-house, and on demonstrating commitment to the organization, might support leadership advancement for aspiring African American leaders in American firms (p. 154).

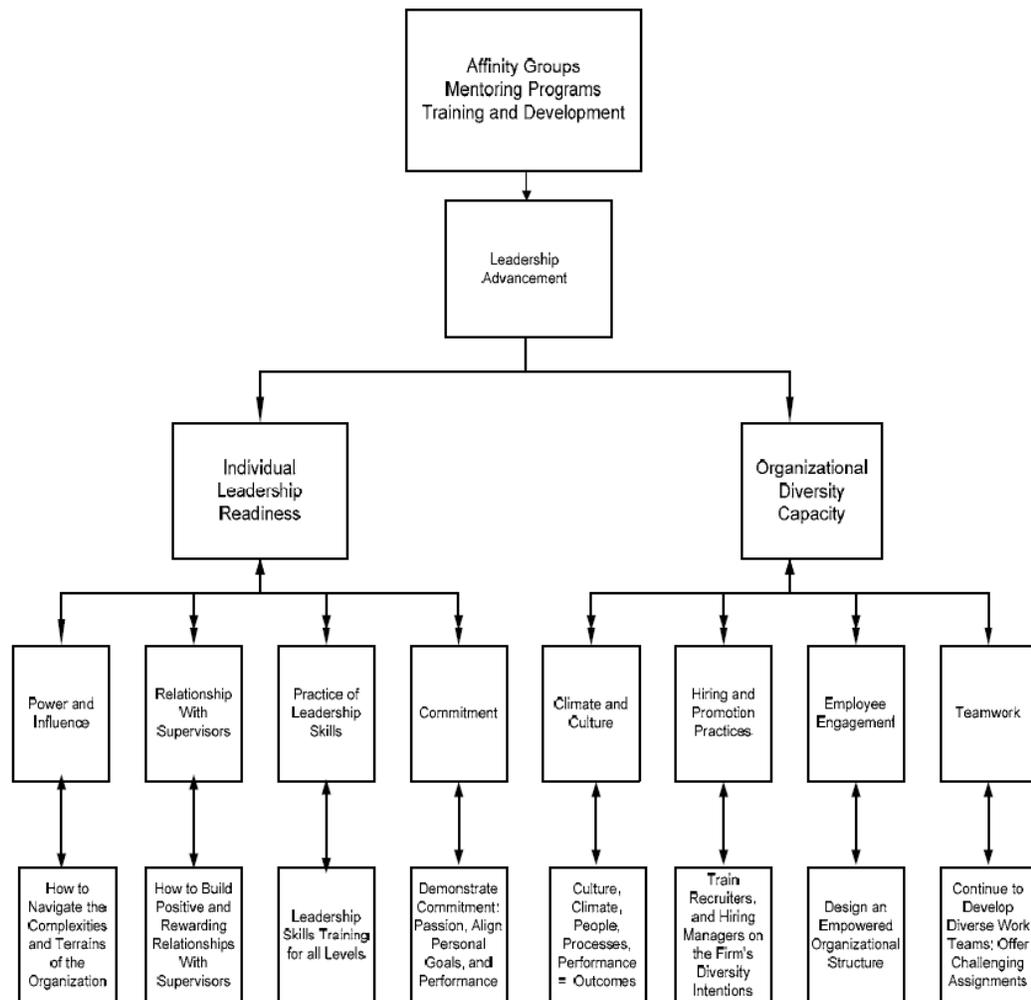


Figure 1. Conceptual leadership advancement framework with affinity groups, mentoring programs and training and development as the leading influence of leadership advancement.

In addition to diversity initiatives, research has found that the career advancement of women in the workplace can be accelerated when organizations create intentional policies that support this outcome. Research conducted by Dawley, Hoffman and Smith (2004) suggested African-American women who were promoted had access to the advancement opportunity as a result of organizational policies that supported not only a qualified, but also a diverse employee group. The findings asserted organizations that embrace this approach understand that placing women in assignments with high visibility, while also establishing mentoring programs and cross-functional training to expand their scope of knowledge, will enhance the career advancement prospects for women.

Barriers or challenges

Few African-American Women in Executive Positions

An in-depth review of history will reveal the challenges women experienced climbing the corporate ladder. Many were restricted completely. Some worked long and hard and made many sacrifices to get their start. Research shows that women hold from 1.3% to 5.1% of executive positions across the world (Berry & Franks, 2010). Within the U.S., 4% of women hold CEO or senior leadership positions (Catalyst, 2013). The percentage of African American women is significantly less. “A new study from McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org estimates that at the rate we’re going it could take about 25 years to reach gender parity in senior vice president roles, and more than 100 years to do so in C-suite jobs” (Sahadi, 2015, p.1).

Women, in general, have encountered sexism, discrimination, exclusion, and a lack of career advancement opportunities (Baley, Wolfe & Wolfe, 1996, Hughes & Dodge, 1997, Brown, 2004, Johnson, 2005, Gee, 2006, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, Scales, 2010). African American women have had the added racism as a barrier or hindrance. Both perceived and realized challenges faced by women, specifically African American women in their ascent to executive positions may be even greater once in those positions (Sanchez-Hucles, & Davis, 2010). Thus, for African-American women in executive positions, this double challenge presents added obstacles to overcome for success.

There has been extensive research over the decades of the challenges and barriers for women and African-American women, specifically, in Corporate America. Four major themes consistently validated through the research include:

1. African-American women are at a double disadvantage based on race and gender, which produces a different experience from all other women and racial groups. This may be due to the history of slavery and the view and treatment of African-American women (Duehr & Bono, 2006, Gee, 2006, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, Scales, 2010).
2. Based on the history of slavery and overall treatment of African-Americans in America, African-American women still struggle with the impact of stereotypes and its influence on how they are perceived (Bailey, Wolfe & Wolfe, 1996, Hughes & Dodge, 1997, Johnson, 2005, Gee, 2006, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, Scales, 2010).
3. The further impact of the dual bias of race and gender often isolates African-American women in this experience within the workplace (Brown, 2004, Johnson, 2005, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, Thorpe-Moscon & Pollack, 2014).
4. Thus, more is expected and more is needed for African-American women to exceed in comparison to their same sex peers (McGee, 1999, Brown, 2004, Johnson, 2005,

Gee, 2006, Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, Sauders, 2010).

These four areas present obstacles that many African-American women face in Corporate America and to reach executive positions these must be confronted and overcome.

African-American Women Face Dual Bias of Race & Gender

The most prominent issue African American women executives contend with is the dual bias of race and gender, as mentioned above. Discrimination against women exists today in a lesser sense in regards to pay and promotion as it did in the past. Nevertheless, evidence shows an inequity still exists amongst women in comparison to their male counterparts (Kellerman & Rhode, 2007). Although the salary gap has lessened over the years decreasing from 42% in 1960 to 21% gap in 2014, there is another 40 plus years before the pay is expected to be equal to men (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2016). Although this gap is not as great as years ago and some could argue that strides have been made, this disparity still impacts women and African American women to a greater extent. According to Sanchez-Hucles & Davis (2010),

“White women may experience gender discrimination, whereas African American women may experience both gender and racial discrimination. The joint possibility of gender and racial discrimination makes it impossible for African American women to make accurate causal attributions concerning potential discrimination if they are passed over for leadership development opportunities” (p. 176).

Those in leadership positions have to excel, in spite of, as well as, in the midst of these challenges. One major conclusion is in regards to African American women, race and gender cannot be separated, meaning African American women typically do not experience race discrimination separate from gender discrimination, the two typically go hand-in-hand (Davis, 2012, Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

For African American women, the barriers of race and gender influence not only the manner in which African American women executives are driven to be successful but also contributes to the many stereotypes and perceptions that hinder African American women executives. The stereotypes influence how African American women are promoted and to some extent, how successful or not they are in those positions. Recent research concludes that gender stereotypes have changed or are in the process of changing due to diversity training in organizations. While the view of women is perceived as more confident and ambitious, successful women are presumed to possess more masculine traits than feminine ones or require the need to act more masculine (Duehr & Bono, 2006) in order to prove themselves.

The Impact of Stereotypes

Hoyt & Blascovich (2007) deem this stereotype / attitude as “think manager, think male stereotype”. Thus, the premise is that for female executives to be successful they must possess the traits of their male counterparts. This assumption is used to assess the successfulness of women managers but is also used against them. Hoyt and Blascovich (2007) stated, “Top management positions and executive level jobs are almost always thought to require an achievement-oriented aggressiveness and an emotional toughness that is antithetical to the female gender stereotype” (p. 596). This means that many times, executive positions are often

thought to require a different persona than women are believed to have. Thus, women either adjust to the desired stereotype to be successful or risk judgment and pressure. African American women executives are under additional pressures to conform to these stereotypes or resist them (Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998, Kray, Reb, Galinsky, & Thompson, 2004). Research also suggests that the more powerful women are in these positions, the less likely to conform to the stereotypes (Kray, Reb, Galinsky, & Thompson, 2004).

Stereotypes can influence the behavior and performance of African American women executives (Catalyst, 2005). The manner in which African American women executives communicate, lead, make decisions, and even assert themselves in the workplace brings them under scrutiny (Collins, 2000; Valentine, 2007). African American women executives are characterized as overly aggressive in communication, which may not differ from their male counterparts but is highly criticized (Collins, 2000; Valentine, 2007). For many African American women executives, success does not come without aggressive communication, hard work – more than their counterparts, and acceptance does not come easy or quickly (Scott, 2011). African American women executives have to speak up for their voices to be heard and assert themselves within their organizations to avoid their power being minimized (Scott, 2011, Collins, 2000).

In addition, African-American women executives have to work harder and outperform their counterparts, are often excluded from informal social networks and have a harder time obtaining sponsors. Women, in general, experience the challenge of balancing a dual role of mother and often wife at home and an executive at work, thus balancing personal versus professional lives. This balancing may often distract from attending extra functions at work or sacrificing family time. Bell (1990) suggested African American women executives have the added pressure of being the figurative spokesperson for their race and gender. Thus, sacrificing work events may mean limited to no access to informal networking events that could be beneficial to the career growth (Fryxell & Lerne, 1989, Mizruchi, 2000, Scott, 2011).

African-American Women Are Often Isolated

African American women executives, in general, are often placed in positions, where they are the only one of their race and gender, thus African American women executives are often isolated in their roles. As the statistics reveal, African American women executives are a minority in executive positions, which often results with few to no peers of their race and gender. Catalyst (2014) described this as “being the ‘other’ in the workplace.” This feeling of “otherness” is a form of isolation which may also reflect in few friendships or limited social activity at work (Catalyst, 2014). Unfortunately, this can reduce visibility and even promotional opportunities. Catalyst (2014) stated, “People who feel like an ‘other’ not only feel different, but also feel separated from the essential group... People who are different may take on the status of ‘outsider:’ they are not truly embraced as part of the team and they are excluded from opportunities” (p.2). As such, this exclusion further limits the number of African American women in executive positions.

Mentoring and sponsorship become even more essential for African American women executives to aid in their effectiveness and to break down the barriers of isolation. The challenge is African American women executives often lack influential mentors or sponsors (Brown, 2004). Additionally, 31% of African American women attribute the lack of company role models of the same racial/ ethnic group as a barrier in the workplace (Brown, 2004).

Understandably, with the low numbers of African American women executives, there is a lack

of African American women executives mentors within the same organizations thereby requiring African American women executives to both gain confidence in their abilities while networking across industries.

Further, women, in general, are typically mentored by other women with few having male mentors while the majority of men have male mentors (Sahadi, 2015). The problem is men hold the majority of executive positions, which influences the hiring and promotion of many females. Thus, as stated by Silva et al (2012), “One consequence of not having access to senior-level mentors is a decreased likelihood of getting access to a key position that promote career advancement” (p. 8).

It Takes More for African American Women Executives to Succeed

Many studies identified that African American women executives have to be confident in their abilities and decisions (Davis, 2012, Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Once African American women executives are in their roles, in addition to fighting against the stereotypes and isolation, there is added pressure to be successful. Confidence is displayed through communication, decision-making, execution, and business performance results. African American women executives have to build and protect their confidence, which can be damaged or broken from actions of the workplace (McGee, 1999, Smith, 2003, Harris, 2011).

African American women executives have to be confident in their abilities and often have less room for mistakes as compared to their counterparts. Studies have found that “the intersection of race and gender biases often result in workplace inequities that distort others’ perceptions of African American women’s capabilities and, thus, permeate the everyday experiences of African American women” (Scott, 2011, p. 13). This leads to more scrutiny and criticism for African American women executives, thus making it harder for African American women executives to succeed (Hughes & Dodge, 1997, Patterson, 2006). A belief is African American women executives have to display masculine qualities to counter the perception of passiveness but often this assertiveness and ambition misinterpreted (Twenge, 1997, Duehr & Bono, 2003, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Bandura (1982, 1986, 1997) believed self-efficacy is critical to overcoming the negative impact of stereotypes. Hoyt and Blascovich (2007) stated, “Individuals high in self-efficacy adopt a more problem-focused strategy; those lower in self-efficacy assume a more emotion-focused approach” (p. 598). This self-efficacy boosts self-confidence and overall performance (Bandura, 1982, 1986, 1997, Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). Self-efficacy becomes a necessary trait for African American women executives to excel in the face of challenges and may give African American women executives leverage in their ability to succeed.

Catalyst (2004) conducted a study that revealed African American women may offer a perspective unlike that of other women. The article stated, African-American women ... are able to leverage their strengths to succeed in the workplace, by exceeding performance expectations, communicating effectively, connecting with mentors, building positive relationships with managers and others, and using their cultural backgrounds to enhance their job performance. Being “outsiders” actually seems to help their performance in some ways (Catalyst, 2004, p. 4).

Thus, African American women executives operate from an “outsiders” point of view, which offers an insight and advantage often missed by someone on the “inside.” African

American women executives have had to learn how to use this perspective to maneuver in a business world dominated by white males.

The Aim of Diversity Programs

To address many of the issues listed above, companies have diversity programs. These programs are meant to bring awareness and equality within the workforce. Granted, as a country, America has made significant progress in combating blatant racism and gender discrimination. Unfortunately, a disparity still exists in the form of pay gaps between men and women, the number of women, specifically, African-American women in C-suite positions and on Boards (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn, 2015).

McKinsey & Company with LeanIn (2015) found, “Women are still underrepresented at every level in the corporate pipeline. . . women face greater barriers to advancement and an even steeper path to senior leadership”(p.1). Thus, as recently as the last few years, women are still at a disadvantage in the workplace, playing on an imbalanced playing field. Much can be contributed to organizational cultures, which have changed at a very slow pace or very little over the past century.

Interestingly, recent research suggests and confirms that diversity in the workplace can help improve organizational performance although this is limited to organizations with a female CEO and with the proportion of women on the board (Noland, Moran, Kotschwar, 2016). “Data shows that women have the qualifications and work experience to take on responsibilities at the highest level. However, the challenge is the slow pace in achieving a critical mass of women in top jobs with power. . . the result is persistent occupational segregation” (Barry & Franks, 2010, pg. 5). Thus, diversity programs, alone, are not the answer. Further, the existence of diversity programs has not eliminated the glass ceiling, which for African-American women, is now considered a “concrete ceiling” (Catalyst, 1999). This is not to say that some African-American women have not successfully made it to C-Suite positions and to Corporate Boards, only to confirm that many obstacles and barriers still exist for those aspiring. In addition, those in executive positions are not free from these challenges, but rather have to strive to overcome them.

Models That May Help African American Women

Jenny Alonzo postulated the following: “We’ve been learning how to play the game since we were kids.” (2012, p.112) Some may argue that is the case for some of the African American executives who have “made it” to the top, while others would argue that they are still trying to figure out what the game is and how to play it. Review of current research presents data that supports the need for African American females to learn the game because if they do not, they will not ascend. Evidence is captured in interviews conducted with various African American female senior executives who offer suggestions and strategies to help others with the objective of reaching higher levels. Giscombe and Mattis (2002) identified barriers to progression in their research but also pointed out that those entering organizations with hopes of reaching senior levels must adopt existing organizational norms which are framed by the white male majority. This is the reality of African American females who learn early on the need to assimilate to be accepted. Giscombe and Mattis (2002) are careful to remind us that those in power tend to support those in their dominant group, thus conferring senior positions of authority on those with the same group.

There's the perception that African American females in executive positions have been restricted; this review turns to those who have not been prevented from entering the executive ranks and asks the question, is there a specific model that supported their ascension and if so, what is it?

Nicole Lewis (of Kelly Services, which specializes in workforce management services and human resources solutions), stated the following: "Being in corporate America is about playing team ball 100% of the time. Even when you don't play, you have to." (p. 1)

Whether valid or not, many African American females trying to ascend to the top of corporations find this to be an accurate portrayal of what is true. Dr. Ancella B. Livers, PhD, is the executive director of The Executive Leadership Council's Institute for Leadership Development & Research. Dr. Livers participated in a year-long study that analyzed and evaluated success factors and obstacles for African American women executives reaching the highest levels of the corporate chain-the C-suite. Factors evaluated were relationship building, mentorship and sponsorship, work-life balance, risk-taking opportunities, and cross-cultural competence in a global work environment. The findings showed that there were benefit in having minorities in senior level positions; however, the findings also showed that African-American females faced serious challenges in their climb up the corporate ladder. According to Livers (2009), thirty-one percent of the surveyed executives attribute those challenges to weaker or less strategic networks available to African American females. Based on the findings, The Executive Leadership Council concluded the following:

- African American female should seek high-visibility stretch assignments to improve their access to C-Suite positions.
- African American females should set career goals and create the action plans necessary to achieve them.
- African American females should work with executive coaches to prepare for and take full advantage of critical feedback.

Dr. Livers followed up with the following comment:

CEOs and black women executives seem to have a significant disconnect about how they view some of the behaviors and experiences of senior black corporate women (p. 2).

Another team of researchers, Caldwell and Watkins (2007) reviewed upward mobility factors for those who held leadership positions versus those who did not. These researchers turned to Mimms' research for support of their proposition.

A review of Mimms' (1996) research explored characteristics of successful African American female administrators. By using surveys and interviews, the researchers worked with two black female presidents and two who were not presidents. The research found that six factors were generally used in the enhancement of careers: holding a doctoral degree, being recognized through participation in national organizations, communication skills, people support, administrative experience and being mobile. Although these may prove to be important, it can be argued that these characteristics are fluid and are not necessarily the solution for African American females. In fact, in one institution, these criteria were purported to be important for ascension. The reality is that several African American females followed the purported model to no avail, while their white peers by-passed the process altogether. If one does not have the relationships and social support networks as their dominant counterparts, these proposed solutions are futile.

Research supports the argument that social networking could be the single most important tool one can have as they try to ascend. Social support can range from relationships with family, friends, community, church, synagogue, and mosque and to those in power in the work environment. Caldwell and Watkins (2007) refer to Granovetter's theory of social networking (1973) and its possible positive or negative effect on those aspiring to higher levels. The theory focuses on the importance of strengthening ties and understanding the impact of relationships that bring others into contact with socially distinct ideas that might not be readily accessible. Payne & Hyle (2001) argue that it is not who you know, it is whom and what they know based on what they tell you. As such, it can be postulated that African American women face a variety of challenges starting with perceived limitations to powerful social networks with the dominant senior level executives. The lack of access to these social networks creates frustration and impacts self-esteem; social inequities in this case go beyond sexism and racism. Hamilton (2004) in interviews with six college presidents, found social support and self-reliance clearly interconnect with self-esteem as important to upward mobility.

African American females are graduating from college, graduate school and joining corporate companies at high rates, yet many are having difficulty moving into senior positions posits Coachman (2009). Coachman's study supports what has been argued by Hamilton (2004) and others. In fact, Coachman offered recommendations to women seeking upward progression into the executive suite.

- Relationships with senior executives need more work. According to Coachman (2009), black women executives suffer from relationships that are comfortable, trusting and strategic as opposed to their white counterparts; particularly white males.
- Feedback is another area where African American females are lacking. Whereas viable and important feedback is given to others, black women are not afforded that luxury. They do not have the internal networks and thus, fail to get enough strategic feedback about how they are doing and how best to advance.
- Experience weighs heavily in the decision to promote. What kind of experiences are black women getting? The research indicated that black female executives do not have the opportunity to showcase the breadth of their skills and experience to the higher levels of the organization.
- Work-life balance seems to be an individual experience. According to Coachman (2009), if black females are proactive in managing work and life, they increase their ability to compete at the highest levels.

Another look at the research conducted by The Executive Leadership Council shows four recommendations African American female executives must do to increase their chances for upward progression. According to Dr. Livers, African American women should do the following:

- Stay in line positions longer or negotiate for operating roles.
- Become an expatriate. Work in an international capacity
- Expand their responsibilities so that others see them as able to handle greater responsibility.
- Make sure their accomplishments are seen by the CEO and peers

Study after study present themes of African American females need for mentors and champions; thus the need to focus their energies on building those social networks. That may not seem appealing as this may be interpreted as having to assimilate to the dominant culture.

Gates (2003) conducted an exploratory study wherein she examined the ways in which American women and men experienced organizations. As a result of the interviews, she found that interpersonal interactions of African Americans with one another as well as with members of the other cultural groups, identified the lack of communication tactics used by African Americans to successfully negotiate their places in organizations. The theme of playing the game continued in Gate's study also.

Davis' (2012) phenomenological study on the leadership development of African American women executives in academia and business reveal five core themes as a result of the interviews with successful African American females; they were "(1) they believed they were predestined for success, (2) they received Sponsorship from the Unexpected, (3) they experienced Double Jeopardy of Race and Gender, (4) they learned How to Play the Game, and (5) they believed in the importance of Paying It Forward." (p.159).

Jackson's (2007) research investigated the experiences and perceptions of barriers to the presidency of 43 African American female college and university presidents. Findings suggested that exclusion from informal networks; lack of preparation and lack of career goals were primary barriers. In addition to the barriers, Jackson outlined strategies for success for African American females who desired to ascend to higher levels in organizations. Such strategies noted are similar as those found by other researchers with additional strategies being as follows: exceed job expectations, be visible and develop leadership skills.

In research conducted by Kimberly Ann Robinson (2012), African American female executives who held those positions from 3-55 years interviewed not only identified perceived barriers, but provided strategies that others could use in order to ascend to higher levels in organizations. One participant offered strategies that ranged from securing an advocate to obtaining higher level degrees to gaining experience outside of one's specialty area to deciding on which part of the country is desired for work. A second participant in Robinson's (2012) study emphasized the importance of having good people skills, special assignments and the importance of serving on committees outside of one's own area of expertise. Another participant reminded African American females that they are expected to act aggressively, so it is important to remain calm in stressful situations. An additional important strategy noted was the importance of cultivating relationships with people. "Knowing how to negotiate and communicate effectively is essential in overcoming the negative issues that may try to hinder your worth." (Robinson, 2012, p.100).

What is clear from the literature is that there is no prescribed model that ensures the ascension of African American female executives into the higher ranks of organizations. The research is scattered at best. Where some of the strategies considered helpful might work fine for some, they did not for others. Cases are as different as the people reviewing them and various factors will influence the dynamics of relationship building and ultimately whether one is offered the opportunity or be invited into the game that so many mention one must play,

In an article written in BusinessInsuranceQuotes, Ursula Burns, Chief Executive Officer of Xerox states the following: "Women have it hard. African-American women have it harder. African-American businesswomen have it triple tough, and that's just the truth."

Assumptions and Limitations

Authors of this study are of African American heritage, thus various assumptions were noted at the beginning of this review. One such assumption was that there are barriers preventing

African American women from the most senior levels in organizations. The literature seems to support this assumption.

Another assumption is that there are specific tools that can provide solutions to the issue of ascension and if appropriately followed, African American women will rise to the C-level. Literature reviewed provides various tools, however, the data is scattered and does not provide a prescriptive tool for advancement of this group.

A third assumption was that there were more African American women in CEO positions for Fortune 500 companies in the United States. The fact is there is only one African American woman holding the position of CEO in a Fortune 500 organization. Although the belief that African Americans are in power in Fortune 500 organizations is not true, the idea that they are stems from combined numbers of both male and females with African American males holding those positions as scarce as they might be.

Finally, a noted limitation is the availability and accessibility to enough African American women executives to conduct an in depth study and more detailed research in this area.

Implications

In the 21st century, globalization, intercultural understanding, service, and collaboration, are viewed as necessities rather than something that may be interesting to embrace. The global society should have progressed far beyond the years of civil rights marches and fights for human dignities. Today we face other human injustices such as human trafficking and food insecurity; however, deciding whether a woman of a certain race should be able to move into the upper levels of executive management should be far from modern day discussions. On the contrary, it is at the forefront of the minds of many African American women who have worked in industry and seek their place at the higher levels of their organizations.

African American women walk a tightrope in the managerial arena (Combs, 2003). They continue to maneuver between sex and race and all the stereotypes associated with these. The implications for this group are far-reaching and restrict diversity; limits the ability for other points of view based on different experiences in the workplace and stifles growth. Ultimately, society does not move forward with this group, instead organizations lose out on a valuable source of experience and insight as it pertains to leadership.

Cain (2015) posited that positive societal change includes the enhancement of equal opportunities for African American women in senior executive level positions. This can only be accomplished when employers stop ignoring that a problem exists and become more willing to take on the responsibility of providing mentors to this population of women. Cain further argues that there is a need for this kind of action, as it creates the attitude in organizations that African American women are valuable and their capabilities are worth embracing. African American women in senior executive positions may be able to better contribute to society based on their lived experiences. Thus, mentoring may improve the chances of African American women to be considered for senior level positions. (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011).

The unwillingness to engage in providing mentorship or other leadership development plans result in unfortunate missteps for companies who say they support equality for all, but do little to show their support through their actions. An implication for not providing mentors means less qualified African American women ready for the C-suite.

These implications are far reaching, crossing over from business to government and into academia. For example, in Academia, 87% of U.S. college presidents both male and female are white. Out of that number, 26% are women (American Council on Education, 2012). In 2011,

81% of college presidents were white and 8% were African American (ACE, 2012); these numbers represent the absence of African American women in leadership positions in traditional career areas.

Davis (2015) postulates that barriers to leadership opportunities are a global phenomenon and this phenomenon is perceived to be against women, but to add to that the color of the woman is more disconcerting (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). African American women in organizations report that racism, not sexism, is the greatest barrier to their upward mobility (Parker, 1996; Talley-Ross, 1992).

Overall, the implications of not having African American women in key levels of leadership prevent organizations from benefitting from a diverse perspective. It has been argued that diversity is the key element to the growth of organizations in a competitive global environment. Should corporations continue to hide behind their lack of cultural intelligence, they will lose their competitive edge; they will lose relevancy (Forbes, 2011).

Conclusion

Research agrees that African American women face the duality of race and gender bias in the workplace. This combination presents many challenges from barriers to promotion to obstacles for career growth. Research also shows that many African American women have overcome these challenges, but overall numbers are still far and few. More mentoring is needed, specifically sponsorship, to aid African American women to gain the visibility necessary for promotion as well as develop the skills and confidence for ascension. Current strategies vary amongst African American females who have made it to the C-suite, thus no one succinct route exists. Further study may aid in identifying common traits and possible resolutions to overcome the known challenges faced by African American women.

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