How Organizations Can Improve the Leadership Representation of Black Women Employees

Diversity and Inclusion Research Team
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By Analyst(s): Diversity and Inclusion Research Team

Foundational: This research is reviewed periodically for accuracy.

Intersectional data analysis shows, despite underrepresentation in leadership positions, Black women employees in the U.S. are more likely than their male counterparts to display informal leadership behaviors. D&I leaders can access this research to learn how to better advance these employees.

Lack of Diverse Leadership

A growing body of research indicates that in addition to better innovation, collaboration and customer service outcomes, diverse companies also show better financial performance. Simultaneously, diversity and inclusion are emerging as priorities for CEOs and business leaders. HR is uniquely positioned to support underrepresented employees and the broader business to ensure that diversity extends to the leadership bench. Organizations have progressed in the past years at increasing women’s representation in leadership. However, these initiatives have overwhelmingly benefited white women employees, while women of color (WOC), especially Black women, have a much more challenging experience attaining executive roles.

D&I leaders have a real opportunity to address this glaring discrepancy by developing Black women employees to be future-ready leaders, thus diversifying the leadership bench and retaining underrepresented talent.

Intersectionality: Race and Gender Barriers

The term “Intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a way to explain the oppression of Black women. It can be used to explain how multiple aspects of social identity discrimination — for example, race and gender — overlap (“intersect”). 1 In the United States, where long legacies of sexism and racism continue to hold back women and people of color, Black women particularly face workplace challenges based on both their race and gender.
For instance, until 1970, most employers would only hire Black women in domestic service work, excluding Black women from better-paying and higher-status jobs. Since then, companies have made strides to recruit Black women to various sectors, yet pay gaps and promotion remain an issue. As early as 2017, the median annual earnings for full-time Black women employees was just over $36,000 — 21% lower than that for white women.² Black women are also most likely to be passed over for promotions; for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 60 Black women are.³ This steady systematic inequality contributes to the “black ceiling,” a phenomenon of socioeconomic factors that hold Black women employees back.⁴ Companies are starting to feel the repercussions of historical systems of inequality, as “unfairness” is the most-cited reason that employees of diverse backgrounds leave their roles.⁵ Coincidentally, between 2007 and 2015 the number of Black women professionals has decreased by 13%.⁶

**Black Women as Informal Leaders**

Despite experiencing numerous barriers in the workplace, many Black women employees are leading regardless of title. In addition to Black women’s desire to be role models at their organizations, the latest Gartner survey on leadership found that Black women employees are most likely to display the behaviors of informal leaders — individuals who take on leadership responsibilities outside of their formal commitments.

Compared to all male respondents in our survey, Black women employees were more likely to display informal leader behaviors toward their teammates and formal leaders. Teammates were more likely to seek their input before making decisions (see Figure 1), as well as more likely to rely on them to communicate concerns (see Figure 2) and defend decisions to team leaders (see Figure 3).

Additionally, their team leaders were more likely to ask them to coach others to perform specific tasks (see Figure 4) and convince others on the right way to move forward (see Figure 5). These findings do not mean all Black women are informal leaders, but rather that informal leadership characteristics spike among this specific demographic. Black women’s proficiency in informal leadership behaviors may be attributed to the unique bias and obstacles they face in the workplace. The frequency with which they encounter obstacles and setbacks may foster hyper-awareness of their workplace culture.⁷

Given that the barriers involve complex issues deeply rooted in centuries-old norms, how can we embrace, retain and find ways to leverage Black women employees?
Figure 1: Q – “My Teammates Seek My Input Before Making Decisions”

My Teammates Seek My Input Before Making Decisions
Percentage of Employees

- All Men: 31%
- Black Women: 40%

n = 3,970 employees
Source: 2019 Gartner Leader Effectiveness Survey for Leaders
739605_C
Figure 2: Q — “My Teammates Rely On Me to Communicate Their Concerns to Our Team Leader”

**My Teammates Rely On Me to Communicate Their Concerns to Our Team Leader**

Percentage of Employees

- **All Men**: 27%
- **Black Women**: 38%

*n = 3,970 employees*

Source: 2019 Gartner Leader Effectiveness Survey for Leaders

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Figure 3: Q — “My Teammates Rely On Me to Defend Their Decisions to Our Team Leader”

My Teammates Rely On Me to Defend Their Decisions to Our Team Leader
Percentage of Employees

- All Men: 26%
- Black Women: 36%

n = 3,970 employees
Source: 2019 Gartner Leader Effectiveness Survey for Leaders
73605_C
Figure 4: Q — “My Team Leader Asks Me to Coach Others to Perform Certain Work Tasks”

My Team Leader Asks Me to Coach Others to Perform Certain Work Tasks
Percentage of Employees

- **All Men**: 31%
- **Black Women**: 43%

n = 3,970 employees
Source: 2019 Gartner Leader Effectiveness Survey for Leaders
73605_C
Create a Workplace Culture That Supports the Development of Black Women Employees

D&I leaders can foster a workplace culture where Black women employees can advance by working with HR to implement the following practices:

- Demonstrate pay transparency.
- Reduce bias in promotion and succession plans.
- Foster a culture of psychological safety and trust.

Demonstrate Pay Transparency
When considering leaving a current employer, women candidates are 23% more likely than men candidates to leave an organization due to lack of respect. Organizations can demonstrate respect toward their employees in a variety of ways, including by compensating them equitably. But fixing pay discrepancies is not enough; organizations also need to mitigate perceptions of pay gaps. Women employees are twice as likely as men employees to perceive a gender pay gap, and racial and ethnic minorities are five times as likely as white employees to perceive a race pay gap. Falling into both of these demographic groups, Black women are doubly impacted by perceptions of pay discrepancy, which may impact retention. Given that retention is a fundamental part of advancing Black women employees, D&I and HR leaders should address pay transparency issues by ensuring pay equity is discussed during employee-manager conversations.

What D&I leaders can do:

1. Partner with HR, legal and senior leaders to facilitate organizationwide communication around pay.

2. Mitigate employee confusion by clarifying the difference between role-to-role and group-to-group pay gaps.

3. Include pay transparency goals that the organization hopes to achieve and note milestones as they are reached.

4. Confirm pay equity results using an unbiased external source, such as a consulting, research or legal firm.

Reduce Bias in Promotion Processes or Embed Bias Mitigation Efforts Into Existing Processes

Given that unconscious bias can affect who gets hired and promoted, reducing bias in promotion reviews is a worthy approach to supporting and leveraging employees. One way to do this is through “inclusion nudges,” a set of behaviors identified by D&I researchers Tinna Nielsen and Lisa Kepinski that make actionable, inclusive decision making natural and reduce reliance on willpower. This prevents promotion reviewers from falling back on default behaviors and mental shortcuts, which can lead to biased decisions. To reduce bias during promotion reviews, Cargill embeds a process inclusion nudge that assumes everyone is eligible for promotion and then asks leaders to make the case for why an individual is not ready for promotion. Placing all employees on equal footing mitigates bias and focuses succession planning efforts on employees’ merits.
Build a Work Culture of Psychological Safety

To be a Black woman employee in a corporate space is to be continuously aware of how you fit in — or don’t — and to be constantly battling presumptions that others may have about you. Many women develop coping strategies, such as “identity shifting” or code switching, to diminish the negative consequences of discrimination. Employees in psychologically safe environments are more comfortable showing and employing their authentic selves without fear of being negatively labeled, because they feel accepted and respected. D&I leaders can help foster psychological safety in their organizations by encouraging leaders and managers to focus on improving their communication and trust with each employee on their teams. One way to improve communication is through career conversations in which managers meet with employees to discuss their career aspirations and satisfaction. This can involve instituting an open-door policy and making time to understand the different communication styles their employees might prefer.

Conclusion

Black women are not progressing to the highest level of leadership within organizations where they are employed. Yet, Black women display informal leader behaviors on their teams. This particular employee segment is one of a variety of diverse employee groups that bring an intersectional identity to the workplace; organizations must understand the importance of intersectionality and the ways that employees’ multiple identities define their experiences both inside and outside of work.

Recommended by the Authors (For Gartner Clients Only)

“Advancing Underrepresented Talent: 3 Ways You Need to Reset Your Strategy”

This research equips DEI leaders to reset their strategies and sustainably advance underrepresented talent.

“Employee Representation by Industry in the United States”

HR leaders can use this research to benchmark representation across industries, including women and people of color, at different levels.

“A Holistic Approach to Advancing Women in Leadership”

D&I leaders can use this resource to create a comprehensive strategy to better attract, retain and promote women in leadership.
Endnotes


3 “Women in the Workplace,” LeanIn.org.


5 “The 2017 Tech Leavers Study,” Kapor Center.

6 “There Are Now Fewer Black Women in Tech Than There Were 10 Years Ago,” Fast Company.


8 2017 Gartner Global Labor Market Survey.

9 “Embed Bias Mitigation to Create Diverse Succession Slates”

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