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## Leadership—Bridging today's gender gap

According to recent headlines, the waters look somewhat troubled for women seeking leadership positions in the business world. As dedicated professionals, we need to determine if this is an accurate assessment, and we must ask what the future holds.

The last decade delivered a plethora of associations organized to help women find their leadership voice. Networking events are examples of proven methods women have implemented to reach their career goals.



### Not For Women Only

Deborah Chambers Chima

According to research by Catalyst, in 1999, 11.2 percent of board members at the largest companies were women. In December 2003, the percentage had grown to only 13.6 percent. Yet, recent headlines continue to feature stories of the demise of senior level women executives in Corporate America. These headlines, coupled with a well documented lack of women in leadership roles on corporate boards, indicate a mixed message.

The conflicting messages of providing support for women to reach and sustain their leadership momentum, and the continuous exit of senior level women indicate a clear need to develop women leaders through a more practical, step by step process. More than 50 percent of today's workforce are women, therefore organizations seeking to meet their business revenue goals would benefit from implementing such a process.

One of the recommended solutions to closing the revolving door is to focus on the five universal key competencies needed to deliver effective leadership.

These competencies are:

- team building,
- leveraging diversity,
- communication,
- people development, and
- leading change.

Without the identification and execution of new strategies to develop and nurture more

women leaders, the future of some organizations remains uncertain.

In the book, *Choose to Lead, Advice, Tools, and Strategies for Women from Women*, my co-author and I note that in today's economy of downsizing and flatter organizations, more emphasis is being placed on team performance, and women leaders are needed. Additionally, organizations that want to lead in their industries know and understand the importance of the female market and its direct and indirect impact on their profit margins. It follows that these organizations should prioritize developing and promoting female leadership capabilities within their organizations.

I recommend the following five tips to bridge the gap between businesses at the top of their industries and those organizations struggling to achieve results because they don't understand how to best capitalize on the female assets within their organizations.

### Tip #1

*Team Building*—Create internal leadership teams that reflect your customer base. Women are very influential household-consumer decision-makers. You need members on your team who represent your marketplace. These team members must have a leadership voice within the organization to ensure the customer's voice is not only heard but understood.

### Tip #2

*Leveraging Diversity*—Women automatically bring diversity to the table when they serve in a leadership capacity. Seek women who are confident enough to oppose your viewpoint.

If they lack the confidence, create an environment where open dialogue is encouraged, accepted and valued. The end result will be a better product, service, or project.

### Tip #3

*Communication*—The differences in communication styles between men and women is well-documented, so there is no need to repeat them here. Keep your communication process simple. Make a concerted effort to do more listening to the voices of women in your organization. Your investment of time and patience in this area will be rewarded with

dedicated employees who will go out of their way to ensure you and your organization succeed—all because you are willing to take the time to really hear and understand what women in your organization are saying about how to address your business issues. Successful business owners know that a dedicated staff is invaluable.

### Tip #4

*People Development*—Organizations that want to succeed in today's economy understand the importance of developing their female talent for all the reasons we have discussed. Invest in creating strategic development plans that identify high-potential women who can help your organization reach the next level of performance. The women's viewpoint is very much needed in this world. Help the women in your organization to be the best and brightest in what they offer by investing in their development. If you are loyal and treat them fairly, they will remain loyal to you.

### Tip #5

*Leading Change*—If the voices of women leaders are allowed to be heard in the business world, change is inevitable. The changes will involve different viewpoints and perspectives about what it takes to achieve continued business success. Embrace this voice of change with enthusiasm, versus fear and trepidation. Seek to understand it. Change for the better benefits all. It is a proven fact that employees who feel empowered to make a difference in their workplace will feel a sense of connection. A sense of connection and belonging will ensure the future success of the organization.

As business build bridges to close the gender gap in leadership, they will continue to benefit from a diversity of opinion and experiences, a variety of leadership styles, and ultimately achieve improved business results.

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