

Achieving gender-balanced teams starts at the top

By Katie Date



Efforts to encourage more women to become supply chain practitioners and correct the gender imbalance that has long plagued the profession are starting to bear fruit. However, there is one area where progress is lacking: The leadership level.

Research indicates that gender-balanced enterprises tend to be more productive and innovative. Also, female supply chain leaders provide role models who can inspire women to enter the profession and climb the career ladder.

How can the supply chain management function entice more women to join its leadership ranks?

This was one of the questions discussed at the *Women in Supply Chain Summit: Achieving Balance in SCM* this past March in Boston. The event was organized by the MIT CTL Women in Supply Chain Initiative and hosted by lifestyle footwear and apparel brand Converse. The female practitioners who participated in the event provided some innovative approaches to changing the complexion of supply chain's upper echelon.

Progress—but not at the top

The 2019 AWESOME/Gartner Women in Supply Chain survey* summary reports a modest improvement in gender diversity in supply chain management. Women currently make up 39% of the supply chain workforce on average, according to the survey results. Gartner surveyed 165 supply chain professionals and their companies' goals to improve gender diversity.

However, the story is less encouraging at the senior managerial level. The number of female executive leaders has declined from 14% to 11% over the last two years; a sobering result observes the report.

There are several possible reasons for the decline. Some executives have retired, while others have been promoted to the C-suite or moved laterally within organizations. A challenge is how to replace the Baby Boomer generation of leaders with women from the Generation X and Millennial cohorts. The former is smaller than the Baby Boomer group while the Millennial generation is not supplying candidates for senior management positions fast enough, the report maintains.

The hope is that an observed uptick in the

number of VP-level female managers this year will fill the executive leadership gap over the next few years. However, such an outcome is by no means assured.

Corporate gender strategies

Meanwhile, there are various strategies that companies—and individuals—can put into practice to increase female representation at the senior level in supply chain management. Here are some examples from Women in Supply Chain Summit attendees who have gained first-hand experience of the challenge.

Grow the talent pool. Companies at the summit reported that recruiting women at the leadership level is particularly challenging because the pool of potential candidates tends to be relatively small.

Accelerated leadership programs for women can enlarge the pool. At one company, all four women in such a program attained senior vice president status in 10 years. Another company launched a Career Central platform that focuses on career development by, for example, offering courses geared to the advancement of female professionals. These offerings include sessions on self-reflection for individuals who need to clarify their career paths, guidance on how to articulate career goals and make course adjustments when necessary and tips on how to build the experience and knowledge needed to advance up the career ladder.

HR and supply chain leaders need to work together to help develop leaders. Several senior supply chain practitioners at the summit complained that all too often females are not included on the slate of candidates for high-level positions.

The good news is that as more women fill senior positions, the cycle of recruitment becomes self-reinforcing because the presence of females

Katie Date is the manager of corporate and SCALE network outreach at the MIT Center for Transportation and Logistics. She leads the MIT CTL Women in Supply Chain Initiative, which is exploring ways to address gender challenges in supply chain management through education and outreach initiatives targeted at mid-career supply chain professionals. She can be contacted at Datecl@mit.edu.

in the upper echelons of management encourages more women to aspire to these roles.

Let leaders lead the way. Women who rise through the leadership ranks can take on campaigner roles such as career mentoring, sponsoring and coaching to encourage junior females to tread the same path. It's essential that these senior-level women understand the difference between the roles. A mentor uses her knowledge and expertise to provide guidance. Sponsors actively champion a person's career development, whereas a coach seeks to nurture individuals by helping them to dig deep and find answers to career issues.

Some companies have established formal and informal programs that provide opportunities for executives to fulfill these roles. Structured programs can include clearly defined features such as quarterly milestones and measurable outcomes for mentors and mentees. There is also reverse mentoring where junior employees mentor senior executives (on technology issues, for example).

Each role requires a specific set of skills and level of commitment. For example, best practices for mentors include committing to regular meetings and ensuring that interactions with mentees are meaningful and not just informal chats. The best mentors are "connection managers" and not merely cheerleaders. They connect mentees to the next phase in their careers.

It's also important to appreciate that participating in these types of programs can benefit the executives involved as well as the aspiring female executives. A panelist at the summit noted that senior managers who were good coaches tended to be better leaders. Moreover, her company required that mid-level managers had to have taken at least one coaching course to be considered for promotion to higher positions.

Women who have succeeded in scaling the managerial heights can also be potent catalysts for change. In addition to providing role models for junior professionals, these executives can have a considerable influence on hiring practices. In one company at the summit, the global percentage of female hires increased by 35%, and women now represent 45% of the team, mainly due to the impact of one woman. The goal was to match the gender diversity of the country in which the team was located, particularly at the executive level, where females occupied 25% to 35% of the high-level positions.

Strike a balance in the workplace. The chances are that female leaders shoulder domestic responsibilities such as rearing children in addition to highly demanding management roles. Achieving the right work/life balance by, for example, clearly delineating "offline" time facilitates the retention of female executives.

However, it might be necessary to reframe "work/life balance" as "work/life integration" for the next generation of women leaders. The traditional concept of a balanced life implies that there is an adversarial relationship between the workplace and the home, which may be outdated. A successful career can be part of a fulfilling life, and exposing kids to a mother's career demands can ease the tension

between the office and the home. Moreover, girls that become familiar with their mother's leadership roles are likely to be less intimidated by the prospect of following a similar path.

Develop appropriate hiring practices. The way companies hire individuals for senior positions can hamper female candidates. A summit speaker pointed to the inappropriate wording of job descriptions as a potential obstacle to female candidates. For example, a spec that asks for "a supply chain ninja" can serve to deter female applicants. Asking the same questions in the same order when interviewing candidates helps to avoid unconscious bias in the recruitment process. Also, female participation in the hiring process increases the success rate of women applicants.

A personal mission, too

While companies can do much to encourage more women to take on the leadership mantle, individuals should play their part as well. Career-minded women need to take the time to clarify their priorities so they can effectively advocate for themselves, advised a summit presenter. Early in her career, she took on roles by default, not by design because her goals were not clear. Yet every career decision has a consequence.

Such clarity is especially important for women who stereotypically find it challenging to advocate for themselves. Moreover, they also have a propensity for unthinkingly saying "yes" to job opportunities rather than being forthright about their ambitions. A recurrent theme at the summit was the need for female professionals to overcome their gender's lack of self-confidence. Women tend to focus on the 20% of skills they lack rather than the 80% they possess—and in many instances the skills at which they excel. This tendency hinders women's rise through the managerial ranks both on a day-to-day basis and during job interviews. A more confident demeanor helps women to compete successfully for promotions.

There are mechanisms for building confidence. An example is advocacy networks; personal networks of female coworkers who support each other. One leader at the summit described a networking circle to which people were nominated. Members of such a network can support each other by, for example, helping to ensure that female colleagues are heard during meetings.

Adding value

A gender-balanced leadership team tends to be a more effective team. Moreover, women bring attributes to the top table that are increasingly valuable in today's competitive environment. Examples include the resilience that comes from having to negotiate a challenging career path and the ability to juggle multiple responsibilities. ∞∞

*2019 Women in Supply Chain Research, AWESOME and Gartner, May 2019, <https://www.awesomeleaders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-AWESOME-GartnerReport.pdf>