# Introduction: The Leadership Equation

Our research aims to shed light on why there are so few women represented in the senior-most levels of leadership in the biotech/pharma industry, despite the fact that women have been graduating with doctoral degrees in the biological and health sciences at equal or greater rates than men since 2008 and despite there being compelling business reasons to have more women in senior leadership positions.

To understand more about the factors that lead to this gender disparity, we interviewed
40 rising women scientist leaders, who were at the mid-management level in their organization, as well as 21 managers of mid-level women scientists and 15 HR partners who support them. Participants came from 19 different companies in the biotech/pharma and medical device industries.

Our research identified several critical factors that can support women’s advancement as well as a number of restraining forces that hinder them.

Through our findings, you can learn:

* What are the common disconnects between what women are told they need to do to advance and what managers and HR partners believe women need to do?
* How do a lack of processes and unskilled managers adversely affect women in particular?
* In what ways are women held to a different standard than men and role of unconscious bias?
* Why do some talented and dedicated women opt out?
* What factors have women found to be particularly helpful in their career development?
* What proactive steps can women and companies take to address these challenges?
* What resources are available to help close this gender gap at the senior leadership level?

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# The Leadership Equation: Critical Elements that Impact the Advancement of Women Scientists

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The biotech/pharma industry, like many male-dominated industries, has a problem advancing women. Although women have been graduating with doctoral degrees in the biological and health sciences at equal or greater rates than men since 2008,[[1]](#footnote-1) representation of women at the senior most levels of leadership in the industry is sadly far from equitable. Women are only 10 percent of Scientific Advisory Boards of biotech companies.[[2]](#footnote-2) In larger biotechs, only 20 percent have female Directors on their Boards and 52 percent of small biotechs (<1,000 people) have no female Board members at all.[[3]](#footnote-3) A recent study by MassBio in partnership with Liftstream found that only 1 in 10 Board members are women in the Massachusetts Life Sciences industry with only 20 percent representation on senior leadership teams.[[4]](#footnote-4) The feeder pool for these Board positions are the senior teams of the biotech/pharma organizations, but only 14 percent of biotechs have women on the leadership team, and often those at the C-level are in functional positions and not in senior scientific or business unit roles with P&L responsibilities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There is a strong business case for why the goal of gender parity should go beyond a “nice to have” and instead be accepted as a sound business strategy. When you consider the following, the case for advancing women leaders at all levels is clear:

* Companies with gender diverse Boards—at least three female members out of 10—outperform those with all male Boards.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Having a greater representation of women in senior management positions is correlated with better financial performance.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Teams with more women on them are “smarter” than less diverse teams in terms of productive brainstorming, decision-making, and solving complex problems.[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Venture capital firms with better gender diversity are more successful and produce a higher rate of returns.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Women, who make 80 percent of healthcare decisions, are the target market for the industry andcompanies with diverse cultures that mirror their target market perform significantly better than more homogenous organizations.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Based on our research, we know that many women in science *want* to be promoted and grow in their careers, yet they often encounter a variety of restraining forces that hinder them. Given the importance of advancing women scientists through the talent pipeline, we sought to better understand the factors that impede or facilitate women’s advancement by interviewing 40 rising women scientist leaders, who were at the mid-management level in their organizations. In addition, to get the perspective of organizations, we interviewed 21 managers of mid-level women scientists and 15 HR partners who support them. Participants came from 19 different companies in the biotech/pharma and medical device industries. After analyzing the data and referencing supporting research, we identified key actions that women can take to facilitate their own advancement and what organizations need to do differently to better support their rising women scientist leaders.

# What is unique about this work?

* *A focus on talent management processes:* Managers and HR partners who facilitate the processes that help advance talent often are not considering how those processes can disadvantage women and are likely unaware that the leadership capabilities they are assessing can show up differently for women versus men.
* *A focus on the biotech/pharma industry:* Many organizations in the industry have not built robust talent processes and may not invest in developing good managers. This can have a particularly negative effect on women’s leadership development, as less defined processes leave more room for unconscious bias to enter the system.
* *Exploration of the higher bar for women:* There is a gap between the leadership skills that organizations say they want to see to promote someone, what capabilities they perceive women as having, and where women are being told they need to develop to advance. Women are frequently expected to meet additional competencies beyond the standard leadership criteria for promotion, and are often unclear on where they need to grow to be given the next opportunity.
* *Insights on why women may opt out*: Due to organizational factors that are seen as discouraging or unappealing, some women choose not to pursue advancement despite desiring growth. If organizations are aware of the factors that contribute to this, they may more effectively help their female leaders achieve their career aspirations.
* *Providing clear advice*: Being executive coaches as well as talent management professionals, we provide clear, actionable recommendations for what women can do to support their own advancement, as well as what organizations can do to help women move up in the ranks.

# Desired Senior Leadership Capabilities

We first asked the HR partners and managers what leadership capabilities they need to see demonstrated in order to promote someone to a senior leadership role (*i.e.,* VP or above) and captured the 10 most common criteria that were identified by at least 20 percent of our participants. Later in the interview, we asked them to think about the women scientists in their organizations and evaluate their strengths and growth areas. We also asked the women scientists to reflect on feedback they have been given on their strengths and weaknesses.

For the top-five criteria that organizations list as necessary for promotion, women are ranked by organizations as weak in only one, while women rate themselves as being strong in all:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  **Criteria for promotion** | **What organizations say women need more of** | **What women say their capabilities are** |
| 1. Team Leadership & People Development
 |  | x |
| 1. Collaboration/Influencing Skills
 | x | x |
| 1. Scientific Knowledge/Technical Expertise
 |  | x |
| 1. Management & Planning Skills
 |  | x |
| 1. Good Communication Skills
 |  | x |

Of the top-five skills, the one skill that organizations felt women need more of was collaboration/ influencing skills. Conversely, women feel their collaboration and influencing abilities are some of their greatest strengths, although many of the women mentioned feeling that it was the ‘influencing’ side of this skill that they sometimes struggled with. When trying to influence people to get on board with a decision, women were seen as striving for consensus for too long instead of “selling their ideas” or just “making the call.”

If HR/managers see women as being strong in four out of the top-five skills, why do many women continue to be held back? Women report that they see men get promoted seemingly based primarily on their scientific and technical expertise, but if women are also skilled in this area, why is it not enough to get them promoted? Also, team leadership/ people development was an area the women felt highly confident about and is also a critical skill for promotion, yet women indicated their male colleagues were regularly promoted without demonstrating this capability. What creates this disconnect? The data presented later in this document begin to identify reasons for the disconnect including: unconscious bias, unsophisticated talent processes, vague or inconsistent feedback, a higher performance bar, and insufficient developmental coaching.

For the next five most important criteria that organizations list as required for promotion, the perceptions of the HR/managers and women were more closely aligned:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Criteria for promotion** | **What organizations say women need more of**  | **What women say their capabilities are** |
| 1. Ability to Execute
 |  | x |
| 1. Strategic Thinking
 | x |  |
| 1. Big Picture Thinking/ Business Acumen
 | x |  |
| 1. Political Savvy
 |  |  |
| 1. Assertiveness/ Conflict Skills
 | x |  |

HR/managers ranked women as needing more development in three of the next five most important skills, and women themselves did not indicate these areas as particular strengths. Notably, HR/managers mentioned that women need to improve their “Executive Presence/Confidence” and women also reported hearing this is something they need to work on, yet it does not appear on any organization’s list as required for promotion. If it’s not required for promotion, why is it being cited as something that women need to have? Most of the women also indicated this feedback was vague and they were unclear how they needed to change their behavior to have more “Executive Presence.”

# What’s the problem? Gaps and stumbling blocks

Women believe they have many of the strengths needed to ascend to the next level, and organizational representatives generally agree, yet women often feel their careers stalling as their male counterparts are promoted even without some of these skills. This leaves women rightly feeling they are being held to higher or different standards and that some of what impedes their advancement is related to forces outside their control.

One uncontrollable force that appears to contribute to many of the stumbling blocks outlined below, is the presence of unconscious bias. According to the University of California’s Office of Diversity and Outreach, “everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one’s tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing.” In work situations, it may cause people to attribute stronger leadership qualities to men than to women.

What does our research reveal as some of the core stumbling blocks?

*Lack of process for our industry*:
Many of the study participants commented that biotechs —especially early-stage companies—are primarily focused on the science and neglect to build rigorous HR processes. For employees, this means they aren’t clear on the criteria for promotion. For organizations, this leaves them without an accurate, data-based way of assessing the strength of an individual’s capabilities.Additionally, even in organizations with clearly defined promotion criteria, managers we spoke to indicated that when they are considering who to hire or to promote they more often rely on their personal criteria (*e.g.,* “I know it when I see it.”) and value their own gut feeling more than any organizational model*.* This approach allows for unconscious bias to seep into performance assessments and promotion decisions, which adversely affects women and their opportunities for advancement.

*Weak data on performance:*
In the absence of a rigorous talent process, the manager is often the only source of data and the key individual who determines if someone should be brought forward for promotion. If additional perspectives are brought in, the process usually involves a few informal conversations that often are not anchored by a leadership framework with clear behavioral criteria. Moreover, several participants noted that the feedback for women during talent reviews tended to be vague and nonspecific, more often focused on soft skills rather than on technical or functional capabilities.

*Unskilled managers:*
Although some theories have posited that women are reluctant to show ambition, of the women who desired to move up, almost all of them indicated that they had voiced this goal to their manager. When it comes to development, the main feedback provider is the women’s direct manager and both senior leaders and HR admitted that the quality of their managers is inconsistent at best. Unskilled or unsupportive managers were seen by women as “more talk than action” or “blockers” who didn’t seem to want good talent to leave the role they are in. Several women indicated they had male managers who were “typical scientists” who are very good technically/scientifically but who did not focus much on leadership and development; meaning, the male managers may be good scientists but they are poor managers! Many women also indicated that their organizations seemed to value technical skills and scientific breakthroughs over good management and leadership capabilities in men selected for promotions. However, having these skills, in addition to team leadership and people development skills, did not seem to be sufficient for their *own* advancement, leaving the women unclear on what they need to do differently to progress.

*Women receive vague or insufficient feedback:*
While the vast majority (73 percent) of the women interviewed want to continue to grow their careers, increase their learning, and expand their roles, 60 percent have never been told what was needed to get to the next level, or they received vague feedback that was not actionable. Recent research supports the theory that women receive feedback that is vague and less grounded in business-relevant information and is over-focused on soft skills such as communication style.[[11]](#footnote-11) The “Women in the Workplace 2016” study, published by McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org, indicated that women were just as likely to ask for feedback as men, but they were 20 percent less likely to receive the helpful, critical feedback that spurs development, as managers feared hurting the women’s feelings.[[12]](#footnote-12)

*Higher Bar for Women:*
When asked directly if both women and men were held to the same standard, managers and HR partners both indicated they were ‘supposed to be’ but that time and again they had seen women being held to a higher standard—both in terms of leadership skills and experience. Although it’s meant to be the same, 40 percent of HR/manager participants indicated they see that women are expected to demonstrate leadership skills more frequently and gain experience over a longer period of time before they are recognized for their accomplishments.

This is consistent with earlier research that indicates women do often have to demonstrate more experience and competence in order to get the promotion.[[13]](#footnote-13) Research suggests that males with the ‘potential to perform’ are treated more preferentially than women with actual track records of performance.[[14]](#footnote-14) So if people wonder why women may hesitate to ‘throw their hat in the ring’ for a promotion or may wait until they have 100 percent of the boxes checked on the “preferred experience” list before they’ll apply for a role, this doesn’t show that they have a ‘confidence gap’ – it shows they’re realistic!

*Organizations are factoring in skills that aren’t ranked high in criteria for promotion:*
Of the competencies that HR/managers most frequently cited as holding women back, the majority were not related to the leadership capabilities listed as requirements for promotion. Specific areas that HR/managers indicated women need to improve include:

* *Improve executive presence/confidence:* Many women have been told they need to improve their “executive presence,” which is described as being a mix of confidence, communication skills and nonverbal communication. In addition, women have heard they need more ‘confidence’ or ‘gravitas’ – for example, being able to answer questions and sound sure of the answer even if they aren’t 100 percent certain, a trait more typical of men. The majority of women in our sample felt that they are in fact confident, but evidently their confidence was not expressed in a way that matched what organizations are looking for. In fact, a recent Harvard Business Review suggests that the issue is less that women *aren’t* confident but that men are *over*-confident.[[15]](#footnote-15) Being told that they need more “gravitas” may be organizational code for “you need to show up more like a man.” Katie Couric when relating a story about how she was once told she needed to display more ‘gravitas’ joked that “gravitas” seemed to be Latin for “has testicles”!
* *Increase visibility/manage up:* Our HR/managers often indicated that the women weren’t doing enough to get ‘on the radar screen’ of their senior leaders so that there would be appropriate support when their name was surfaced in a promotion discussion. Yet, the women are often uncomfortable ‘bragging’ about themselves and can feel that self-promoting to ensure senior leaders know what they’re accomplishing is “political” or “too aggressive.” Therefore, they often struggle to adequately raise their profile.
* *Be more strategic:* Some of the women did report being told that they need to be more strategic in terms of setting direction for their groups and be more skilled at communicating their plans (*i.e.,* show more confidence in their strategy). Women reported feeling the need to be fully transparent and not ‘blow smoke’ so they are likely to share details and contingency plans when communicating their strategies. The women stated they often anticipate multiple ways a scenario could play out, and they want to convey these possibilities in order to be honest and transparent. Rather than perceiving this approach as well prepared, organizations seem to perceive it as a woman’s lack of confidence in her strategy, *e.g.,* “Why does she need a Plan B? Doesn’t she think her strategy will work?”
* *Pull up out of the weeds:* The organizational view was that the women spend more of their time strictly focused on the specifics of their role and responsibilities, ensuring every “i” is dotted and “t” is crossed. Although often the first strength HR/managers listed for their high-potential women was “they get things done,” or “they deliver,” the flip side of the feedback was that women are seen as over-focused on execution, as ‘doers’ or ‘perfectionists,’ who don’t delegate enough in order to spend more time on higher value added activities, such as cross-organizational initiatives with strategic impact. In addition, if the women are so busy in the weeds delivering results, it is unlikely that they are in situations where their work is noticed by potential senior sponsors that can help advocate on their behalf for promotions. In many organizations, sponsors and this visibility is an “unsaid” requirement for career growth.*Build networks:* HR/managers felt women don’t spend enough time building a broad network with peers and mentors both inside and outside of their company. At their level, advancement often relies more on having “someone in your corner fighting for you” than solely having the right capabilities. Part of this is volunteering for cross-organizational initiatives, as well as spending time before, after, and during work to socialize and expand relationships. But this concept bumped up against some social challenges (*e.g.,* often the guys would go out together and not include a female colleague) as well as work-life balance issues (*e.g.,* not able to stay late due to family commitments or working through lunch in order to be able to leave on time).
* *Women receive mixed messages:* When women do receive feedback, they often receive mixed messages, creating a double bind that leaves them feeling at a loss for how to ‘thread the needle’ in search of elusive capabilities:
	+ *Assertiveness:* Many of the women had been told that they were talking too much and too early in meetings—that they were too passionate and outspoken with their views. Conversely, the other segment of our women was told that they were not getting their voices heard in terms of getting ‘air time’ by voicing their opinions during meetings, particularly with senior people and also in areas that weren’t their direct expertise. The organization wanted to see them weighing in with clear opinions and not just about topics directly related to their job. The women felt that there was a very narrow band of acceptable behaviors that they were being asked to demonstrate.
	+ *Collaboration:* Women are told that being able to collaborate and build consensus is important, but also are being told that they should not seek other’s opinions so much and should be more willing to take a stand and move ahead in the absence of agreement. Collaboration and influencing skills were cited as a requirement for promotion and women believe this is a strength of theirs, yet organizations state that generally women don’t demonstrate it sufficiently. Given that most women think they are highly collaborative, they are not clear what else organizations are looking for in regard to this capability. Research suggests that men are viewed as more skilled at influencing than women, particularly when using a more ‘dominant’ communication style, whereas women are seen as more successful at influencing when they temper their competence with displays of communality and warmth.[[16]](#footnote-16) This suggests that women have to be more nuanced and artful in balancing pushing their own views while bringing others along. Yet even if this balanced style delivers results, they may still be penalized for not behaving in a more aggressive way that managers may be unconsciously looking for. Meanwhile, women who do display a more aggressive style aren’t seen as likable, while when men behave this way it does not detract from their likability.[[17]](#footnote-17), [[18]](#footnote-18)
	+ *Ambition:* For those who had *not* asked to move up, unspoken or implied messages from the organization seem to contribute to their silence. The women who didn’t express their interest in advancement indicated that they felt they couldn’t or shouldn’t voice this interest for fear of appearing too ambitious. Reasons for this included fear of sounding too aggressive, feeling it wasn’t “culturally acceptable” to want to move up, or feeling they had to be “very careful” about how to approach the conversation to avoid upsetting their manager. Some felt that they needed to show they had fully mastered the current role before even asking about moving up to next role. For many, the unspoken message seemed to be that “we should all be happy doing what we're doing and the organization will 'tap' you when it's time.”

Overall, many women felt that they have the leadership skills that companies say they require for advancement, but that somehow those capabilities aren’t being valued or recognized by the organization in the same way they are when demonstrated by their male counterparts. Some women have concluded that if they want to succeed they need to exhibit their capabilities in a way that is different from who they are. This frequently leaves them feeling as if they have to choose between being authentic or trying to act on feedback that is counter to who they are as people. It also leaves them feeling frustrated that the deep skills they bring to their teams and projects aren’t adequately recognized.

# Why do some women opt out?

As stated earlier, our research showed that the vast majority of the women in our sample want to continue to grow their careers, increase their learning, and expand their roles. Often this meant a promotion, but frequently, the women seemed less concerned with “climbing the ladder,” enhancing their title, or gaining increased pay and more interested in what the role looked like and if that role would allow them to feel they were making a broader contribution. All of the stumbling blocks outlined in the previous section can be said to be factors that discourage and limit the advancement of women who are trying to advance. But, in some cases, women have deliberately taken themselves off the promotion path. Why?

For those who felt they had *intentionally* opted out of actively seeking advancement, reasons they cited included: not enough support at home, not enough support at work, prioritizing family commitments, not wanting more stress which they felt would come with a higher position, and finding the politics and culture of more senior teams unappealing due to aggressive or overly competitive behavior. Other big factors were the expectation of being on call “24 x7” and the need to be available for travel, which caused many of the women who are also parents to feel that advancing to the next level wouldn’t be worth the tradeoffs they would have to make on the home front.

Also recognize that some women may ‘opt out’ of joining your company for reasons that you may not be aware of. The 2016 MassBio/LiftStream research found that 46 percent of women may reject an employer for having an all-male board, having an all-male management team, or being interviewed only by men. This emphasis on the expectation of diversity became an even stronger driving force for women later in their careers, impacting whether they remained with an employer or if they were choosing a new employer.[[19]](#footnote-19) So by not being proactive in this space, organizations are depriving themselves of the best talent on the market and may cause a ‘leaking pipeline’ in multiple areas along their female leadership bench.

# What can be done about it?

*Recommendations for Women: Ensuring Your Leadership Success*

* **Ask for feedback and clarification**
	+ Given that we know many organizations either do not have, or do not adhere to, specific, measurable promotion criteria, be clear with your manager that you want to advance, and ask for detailed feedback about what actionable improvements you can make to help you get there. Request feedback both to improve your skills and to demonstrate to your manager and senior leaders that you are focused on developing skills that are important to the organization.
	+ When receiving feedback, be aware of when you are receiving mixed messages about what behaviors you need to exhibit or develop. Ask for clarification if you have received conflicting advice. If the feedback would make you feel inauthentic, look for a compromise approach that may have the same impact (*e.g.,* if advised to jump in and interrupt to get “air time” and that feels uncomfortable to you, instead ask for time on the agenda to share your ideas).
	+ In terms of being labeled ‘overly collaborative’ recognize that this approach is generally the better way to achieve buy-in and engagement. But sometimes a leader may give this feedback if they don’t feel they’re hearing your personal view or if they are worried you are being too swayed by your constituents. Continue to use your collaborative approach, then clearly indicate what conclusions you have drawn, using declarative statements such as “My view on this is…” or “Here’s what I think…” and include the facts that led you to that conclusion. Sometimes it’s more a matter of changing your packaging than altering your leadership style.
	+ If you are thinking about taking yourself off the promotion path due to beliefs about what the next role will require of you, avoid presuming that the way the incumbent has chosen to handle the role is the only way to do it. Don’t assume that 24x7 availability and extensive travel is definitely required just because that’s what the incumbent did. Get the role and then make it work for YOU.
* **Raise your profile and increase your visibility**
	+ Become aware of what your company is looking for in terms of leadership capabilities and be deliberate about developing and displaying yours. Nearly every woman we interviewed indicated some degree of discomfort when we asked them to share what their key strengths and capabilities were. As women, we need to get more comfortable with tooting our own horn, in both direct and indirect ways. If the direct approach feels uncomfortable, partner with other women to call out one another’s successes. Or ask yourself what a best friend or close colleague would say about your skills and accomplishments, then write that down and practice saying it to friends and family, or in a mirror, until you feel comfortable.
	+ Many of the women we spoke with also indicated they were uncomfortable advocating for themselves, which can at least be partly attributed to women being more likely to be dinged for being seen as ‘pushy or ‘aggressive.’ To circumvent any discomfort, frame requests for resources or visibility in a communal way, for instance framing the request as being on behalf of your team or project. Think of it as advocating for your team’s success and weave in how your leadership contributes to that success.
	+ Although the women we interviewed noted that their male colleagues would routinely get on the calendar of senior leaders (in either formal or informal ‘go for a beer’ ways) to ensure they stayed ‘on the radar screen,’ many women were reluctant to do this as it felt too political or self-promoting. Luckily, there are other ways to go about this, such as by volunteering to be on a cross-organization project team that will be reporting out to the senior team. When the visibility comes ‘naturally’ through the course of the work on a team, that may feel more comfortable.
* **The confidence question**
	+ We know from our research that women are confident in their scientific and leadership skills. But, driven by a desire to be complete and transparent when presenting their strategies and plans, our women conceded that they tend to share all the caveats, dependencies, and things that could get in the way of achieving their full objective, which can be interpreted by others as lacking confidence. To avoid this misinterpretation of your behavior, take into consideration the audience you’re addressing and then take a hard look at the details that you’re planning to share, paring them down 20-30 percent. Then pay attention to the delivery by ending with a clear declarative statement, *e.g.,* “…despite these additional factors, I’m confident that I’ve chosen the best strategy to pursue.”
* **Strategic thinking**
	+ Build, grow or hone your strategic thinking capabilities. If it’s already part of your current role, double down to ensure you’re doing this rigorously and presenting your strategic plans to those outside your group. If it’s not part of your current role, seek out a project or team to be involved in that will help you gain this skill. If these skills are rusty, take a training class to build your capabilities then look for an immediate on-the-job opportunity to put your new learning into practice.
	+ As we’ve discussed earlier, sometimes it’s just a matter of packaging. Use the word “strategy” in conversation and presentations to call attention to your rigorous thinking in this space. Using this explicit language calls attention to what your organization is looking for since senior leaders may overlook the behavior if it doesn’t show up in the typical male fashion, *e.g.,* state explicitly “This relates to my strategic approach for…”
* **Build relationships – peer networks and senior sponsors**
	+ The move from middle management to the senior leadership ranks is a critical pivot point where things shift in terms of what it takes to get promoted. It’s not just how you do your job and lead your team, it’s about how you are contributing to the broader organization. Promotions at this level often move outside of your functional silo and require the blessing of senior leaders from across the organization. Therefore, it’s critical to broaden and strengthen your networks, both inside and outside of your organization. Internal connections are key to building a deeper understanding of how the whole organization works and allows you to work through informal channels to influence how things get done. The networks outside of work are important both in terms of building your reputation in the scientific community, and increasing your options when thinking about your next career move.
	+ The most influential factor the women in our sample indicated that helped them move their career forward was having a strong sponsor and this finding is consistent with the literature.[[20]](#footnote-20) A sponsor is a senior leader either within or outside of your functional silo who not only provides feedback and support (which you can also get from a mentor), but who will actively help to shepherd and shape your career. Because the industry is still largely male dominated at the senior ranks, you likely will need to seek out a male sponsor. Some senior male leaders in our sample indicated a hesitancy to reach out to females to mentor for fear of how their gesture could be interpreted, which is not too surprising in an era where sexual harassment is strictly prohibited and people don’t want to risk having their actions misinterpreted. So, the onus falls on the women to generate these sponsorships, unless the organization has established a practice in this area.
	+ Building your network is a great way to create an effective support system. Despite women’s confidence in their scientific and leadership skills, it’s often helpful to have some social supports to encourage you to apply for a position at the next level. One approach is to form your own personal Board of Directors that you can turn to for feedback, guidance, advice, and advocacy. Think of three to five people with whom you have good relationships at work or in the broader field, whom you feel could be effective in this capacity. Approach them with this framework and make your request explicit “I’d like to meet with you quarterly to discuss…”

*Recommendations for Organizations: Developing Your Female Leaders*

* **Improve your talent management processes**
	+ As many as one-third of women see their company’s performance evaluation process as unfair and biased.[[21]](#footnote-21) Build good talent processes earlier and with gender intelligent talent management in mind. This is a journey not a destination. Bring on board or consult with strong HR and talent management experts who understand diversity so they can help you lay a strong foundation upon which your talent systems can grow as your company grows.
	+ Establish a set of clear leadership capabilities as the basis for promotion and articulate how those show up behaviorally. Rigorously gather multi-rater feedback to assess the strength of those capabilities and utilize that information as part of the promotion process. We contend that the behaviors that comprise these leadership capabilities can differ substantially between men and women. For instance, when creating a strategy, many women we spoke with acknowledged that they may take longer, explore more options, involve more people and then speak about the final product as “our strategy” and “what we think…” This may lead an organization to dismiss or overlook the woman’s strategic thinking capabilities as they are not being displayed in a fashion typical of their male colleagues. Educate your leaders to be aware of this phenomenon.
	+ Track how many women are being considered for promotion and put in place proactive processes to ensure women are getting opportunities as often as their male colleagues. One company we spoke with instituted a ‘rule of three’ which means when managers are looking to promote someone, they need to bring at least three possible candidates for promotion and only two of them can look like the manager in terms of demographics/race/*etc.* For smaller biotechs, talk proactively with your HR partner about the people within the group or function that you may be considering for promotion this year. Look at the demographics of the pool you are pulling from and the pool that you are promoting them up to and determine whether you are losing women at any of these transition points. If so, hold a talent review session focused specifically on looking at women who may be eligible for promotion but may be slipping through the cracks.
	+ A large percentage of women who said they had helpful career discussions, which included great feedback and development planning, indicated these conversations were prompted by having an HR-orchestrated talent management process. Recognize that these conversations may not be happening if there are not deliberate systems in place to ensure managers make time for these discussions in this fast-paced industry.
	+ Since many individuals at the manager level have not received training on how to be a good manager, be aware that some women may not be getting the clear or frequent feedback that they need to develop.[[22]](#footnote-22)A remedy for this is to include in your performance management process regular coaching touchpoints for managers to have with ALL participants, minimally quarterly (ideally monthly), with a developmental, forward-looking focus to help facilitate everyone getting the feedback they need.
	+ Several women in our study said that they felt their organization’s initiatives to promote more women had spurred their manager into action to have constructive career conversations with them and even connect them with sponsors and mentors. The focus on gender parity has become more pronounced and visible in many organizations in the last few years. In January 2017, MassBio published an open letter to the BioPharma Community about increasing gender diversity, and this seems to reflect an increasing sense of urgency around this topic for our industry. Foster this awareness to spur management into action to address disparity at all levels.
* **Address unconscious bias**
	+ Raise awareness of the existence of unconscious bias through facilitated learning programs and targeted messaging. Many people in management and leadership roles are still unfamiliar with this phenomenon. But be aware that awareness alone is not sufficient to solve the problem. A recent study found that 1 in 4 women believed their internal recruitment processes to be biased and nearly half felt that the promotion process was inaccurate.[[23]](#footnote-23)
	+ Put in place ‘bias interrupters’ in your talent processes, *e.g.,* build in a process check such as having managers ask themselves “How detailed and specific is our feedback for our women candidates? Is the feedback as concrete and business focused as for the men? Are we over-focusing on soft skills?” If you hear the term ‘executive presence’ coming up as a development need, dig into the assumptions behind the statement and ask what behaviors, specifically, the feedback provider is indicating need to change. Ask “Does this behavior actually impede their efficacy or is it a stylistic difference that we should accommodate?”
	+ When evaluating candidates for hire or employees for promotion, bias is mitigated by evaluating multiple people jointly rather than individually. Performance is elevated in the decision-making process in this setting and stereotypes that can hold people back seem to be limited.[[24]](#footnote-24) So, when possible, bring in several contenders of both genders during an interview or promotion process.
* **Examine corporate culture**
	+ Be aware of what may cause some women to intentionally or unintentionally “opt out” and make it a priority to address factors that may deny the organization a key senior leader. Conduct thorough exit interviews when you lose rising women leaders and examine this data for elements of your culture that may turn women off.
	+ Meritocracies are often most blind to where they have inequalities. Simply saying “We hire/promote based on merit/performance” is no safeguard against bias disrupting your talent processes. In fact, some research suggests that such organizations may be even more likely to fall victim to the effects of unconscious bias exactly because they think they’re immune.[[25]](#footnote-25) So don’t assume that your organization is free of bias just because your leaders are well intentioned.
	+ Ensure that your talent systems and processes are giving credit to leadership styles that have been shown to generate results and that women are known to demonstrate, often more so than their male counterparts. For instance, research shows that female managers are more likely to elicit respect and pride from their followers, communicate their vision effectively, empower and mentor subordinates, and approach problem-solving in a more flexible and creative way, as well as fairly reward direct reports.[[26]](#footnote-26) Give credit where credit is due.
	+ Look at your numbers. Identify where your pipeline may be ‘squeezed’ or ‘leaking’ and create concrete action plans with the leaders in those areas to rectify the situation. Be aware that women believe that having diversity on the leadership team is the most significant factor for increasing the participation of women in an organization at all levels.[[27]](#footnote-27)
* **Support strategic opportunities for women**
	+ Make sure your high-potential women are involved in key strategic initiatives, have the opportunity to learn about your business model, and are involved in setting organizational, departmental and/or functional strategy.
	+ Provide training, mentoring, and other learning opportunities to rising women leaders to help them develop strategic thinking and planning skills.
	+ Proactively identify mentors and sponsors, both inside and outside your company, for your rising women leaders. These mentors and sponsors can help provide a more strategic perspective on organizational issues. Because of the aforementioned discomfort senior male leaders may have in reaching out to more junior women to offer mentorship or sponsorship, create the processes or programs that ensure these connections are both easier to make and clearly sanctioned by the organization.
	+ When launching a new corporate initiative, be intentional about the gender balance of the group that you form and provide a strategic model so that there is a shared framework for the group to leverage, which puts everyone on equal footing.
* **Support increased visibility for women leaders**
	+ Get high-potential women in front of senior leaders on a regular basis*, e.g.,* by putting women on high-level strategic initiatives where they will get to present their work to the Board or executive team or by creating informal settings that help your Board get to know your women leaders in a different way, such as through informal group lunches.
	+ Provide sponsorship and/or mentorship programs, and remember that women don’t only have to be paired with women. Our women said that their primary factor for success was having a senior leader as their sponsor, most often a male. Encourage all of your male executives to sponsor at least one to two rising female leaders as this edict can help overcome some reluctance that some male leaders feel in reaching out to support more junior women for fear their actions will be misinterpreted as having an ulterior motive.
	+ Create peer mentoring/advising circles cross-organizationally and encourage discussion around topics that can support development such as negotiation, influencing, and business relevant issues. The support and mutual learning offered by such groups can be a powerful force!
* **Be aware of ‘the narrow path’ that women feel they have to walk:**
	+ Educate managers on how their feedback can create mixed messages for women, *e.g.,* advising a woman to not be too pushy, but then criticizing her for not speaking up. Give specific feedback and prompt managers to ask themselves, “Would I give this same feedback to a male team member?”
	+ In terms of collaboration, beware of an unconscious preference for the more directive, authoritarian approach favored in a masculine environment. If you are advising women to “Have your own voice” or “Don’t be too collaborative” recognize the strengths that their approach may have in generating buy-in and engagement.
	+ If you notice the issue of confidence arising in performance meetings or talent reviews, before making the presumption that confidence is lacking, look at the specific behaviors being expressed and then ask if there are other plausible stylistic reasons for acting in this fashion. Before your managers give feedback, have them ask themselves “What do I really mean when I say I want Sarah to “sound more confident”?
* **Consider the following list of things our women said helped catalyze their development:**
	+ *Manager* – Having a supportive, developmentally focused manager who believed in them, provided them with stretch opportunities to learn, and crafted development plans that helped spur growth
	+ *Experience* – Learning through a challenging assignment or even adversity
	+ *Formal Learning* – Leadership trainings of all kind including ‘women only’ programs, technical/business learning programs, and targeted readings
	+ *Support* – Via a great mentor, sponsor, group of colleagues, spouse/partner, or coach
	+ *Community* – Learning with and from others in a communal setting such as a formal Women’s Resource Group, Business Group, or Employee Resource Group or even a group of like-minded friends

# Summary

The complex challenge of increasing the number of talented women who are recognized and advanced in the biotech/pharma industry needs a set of thoughtful, multi-faceted solutions. Based on our research, we feel that organizations must own resolving this problem as much, if not more than, the women themselves. While our research shows there are things for women to be aware of and incorporate into their professional development, women’s opportunities will continue to be more limited than men’s if women are not part of an organization that learns and corrects for how their company’s talent processes and biases are potentially limiting the success of their high-potential women.

Management often lacks awareness of how effective leadership styles can show up differently for women than men, and this blind spot adversely affects the professional experiences and career trajectories of many talented women. Given that diverse leadership teams lead to greater business success, organizations need to proactively build and implement more gender-intelligent talent processes that strive to eliminate the potential for unconscious biases and include initiatives expressly for women.

Additionally, organizations need to do more to reach out to and encourage women to continue to ascend the leadership ranks. You may have a highly-qualified woman on your team who is not knocking on your door for an opportunity, so you may need to knock on her door. The fact that a woman is not initiating the conversation should not automatically be interpreted to mean she is not interested or not capable of being a strong and effective leader. Be aware that there are multiple factors that may contribute to her holding back and be thoughtful in opening up a dialog to surface those issues. The numbers of women appearing in the senior ranks will not improve as much as they need to without strong support and action from executive-level leaders.

For women, we recommend that you take to heart the idea that many people may not be noticing your true capabilities and effectiveness. Recognize that leaders in your organization may be unwittingly assessing you using a different scale than they use for your male peers, and therefore be diligent about asking for feedback, getting clarification, and working to incorporate the additional recommendations listed above into your repertoire of skills. Find a way to make them work for you. Additionally, consider becoming an advocate for gender-intelligent talent processes within your organization; reach out to your HR team and senior management and discuss these ideas with them and how improvements could be made.

Our hope is that through this research we contribute to building awareness of this systemic problem, with that awareness resulting in senior leaders, HR partners, managers and scientists of all levels working together to effect a positive change. The more successful we are as an industry, the more people we can help through healthcare innovations, which is our primary motivation for the work we do.

# Additional Resources

* Boston Women’s Workforce Council (pay equity focus): <https://www.bostonwomensworkforcecouncil.com/>
* Healthcare Business Women’s Association (HBA)
	+ Gender Parity website: <https://genderparity.hbanet.org>
	+ Mentoring program: <https://www.hbanet.org/mentoring>
* Leadership Development Institute at Eckerd College: <https://leadership.eckerd.edu/>
* Simmons Women’s Leadership Training programs: http://www.simmons.edu/academics/executive-education/for-individuals/strategic-leadership-for-women
* Tuck Business School program women leaders: http://exec.tuck.dartmouth.edu/perspectives/women-leaders
* Wharton Women’s Executive Leadership Program: <http://executiveeducation.wharton.upenn.edu/for-individuals/all-programs/womens-executive-leadership-business-strategies-for-success>
* Women Unlimited Leadership Programs: http://women-unlimited.com/home/
* WEST – Women in Engineering, Science and Technology: http://www.westorg.org/
* ReacHire *–* “On-ramping assistance” for women returning to the workforce after a leave: <http://www.reachire.com/>
* Harvard Implicit bias test, which can be taken online:

Main landing page of site with description: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html>

*Or* [*https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/*](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/)

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