

It's Time for "Hacking the She-Suite"!

Enough is Enough!

Have you ever had a day where you hear yourself saying, **"Enough is enough!"**? Even as an experienced executive coach, I still encounter gender bias. ***I'm often the only female in the Boardroom and sometimes struggle to get taken seriously by the "boys club"***. I have had my comments ignored until they're echoed by male leader and then heard and appreciated. {I know, who hasn't?!}

Imagine a world where women of all demographics are fully represented at the senior levels of leadership in our organizations. Through women's leadership, organizational values and impacts will evolve to be more sustainable, inclusive and compassionate, leading to a safer world where more people are free to thrive.

But I have learned a lot over the many years I've been coaching leaders. I've learned how to bust through non-inclusive behavior, how to "own the room", how to speak the "right" language of influence, and how to surprise male executives with the value I add. ***But it was after one of those "enough is enough" days I said to myself, you know what, we seriously need more women of all colors in the higher levels of leadership!***

As a first step, I reached out to 35 brilliant professional women in my network and asked them ***what is your biggest challenge in accelerating your career?***

The results were illuminating, if kind of painful in their consistency, and I'll share them in minute, but first a few headlines about me. ***I've been working as an executive coach for the past 20 years in Fortune 500***

organizations and industries as diverse as automotive manufacturing, digital marketing, tech, health care, defense and many others.

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I'm a Master-level certified executive coach with the Association of Corporate Executive Coaches and I have helped hundreds of talented female (and male) leaders navigate their career growth.

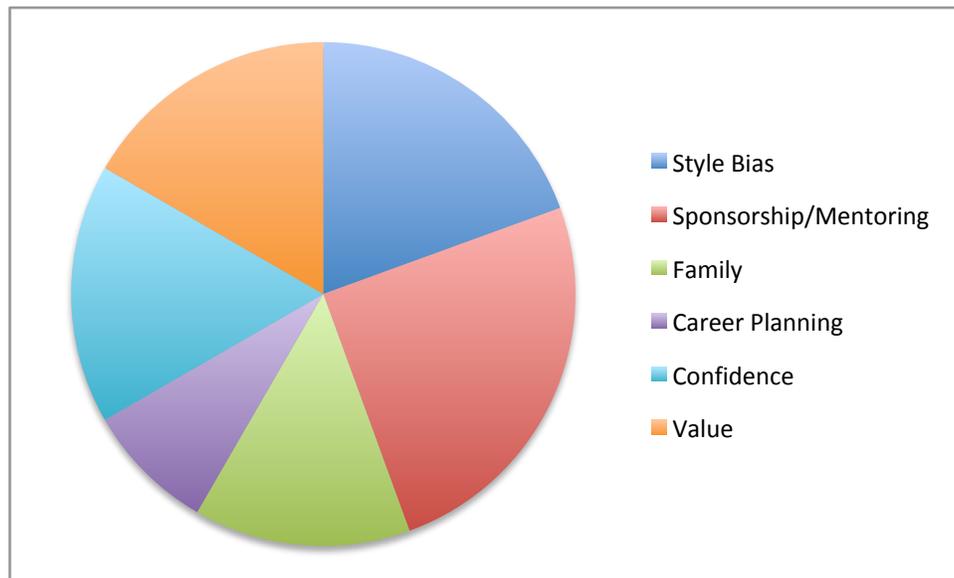
- I've also been a mid-level and senior leader in several organizations, with significant P&L responsibilities.
- I've led fast paced divisions of over 100 people. I've navigated my own career growth within organizations.
- I'm president of the board of an international NGO.
- I'm also the co-author of the new book: *Creating Futures that Matter Today* which teaches how to lead change through shared vision.
- And, like most of the women in this study, I've faced challenges, both internal and external, to growing my career. (You can read my bio on the last page if you want more details on me.)

So back to the study. I sorted the responses into 6 themes as shown in the pie chart on the next page. And as is often the case with systemic and cultural challenges, the issues are interrelated, with correlations and causations running in many directions between them. ***Still, the data provides an interesting baseline for a better understanding about what is getting in the way of women achieving their career goals more quickly.***

One thing I know for sure, you are not alone in your struggles, and this might be the most important insight of all. ***Because when you feel isolated, you tend to believe in the voices that tell you you aren't enough, you don't belong or your ideas or points of view don't matter.*** So, take a look through the categories and see if you relate to the themes.

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"What is your biggest challenge in accelerating your career?"



Exploration of Categories

n=35

Sponsorship/Mentoring

With 9 mentions, this was the most frequently cited category; specifically, the lack of it. ***Many women pondered how to find mentors that enable them to continue learning and growing, as well to provide better visibility to the senior leadership team.*** Others note, *"There are so few other female leaders that it's really hard to form a collective and work together to drive growth forward. It can get a bit lonely as my peers are all men... some of which you have a connection with and some you don't."* Interestingly, some of these leaders noted that senior female leaders can be equally negligent in providing mentoring and sponsorship to up and coming female leaders. Sound familiar so far?

Style Bias

With 7 mentions, women frequently noted that their personal styles can be interpreted as less effective than men's. This can run in either direction—where a female leader is

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seen as "too soft" or in the other direction as "too direct". This can be a significant career derailleur, as it is one of those cultural biases that falls below the water line and acts as an invisible but powerful deterrent to women's success. As one leader remarked, ***"My communication style was seen as 'too nice and too collaborative' and ran counter to prevailing culture."*** Another woman commented, ***"An effective, results focused leadership style in a female is interpreted as too tough and too ambitious."***

Clearly, these biases place women in a double bind, where they are perceived as less effective simply for showing up in their natural style. In my experience as an executive coach, men usually have much more latitude in how their styles are perceived. This one seems particularly difficult to manage, but what do you think?

Value/Visibility

This category has two names; as I pondered why these women were not showing up in the eyes of senior leaders, it seemed that they were being perceived as not adding as much value as male colleagues. Trying to quantify what "adding value" actually means can be fraught with challenges. For some leaders it may mean achieving specific metrics which may or may not be clearly communicated. For others, it may mean simply showing up as a homogeneous member of a primarily white, male team, thus reinforcing the power

Harvard Business Review's Research on Women's Career Challenges

The recently published "HBR Guide for Women at Work" fully supports the findings in this study. In their book they explain, "Unconscious gender biases run rampant in organizations today. Women are less likely to be given credit for their work, tend to command lower salaries, and are less likely to be promoted, especially to key leadership and C-suite positions, than their male colleagues. Because of gender biases inherent in our culture, women often struggle to make their voices heard, avoid getting involved with office politics, and shy away from negotiating for the roles and salaries they deserve. It may feel like there's no way out: When they do speak out or talk about their achievements, women may be considered overly aggressive." The HBR study went on to discuss the issues described in this study, such as style bias, lack of executive sponsorship, career planning and confidence, as well.

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structure and comfort zones of the current leadership culture—obviously unattainable for a female and especially for a female of color.

The point is that sometimes women are not being seen as adding value equal to their male counterparts. One woman was told she was only on the leadership team because she was so cute. ***Another commented, "It's a constant battle for many of us to be included/seen/heard even when we have the label of 'leadership' – it's almost like we have been given the title but not the power that goes with it and you are always having to prove yourself."*** The process by which women's value is "erased" by cultural bias is insidious and must be made more explicit and discussable in order to change it. Sadly, one woman commented that, as a sexual harassment survivor, she no longer wanted to be visible.

Confidence

With 6 mentions, this theme was also cited as a key challenge. It's a systemic problem as well as an individual development opportunity. ***It becomes increasingly hard to have confidence when you are not seen as adding equal value to male colleagues, when you are getting feedback, either explicitly or implicitly, that your natural style is not acceptable or effective and when you are not receiving mentoring or sponsorship from male or female senior leaders.*** In the face of this context, how surprising is it that female leaders may begin to doubt themselves?

As one person states, ***"It's just hard for me to fake it until I make it and so I always sell exactly what I know I can do. I wish I were more comfortable believing that I am capable and worthy of the roles a few steps ahead."*** Another writes, ***"My biggest challenge is being taken seriously when dealing with executives. I have felt cared for and entertained at times, instead of really heard or understood. It takes me twice the***

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effort to evoke big change/action." There are many good leadership programs which help women develop more confidence. However, it's crucial to remember the lack of level playing fields within which many women work can continue to erode anyone's confidence.

Family

While this category received only 4 mentions, I think this is because it is often the most important context that women constantly think about, juggle and factor into any change in career status. Many women simply take these challenges for granted. However, issues like unequal distribution of child care, chores at home, and concerns about missing out on their children growing up clearly provided additional barriers for women's career growth. ***One woman explained, "I am uncomfortable imagining myself a few steps ahead because I always think about implications on my time, my family."*** Another reflects, ***"If I had any regrets it would be about how much time I missed with my kids growing up....But, is that a being a woman in the C-suite or do dads feel that way, too?"***

Career Planning

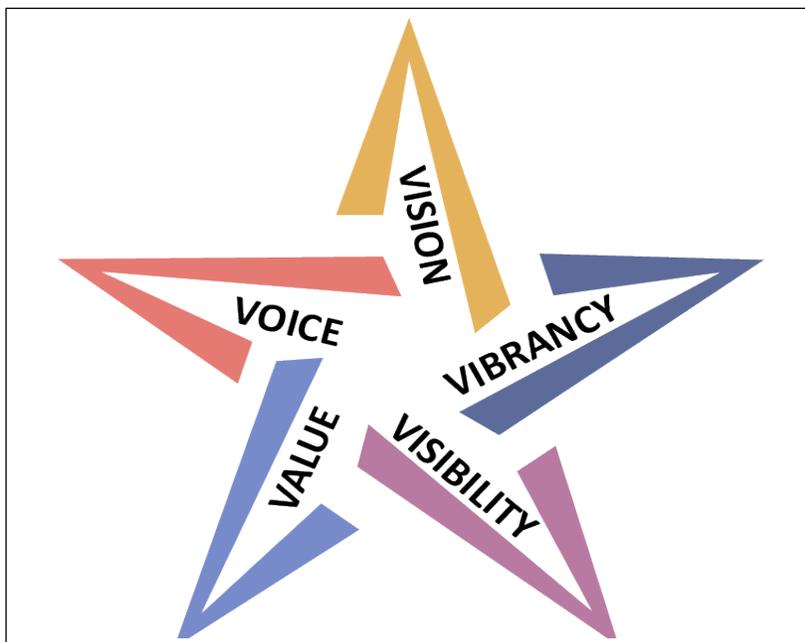
In some cases, there seems to be a pervasive difference between how men and women's career paths are supported in organizations. As one of the participants in this study explains, ***it is about "having to prove my worthiness for a promotion vs. the company being willing to 'bet on' a male candidate."*** Another notes that **women are expected to 'wait for it' rather than 'ask for it'**. Others report that there is simply **a lack of focus on longer term career planning compounded by a lack of visibility to the senior leadership team.** Along with the other obstacles already mentioned, the lack of female role models and a visible path to the C-suite can make it nearly impossible to see a viable or clear path forward.

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So, What Should We Do?

Since reconnecting with these wonderful professionals and exploring their career growth challenges, *I've become even more committed to helping women of all demographics get recognized and promoted into positions of more impact, more quickly.* I believe in this because it has the potential to make the world a safer, more inclusive and more sustainable place, where more people can thrive. But what about you? Are you frustrated with the lack of visibility, recognition or mentoring you are receiving at work? Do you see others, notably white males, being moved more quickly through the system than you and other women like you?

The Five V's



As I studied the responses to my question, some light bulbs went off. I realized I already a lot of experience in working with these problems and they fall into this graphic of The Five V's. Women need to speak in ways that ensure their **voices are being heard**, confidently adapting their language of

influence to the styles of those around them. They need to show the ability to provide long term **vision** and strategy for the businesses they lead. They need to find ways to make sure they are **visible** to senior team members and are being recognized for the **value** they add. And they need to protect their quality of life, ensuring they have **vibrancy** and well-being, despite these extra challenges.

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We have to stop listening to the voices that tell us we don't matter, that it's okay to be on a slower career track or that we have to lead like men. I'm telling you from my heart: It's just not true! Your future matters—not just to you, but to all the people you have already touched and have yet to touch with your uniquely female leadership style.

But even more important than these practices, I learned that ***women need to feel connected to a supportive community, where they are known, appreciated and supported in living into their fullest vision of themselves.*** That's why I'm on a mission to develop methodologies for accelerating women's leadership development that uniquely suited to women.

The Five V model can provide powerful insight and behavioral support so that women have not only additional skills and expertise for leadership but even more importantly, lifestyle practices to help them build their resiliency and vibrancy, avoiding burn out or the tendency to settle for a role that really doesn't

express the full potential of each woman.

Please connect with me to hear more about The Five V approach to developing female leaders as well as a big idea I have about a new way to accelerate women's growth. ***In the meantime, I'd love to hear from you! What's your biggest challenge in accelerating your career?*** My contact information is below.

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About Anna Pool



I'm a Master-level certified executive coach through the *Association of Corporate Executive Coaches* with over 20 years of experience in facilitating leadership and organizational development, executive education and executive coaching across a broad range of industries including Michelin, Shell, Fluor, Verizon, Citi, Amgen, Cisco, Bonmarche', Infosys, Accenture, Nike, Publicis, and Ford Motor Company as well as numerous not for profits.

My vision is focused on helping more women accelerate their careers. While not all women aspire to the C-Suite, I believe every woman should have the opportunity to achieve the level of leadership she seeks and is capable of.

My business background includes experience at the vice president and Board level of a medium sized alternative health care facility, benchmarked by the Harvard Medical School as one of the most innovative and effective of its kind. I'm the former Director of Organizational Consulting for Lore International Institute (now a Korn Ferry company). I also served as the organizational learning consultant for Ford's *New Business Leader* program, an innovative action-learning program that was benchmarked by the International Consortium on Executive Development as among the best in the world. In my free time, I serve as the **president of the board for Shanta Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides pathways out of poverty for some of the world's most underserved populations.** www.shantafoundation.org

With Norwegian thought leader Marjorie Parker, I'm the co-author of ***Creating Futures that Matter Today: Facilitating Change through Shared Vision***. I'm a frequent speaker on the use of Visionary Thinking and Creating Shared Vision to accelerate innovation, alignment and impact in today's organizations. Check out the book on Amazon [HERE](#).

I have a Master's degree in Organizational Development from the Fielding Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara and have completed a two-year certification with The Gestalt Institute of the Berkshires, as well as **trainings in neuroscience and its practical application in working with leaders**. I'm certified in the use of the Language of Influence, The Awareness 20/20, The Change Style Indicator, The Decision Style Indicator, The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, The EQi 2.0, The Denison Organizational Culture Survey, The Press Time simulation and numerous other assessments.

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