

# Women (and Men) in Leadership Roles: Building a New Yellow-Brick Road

**“Women are already the most dynamic and fastest growing economic force in the world today.”**

—Muhtar Kent, CEO of Coca Cola.

IN 1939, WHEN MGM RELEASED “The Wizard of Oz,” we watched Dorothy become disenchanted with her life in Kansas, wishing to be “somewhere over the rainbow.” That same year, women were 24 percent of the workforce and typically spent their days caring for households and families, perhaps also wishing to be somewhere over the rainbow.

Dorothy’s world turned upside down when a cyclone dropped her in the land of Oz. Soon, Dorothy (wearing sparkly, high-heeled, red pumps) and Toto set off on the yellow-brick road to see the Wizard of Oz, who held hope for Dorothy’s future.

Similarly, the 1960s women’s movement turned the United States upside down giving women hope for the future. Soon, more women than ever before were on that well-worn, yellow-brick road used so successfully by men. Since the 1980s, women make up more than 50 percent of college graduates.

Victory, right? Not so fast. Now is not the time to fall asleep in a field of poppies. The problem has changed. Today, only 4 percent of Fortune 500 companies are led by women. Women hold a mere 16 percent of corporate board seats. Clearly, only a portion make it to the Emerald City, and even fewer become the Great and Powerful Oz.

Why should we care? What’s at stake? As it turns out, a lot.

Research shows that having more women in the top echelons of organizations makes a difference to profitability.

- Fortune 500 companies with the most women on their boards have produced 53 percent stronger return on equity than those with the fewest women.<sup>1</sup>

- From 2005 to 2011, the share price of companies with at least one woman on the board outperformed those with none by 26 percent when comparing companies with similar

market capitalization.<sup>2</sup>

- In the United States, women control or influence more than 80 percent of purchasing decisions.

Worldwide, countries recognize the economic importance of women in senior positions. In China, women hold 51 percent of senior leadership positions, 31 percent in Russia, and 30 percent in Turkey. North America rests at 21 percent.<sup>3</sup> The United States is not well positioned to take advantage of top talent.

Advancing women into senior leadership roles is also about the future. John Gerzema, the author of *The Athena Doctrine: How Women (and the Men Who Think Like Them) Will Rule the Future*, notes that in a world where everyone is connected, skills such as communication, patience, loyalty, flexibility, collaboration, and empathy will be key.<sup>4</sup>

If women make such a difference now and in the future, what can women and men do to overcome the lack of women at the top. Let’s start with women. Men, keep reading.

Like Dorothy’s companions, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion, women must use brains, heart, and courage.

## Use your brain

- **Know your business.** Be an expert at what you do and see the big picture.
- **Manage your “brand.”** It walks in the door before you do. Do you know what it is?

## Use your heart

- **Be self-aware.** Interviews I have conducted with 66 leaders (2/3 men) affirm that self-awareness and intuition are keys to success.
- **Remain authentic.** Authenticity counts, particularly to the next generation.
- **Collaborate.** Use collaboration to

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- bring people and teams together.
- **Develop communications skills.** Practice listening with empathy and mutual respect.
- **Be helpful.** For those women who reach the Emerald City, make it easier for younger women. They do not need to fight flying monkeys like we did.

### Have courage

- **Ask for work/life fit.** If you don't ask for it, you'll never get it.
- **Network with men—formally and informally.** According to a Harvard study, all agree that women have weaker networks than men. The study notes that today's "old boys' club" looks remarkably like a golf course.<sup>5</sup> Talk with people in power.
- **Show up and speak up.** Show up with constructive ideas, sit at the table like you mean it, and speak up. Speak up again and again if necessary to be heard.
- **Volunteer to lead.** Research shows that men apply for positions when they meet 60 percent of the qualifications; women apply when they meet 100 percent. If you hear of a leadership opportunity, don't wait: Volunteer.

### And, men:

#### Use your brain

- **Recognize that economic competitiveness is at stake.** If there is not a strong mix of men and women in leadership and on teams, you do not have the best talent at the table.
- **Embrace that bias exists.** In Harvard Business School's Heidi/Howard case study, students read a true story based on Heidi Roizen, a venture capitalist. Another group of students read an identical story, except Heidi was changed to Howard. While judged equally competent, Howard was regarded as a more appealing colleague while Heidi was viewed as selfish, and not the person you would want to work for.<sup>6</sup>
- **Seek out women for leadership positions and boards.** Talented women are easily overlooked. Refer to Heidi/Howard and look harder.

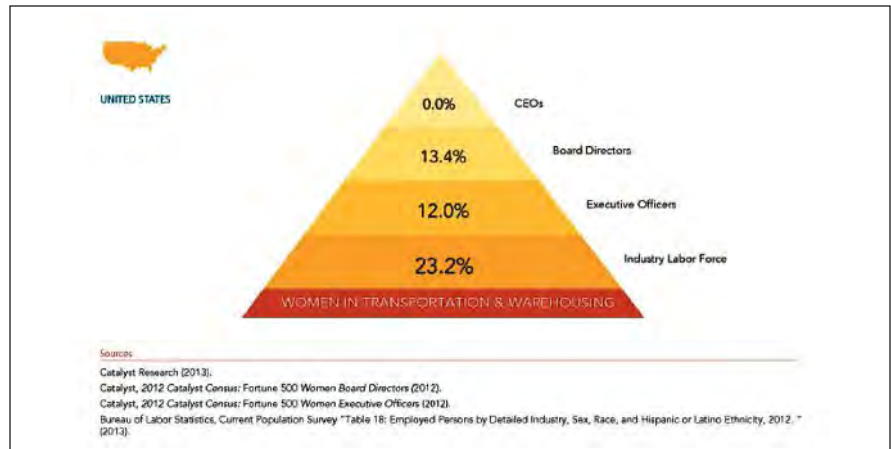


Figure 1. This figure from Catalyst, a nonprofit organization with a mission to expand opportunities for women and business, shows the percentage of women in top leadership roles in the transportation and warehousing industries based on its research. Figure courtesy of Catalyst, [www.catalyst.org](http://www.catalyst.org).

### Use your heart

- **Ask for workplace flexibility.** A *Washington Post* poll of workers showed that 88 percent view workplace flexibility as important (equal to health insurance benefits). Of the 88 percent, 96 percent were women and 86 percent were men.<sup>7</sup> Men, talk about your expectations for work/life fit.
- **Hear the women.** Women speak up but are overlooked. In a study of corporate boards, 21 percent of these accomplished women say they are not heard. One respondent said, "I have to yell for them to hear me."<sup>8</sup> Both men and women must be heard to get the best points on the table. Pay attention.

### Have courage.

- **Network with women.** Talk about career development equally with men and women.
- **Seek out women's perspectives.** Texas Tech Engineering Dean Al Sacco, Jr. noted that for important decisions, he specifically seeks perspectives from men and women. Women, he says, see situations differently. To make good decisions, he wants to hear all perspectives.
- **Make a conscious effort to advance women.** Better gender balance creates stronger organizations, but 87 percent of female directors faced gender-related hurdles.<sup>9</sup> Given the benefits, can you afford *not* to make gender a policy issue?

And, what about the transportation industry? An unscientific scan of leadership staff in several notable transportation consulting firms indicates a striking lack of women. I do not believe there are no qualified women. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women make up about 16-percent of undergraduate engineering classes and women have been in the engineering labor force long enough to be represented in leadership.

A recent McKinsey study notes that one of the attributes of companies with strong gender diversity is visible attention including metrics and goals from the C-suite.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, as a manager at the Federal Highway Administration, we explicitly monitored gender balance (among other metrics). From personal experience, I believe that attention is one reason women make up more than 30-percent of senior executive positions.

As engineers and technical people, we know that metrics matter. After 30 years in transportation, I know leaders in many transportation companies and organizations, and the vast majority are led by men. Respectfully, I suggest that you look around—at your board, your leadership team, and those you are developing into future leaders. Are you engaging the talent pool of women that will be necessary for a successful future? If not, start measuring. Bring gender into the awareness of leaders. In my career, I rarely feel intentional bias, but unintentional bias is prevalent. And, frankly, it is exhausting to be the only woman in

the room. Women struggle daily to fit in *and* stand out. Women's professional organizations play a key role in supporting women, providing mentors, and creating an atmosphere of renewal.

I am encouraged by the growing interest from both men and women in balanced lifestyles. I worked with talented young men who expected to spend time with their families. They wanted to be home for soccer games and recitals, and share child care demands. In the end, our organizations and families benefit from active engagement from both men and women.

Advancement of women into senior leadership is an economic issue, and it is *your* issue. The future of leadership is changing; global competition in a world increasingly driven by women is changing. Perhaps, the yellow-brick road should change. Women, we don't need to give up our sparkly, high-heeled, red shoes, but perhaps we also need red construction boots to build a new road. Men, let's build it together. ■

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