

If you only listen to half your people, will you only grow half as fast?

Women are underrepresented at leadership level within the consulting industry. This is a complex issue driven by numerous factors, but one of the most telling is the attitude of others within firms and their lack of support: 50% of female consultants believe that their colleagues regard having a career in consulting and looking after a family as mutually exclusive – as do 40% of men.



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To understand the reasons why women are still rarely making it to partner level, or are even leaving consulting for good in the early stages of their career, EY sponsored a research paper, *Women in consulting: how to hold on to talent in the “pinched middle,”* from Source Global Research and UNIDA Diversity Consulting. The survey respondents – the “pinched middle” – are women and men at manager and senior manager level who are faced with balancing career advancement and becoming busier in their personal lives.

“While we have all the processes, policies and procedures in place, our values and behaviors often don’t support women enough. Organizations aren’t always walking the talk,” says Adrian Edwards, Managing Partner, Ernst & Young LLP and Deputy EY Europe, Middle East, India and Africa (EMEIA) Advisory Leader, who commissioned the report. “All of us as leaders could and must do better. When I took a test on unconscious bias through the Dads4Daughters site¹ recently, as part of a campaign for Dads4Daughters Day, I was surprised by my score. As an ambassador for diversity, I thought I’d do much better. It was a really alarming wake-up call,” says Adrian.

Leaders’ roles in addressing unconscious bias

Leaders naturally have a crucial role to play in bringing the talk and the walk closer together. Unconscious – and conscious – biases do exist in the workplace, and entrenched prejudices about some people’s ability to perform to expected levels can hamper their ability to prove themselves. For example, would a parent of young children automatically struggle to work the late nights that some engagements demand? Some might assume they would – this is conscious bias in action, and it can suppress potential.



“So often, when work-life balance issues arise, you see women making the sacrifice and ultimately leaving the firm, to make everyone’s lives easier. There could certainly be efforts on the part of firms to give these women a more manageable career, but it all comes down to leadership. The leaders set the tone and the context around how the business will run.”

Female senior manager

For this situation to change, leaders need to start questioning their own behavior. So what can they do to initiate that?

- ▶ **Become aware of personal biases:** take tests that reveal unconscious or unacknowledged attitudes (such as Project Implicit² or Dads4Daughters³) that result in behaviors that may actively harm female employees
- ▶ **Put themselves in others’ shoes:** use opportunities to consider the impact of actions on others, e.g., by joining reverse mentoring initiatives or participating in cultural intelligence workshops
- ▶ **Don’t be exclusive:** be inclusive – notice others and avoid focusing attention on those who are similar in terms of age, gender, career, or social or academic background, for example
- ▶ **Be alert to the threats to diversity in the workplace:** take the initiative to find out why women are leaving the firm – and prevent it from happening

One of the most powerful of these actions may be reverse mentoring, in which a leader learns what life is like for a more junior, and often minority, employee by having a direct, structured relationship with them whereby they are the learner or the mentee. Adrian’s experience of being mentored by a female colleague with an ethnic minority background was, in his words, “Absolutely invaluable ... it gave me the opportunity to understand the reality of what the system is really like, and to see the impact of my own behaviors, default attitudes and even language,” he says.

Forty-one percent of women think their firm only pays lip service to gender diversity.

Of course, some leaders are more curious to learn and embrace different perspectives than others. “Can you be a diverse and inclusive leader without a broad experience of what the world is like?” asks Adrian. “The paradox is, if you’re not diverse and inclusive, you’ll be less inclined to try things such as reverse mentoring – but they are the people who need it most,” he concludes.

One idea, though ambitious, might be to incentivize and measure the actions leadership takes to work toward greater diversity, including gender parity. “I always try to balance the ratio of gender representation so that, say, when a woman is promoted, their previous role is taken by another woman,” says Adrian. “It is hard to measure behavioral change, of course, but, at the very least, it could be possible to measure the hours partners spend mentoring, coaching and sponsoring talented women,” he suggests.

1. <http://dads4daughters.com/>, accessed 26 June 2017.
2. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>, accessed 26 June 2017.
3. <http://dads4daughters.uk/what-is-dads4daughters/>, accessed 26 June 2017.

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Shifting the focus from performance to potential

Organizations need to drive revenue to stay in business; in consulting, revenue comes from building client relationships. Leaders invest a great deal of time, effort and intellect in managing their accounts. If client relationships are breaking down or numbers are dipping, leaders will focus their attention on addressing these issues immediately. The sales pipeline gets far more attention than the talent pipeline. Ironically, though, professional services firms won't earn a penny without strong consultants.

Leaders' relationships with team members need just as much attention as client relationships: taking the time to build deeper, more empathetic connections, asking the right questions, and exploring different options and pathways to success forge those relationships and achievements in both contexts. Leaders need to work at being as invested in the success of the individuals they manage, irrespective of gender, as they are in the success of a client engagement. Consulting firms seem to be lagging behind in their progress to enact this themselves; one of the reasons could be the huge value they put on revenue generation.

But should revenue really be the number one metric where talent development is concerned?



"In professional services organizations, we always face the same challenge: the activities that we prize and prioritize the most are financial and client-facing based," says Adrian. "Every week, the reports come in that map out KPIs such as chargeable hours, FTE and utilization. In-year performance is a major imperative, and this contributes to a culture in which you're only as good as your last job," he continues. Talent development should take a longer-term view, Adrian argues: "We tend to confuse performance with potential, and value less the broader, long-term experience and softer factors."

What else should count? At EY, we believe that long-term value creation and individuals' contribution to the health of the business is critical, based on criteria such as:

- ▶ **Nurturing the next generation of business leaders:** emphasize the importance of upward feedback and measure the impact that current leaders have on the development of their people
- ▶ **Improving the quality, depth and breadth of business relationships:** measure sustained new business generation over a number of years, not just on an annual basis



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- ▶ **Raising the quality of work and increasing client satisfaction:** consistently evaluate client feedback, giving equal weight to qualitative and quantitative success indicators
- ▶ **Developing new client services:** reward innovation and time invested in the development of new offerings

This refocusing of assessment, to factor in wider leadership qualities and sustainable business practices rather than chargeable hours, would also allow for recognition and reward of a broader range of skills, behaviors and characteristics; in turn, building a culture that values and profits from building more diverse and inclusive teams.

Exploring alternative career paths

For many consultants in the pinched middle, the choice of career progression can be stark: try to reach partner level, transfer to another firm or step out of consulting. And for too many women, their choice (or what they feel is their only option) is to leave work altogether when they start a family. To keep them in consulting, the critical thing would be to offer an option to balance their work with other life choices and commitments without it having a detrimental effect on their career.

This will be a challenge for the consulting industry specifically, where the emphasis on client-facing work is huge and the representation of men on senior leadership level is disproportionately high. Because people tend to regard their own choices in life as the only ones available, the chances for mothers to work part time, or even build a career in these kind of male-dominated environments, are accordingly quite low. Too often, mothers are offered jobs for which they are overqualified or have to live up to conservative consulting expectations of full-time chargeable hours, mobility and flexibility, in addition to managing their family life at home.

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“This is especially pertinent in an age where younger generations of both genders aim for flexible working conditions and cite poor work-life balance as a reason for leaving firms,” says Eva Voss, Ernst & Young GmbH, Regional Diversity & Inclusiveness Leader, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. “And these attitudes are reflected in the advance of the gig economy.” With this shift in mindset, stepping up to a leadership position and working part time, potentially on more local assignments, should no longer be mutually exclusive.

“I really want to be a partner and I’m on track for this to happen. I have a mentor, a coach and a sponsor, and that has been fantastic and makes a huge difference. I have seen the impact a coach and sponsor can have and it is amazing – the ‘real deal.’”
Female manager

In response to this, some organizations, EY included, are already encouraging alternative career paths – for example, as subject matter experts and thought leaders. But there are other avenues that women in consulting could explore beyond the high-pressure sales-oriented, client-facing roles: for example, moving into business services such as finance, human resources, marketing or even internal consulting, either for a period of time to broaden knowledge, while staying connected with their previous consulting teams with the intention to rejoin them in the future, or remaining in such a role if they choose.

Specifically, leadership not only needs to value these business support roles, but to count them as upward development – so, for example, a woman who leaves client work as manager, and is subsequently promoted to senior manager in a business support role, can return to client-facing consulting as a senior manager, if not a higher rank.

There is a compound benefit to this, as corporate clients often specifically ask for consultants with a broad background. “I talk about this with many clients. What I hear is a common understanding that broad experiential learning – such as spending time in frontline sales roles, in operating units and in support functions – is required to develop top executives,” says Adrian.

It is clear what is required of leadership teams: they must regard these kind of roles as being equally valid as consulting roles, and provide coaching and guidance to their counselees. Sponsoring would be a powerful tool in this respect: by advocating and championing inadequately represented individuals, leadership may automatically change the system overall.

Eva Voss emphasizes the importance of sponsoring, in addition to mentoring, women in this context. “A popular expression in this context is that ‘women are over-mentored and under-sponsored,’” says Eva. “While mentoring has great value, sponsorship involves a more proactive approach whereby the sponsor opens up their network to the colleague being sponsored and ensures that they are named on relevant talent pipeline and promotion lists, considered for high-profile projects and given exposure to C-suite clients.”

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, EY is committed to using sponsorship as a tool to strengthen the leadership pipeline and, as a result, has initiated the EY Career Watch Program.⁴ The program pairs partners with high-potential females to help support them as they work to achieve their full potential and realize their career ambitions. This not only helps women in their careers but also supports the wider talent agenda. For example, by 2018, within MENA, EY aims to have 50% of its new partner promotion from the Career Watch program. This would be a significant step toward gender parity.

4. *Tapping into the talent of our women in the Middle East*, EY, 2017, [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-women-in-the-middle-east-portfolio.pdf/\\$FILE/ey-women-in-the-middle-east-portfolio.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-women-in-the-middle-east-portfolio.pdf/$FILE/ey-women-in-the-middle-east-portfolio.pdf), accessed 26 June 2017.



Amplifying change

If there were to be a wish list for leaders to help develop the female talent pipeline, it might look something like this:

- ▶ Multiyear views of individual performance rather than an annual snapshot
- ▶ Reflection on all aspects of future leaders and how each is being developed
- ▶ Different roles or career paths being valued equally – as a contribution to the individual and to the firm
- ▶ Flexibility to return to client-facing work at the equivalent, or higher, rank as in their business support role
- ▶ Incentives for leaders to embrace and action gender parity targets

For the time being, leaders might abide by a checklist to move their own attitudes – and the overall female pipeline issue – forward:

- ▶ Take unconscious bias tests – and do them again and again, over time, to track progress
- ▶ Take the opportunity to get trained in rethinking attitudes
- ▶ Be open to reverse mentoring
- ▶ Take time to listen and understand
- ▶ Actively sponsor and coach talented women

Last but not least, male leaders should also carry any changed attitudes through to their personal lives: supporting their partners' careers, encouraging and broadening their daughters' professional ambitions, and influencing wider societal perspectives.

Almost half (47%) of female senior managers say tailored career paths and roles that take into account non-work commitments would help a lot, and a further 40% say it would help a bit.

Even the best corporate initiatives and professional support won't have a sustainable impact on women if it is missing from their personal lives. ■