University of Phoenix

Narrowing the Path to C-Suite Positions

White Paper

Alfreda Goods, DM

Adrian Allen, DBA

Lisa K. Langford, DM

Table of Contents

Abstract

African American women are disproportionately underrepresented in senior-level leadership positions in United States corporations. While women make up 21% of C-Suite positions, only 4% are African American. To date, there are only three African American women who have attained CEO status in Fortune 500 corporations. This white paper aims to understand what is missing from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives to successfully promote more African American women into senior-level positions. The concept of racial microaggressions is a significant negative contributor to this disparity.

Problem Statement

African American women are disproportionately underrepresented in senior-level leadership positions in US corporations across industries (Erskine et al., 2021; Perry, 2021). There have been significant efforts to support DEI, and although women make up 21% of C-Suite positions, it is astonishing that in 2022, only 4% are African American (Afsharipour & Rosenblum, 2022; Campbell et al., 2022; Connley, 2021; Leanin & McKinsey et al., 2022). Research shows that racial microaggressions create a dual standard system that challenges African American women's success as viable candidates for senior-level leadership positions and is a significant factor in African American women's inability to move into leadership roles (Leanin & McKinsey et al., 2022).

Background

Maya Angelou stated in 1978, "Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise. Up from a past that is rooted in pain, I rise". These poignant words resonate with the disparity of African American women in Chief Executive Officer (CEO) roles and question whether DEI is a delusion or if corporations are serious about including and promoting African American women in leadership roles within their organizations. Organizational leaders must begin to unravel racism at the systemic level, behaviorally and structurally. To overcome these realities and ensure African American women obtain leadership roles in the decision-making process within organizations, not just in title only. Leaders can use open communication to become aware of microaggression to alleviate its use and offer African American women mentorship and sponsorship opportunities to support advancing their careers into senior-leadership positions. Although some approaches may have addressed the problem, they only lessen a portion of the problem.

When one considers the severity of microaggressions, this may enable behavioral and mindset changes that impel real work toward instituting modification for the inclusion of African American women in CEO rankings. Inclusion means equal access to opportunities and resources for those who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized. It entails embracing all individuals regardless of race and not focusing on perceived differences but building on individuals' commonalities as strengths and embracing their talents and experiences.

Microaggressions

As a layer of intellectual inclusivity, microaggression is a broadly used term that is ambiguous, which minimizes its impact. Better defining microaggressions to fit the population or situation may be more precise with its delivery intent. Organized microaggressions have three distinct categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Hopper, 2019).

Microassaults are intentional forms of racism and send derogatory messages to hurt an individual of another race. An example would be using a negative term or racial slur to refer to a person of color. Microinsults and microinvalidations are more subtle and not as direct as microassaults. Microinsults are rude and insensitive comments that demean an individual's racial heritage or identity. In contrast, microinvalidations diminish the individuals' experiences of racism as unreal or imagined (Cheng et al., 2020; Groves, 2021).

Whether direct or indirect, microaggressions are a form of racism that communicates hostility and negatively impacts African American women in the workplace (Didwania, 2022). This form of communication demeans African American women, often making them feel less than they are and questioning their abilities and talents (Gebhardt, 2020; Holder et al., 2015; Melaku, 2019). Therefore, directly addressing microaggressions makes the person aware that

their biased remarks are hurtful and damaging and can stifle an African American women's success.

Microaggressions create dual standards in the organization with unspoken rules that African American women must act a specific way to fit in. An example, when African American women strive to get ahead, they are stereotyped as aggressive, too assertive, or angry. While describing Caucasian women exhibiting the same characteristics as confident and friendly, this microinsult paves a different path for African American women in the same organization. This negative description of African American women lowers their realms for success and supports the dual standards these women face by challenging their competencies, talents, and hard work. In such instances, some African American women have to downplay their qualifications to avoid the stereotypes they face.

African American women often realize there are two or more structures to learn, navigate, and be responsible for, where invisible and unconscious biases prevail and surround this dual standard. African American women use complex cognitive and performance skills as they maneuver to fit and operate in this dual standard (Melaku, 2019; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Even though African American women's behaviors are aligned with the mainstream when they display self-confidence and independence, they are still negatively labeled. They must endure microaggressions in the workplace instead of embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Parker and Ogilvie's (1996) theories have readdressed their assertions which are still valid today, that there has been little change to acknowledge the leadership differences in African American women and the mainstream styles (Sims et al., 2019). Microaggressions, whether subtle or intentional, directed at African American women exemplify racial disparities and do not create an inclusive work environment. Instead, its use in the workplace makes it

difficult for experienced and talented African American women to feel like they belong (Hamilton, 2021; Melaku, 2019; Townsend et al., 2021).

Gebhardt (2022), in partnership with Fortune, asked 4,275 people, including women, people of color, and individuals with disabilities, about their experiences with microaggressions. When African American women responded to the question about the most common microaggressions they experienced, 45% reported being treated unprofessionally, 29% called "well-spoken," and 28% overspoken when providing input. These are examples of microinsults. Labeling African American women as unprofessional discredits their talents and discounts their worth. Using the phrase "well-spoken" to an African American woman implies she is an anomaly because other individuals of her race do not use proper English.

Leanin and McKinsey and Company, in their study on the state of Black women in corporate America (2020), asked African American women respondents about microaggression. These women reported hearing comments such as "she received the promotion because she is black, or she was lucky to close the sale" (p. 7) when referring to an African American woman. Microinvalidations of African American women in the professional ranks infer that promotion may be race-based, not talent and knowledge. Another respondent reported, "a senior partner asked to 'touch my hair' to confirm it was 'all mine'" (p. 1). This microinsult comment focuses on her physical attributes or racial identification and is disrespectful. At the same time, another respondent reported that "an older male colleague interrupted me in a meeting and said, 'now young lady...' and then told me how I was incorrect in his opinion" (p. 1). These comments are microinvalidations and microinsults aimed at demeaning African American women. Emphasis should be on the women's credentials, talents, and contributions to the organization, not their race.

Leanin and McKinsey and Company's 2020 annual Women in the Workplace Study found that 49% of black women felt their race and ethnicity made it more difficult for them to get ahead or promoted compared to 3% of white women and 11% of women overall (p. 6). These statistics support Langford's (2017) assertion that race disparity and gender biases exist in the workplace, which makes it more difficult for experienced and talented African American women to feel like they belong (Hamilton, 2021; Melaku, 2019; Townsend et al., 2021).

While we have made strides with three African American women reaching the pinnacle of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, these are baby steps compared to other races that are Fortune 500 executives. Numerous organizations have committed to changing the narrative since the death of George Floyd; however, the inequities of African American women in C-Suite leadership roles persist. Practical leadership training, development, and access to mentorships and sponsorships will begin to build a pathway to success and establish mutually beneficial relationships that could close the gap by promoting more African American women to senior-level positions.

Solutions

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives

Communications

When enacting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, the goal should be to create an effective platform for consistent leadership training development and access. Building this leadership development starts with a foundation of integrity and trust. In addition, committing to long-term practices to addressing DEI should be established along with inclusion

to create cohesive bonds to address unconscious biases such as microaggressions and institute a more inclusive work environment.

Leaders should be the first partakers of setting the standards for DEI training initiatives that support transparent communication where individuals can honestly, truthfully, and tactfully discuss their experiences without reprimand or reprisal. DEI should be a matter of business practices, part of the organization's culture, and not an exception or accommodation (DuKach, 2022; Fernandes, 2021; Glauser, 2022; Onyeador et al., 2021; Schnall & Lawrence, 2022). The workplace is a blended multicultural and multigenerational environment, and communication and awareness of unconscious biases are essential for effective organizational behavior, acceptance, tolerance, equity, and fairness (Yogeeswaran et al., 2021).

Mentorship and Sponsorship Opportunities

A practical method to consider for increasing the representation of African American women in senior-level positions is creating corporate mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. These opportunities can begin with pairing African American women with senior leaders willing to help them navigate their career paths along with a talent succession plan that can co-create opportunities to increase their entry into leadership positions. A mentor is a trusted adviser and generally an interpersonal relationship between an experienced individual and a novice (Atkisson, 2022).

Mentoring coupled with sponsorship can bridge the gap and shift the paradigm for leadership to catapult African American women's movement into senior-ranking positions. When mentors and mentees are assigned, the focus should be on matching based on their personalities and career path to ensure a successful experience (Iverson, 2019). Navigating the corporate arena

with a mentor allows African American women to access information and influential people who can help advance their careers.

Instead of minimizing the contributions of African American women, organizational leaders should be encouraged to become mentors and accept these women in the organization and share information with them while capitalizing on how their qualities can be beneficial to the organization (Brown, 2021; Carter, 2022; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Ingraham et al., 2021; Jones, 2006; Shepherd, 2015). Positive mentorship programs can promote the inclusion and acceptance of African American women as part of the organization and not as outsiders. Inclusion and equity are beneficial financially and in knowledge transfer. Establishing inclusive values and what it means to African American women, organizations, and the shared commitment to the vision and mission set the direction and framework for sustainable change and growth. Mentorships at the senior levels equate to navigating the corporate waters. The lack of African American women representation is not a secret. Resolving the practice of exclusion is a mystery. Mentorships and managing the black ceiling have been at the forefront, although getting the needle to move is challenging (Bishop, 2020).

Sponsorship is another flexible framework for obtaining leadership positions, especially for women (Ang, 2019). A soft torch must pass from one level to the next for African American women. Like succession planning, the nod or tap for African American women to succeed to the next level must be systematic, structured, and attainable. Sponsorship allows penetration into the inner sanctum of decision-making and organizational leadership. Grooming African American women for strategic placement due to attrition should be a part of the strategic plan, just as it is for any key position. Several unique methods that may be attainable include sponsorship, job pairing and sharing, dual role training, and multicultural diversity leadership co-creation

diversity, equity, inclusion, and leadership initiatives to broaden the roles, perspectives, and enhanced perceptions of emerging global leadership—some considerations for program creations.

African American women possess various talents, skills, and abilities not identified and recognized as strengths as promotable candidates for senior leadership positions. African American women face many barriers when striving to attain leadership roles, such as being over-credentialed, underrepresented, experienced, and overly qualified in some respects. Many other combinations pose barriers to upward movement. Organizations should be intent on internally filling the gaps by determining the organization's needs and training these women to meet the current and potential future obligations, as well as hiring from within and compensating them instead of recruiting from outside.

Conclusion

Whether subtle or direct, microaggressions can negatively impact the success of African American women seeking to move into C-Suite leadership roles. Addressing microaggressions directly, openly, and honestly to establish transparency and viability (Bond et al., 2022) is the first step to embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion and creating a culture of belonging. In addition, directly addressing microaggressions also make the person using them aware that their biased remarks are harmful, damaging, and can stifle an African American women's success. Any micro-aggressive behaviors may counteract the focused intention on DEI efforts and initiatives. What may be less apparent is the true impact of the marginalization of African American women in professional and corporate settings.

When leaders are characterized based on their uniqueness, not as negative adjectives: angry, aggressive, assertive, all reserved for women of color, the strength of business acumen can be capitalized to its fullest when African American women are perceived positively as possessing initiative, drive, tenacity, and brilliance. Microaggressions should not be tolerated in the workplace because they are a form of prejudice and in opposition to the DEI principles. Organizations should prioritize training their workforce to be aware of them to create an inclusive workplace for diverse employees. Not addressing microaggressions in the workplace is ethically wrong and leaves a deep scar on those affected. Even though there have been some strides in African American women obtaining C-Suite positions, they have a long road ahead to get equitable seats at the table. African American women are not asking for a level playing field but an opportunity to sit at a microaggression-free table.

References

Afsharipour, A. & Rosenblum, D., (2022). Power and pay in the c-suite. *Inequality Inquiry.* https://ssrn.com/abstract=4014809

Ang, J. (2019). *The game plan of successful career sponsorship: Harnessing the talent of aspiring managers and senior leaders*. Emerald Group Publishing.

Atkisson, C. (2022). Mentors matter: Association of mentors with project success in the Apache Software Foundation Incubator. PloS One, 17(8), e0272764. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272764

Bishop, J. (2020, September). Level Up: The success factors in advancing African American women into the c-suite in corporate America. In *The Tenth International Conference on Engaged Management Scholarship*.

Bond, M. A., & Haynes-Baratz, M. C. (2022). Mobilizing bystanders to address microaggressions in the workplace: The case for a systems-change approach to getting a (Collective) GRIP. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *69*(1-2), pp. 221–238.

Brown, B. G. (2021). *Experiences of African American women in middle-level management: A exploratory case study* (Publication No. 28320910). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix].

Campbell, K, & Chrobot-Mason, D. (2022) *"Promoting women in leadership: Why men engage in allyship,"* [Paper presentation]. Dismantling Bias Conference Series. Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN., United States. https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgg/vol3/iss6/6

Carter, E. R. (2022). DEI, Initiatives are futile without accountability. *Harvard Business Review.* https://hbr.org/2022/02/dei-initiatives-are-futile-without-accountability

Cheng, A., King, B., Barrita, A., King, A. & Wong-Padoongpatt, G. (2021). Asian Americans experience microassaults during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Spectra Undergraduate Research Journal 1*(1), 56–62. https://doi.org/10.9741/2766-7227.1004.

Connley, C. (2021, January 12). Closing the gap, how corporate initiatives continue to fail black women. *CNBC*. https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/01/how-corporate-americas-diversity-initiatives-continue-to-fail-black-women.html

Didwania, A. (2022, February 17-19). Microaggressions: Understanding what they are, why they are harmful to health and how to manage them [Presenter]. The Integrative Healthcare Symposium, New York, NY. https://www.ihsymposium.com

Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016, July-August). Why diversity programs fail. *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 52–60. https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail

DuKach, D. (January-February 2022). DEI gets real. *Harvard Business Review.* https://hbr.org/2022/01/dei-gets-real

Erskine, S. E., Archibold, E. E., & Bilimoria, D. (2021). Afro-diasporic women are navigating the black ceiling. Individual relational and organizational strategies. *Business Horizons*, 64(1), 37-50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.10.004

Fernandes, P. (2021). Creating a diversity and inclusion training program. *Business News Daily*. https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/9782-diversity-training.html

Gebhardt, J. (2022). Study: *Microaggression in the workplace.* SurveyMonkey. https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/microaggressions-research

Glauser, M. (2022, June 22). *Beyond dei: The next step to civility.* https://cruciallearning.com/blog/beyond-dei-the-next-step-to-civility/

Groves, M. (2021). Self-affirmations and the perception of micro-aggressions. *Psychology Student Research Showcase, 49,* 1-2. https://scholar.umw.edu/psychology-showcase/49.

Hamilton, D. (2021, October 19). 3 ways executives hold black women back at work. *CNN Business Perspectives*. https://www/cnn.com

Holder, A.M.B., Jackson, M.A., & Ponterolto, J. G (2015). Racial microaggression experiences and coping strategies of black women in corporate leadership. *Qualitative Psychology*, 2(2), 164-180. https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2015-30581-001

Hopper, E. (2019). What is a microaggression? Everyday insults with harmful effects. www.thoughtco.com/microaggression-definition-examples-4171853

Ingraham, A., Fearn, K., Paz, M.T., Younger, V., Rogers, S.E., Cheng, M., Harvey, B. H., Beldona, S., Kwansa, F., Hooper, M., Jackson, L., & Williams-Bryant, D. (2021). Creating more opportunities and executive leadership positions for people of color in the hospitality industry. *The Consortium Journal of Hospitality and Tourism,* 39. https://www.hospitalityhbcu.org/uploads/articlelink/1643102325.pdf#page=41.

Iverson, A. (2019). Developing and executing a corporate mentorship program. *Journal of Pension Benefits*. 27(1), 1-4. https://pinnacle-plan.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Amanda-Iverson-Article-Developing-and-Executing-a-Corporate-Mentorship-Program.pdf

Jones, C. (2006). Falling between the cracks: What diversity means to black women in higher education. *Policy Futures in Education,* 4(2), 145-159. https://doi.org//10.2304/pfile.2006.4.2.145

Langford, L. K. (2017). *A narrative inquiry exploring the stories of African-American women in leadership at nonprofit organizations* (Publication No. 10637379).[Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix].

Leanin.Org & McKinsey & Company (2020). *The state of Black women in corporate America,* https://leanin.org/research/state-of-black-women-in-corporate-america

Leanin.Org & McKinsey & Company (2022). *Women in the workplace 2022.* https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace?cid=other-eml-dre-mip-mck&hlkid=d60543c05b11404cadaa2f3bdb

McGirt, E. (2019). Are you a microaggressor? Fortune Online. https://fortune.com/2019/05/01/are-you-a-microaggressor/

Melaku, T. M. (2019). *"You don't look like a lawyer": Black women and systemic racism.*

Rowman & Littlefield. Onyeador, I.N., Hudson, S.T.J., & Lewis, N. A. (2021). Moving beyond implicit bias training: Policy Insights for Increasing Organizational Diversity. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences.* 8(1), 19–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732220983840

Parker, P.S., & Ogilvie, D.T. (1996). Gender, culture, and leadership: Toward a culturally distinct model of African American women executives' leadership strategies. *Leadership Quarterly, 7*(2), 189–214.

Perry, S.M. (2021). Diversity, equity, and inclusion. –Catchy slogans and buzzwords with little proof that they matter to the legal professions in Massachusetts! *Boston College Law Review*, 62(8), 2747–2758. https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/bclr/vol62/iss8/14

Schnall, M. & Lawrence, T. (2022). When black women lead, we all win: 10 inspiring leaders show the way. https://www/forbes.com/sites/marianneschnall/2020/08/17/when-black-women-lead-we-all-win/?sh=2279b93b4513

Shepherd, M. L. (2015). Perceptions of African American female leaders on career advancement. *Leadership & Organizational Management Journal*, (1), 49–62.

Sims, C. M., & Carter, A. D. (2019). Revisiting Parker & Ogilvie's African American women executive leadership model. *The Journal of Business Diversity*, *19*(2), 99–112.

Singh, R. S., Bhambhani, Y., Skinta, M. D., & Torres-Harding, S. R. (2021). Measurement of intersectional microaggressions: Conceptual barriers and recommendations. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *16*(5), 956-971.

Townsend, C. V. (2021). Identity politics: Why African American women are missing in administrative leadership in public higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220935455

Yogeeswaran, K., Gale, J., & Verkuyten, M. (2021). Interculturalism as a strategy to manage diversity: Moving psychological research beyond colorblindness and multiculturalism. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *15*(10). https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com