

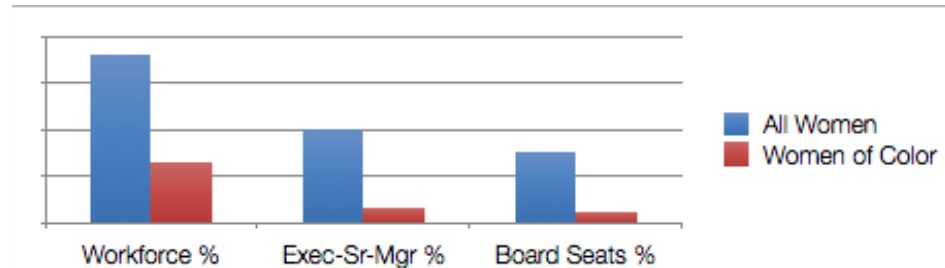
# 5 MYTHS ABOUT DEVELOPING MULTICULTURAL WOMEN (MCW) LEADERS

Why are women getting ahead in leadership,  
but MCW are being left behind?



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Most of us know the facts: Multicultural women represent one-third of the female workforce, but they are five times less likely to hold executive, senior, and managerial jobs.



Internal data at many companies often curves even more steeply; some reports even show that women of color seem to disappear as they rise up the ranks. For years, executives have struggled to solve this problem. And the stakes are high – lack of abundant opportunities for women of color is not only a waste of valuable talent already recruited and trained, but also could be grounds for legal action. Responsible leaders in many positions - LOB, HR, L&D, D&I – want to find a way to open the pipeline to leadership for diverse talent.

Culled from over a decade of experience in presenting successful programs that address both sides of the problem --inclusive leadership as well as leadership development targeted for women and/or minorities— here are 5 debilitating myths we encounter over and over:

## **MYTH #1: RECRUITING MORE MCW WILL SOLVE THE PROBLEM**

Many companies turn to their internal and external recruiters to close the gap.

While an important element of overall company diversity, our research shows that recruiting practices alone are not likely to solve the problem. When we accept the fact that numerous unconscious biases permeate every culture and establish unwritten rules for advancement, a volume approach to diverse hiring falls apart quickly. New hires soon encounter impediments that frustrate their overall sense of opportunity for career growth, causing attrition rates to spike dramatically after only a year or two of employment. If movement through the career pipeline is sluggish or blocked, the best people will quickly become aware of the problem and move somewhere that affords them a better shot at success.

Even more importantly, when initially considering their options, the most savvy MCW will look to the existing senior management of an organization as a barometer for their chance to achieve their goals. If the view at the top doesn't look like they do, they may not even consider your company. At the very least, they will question the corporate culture during the interview process and check whether you are offsetting implicit bias with programs that can increase their opportunities for advancement. Remember, in today's world, recruits can easily connect with your MCW employees on social media and get the unvarnished story.

**BOTTOM LINE**

If a company only relies on recruiting without making changes internally, they are likely to lose the chance to hire and/or retain the most desirable MCW talent in the marketplace.

## **MYTH #2: DON'T FIX THE WOMEN, FIX THE ENVIRONMENT THAT DISCRIMINATES AGAINST THEM.**

We often hear that a leadership program targeted on multicultural women is just 'fixing the women.' MCW are already working harder than their peers and, as one of our program participants put it, "leaning in so far I am about to fall over." There is a valid concern that we place the burden of improving the system on the women themselves when, in fact, it is the universe of leaders who hold them back in subtle (or not so subtle) ways. According to this argument, we should invest in inclusive leadership training and unconscious bias programs to change an environment that does not properly appreciate or reward ethnically diverse female talent. And we agree; every company certainly *should* do that.

However, while the righteous indignation of this argument is incredibly compelling, our research shows that focusing *entirely* on inclusion training for leaders is not the best way to improve outcomes for MCW poised to advance *today*. Inclusive leadership/unconscious bias programs are not a 'cure-all' that will transform the behavior of all your leaders overnight and eliminate *all* of their blind spots. Experts have identified over 150 types of biases that operate inside our brains at once; even with the best of intentions, these cannot all be held at bay. And, as a matter of practicality,

we know that a large percentage of leaders who engage in training truly mean well for a positive outcome, but quickly return to business as usual after their programs end.

### **BOTTOM LINE**

Systemic change will be inherently slow and imperfect. Eliminating biases inherent in the system takes time and will only ever approach fairness, never attain it. While leadership programs to increase awareness are an important step toward achieving a more effective diverse workforce, these efforts are not enough on their own.

## **MYTH #3: ASSIGNING EXECUTIVE SPONSORS TO ADVOCATE FOR MCW IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO OPEN THE DIVERSITY PIPELINE.**

Just as inclusion training is helpful but not a total solution for advancing MCW, assigning sponsors is not a silver bullet either. One woman told us that the sponsor assigned to her by HR did not really understand the difference between sponsorship and mentorship, so she spent the first 12 months of their relationship training him using the sponsorship insights she learned in our course. Similarly, another woman described a situation where her assigned sponsor had no influence in the areas where she wanted to advance, so she needed the ability to cultivate sponsors in the area of the business she was trying to access. Of course, the worst cases are situations



where the ‘assigned’ sponsors do not engage with their protégés in any meaningful way.

There isn’t any *harm* in assigning sponsors. If the process works 50% of the time, we should still be better off, right? Sadly, there can also be negative repercussions from assigning sponsors:

1. Protégés believe that one sponsor is all they need and don’t learn how to enlist additional sponsors with political capital in the right areas. When the assigned sponsor leaves, moves, or simply can’t influence the right decisions, the protégé is stuck with no support.
2. If the sponsor relationship doesn’t go well, protégés may feel they failed and give up trying.
3. Assigned sponsors can feel they have ‘checked the box’ and don’t need to think about having other MCW protégés.

### **BOTTOM LINE**

Attaining, cultivating, and leveraging sponsors is a delicate process that requires a variety of skill sets – on both sides of the relationship – to be truly effective. Just setting up a sponsor relationship with no tools for support is often doomed to failure.



## **MYTH #4: WE SHOULD USE OVERALL DIVERSITY METRICS TO MEASURE WHETHER LEADERS ARE ADVANCING MCW AND HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE AS WE WOULD FOR ANY BUSINESS PRIORITY.**

Of course, this sounds entirely logical and reasonable - but relying on metrics to move the needle can be very complicated. If it feels like a quota for MCW is being imposed on managers, there will be pushback which can lead to unintended consequences. And the “numbers don’t lie” approach is fraught with potential for misunderstanding. In one financial firm we worked with, managers had great hiring statistics - but they were matched by high turnover rates. They hit their hiring numbers by pulling in MCW who weren’t qualified or interested enough to stay the course. So unless you really scratch at the surface of the stats, you may be lulled into a false sense of security.

### **BOTTOM LINE**

Metrics must be used carefully as part of an overall strategy for making meaningful culture change in an organization. True change doesn’t happen in a single year. Metrics can be part of the answer, but certainly not the only answer.

## MYTH #5: WE DON'T NEED TARGETED TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR MCW - THEY ALREADY KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING. MCW JUST NEED OPPORTUNITIES TO ADVANCE.

This brings us full circle back to the beginning: don't 'fix the women.' We can all agree that we do not need a remedial course for MCW who are already high-performing. To truly move the needle toward *better outcomes* for today's women, we need to work on both sides of the issue at the same time: provide inclusion programs for leaders *and* equip the women themselves for a world that will continue to be imperfect. A leadership program for women of color doesn't 'fix the women,' it provides extra equipment for them to climb a mountain while carrying more weight (bias against them) than their male and majority counterparts. Here is an approach we've found to be highly effective:

1. **Remove the Blinders** – We were surprised to find that a significant number of MCW entering our program simply did not see the subtle ways that race and gender differences could complicate the processes of building their trust and influence with senior leadership. Most MCW are so accustomed to not having the permission space for this discussion, we don't see the issues clearly. Pretending the obstacles aren't there is a coping mechanism that only works so long. The good news is that there are easy ways to deal with these issues with grace and ease—once you can see them!



- 2. Eliminate Isolation** – There are so few MCW in corporate America rising into leadership that they often feel isolated. We’ve found that MCW value connections with a community of high-power women who look like them (what majority males experience at work every day). Keep in mind that this is different from a typical affinity group where the women are not necessarily on the fast-track together. Participants in our programs report that the ability to connect with other ‘women on the move’ from diverse backgrounds gave them increased confidence, a sounding board for problem solving, and more loyalty to a company that provides this kind of support.
- 3. Provide Opportunities for Visibility/Networking** – With our most forward-thinking clients, we work with HR, managers, and senior leadership to properly set the stage for success. We then provide tools and techniques to effectively connect program participants with potential sponsors. Wherever possible, we integrate our program with their internal talent system to provide up-to-date information on hiring potential and interests at scale. In some cases, executives meet with participants live and/or virtually to enhance visibility and networking opportunities. We also provide detailed briefings for managers of participants to help them understand their role in the development process.
- 4. Provide Role Models** – It is true that effective sponsors and mentors don’t have to look like MCW, but having some who do allows MCW to learn from the experiences of those who have figured out how to thrive in leadership teams that are largely “pale, male, and Yale” – to borrow a phrase from one MCW executive. The few MCW at the top of major corporations, however, are typically overwhelmed with requests to mentor and sponsor the MCW in their organization; there just aren’t enough to go around. Through our program, participants meet not only the other participants, but also have access to:

- Our course facilitators—MCW who have had successful corporate careers in finance, healthcare, manufacturing, etc. – during interactive Webex discussions, as well as ‘office hours’ where they can ask for advice on particular situations.
- A library of short podcasts where MCW executives share their personal experiences and advice specifically for MCW on the way up.
- An alumni association for grads after the course ends with numerous Fortune 100 companies participating. Here MCW continue to access executive speakers, quarterly peer discussions and local meet-ups...all in conjunction with other high-performing MCW.

Having targeted leadership development for MCW isn’t remedial at all. It’s about being more connected to the women who look like you *and* more connected to the mostly male leadership *at the same time*. One participant described our program as an ‘eco-system’ for growth. It’s not just the insights you gain from readings and discussions—the incredible results we have achieved only happen when MCW participants apply their knowledge of the unwritten rules, extend the universe of their relationships, and enlist the support they need.

## THE BLUE CIRCLE ADVANTAGE

Our programs at Blue Circle Leadership not only provide practical tools and support for the MCW who are climbing, we also engage their leaders and HR representatives to help as well. We are frequently asked to share what we learn from our MCW participants with all leaders throughout an organization. We compile data on the actual challenges *their* women face--- not just the generic statistics on bias.

Our programs can improve the results for today's women of color by equipping them at the same time we are working on the environment. One of our Fortune 50 financial clients recently studied our MCW program participants and found they were *3.5 times more likely to get a promotion* than statistically similar MCW who did not attend our training.

**For more information, please contact us:**

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