

# Women, Water, + Leadership


Are We Making Progress?

By Sandra Stroope and Bonnie Hagemann

**What do the push for gender equality in the C-suite and water have in common? Quite a bit. Though much progress has been made, women still face many challenges in rising to the top.**



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Are women making progress in leadership roles? It's a reasonable question. There are currently 15 Fortune 500 companies run by women—the same number as last year, though some of the names have changed. Katharine Graham of *The Washington Post* was the first female executive to run a Fortune 500 company when the media firm joined the list in 1972. So, a hefty 38 years later, women still only represent 3 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs.

#### How can this be?

Women comprise almost 50 percent of the workforce. According to Pew Research, women are rated higher than men in every area of leadership measured, except decisiveness. Women are rated as more honest, intelligent, hardworking, compassionate, outgoing, and creative, as well as equally ambitious when compared to men. And companies with higher numbers of women at senior levels also have better organizational and financial performance according to McKinsey's "Women Matter" studies.

It just doesn't add up! If all of this is true, why do women only account for 3 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs? To go even further, the executive suites are not faring much better, with an estimated 10 percent of executive positions and board seats being held by women. It's only when we get down below the executive suite that we begin to see a more realistic representation of our female counterparts. Is it just corporate America or do these statistics reflect a bigger picture?

#### What are the facts?

**Government.** We took a look at the global government sector and found the story gets only a little better, with only 4.7 percent women in head of state positions across the globe, and the next layer of government leadership shows that slightly more than 18 percent of the world's senators or members of parliament are now



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women (according to the United Nations Department of Public Information). Historically, we know that when the United Nations held its first World Conference on Women in 1975, it was clear that discrimination against women was a problem and that measures were needed to ensure change. The charge went out to the attending governments to develop strategies for change and promote equal participation of women in politics.

Progress was slow, gaining only 1 percentage point of women in parliament between 1975 and 1985. As more aggressive measures were implemented with the 1985 World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women and with the 1995 Beijing Plan of Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the percentages rose. “Today, 18.6 percent of seats in parliaments are represented by women, a 60 percent increase since 1995,” says Theobald Gurirab in the *UN Chronicle*.

Concentrating specifically on the United States, we find that the percentage of women in the U.S. Congress has risen from 3 percent in 1979 to 16.8 percent in 2010, and the percentage of women in the state legislatures has risen from 10 percent in 1979 to 24.5 percent in 2010 (from the report “Women in Elective Office 2010” by the Center for Women and Politics).

**Not-for-profit.** In another sector, the not-for-profit world, we found that

the story begins to improve significantly, with women representing some 33 percent of CEOs and presidents—more than double that of Fortune 500 companies.

**Education.** Even dipping into the education sector, we found that 23 percent of college presidents were women in a 2006 ACE study, which is an increase from 9.5 percent in 1986. In public schools, the percentage of female administrators is on the rise, increasing to as much as 50 percent in some states. This is excellent progress; however, the percentage of female teachers is 70 percent, rendering even this impressive number of leadership seats held by women as disproportionate to the population they serve.

So what can be done? Additional efforts are clearly needed. We need additional and ongoing support from the current leaders in all sectors to overcome the historic under-representation of women in corporate, government, nonprofit, education, and other leadership roles. There are many initiatives underway and no doubt more in the making. In addition, women seeking leadership positions can look at their own strengths and development areas individually and as a people group. Let’s take a look at women and leadership skills on a deeper level.

### **What are some of the key skills women need to rise to the top?**

**1. Decisiveness.** If decisiveness is the one area in which men are perceived as better leaders, could decisiveness be the one skill that separates the men from the women? Ummm, we don’t think so. After all, have you ever watched moms in action? They dole out decisions like Halloween candy and do so with speed, accuracy, and motherly fortitude. And they do this while driving in traffic, dividing and passing out snacks, offering advice, and sliding into

the parking lot in time to jump out of the car, look like they’ve got it together, and walk into the dance recital on time.

So, we don’t really think it’s a lack of skill, but perhaps it is the execution of the skill. Anne Mulcahy, former CEO of Xerox, explained that she had to change the way she made decisions. Instead of relying on influence and creating consensus, she realized at some point “the decision needs to be made. A call needs to be made.” There is a need to use broader, more strategic decision-making techniques.

Research on the Myers-Briggs personality type indicator shows that the majority of women, approximately 60 percent, base decisions on values and the impact on people, rather than rely on logical reasoning and objective analysis. Additionally, studies have found that the “feeler” personality types are less likely to score well on assessments measuring critical thinking approaches such as evaluating arguments and drawing conclusions. So, the way that decisions are made may be a factor, as well as the delivery of the decision.

**2. Assertive communication.** Women can’t make it in leadership if they are too soft, but they come across as overly aggressive if they try to lead as a man might. Far too many book readers and moviegoers can see similarities between life and art having worked for a female leader such as Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*. The demanding treatment of her staff causes a high turnover rate among personal assistants. The author, Lauren Weisberger, says this character is partially fictional and partially a composite of actual experiences she and her friends had in their first jobs. Women have learned to speak assertively, but they still struggle to find the balance between assertiveness and the perception of aggression.

On the other hand, many women

have been criticized for being too nice. Assertiveness means having the ability, courage, and confidence to express your own feelings and assert your own rights while respecting the feelings and rights of others. Assertive communication is appropriately direct, open, and honest.

### 3. Political and organization savvy.

Competition and politics are so brutal at the top that many women just opt out and step off the path. These female creatures see the world differently, and many are not willing to make the time, personal, and emotional sacrifice necessary to get to the executive suite. Many women, to preserve their authentic selves, decide that the executive path is incongruent with their values or job satisfaction and thus choose another path.

Strong interpersonal relationships and networks within an organization are also critical to success. Rather than ignoring politics, many women are playing the game with ethics and integrity, but they still need to promote themselves, build their career, find mentors, and seek development and opportunity rather than assume that their work will speak for itself. Over the years, women have learned to take more risks and then allow the responsibility to land on their own shoulders. Following the advice of Eleanor Roosevelt, they have learned to “get in the game and stay in the game.”

A study by CareerWomen.com found that the majority of women in the workplace had a formal or informal mentor who had influenced their personal development and career success. More interesting, the survey of those women with mentors found that the majority reported that their most important mentoring relationships were with men rather than women. It is critical that women also begin to build relationships with other women who can share career advice on areas such as work-life balance, overcoming gender bias, and style issues that a male mentor may not be able to effectively address.

**4. Inspire performance.** Women who rise to the executive suite are able to inspire performance and results in others. When Judi Johansen was appointed as the president of Marylhurst University, after having served as president and

CEO of PacifiCorp, the announcement from the board said, “She is a proven organizational leader and strategic thinker. She is a good listener and quick learner. She knows how to bring out the best in people, including those with expertise beyond her own. She is a relationship builder. She has financial acumen.”

There is a definite need to strike a balance between achieving results and maintaining effective relationships, and women leaders in the vein of Johansen have been able to find the balance and live it. She is a great example of how women leaders can set business objectives, build relationships, and ultimately, drive results.

**5. Work-life balance.** Women of all ages in the workforce are striving to find a livable work-life balance—one that allows them to live a fulfilling life both in and out of the workplace. One interesting trend along these lines concerns the young women in the workforce. A recent report by the Families and Work Institute showed that women in the Millennial generation, under the age of 29, are just as likely as men to want jobs with greater responsibility, even if they have kids at home.

This represents an increase from years past, and with an expected 50 percent unemployment rate for Millennials graduating college, the competition is going to be hot, hot, hot! On top of that, the demands of career and family have been well documented. These ambitious young women will need to be able manage stress, communicate effectively about work expectations and needs, and compartmentalize, leaving work at work. This may be a difficult role for young adults whose helicopter parents have come through for them all of their lives and who are now expected to make it on their own.

### What are the next steps?

Recently, Sandra was rummaging through an overflowing file cabinet, trying to make room for this year’s recently completed income tax file, when she came across a copy of an old college research paper on the topic of women in leadership. Scanning the 20-year-old quotes, interviews, and references, it became clear that many obstacles to

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women as leaders are just as prevalent today as they were back then. One of the research articles said that a majority of people, male or female, would prefer to work for a man rather than a woman if given the choice. As women have inched (and we do mean *inched*) their way into the executive suite, they have faced extreme scrutiny that is still prevalent today.

Women in leadership have not yet arrived, but we’re not worried. Just as water seeks its own level, women will eventually settle into the executive suite and arrive at their own form of leadership. It won’t be the “male version” of leadership that has often been used to make it to the top. When water is seeking its own level, resisting forces can keep it tilted for awhile, but no amount of resistance will keep the level at bay forever. Many women leader forerunners have created a path, and the women who follow will fill in all of the cracks and crevices of the leadership great divide. We believe that during the coming decade, as women begin to settle into the executive seats en masse, women as leaders will forge an identity all their own. Now *that* will be progress.

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