

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION



UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

It comes as no surprise that one-third of recruiting executives cited securing critical talent as the most pressing concern for 2025.¹ The ongoing labor shortage has created significant talent acquisition challenges in recent years, leading to an environment in which organizations and HR professionals now require innovative ways to expand their workforces. Yet, despite this urgency, few organizations look inward when filling open roles. The median percentage of nonexecutive positions filled internally is just 7%, and 100% of executive hires are sourced externally.²

When career advancement opportunities are limited, employees often seek growth somewhere else, undermining the development of internal leadership pipelines. This reality prompts an important question: What can organizations do to prevent highly qualified emerging leaders from seeking greener pastures? A clear starting point is to tap into existing talent by removing barriers to internal mobility and investing in development strategies that prepare high-potential employees for senior roles.

Increasing efforts to engage underutilized segments of the workforce, which include millions of people who fall outside the scope of traditional recruitment channels, is a powerful yet underleveraged strategy to expand talent pools. Although women account for nearly half of the employed population, they are the largest untapped talent pool in the U.S. labor force. Despite their critical role in the workforce, women continue to be underrepresented in employment as positions become more senior, signaling persistent barriers to career advancement.³

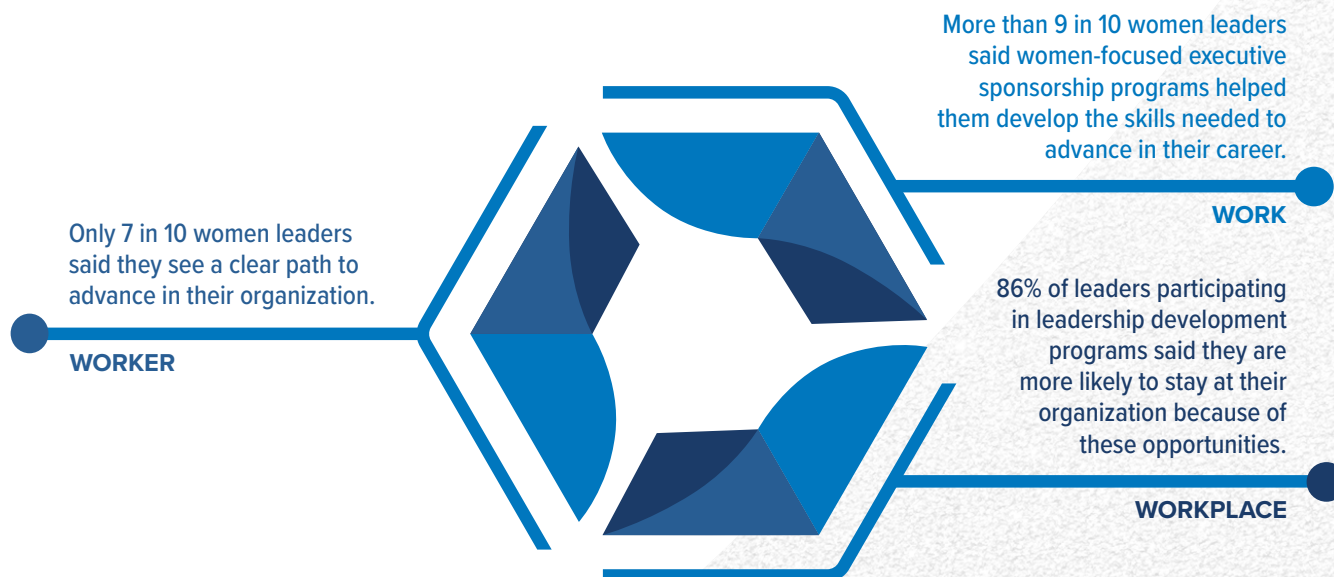
To better understand how organizations can tackle these two-pronged challenges, SHRM surveyed 3,010 leaders, ranging from managers to directors and above, to understand what organizations can do to support leaders as they progress through their careers. Additionally, SHRM surveyed 1,141 HR professionals to gain insights on organizational initiatives that lead to better retention outcomes.



¹ [Recruiting Executives: Priorities and Perspectives](#), SHRM, 2025.

² [2025 Recruiting Executives Benchmarking: Insights to Maximize Recruitment](#), SHRM, 2025.

³ [Women in the Workforce: Underrepresentation in Management Positions Persists, and the Gender Pay Gap Varies by Industry and Demographics](#), U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023.



Women in Leadership: Reducing Barriers and Expanding Opportunities for Career Progression

KEY FINDINGS

To address the talent shortage, organizational leadership and HR teams must prioritize internal mobility, reduce advancement barriers, and fully leverage the contributions of women in the workforce. The findings from this research are intended to provide organizations with actionable steps aimed at creating healthy leader pipelines and reducing the barriers to career progression that women leaders face.

Key findings from this research include:

- 1. The U.S. has been experiencing a significant and persistent labor shortage due to underlying factors that predate the pandemic.** In recent years, there have consistently been more job openings than unemployed people in any given month, underscoring a persistent shortage of labor. This shortage is the byproduct of many factors, including a long-run trend of population aging that has significantly slowed labor supply growth in recent decades and could cause an absolute decline in labor supply in future decades.
- 2. Women are the largest underutilized talent pool in the labor force.** Women now represent nearly half of the employed population (47%), but the data show female employment representation declines as managerial positions become increasingly more senior.
- 3. Women leaders are less likely to see a clear path to advance in their current organization.** About two-thirds of female managers and supervisors (66%) indicated they see a clear path to advance, compared to 74% of their male counterparts. About 3 in 4 women at the director level and above (74%) indicated they see a clear path to advance, versus 83% of men who hold similar positions.

4. **Regardless of gender, leaders are motivated by job opportunities that provide them with access to learning and development opportunities.** Although a competitive salary and benefits were certainly the dominant motivating factors when leaders were asked what they look for when considering job opportunities, nearly half of female managers and supervisors (48%) and female directors and above (46%) indicated it would be a step back in their career if access to learning and development programs decreased despite their pay increasing.
5. **Formal leadership development programs are highly valued by leaders and HR professionals.** When organizations provide employees with opportunities to participate in formal leadership development programs, HR professionals indicated these programs are effective at increasing participant skill development (96%), engagement (95%), satisfaction (94%), and retention (93%). Additionally, 86% of leaders participating in leadership development programs indicated they are more likely to stay at their organization because of these opportunities.
6. **Executives play an important role in demonstrating their commitment to advancing leaders within their organizations.** Nearly half of leaders currently participating in leadership programs indicated the opportunity to learn from (50%) and connect with (48%) higher-level leadership as a top benefit of these programs. For women participating in women-focused executive sponsorship (WFES) programs at the time of the survey, 90% of female managers and supervisors and 96% of female directors and above indicated WFES programs helped them develop the skills needed to advance in their career.
7. **Improving internal talent mobility to develop healthy leadership pipelines is essential.** About 60% of leaders who made lateral career transfers indicated their desire to stay increased after making their most recent transfer, and more than 90% of leaders would recommend that others make at least one or more lateral transfers in their career.



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