Seven Hurdles Women Leaders Face

Hurdles are obstacles you cross while running full speed. If you get tripped up on one, you go down. So you need to get over all of them. Also hurdles aren’t that high (just a few feet), and with practice and purposeful intention, hurdles can be crossed skillfully and even triumphantly.

Bias (Bias? What bias?)

While current research has covered unconscious biases placed on women, little has been done to recognize the role of the unconscious biases women place on themselves. What beliefs and assumptions have women accepted (perhaps unconsciously) that keep us from training for and overcoming the hurdles below? For women leaders to step in fully to achieve their career aspirations, they must first understand these self-limiting barriers and then make conscious choices to think and act differently.

Shift: from not seeing our part to owning the barriers we create for ourselves

Clarity (Do I know what I want?)

When asked what their next professional step will be, many women will admit to not having a clear answer. If asked about where they are ultimately going, their vision is foggy at best. If we don’t know what we want and where we’re going, how can we and those around us help us to manifest it? Once a woman has knowledge of who she is and where she ultimately wants to go and can speak to this with clarity, the task at hand is to do what is necessary to make her vision reality and channel her strengths accordingly.

Shift: from clarity about our future to knowing what we want in the short and long term

Making the Ask (How do I ask for what I want?)

Let’s say a woman knows who she is, the value she brings, and how she thinks this value can make a difference. Our research shows that when it comes down to asking for what she wants (especially matters of financial income), women have serious work to do. If we don’t get comfortable asking for what we want, how can those around us support us in multiplying our impact? Request-making is essential on the home front too; if women aren’t great at asking for what they need in their own living room, how can they do much better in the board room? If women don’t stop to stand up for what they want and need, who will?

Shift: from putting off self-serving requests to asking (often) for what we want and need

Branding & Presence (How am I showing up?)

What are people saying when we leave the room? What do we WANT people to say when we leave the room? What is our purpose? If there is any disparity between the two, it’s every leader’s job to fix. And yet, women are uncomfortable promoting themselves. Ask a woman for 2-4 things she’s great at, and what ensues is
speechlessness. Women need to know what their specific super powers (strengths) include (and yes, we each have several) and then be able to comfortably articulate them.

**Shift: from assuming that others will promote our value to taking charge of our personal brand**

**Proving Our Value (Why can’t I do it all?)**

Overcompensating, over-delivering, doing it ourselves, taking on too much, wanting to make it perfect—all of this makes it even harder to shift to a focus on bringing others along. To control or not to control—that is the question. Women as leaders (not just as achievers) need to attract great talent and then inspire, share responsibility and influence an environment where their leadership has multiplying impact.

**Shift: from proving ourselves to scaling and multiplying our impact**

**Networking (Who has time?)**

Making time and taking time to build a network seems inefficient if not superfluous to many women. Additionally, men frequently have advantages in casual networking opportunities with other men that women are not able to take advantage of. Instead of viewing the development of a robust network as something they don’t have time for, women need to make this an even higher priority than men because women so often still aren’t in the “natural” places where men enjoy casual brand-building and networking opportunities.

**Shift: from tracking the “time costs” of networking to making relationship-building a strategic priority**

**Recognized Confidence (Can I do this?)**

Evidence suggests that one of the biggest barriers for women is lack of self-confidence. The challenge that confidence experts point to is the external and extrinsic ways women can build up the confidence required to lead. Women need to believe in their worthiness—and learn how to stop the harsh thinking about themselves and others—or all this fuss about confidence won’t result in much more than talk.

**Shift: from confidence-building to first Coaching Our Inner Critic™**

Based on Linkage’s study of over 3,000 women leaders who are responsible for talent in half the Fortune 500, and aggregate data from 1,500 Linkage Women in Leadership Assessments

**Linkage** develops leaders who create lasting impact. For 25 years we’ve worked with thousands of leaders to define the right combination of strategic leadership solutions to meet business needs. While our work with leaders is gender-neutral, we have learned over time that there are challenges, specific to women, that create hurdles for leadership advancement. Linkage believes that alongside investing in the development of leaders, organizations must:

- Create a leadership culture of engagement—rooted in inclusion—where all talent can bring their full selves to the table, and
- Address the specific hurdles women face and equip them with the knowledge and tools needed to navigate them