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**MIND  
THE  
GAP**  
**WOMEN'S  
LEADERSHIP IN  
PUBLIC RELATIONS**

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# PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

It's well documented that men hold the vast majority of CEO positions in the top PR agencies, with some estimates topping nearly 80 percent. In an industry that is predominantly women, this makes the gap between men and women especially pronounced.

Studies point to several factors impacting women's rise to the C-suite, including work-life considerations and practices, reduced likelihood to receive milestone promotions or pay increases, and unconscious biases.

Most of the current research available doesn't address issues specific to the public relations and communications profession.

So, we've set out to address how we can achieve better and quicker progress that empowers and moves more women into leadership positions. This includes how companies and the industry can support women to achieve coveted senior positions and identifying practical actions that mid-level women can take to navigate their careers.

This is part one of a two-part study of mid- to senior-level women and men in public relations to analyze women's leadership in the field. The report opens with some notable quotes, followed by the "Summary of Themes," and ends with a "Call to Action."

# METHOD

Ten focus groups were conducted of the following groups independently led by same-sex moderators: senior-level women, mid-level women, senior-level men, and mid-level men. Participants were agency leaders, chief communication officers, executives, and mid-level employees in corporations, agencies, and nonprofits. Sixty individuals participated in this study.

While this study offers an analysis of the perception of women in leadership in public relations, there are disadvantages to the focus group method. One disadvantage of the focus group method is the results are not statistically representative of the general public relations industry and participants may feel less comfortable disclosing about a topic in a group setting, rather than an individual setting. Another disadvantage of this study focused on gender, it is important to note the intersectionality of experiences—various other qualities such as race, sexual orientation, and age—do not, and cannot, exist separately, but instead are woven together. However, this study offers a base for part two of the study that entails a follow-up survey to offer a closer look at the public relations industry.

# THERE IS WORK TO BE DONE

IN THEIR OWN WORDS, THESE ARE CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE IN THE WORKPLACE.

*Typically, when we're having kids, it's during a time that you are up for promotion and then going into those leadership positions. And everybody who got promoted does not have a kid. It was astonishing. I'm keyed in on it, because I just had a kid. So I'm paying attention to that.*

**- Mid-level female**

*And I'm very lucky that my manager is like, "Do whatever the hell you want." Because I've been able to set up this situation. I work from home one day a week and I get that benefit. But there are a lot of people in our office who do not because their boss wants face time. And our official policy is that we're all flexible all the time. But they do not enforce it from a leadership level. And when you have leadership who comes into the office in a blizzard because they think people should be there or they complain that someone's at home sick with the flu and, "Why didn't you come in?" That is not the example that we should be setting at the top. And people are terrified and it's a cycle. And I don't think that helps anybody want to continue to go into that level when you're like,*

*"Well, that really, really sucks."*

**- Mid-level female**

*I do think women have to show up more, and speak up more and be more present to be recognized at the same level as male colleagues.*

**-Mid-level female**

*Yeah, I'm not an advocate of, "Let's promote equal numbers of men and women each year." I'm a big believer in meritocracy.*

**-Mid-level female**

*I was always saying to my husband, "I wish I had gray hair because I think I'd have the job I really think I'm qualified for." Because I think I look too young for...they don't want a kid in these jobs.*

**-Senior-level female**

*I see, too, a lot of men pick other men for leadership positions and they may know other men. And they're going to their network...[Not consisting of women.]*

**-Mid-level female**

*I know I grew one of the biggest accounts that we had and then all of a sudden, everyone started taking notice and my boss then wanted to go out to golf with my client and I was not invited to that even though*

*I was the lead person.*

**-Mid-level female**

*I think it's the kind of being left out of some of the male networks that makes it challenging even now where I am. Our office managing partner, he is a marketing guy and they seem to have a bond that frankly, I can't achieve because they talk about sports.*

**- Mid-level female**

*I've had this situation where clients want a man. So it'll be my ideas, but the client wants to hear it from a man and it has been in no uncertain terms made clear. And so, if I find a man boss -- and I have before -- who will represent my ideas and get them to be heard and make sure that that person and that our colleagues know that those are my ideas.*

**-Mid-level female**

*That's what I always tell my mom when she asks me, "Where are the kids [meaning why hasn't she had kids]?" I'm like, "I don't know. How the heck would I ever even do that?" It's so crazy, these expectations of you're going home and then going back online.*

**-Mid-level female**

*And so I'm only having one. My husband literally said, "If you have a second kid, you have to quit. You can't keep doing this job." I actually had to make a choice to keep working or have children, which is just really messed up.*

**-Mid-level female**

*These [senior-level] jobs look terrible. And I have no desire to do that job because I don't want to come back early from my maternity leave. And I don't want to be working until 11:00 pm every day when I have a kid at home who needs their mom and their dad, equally. These jobs look awful.*

**-Mid-level female**

# SUMMARY OF THEMES

# MENTORSHIPS AND SPONSORSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTORS TO SUCCESS

## INFORMAL MENTORSHIPS MAY WORK BETTER.

- Most participants said formal mentorship programs were not as effective as informal programs as relationships may feel forced if the chemistry isn't right. While respondents said programs existed at their companies, the mentorships often didn't stick over the long haul. While informal mentorships seemed to work best, not all organizational structures may lend themselves well to that.
- Some senior-level women and men said mentorship programs didn't exist when they were rising to the top, but are more common practice today.
- Participants said coaching or training programs to learn how to be a good mentor or sponsor would be beneficial.

## SPONSORS AND PEER NETWORKS ARE PERCEIVED AS CRITICAL FOR CAREER SUCCESS.

- Both men and women said a sponsor, champion, or career advocate is beneficial for supporting career mobility and serving as a sounding board for guidance.
- Peer-to-peer mentorships can provide insight from like-minded individuals facing similar challenges.
- Time is a precious commodity; mentors/sponsors suggested mentees should be considerate and productive with time spent with their mentors.
- Mentors should be direct with their feedback to their mentees, according to the interviewees. Valuable insights resulted from frank discussions.

## THERE IS A POSITIVE SHIFT IN WOMEN HELPING OTHER WOMEN.

- Executive participants reported the environment has changed from when they came up and there was more apprehension about helping other women rise because of the scarcity of opportunities for women leaders; now there's more openness.
- Alternatively, some senior-level women said women climbing to the top should work just as hard as they did to make it.



*When it became more formal, it actually didn't work as well. Because the responsibility was on both parts, and it felt forced, either from a mentor perspective or a mentee perspective, where you had to pull it out of the mentee, or the mentee had to schedule things. More informal, actually, is a better approach, in my view.*

**- Senior-level male**

*...Take care of that network of people. It's not kind of a transactional relationship. It is kind of a true deep network that no matter where you go and, you know, you stay connected somehow and you kind of always learn.*

**- Senior-level female**

*You need an advocate. So whether it's a mentor or your boss, you have to have an advocate. And I think that's what we hear a lot now in general, and also in the discussions of why there are more men at the top. Well, because they've had advocates, they've had people pushing them up.*

**- Mid-level female**



... [It] takes a certain type of woman to fit into a male dominated [environment].

- Senior-level male

*But with gender issues, a lot of it is about expectations and language and it may not always be mean-spirited, but the outcome can still be one where it keeps a woman from being able to speak her mind or feel comfortable; or welcomed into a leadership position; or judged on a different set of metrics than a male would be.*

-Senior-level male

*You have to battle stereotypes that are out there to overcome what the world may think, the pressures that are out there. I've worked for some men that are extremely nurturing, supportive, great listeners. And I've worked for women that are the complete opposite of that. So good leaders are great leaders. Bad leaders are bad leaders. But we have these stereotypes that we need to support and overcome.*

- Senior-level female

# BARRIERS STILL EXIST

## SEXISM STILL PERSISTS.

- Some senior-level men said there is sexism in the C-suite so unless this is addressed at a macro-level, gender inequity in public relations will persist.
- Some women said it appears male leaders are more comfortable choosing other male leaders in their network for positions.
- Mid-level women said they still felt left out of the “boys club” and cited multiple examples of being excluded from client pitches and social outings. That closed network creates a barrier for leadership opportunities.

## THERE IS A DOUBLE-BIND ABOUT WOMEN’S CHARACTERISTICS AND LEADERSHIP STYLES.

- Women and men said that perceptions sometimes differ when a male versus a female leader is assertive; the behavior is more likely to be viewed as confrontational rather than decisive when exhibited by a female leader.

## MEN AND WOMEN DISAGREE ABOUT THE EXTENT OF THE GENDERED EXPERIENCES AT WORK.

- Almost no male respondents said they had personally experienced discrimination in the workplace, while nearly all women said they had.
- Many men said they didn’t think there were systematic barriers to a woman’s rise to leadership positions; most women disagreed, frequently citing challenges such as work-life fit, sexism, and unconscious biases.
- Respondents said that there is pressure to hire more women and diverse candidates into senior roles, but it’s critical to hire the right person for the job, regardless of their diverse background.
- Unconscious bias courses and other programs were said to be on the rise, but some questioned their long-term efficacy.
- Male respondents said females were favored to serve on corporate boards, rather than male CCOs.

# WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER? IT'S NOT THE GENDER, IT'S THE INDIVIDUAL

## WOMEN AND MEN SHARED THE SAME PERCEPTIONS OF GOOD LEADERSHIP, AGREEING THAT LEADERS SHOULD BE DEFINED BY THEIR QUALITIES, NOT THEIR GENDER.

- Leadership styles differ from person to person. Personalities, culture, and experiences play a significant role. Some women seemed to downplay their gender as relevant to their leadership qualities.
- Common descriptions of “good” leadership were cited as: honesty, authenticity, grit, the ability to have tough conversations and take on challenging tasks, making time for others, strong emotional intelligence, consistency in words and actions, accessibility, strong listening skills, resiliency and agility, confidence, curiosity, a “North Star,” staying cool and calm under pressure. Participants agreed that passive aggressive behavior stifles leadership.
- Respondents cited the ability to work well with the C-suite, but also colleagues, as instrumental to success.
- The ability to speak the language of the business and build relationships with other functions was deemed important.

## COACHING AND MODELING WERE CITED AS ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS.

- Making time and being accessible for their employees is a major factor of success.
- Mid-level and senior-level women cited role models in their organizations and the industry as being influential, and often modeled their behavior.

“”

*And those words, “Go be the boss,” because I don’t think I ever really thought of myself, ever, as the boss. And I think men are like, “Yeah, I’m the boss. Yeah, I’m the boss.” And to be the boss you have to have that.*

**–Senior-level female**

*I mean, I think a strong quality and a good quality in female leaders who are communicators is empathy. And I know that word gets overused, but it’s just this idea of being able to connect with that other party in a really authentic way and understand their situation.*

**–Mid-level female**

# MANAGING WORK-LIFE FIT IS STILL CHALLENGING

## RESPONDENTS CITED INCONSISTENCIES AND CONTRADICTIONS OF THE NORMS AND POLICIES RELATING TO WORK-LIFE FIT.

- Some mid-level women said they had no desire to climb higher in the ranks as they grappled with the “costs” of getting to the next level.
- Women wanted more flexibility in their work, such as working from home.
- Some indicated an inconsistency among managers in the same organization around flexibility; while some allowed employees to work from home, some managers in the same department did not.
- Women without children said they deserve the same leave time for their own personal endeavors as those who took parental leave.

## WOMEN AND MEN FEEL PRESSURE TO ALWAYS BE “ON” AND WORK AFTER HOURS

- Female executives said they try to model how work-life integration is managed. For example, some said when they are on vacation, they’re on vacation, hoping to set a good example for their employees.
- Some mid-levels said they missed out on social/family activities because of after-hour work demands.
- Some reported that while their companies offer flexibility, they feel “shamed” if they take advantage of these programs, and therefore prefer not to.

## BOTH MID AND SENIOR-LEVEL WOMEN SAID STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEMS (I.E. MANAGER, COMPANY CULTURE, SIGNIFICANT OTHER) ARE CRITICAL TO MAKING IT WORK.



*So I make a point of making a big deal when I go on vacations so [my teams] feel like they're empowered to do the same thing. So there's the work side of things, but there's also the lifestyle side of things and I think that in this industry it's becoming increasingly important that you show that, particularly to the new generation that's coming through.*

**-Senior-level female**

*Technology is a blessing and a curse because it can make things easier, but it also means that I don't think we just ever stop working. The first thing we probably do in the morning is check email. And it's one of the last things I do at night. And even though I often say I'm not going to check email, I always do. And I always reply to things. And I don't have children.*

**-Mid-level female**



# HR POLICIES ARE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PROGRESS

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES WERE CITED AS IMPORTANT FOR GROWTH.

- Some women, especially in agencies, were frustrated by the lack of organizational support given to them for professional development programs in leadership training and other topics.

## BOTH WOMEN AND MEN SAID THERE IS AN INDUSTRY PAY GAP.

- Women and men often said they found out male counterparts were doing the same tasks as women, but for more money; some suggested their managers and HR made excuses as to why men were paid more.
- Several male executives said they push for women to get equal pay for equal work.
- Some participants suggested negotiation classes helped them ask for more money.

## IMBALANCED GENDER-BASED POLICIES FRUSTRATED FEMALE RESPONDENTS—SOCIAL BIASES AND JUDGMENTS AROUND PARENTING ARE AT PLAY IN THE WORKFORCE.

- Some reported their organizations have limited maternity policies and no paternity leave.
- Several suggested it's unfair that men receive less time for paternity leave saying that creates an imbalance. Policies, therefore, should be egalitarian. Some suggested paternity leave should be mandatory.
- Many mid-level women said taking a leave of absence for families hampered their ability to be promoted, especially when men took less time off. Some men noted that other men who take a "significant" paternity leave may be perceived to be less committed toward the organization.
- Some men and women said when women take maternity leave, they typically go at an important time in their career and may be missing out on key opportunities while male counterparts excel.

*[There are] not just biological, but also societal expectations about, "Well, so the mom goes [back to work] after two weeks and gets the promotion." What's the judgment? And, "Don't you feel guilty for being a bad mom for putting your job above your child?" None of this stuff would ever come to play for a man. Nobody would blink twice if you went back in two weeks.*

**- Senior-level male**

*So now I'm, basically, two years behind the cycle that I was supposed to be on. You're penalized for not being the boy that can stay in the office and just takes a week or two off. It's just not an equal playing field.*

**- Mid-level female**

*"This doesn't make sense, because it's the fairness." I was like, "So, are you going to penalize me because I don't have little ones anymore?" I was like, "I get it. A mother should be able, if her baby's sick, to work at home. I'm not saying you should take that away. I'm just saying that whatever the standard is, male, female, whoever you are, it needs to be across the board."*

**-Mid-level female**

# THE CALL TO ACTION

## CHANGE HAPPENS NOW

### **GENDER EQUALITY IS NOT JUST A CAUSE FOR WOMEN, BUT FOR MEN, TOO.**

- Both men and women cited the importance of joining together to increase equality and inclusiveness in their organizations and the industry.
- Women and men agreed that change needs to happen, and happen now.
- Open discussions with men and women at all levels about diversity and inclusion in the workplace is essential to progress.

### **ADDRESS POTENTIAL PAY GAPS.**

- Both men and women felt that gender pay disparity in the industry is improving, but must be addressed systematically.
- Some reported that consistently reviewing organization-wide compensation would help address any pay gaps and inconsistencies in those doing equal work.

### **LEADERS MUST PRIORITIZE ACTION.**

- Change starts at the top—C-suites need to ensure their boards, teams, and practices reflect the diversity they seek to embed throughout the organization.
- It's important to acknowledge there is still a gender leadership imbalance and work together to drive change in policy and behaviors.
- Work-life fit was frequently cited as a key factor in retention; leaders should set an example for their teams.

### **TAKE CARE OF YOUR AND OTHERS' CAREERS.**

- Seek out sponsors and peer networks to help support you and your career goals.
- Engage in professional development activities, understand the business, and evolve skills and abilities that will help advance your career.
- Institute a cycle of mentorship/sponsorship. Help mentor or sponsor others to help them grow in their careers.

### **REVIEW POLICIES AND MAKE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE.**

- Organizational policies should be reviewed regularly to ensure that both women and men are granted equal opportunities.
- Unconscious bias classes are beneficial, but there needs to be ongoing programming rather than one-off training.
- Encourage informal mentorships and sponsorships. Work on professional development plans with employees.

# WHAT CAN BE DONE?

*Self-awareness is number one. Just recognize that if we lack diversity or lack parity, we need to do something about it. And then the other thing, sometimes it's directed by a client. We had a client, it was [redacted large corporation], publicly came out and said, "We need parity from all of our agencies or we will be reconsidering who our agencies are."*

*- Senior-level male*

*I think family leave policies, and flex working schedules and those types of culture policies are just so important. I honestly think that, until we give women what they need in terms of support for family planning and career planning, we'll never have that equality. And we'll never really be able to break through the upper levels. I think it comes down to corporate policies and the ways that they're enacted.*

**-Mid-level female**

*"There's companies who do a year of maternity and paternity leave and let parents split it. And, really, I think PR agencies should be leading the charge with that. Why couldn't we make a stand and say, "This is what we're going to do for the people in our industry," and actually represent the workforce?"*

**- Mid-level female**

*"I think there's still clearly an overt bias that is at play in a number of different environments, but I think even more than that, there's unconscious bias that everybody carries with them, that is what I'd love for us to figure out how to get to. Because that's not as easy, I don't think, as taking head-on the look of conscious bias as saying, "I'd rather have you than your female colleague simply because you're a man." That's something that's pretty overt, and we can all kind of see it. But the unconscious bias where there are decisions that are made without people necessarily even knowing that they're making them based on their history and their experiences. I think that's where we'll see real change. It's not easy."*

**- Senior-level male**

*It's got to be that leaders are leaders and that we all bring out that next generation of leaders, whether they are men or women. It should be the best leaders running companies, organizations, not based on one or the other. And we have to respect all different leadership traits. I think if everyone was to look at our best leaders, they're not the same. They all have different traits that they dial up and down as women or men do.*

**-Senior-level female**

*If we don't fundamentally, aggressively change what we have been doing, we'll continue to do the same or we won't move at as fast a rate as we otherwise should.*

**- Senior-level male**

*So for companies, I think it's a matter of having a conversation not only with the women. Maybe with the general population, men and women, about everybody taking the bull by the horns and trying to make their company and their situations better. I wouldn't separate out the women. Maybe there are situations where you could. But, having some candid conversations with some of the mid-tier people who are about to bridge that gap to senior leadership, and what it takes to do so.*

**-Mid-level female**

# THANKS FOR READING OUR REPORT!

## *STAY TUNED FOR PART TWO OF THE STUDY.*

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