

ONLY WOMEN ALLOWED!

Leadership development that puts more women in the C-suite

RESEARCH
THAT HAS **IMPACT**
SERIES

An innovative new pilot program proposed by a graduate student at the Levene Graduate School of Business seeks to put more women in upper-level, corporate “C-Suite” management positions. Recent Master of Administration (Leadership) graduate Erin Lord was interested in how best to address the underrepresentation of women in senior roles through leadership development programs (LDPs). Lord’s research revealed that while traditional mixed-gender LDPs have a role to play in women’s career advancement, most do not address the common barriers and unique challenges that women often face.

Effective leadership programs are designed with individual and contextual considerations taken into account. Women-only LDPs (WLDPs) are needed as a complement to mixed-gender LDPs in order to make real change in organizations. Lord identified barriers and challenges as reported by women leaders in previous studies. Within a women-only setting, participants are more likely to openly talk about such challenges without feeling the need to suppress or explain themselves to those who haven’t shared similar experiences. Lord also examined the content of six

WLDPs offered by some of the world’s top-ranked institutions, including Stanford, Oxford, and INSEAD. Most of these programs included topics on leadership identity (e.g., self-awareness, developing a personal brand), leadership transition, relationship building, leadership competencies (e.g., strategic visioning, change management), and recognizing and learning to overcome gender bias. Lord concluded that many of these well-established WLDPs are grounded in the assumption that women leaders are a homogenous group. The programs do not fully account for the diversity in experience or the various intersecting identities of women, including race, ethnicity, and gender and sexual diversity. In addition, other barriers such as the gendered expectations of appearance that many women leaders face are not addressed by these programs, nor do they take into account new trends like meditation training as an effective leadership development tactic.

Lord proposes a WLDP which addresses these gaps and builds upon the strengths of these six reputable programs. Her proposed WLDP is grounded in three pillars, namely women-only participants to provide a

context where subtle gender inequalities can surface, gender-aware teaching and practices taught by diverse women with expertise in gender and intersectionality, and a safe learning environment. The WLDP is not a “one and done” program, but one that offers sustained follow-up and networking to support ongoing learning.

Lord also argues that WLDPs on their own will not redress the absence of women in senior level roles. Significant culture and structural changes in many organizations are required, and top leaders must enact a real commitment to diversity, inclusion and equity.

Lord describes herself as an aspiring leader, one who prior to completing this research had a tendency to feel hopeless as she confronted and witnessed subtle, and not so subtle, gender inequities at work. As a result of this experience she is better equipped to navigate both workplace challenges and her career advancement. She is confident that her proposed WLDP will offer tremendous benefits to other women, including those who already hold leadership roles and those aspiring to hold such roles.

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