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ARTICLE LEADERSHIP

Beating The Odds

Leadership Lessons from Senior African-American Women

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BEATING THE ODDS

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM SENIOR AFRICAN- AMERICAN WOMEN

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and David Thomas

Any list of top CEOs reveals a startling lack of diversity. Among the leaders of *Fortune* 500 companies, for example, just 32 are women; with the recent departure of Ken Chenault from American Express, just three are African-American; and not one is an African-American woman. What's going on?

This spring marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of the African-American Student Union at Harvard Business School, and in preparation for the commemoration we have been studying the careers of the approximately 2,300 alumni of African descent who have graduated from HBS since its founding, in 1908. From that group we identified 532 African-American women who graduated from 1977 to 2015. We analyzed the career paths of the 67 of them who

have attained the position of chair, CEO, or other C-level executive in a corporation or senior managing director or partner in a professional services firm, and we conducted in-depth interviews with 30 of those 67.

How did these women beat the odds? Certainly, they are well prepared and highly competitive in the job market; according to our data, they have invested more years in higher education, at more-selective institutions, than their colleagues and their non-African-American classmates. Yet as is the case for all those who have managed to scale the heights of corporate America, it wasn't simply personal strengths and talents that got them there. It was the willingness and ability of others to recognize, support, and develop those strengths and talents. We wish to speak to both elements of success.

Too often we see business leaders struggle to advance members of underrepresented groups because they model their development strategies on their own paths to success. They believe they're good at spotting and supporting talent, but their support is informed by their own experience: "I looked like that five years ago, and this is what I needed to grow into the next level." Our research suggests that company leaders are best able to recognize talent and understand others' development needs *when those talents and needs present themselves as theirs did*; they often overlook—or are baffled by how to develop—talent that looks different. So in our study we asked: What lessons can aspiring leaders—specifically, women of color and members of other underrepresented groups—take from the careers of highly successful African-American women? Moreover, what can corporate leaders learn about how to spot and develop black women's talents, and what might such lessons teach us about how to cultivate the talents of underrepresented groups more generally?

In simple terms, the answer to the question of what it takes to succeed can be reduced to a single capacity: resilience. To be sure, resilience has been widely celebrated as a character virtue in the past decade, and it plays a role in every success narrative, regardless of a person's race or gender. But the African-American women we interviewed seemed to rely more heavily than others on that quality, because of the frequency with which they encountered obstacles and setbacks resulting from the intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and other identities. In each case they bounced back, refused to get distracted or derailed, and maintained forward progress. One explained, "We were all told that you had to be smarter or run faster or jump higher or be better than anybody else around you just to stay in the game. That was a lesson from early, early on—from my parents, teachers, mentors, church. So you come [to your job] with that orientation."

The women we studied developed three skills that were key to their resilience: emotional intelligence, authenticity, and agility. They became EQ experts, adept at both reading the interpersonal and political

“I THINK THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING BLACK IN AMERICA CREATES RESILIENCE—A STEADY STEADINESS. AND IT CREATES COURAGE AND PRIDE. NOT PRIDE IN A BOASTFUL WAY, BUT BEING PROUD, AS YOU NEED TO BE IN MOMENTS WHEN YOU FEEL COMPLETELY REJECTED, COMPLETELY IGNORED, OVERLOOKED, SIDELINED.”

—A senior executive of a *Fortune* 50 financial services firm

dynamics of their organizations and managing their reactions to situations that threatened to undermine their sense of competence and well-being—what some scholars call “identity abrasions.” They practiced authentic leadership through deep self-awareness and an ability to craft their own identities. And they demonstrated agility in their capacity to deftly transform obstacles (including self-doubt and excessive scrutiny) into opportunities to learn, develop, and ultimately exceed expectations.

These skills can help propel anyone's career. All professionals and the organizations in which they work can benefit from cultivating and leveraging emotional intelligence, authenticity, and agility. While those skills are essential for every career, they are especially critical for members of historically disadvantaged groups. To that end, we hope that the stories of the women we interviewed will inspire young people from underrepresented groups who are still deciding what kind of career path makes sense for them. Despite the discouraging lack of representation at the very top of companies, the stories offer a road map to the high-level jobs from which future CEOs will emerge.

IN BRIEF

THE CHALLENGE

There's a startling lack of diversity at the top of most corporations. What does it take for people of color to get ahead? We talked to an extraordinary group of African-American female executives to find out.

THE FINDING

The women we studied developed three skills that were key to their resilience: emotional intelligence, authenticity, and agility.

THE VISIBILITY/ INVISIBILITY CONUNDRUM

Before turning to the skills crucial to resilience, let's examine one of the biggest challenges faced by the women we studied: the double-edged sword of visibility and invisibility. On one hand, because they are anomalies in their organizations, African-American women stand out. "I was always the only black person," one senior finance executive told us. "I literally spent the first 20 years not really ever seeing another black person in the day-to-day course of work." Many of the women reported feeling as though they were "on display," which can lead to an inhibiting and potentially limiting self-consciousness. "It makes you work hard to make sure you're never misstepping," said one chief investment officer. In a sense, their race and gender put these women under a spotlight, and that can be exhausting. Some described it as a kind of tax—one that majority employees don't have to pay, and one that could easily derail a career.

Sometimes, however, these women found benefits in their hypervisibility. "There are so many rooms I've gone into in my life where I was the only black person, and I immediately started to see that as an advantage," said the vice chair of an investment firm. "Because they're going to look, they're going to listen....They're wondering how I got into the room, so I have an opportunity to get their attention. All I have to do is deliver into that space."

On the other hand, black women are sometimes made to feel as though they're invisible. Some report having been mistaken for secretaries or even members of the waitstaff when starting new jobs. These instances of mistaken identity often create awkward scenarios, requiring executives to announce themselves and their qualifications just to find meeting locations or access necessary resources. Instead of obsessing over these slights and low expectations, though, some used invisibility as a launchpad. If colleagues underestimate you, it's easier to exceed expectations; if you're not perceived as a threat, you may find a faster path to promotion. One woman, a general manager in the media industry, described gaining entry to meetings that more-formidable colleagues lacked access to. "Senior executives would say, 'Sure, you can come in,' because they doubted me," she told us. "If they had known I was going to come in and get the jobs they wanted, they probably would have said no."

Navigating between the extremes of hypervisibility and invisibility can feel traumatic. One is either performing under a microscope or being ignored, and self-esteem can take a hit in either scenario. Having built the capacity for resilience, however, the women we studied were consistently able to maneuver around this paradox, often turning the obstacles it posed into opportunities.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

For the research initiative associated with the 50th anniversary of the founding of the African-American Student Union at Harvard Business School, we built a database of all the graduates of African descent since the school's founding, in 1908—approximately 2,300 people. Of the 1,821 who graduated from 1977 to 2015, we were able to collect complete work histories for 1,381 using information from LinkedIn, Bloomberg biographies, alumni records, and other public sources. We then conducted deep dives into the careers of those 1,381 to better understand their routes to senior positions. We discovered that only 67 of the 532 women in the group, or about 13%, had attained the senior executive level. (By comparison, 40% of the non-African-American HBS alumni in a matched sample had attained senior executive status.) We reached out to those 67 women and interviewed 30 in depth.

THREE KEYS TO RESILIENCE

Let's look now at how the women's resilience was reinforced and enhanced through emotional intelligence, authenticity, and agility.

Emotional intelligence. A key component of this skill is the ability to manage and regulate one's feelings. It's easy to envision the anger and resentment a rising executive might experience at being repeatedly doubted or ignored. But the women we spoke with resisted knee-jerk reactions that might have damaged their careers and developed the wherewithal to respond in more thoughtful and constructive ways. They also became skilled at picking up on others' emotions and reacting strategically. "I'm really good at reading environments," said a senior executive at a *Fortune* 100 consumer-products firm. They exhibited an acute awareness of how others perceived them—a form of empathy. "You have to be able to step outside yourself and see how other people see you," said the vice chair of a major investment bank. Most important, when the way others viewed them diverged from their own perceptions, they refused to be knocked off stride, holding on to their increasingly well-defined sense of self. One chief financial officer described the process this way: "You have to seek out messages and people who affirm your identity."

EQ is especially useful for those who frequently encounter bias. Research is clear, for example, that successful black women walk a tightrope of emotional expression. Although eager to advance, they may be penalized if they appear "too ambitious." They are often characterized as "intimidating," and their mistakes are apt to be held against them, especially when the "angry black woman" stereotype is triggered. "I almost feel you have to overrely on EQ, because people come to the table with natural biases—you have to be hypersensitive and patient," said a senior executive in

a financial services firm, adding, “While some can react immediately to a difficult situation, as a black person I am conscious about modulating and tempering my response.” She was especially insightful when reflecting on the mixed blessing of this ability: “On one hand, it’s great that I have developed this skill, but on the other hand, it’s sad that I had to.”

Authenticity. This skill involves aligning one’s personal sense of self with its outward expression—actively crafting one’s identity and revealing it in a way that feels genuine. Like emotional intelligence, it requires a high level of self-awareness. Research cited elsewhere in this issue makes clear that disclosing personal information—a key part of behaving authentically—can be especially tricky for minorities. (See “Diversity and Authenticity,” HBR, March–April 2018). The executives we interviewed found ways to master that challenge. They described being candid about their opinions, transparent about their motives, and vocally committed to their values. In fact, “transparency” and “candor” were two of the words they used most frequently to describe their leadership styles.

For these women, authenticity has also involved aligning their racial identity with their leadership positions. Some found roles within their companies that explicitly invited them to draw on that identity, giving them latitude to bring it front and center. They were then able to parlay the visibility afforded by those roles into broader opportunities for leadership. For instance, when her employer set a goal of investing in minority-owned businesses, one woman—now a senior investment officer—stepped into an intrapreneurial leadership role by building a

business that became the firm’s primary strategic imperative. Suddenly her gender, race, and residence in a historically black community became visible assets that deepened her authentic engagement with her career. “That became a turning point of my job—I was actually able to bring these differences to work every day,” she told us. “All of a sudden there were unique differences I was bringing to the table.” Other women launched entrepreneurial ventures that aligned their passions for business and social engagement, serving the needs of diverse stakeholders across the globe.

Agility. This is the ability to effectively confront and nimbly transform obstacles and roadblocks into opportunities throughout one’s career. The women we interviewed were well aware that many of their colleagues and bosses held low expectations of them—expectations that continued, in some cases, even as they advanced into senior jobs. The CEO of a large social-services organization put it this way: “I can’t say that I ever went into a job where people just looked at my credentials and accepted them as legitimate—there was always this question of ‘Are you really qualified?’ or ‘Did you really do the things you said you did?’ I don’t think I reached a point in my career, other than my last role, when that wasn’t a question.”

Not surprisingly, many grew frustrated with the persistent doubting of their abilities. “I’m misunderstood, treated like the nanny, and left to deal with or clean up after [male executives’] hasty decisions,” said one senior leader. “I’m forever exhausted by people thinking the reason I have the senior role I’m in is that I’m black, not that I’m excellent.”

Despite their frustration, the women were neither paralyzed nor defined by how they were seen. One explained, “I’m keenly aware of who I am and that I may look and behave in ways that are different from others, but I don’t really focus on that....When I walk into a room and some of the people who don’t know me think I

work for the people who work for me, I’m aware of it. But I don’t think about it. I don’t sweat it. I don’t stress about it. I think that’s one of the things that has helped me: I don’t let other people’s insecurities be my own.” Some leveraged their confluence of race, gender, and professional identity to seek roles in which they could contribute from a position of strength. “Let’s be honest: I tick a lot of boxes for people,” said a C-suite executive of a major entertainment firm. “They get a package of someone who’s female, who’s African-American, who has an MBA from an elite academic institution. So there I am—the purple unicorn.” By looking at the situation pragmatically instead of letting it fuel self-doubt, she sees how her interests and the firm’s are aligned: She gets a great job, great money, and the chance to have an impact, while the firm gets stellar results and a chance to “tick the boxes.”

Most of the leaders we interviewed took an unconventional path to the top. Their careers were characterized by twists and turns, with lateral moves and promotions accompanying changes in sector, industry, function, or employer. They pursued intriguing opportunities to learn, and if a role or a company didn’t allow them to grow, they activated their networks and identified new opportunities. They

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—A global finance director

“A LARGE PART OF THIS WHOLE DANCE OF BEING SUCCESSFUL IN CORPORATE AMERICA IS ABOUT CREATING SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO TRUST YOU AND FOR YOU TO TRUST THEM. AND THAT COMES WITH RELATIONSHIPS.”

—A financial services business unit director

remained professionally engaged throughout the arc of their careers, sometimes delaying or forgoing personal interests and commitments. One leader attributed her agility to advice she had received from Nelson Mandela: “There’s going to be a point in your career where someone’s going to tap you on the shoulder and ask you to do something that’s not going to make any sense. That might be your opportunity to manifest your true leadership and have a huge impact in your life and on this world.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Success requires more than personal attributes such as EQ, authenticity, and agility; it requires that someone recognize and value those vital skills. Research over decades points to the critical role of nurturing relationships and affirming contexts. One senior executive stated, “Somebody has to be committed to your success for you to really do well in [the corporate] environment. I’ve learned that those relationships matter a lot. I thought you could just work hard and be smart and that would do it, but it’s not enough.”

The success of the women we studied, like that of most people, depended on their having developed relationships with people who recognized their talent, gave them a safe space in which to make and learn from mistakes, provided candid and actionable feedback about their performance, and generally made it their business to support them and create opportunities for them to succeed. Many of the women pointed to managers, mentors, and sponsors who had helped them discover and actualize their best selves. Here’s how one described it: “I was fortunate that early in my career I was in places where I didn’t feel this isolation and where I was desperately loved. The people who

worked with me, the people who were my bosses, they cared about my personhood hugely and without acknowledging it; they took into account the somewhat obvious fact that there were not people like me around—without going out of their way to say that.” She continued, “They did go out of their way to put me in as much contact as they could and give me as much exposure as they could to meetings that I definitely didn’t have to be in. They said, ‘Come into the room. Be here. Just listen. I think it would be good for you.’”

Several women were inspired by managers and mentors to expand their vision of what they could achieve. One remarked, “I was just fortunate that I had a mentor who said, ‘You don’t think you’re ready, but I see your potential. Trust me.’ I did, and he really helped me see what was possible. I worked with him, for him, for many years growing a division where I cut my teeth in P&L management. That was scary and exciting.” And several gave credit to managers who advocated for them throughout their careers. One noted, “There has to be someone at the table saying, ‘This person deserves that opportunity, that raise, that

global assignment, that acknowledgment.’”

Such relationships became even more important as the women sought and took on challenging new roles. They relied on trusted advisers to give them the critical feedback that so many managers fail to share, especially with employees whose backgrounds are different from their own. One woman stated, “I think I’ve had the right mentors giving me the right kind of feedback, and I was able to hear.” Those advisers also provided support and air cover that enabled many women to learn from mistakes without derailing their careers. When one executive launched a business operation in another country, her success was bolstered by a CEO who “was a tremendous champion,” she said. “He was just not going to let me fail, no matter what.”

WHEN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN are underrepresented in an organization’s senior leadership roles despite robust academic credentials and work experience, their struggles often suggest a broader problem: a workplace that fails to offer *every* employee equal access to opportunities for growth. Much of the narrative about women and African-Americans in corporate life focuses on derailment, plateauing, and off-ramping—and that’s doubly true for African-American women. As the women we interviewed demonstrate, that narrative need not be the rule. However, it takes extraordinary ability, perseverance, and support to transcend it. The insights gleaned in our study are important not just for African-Americans and women; they’re essential for any manager who recognizes what research has shown over and over again—that an organization’s diversity is its strength. 

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FURTHER READING

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