



The Progress Paradox

How Advancing Women Benefits Men

By Rayona Sharpnack
CEO & Founder

[Institute for Women's Leadership](#)

The jury is no longer out on the issue of advancing women at work. Companies with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions are on average 48% more profitable and show a 37% higher return on equity. As Warren Buffett recently pointed out, "America has forged [its] success while utilizing, in large part, only half of the country's talent... We've seen what can be accomplished when we use 50% of our human capacity. Visualize what 100% can do."

I have been teaching and advocating for women's leadership for 20+ years, and while I have seen solid progress for women in management, I have also observed a hard truth: Women can't — and won't — advance to full gender partnership unless they can engage the support of men.

But why would a man — who is currently competing with only 50% of the population for the top jobs and opportunities — take steps to invite the other 50% into the arena?

Because it is actually to his advantage.

This sounds like a paradox, but it's the same paradox that all progress presents us. We often have to appear to go backward in order to go forward. It's like having to go back and learn to type so you can be a computer programmer or shutting down a factory for retooling. In this case, men will have to learn how to advance the careers of their apparent competitors in order to thrive in the workplace.

The fact is, gender partnership is very, very good for the bottom line. This is, in large part, because men and women brains have very different ways of doing and seeing things. When they work in tandem it can be like having the best of both worlds — and with a built-in system of healthy checks and balances.

For example, men's brains are literally configured to focus on achieving results, while women's are oriented to the process by which the results will be achieved. Without the drive to achieve, the team might not get the product out the door on time. But without the capacity to analyze the process of how to do this, ask questions and consider potential consequences, the team could end up releasing a product that doesn't work or that customers won't buy.

Companies with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions do better financially not because women are smarter or better educated or work harder. These companies prosper because they are fully

utilizing the innate talents and skills of BOTH genders. So sooner or later — depending on how innovative or traditional their companies are — men are going to have to choose between learning how to benefit by advancing women or seeing their careers — and their companies' profits — suffer because they resist or refrain from doing so.

Men will benefit when they choose to play a leadership role in advancing women in their companies, ensuring that the teams they manage become top performers by utilizing both the logical, results-oriented skills of men and the intuitive, people- and process-oriented skills of women.

For men, embracing the progress paradox means taking the long view and committing to the proposition that assuming a leadership role in welcoming women to participate (and, yes, sometimes compete) will pay off — for them, for their companies, and for the world as a whole.

True, it will require courage to live with the paradox until it pays off, but courage is something men are very, very good at.

[Rayona Sharpnack](#) is the founder and CEO of the [Institute for Women's Leadership](#) and co-founder of [GenderAllies](#). She is also the author of "Trading Up: 5 Steps for Redesigning Your Leadership and Life from the Inside Out" (Jossey-Bass, 2007). You may reach her at info@womensleadership.com or 415-331-3222.

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