Article

The Female Executive's Perspective on Career Planning and Advancement in Organizations: Experiences With Cascading Gender Bias, the Double-Bind, and Unwritten Rules to Advancement

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Abstract

Gender bias continues to play a role in the gender discrepancy at executive levels in organizations across the United States, although women hold 51% of all middle management positions. Female middle managers may be overlooked for advancement to executive positions because of a lack of synergy between individual career planning and organizational development and advancement practices. This may have significant implications for organizations as they struggle to recruit and hire qualified senior leadership to close the widening leadership gap created as baby boomers leave the workforce in record numbers over the next decade. One way to retain talented, knowledgeable, female middle managers is to incorporate career planning and advancement programs, which increase visibility for both the individual and organizational leaders into potential advancement opportunities. This descriptive phenomenological study was designed to investigate and describe the lived experiences of female executives with career planning and advancement in organizations. Data collected from 16 female executives employed in organizations in Nashville, Tennessee, revealed that although individuals must make a commitment to career planning and take responsibility for executing the plan, successful career planning and advancement are dependent on others beyond the individual seeking advancement. The findings of this study are important for women who desire advancement to executive levels and to organizational leaders who want to hire and promote the right person for the job regardless of gender.

Introduction

As of March 2011, 51.5% of managers in the United States were women, but only 14.4% of executive officers and a mere 5.2% of the CEOs were female (Catalyst, 2011). Researchers strive to identify the barriers women face in the pursuit of advancement in organizations in the United States and explain how women of high professional achievement have overcome barriers to career advancement including gender bias, conflicting behavioral expectations (the double-bind), challenges to networking, and difficulties initiating mentor relationships. Research found that engaging in career planning can help women proactively manage their careers, navigate obstacles to advancement, and overcome gender bias and stereotypes to obtain executive level leadership positions in the United States organizations (Sabattini, 2008; Warren, 2009). Providing organizational support for career planning and advancement can help organizational leaders retain talented female middle managers and close the leadership gap, which

will only widen further as millions of baby boomers leave the workforce in the next 10 years (Green, 2007; Levanon & Cheng, 2011; Rogers et al., 2011).

For the purpose of this study, a distinction was made between career development, career planning, and career planning strategies. Career development was defined as the application of programs, training, and development opportunities provided by the employer to assist employees with professional development and advancement (Lalli, 2009). Career paths, career maps, education, training, and workshops are all common components of career development programs, and assist employees with the implementation of a

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career plan (Van de Ven, 2007). Career planning was defined as the action taken to access individual values, desires, goals, interests, and career aspirations. Career planning also encompasses evaluating opportunities; setting career goals; engaging in purposeful networking; hiring a career coach; obtaining career counseling; identifying and taking advantage of educational and developmental opportunities; and actively seeking the advice and guidance of trusted peers, managers, and subject matter experts (Dagley & Salter, 2004; McGrath, Zell, & Vance, 2013).

Women in organizations often face obstacles in obtaining mentors, especially female mentors who may have better insights into the challenges women face in achieving advancement in organizations (Enslin, 2007; Evans, 2009). A study conducted by Raggins and Cotton (1991) found that women had restricted access to mentors and reported a lack of availability and willingness of male leaders to engage in a mentoring relationship with females. A second study found that women who successfully gained access to male mentors were significantly less likely to engage in and benefit from networking and bonding opportunities available outside work hours (Raggins & Cotton, 1999). Herminia (1992) and Sabattini (2008) pointed out that a lack of access to social bonding presented an obstacle to advancement for women in organizations and has consequences for career advancement manifest in the underrepresentation of women in executive positions.

Career planning was identified as one of the unwritten rules to advancement for women in organizations, and female executives who participated in past research studies exploring the hurdles to advancement for women wished they had discovered and applied career planning earlier in their careers (Evans, 2009; Sabattini, 2008; Sabattini & Dinolfo, 2010). Career planning can help women overcome obstacles to advancement in organizations by helping the individual gain the self-awareness to make the appropriate career choices and helping individuals identify and leverage development tools appropriate to achieving long-term personal and professional growth (Thurgate & Jackson, 2011). Insights gained from engaging in career planning with employees may also help organizations develop and implement programs, policies, and procedures that more adequately promote gender equality in recruiting, hiring, promotion, and succession planning practices (Levanon & Cheng, 2011; Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008; Rogers et al., 2011).

Creating a partnership between motivated female employees and organizational leaders by implementing a comprehensive career planning element in the talent management system may be effective in mitigating the loss of female talent in organizations. Creating a partnership may also help organizational leaders close the leadership gap and mitigate the loss of experienced workers as older workers begin to retire and leave the workforce in larger numbers (Green, 2007; Levanon & Cheng, 2011; Rogers et al., 2011). Organizations that create customized career paths and development opportunities improve both employee loyalty and customer loyalty (Benko & Weisberg, 2007). The transparency and detail available through customized career planning allow individuals and organizations to leverage career development tools to maximize the potential of the individual and to meet both individual and organizational growth objectives (Adomaitien & Zubrickien, 2010). Increasing employee retention rates and promoting from within saves organizations millions of dollars in costs associated with high employee turnover (Benko & Weisberg, 2007).

Research Question

This study was organized around one central question and six sub-questions. The central research question was as follows: What are female executives' perceptions of experiences with career planning and advancement in organizations?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study provides a foundation for understanding the obstacles to the advancement of women in organizations in the United States and includes the theory of cascading gender bias (Warren, 2009), the double-bind dilemma (Catalyst, 2007), and the unwritten rules of advancement (Sabattini, 2008). Each of these theories describes implications of gender bias for perceptions of women as leaders and the influence of gender stereotypes on the advancement of women in organizations. These studies address the hurdles women face as they pursue advancement in organizations and provided the theoretical underpinning for this study.

Cascading Gender Bias

The theory of cascading gender bias identified potential for leadership bias to influence organizational human resource management system. Warren (2009) described the double-bind dilemma and the unwritten rules to advancement as side effects of gender bias, which can prevent women from advancing to the executive suite. Warren identified three major contributors to gender bias in talent management systems: senior leadership effect, institutionalizing bias, and compounding bias.

Senior leadership effect describes two phenomena that contribute to cascading bias. First, because both male and female managers apply a *think leader–think male* perspective to performance evaluation, women are disadvantaged when being considered for leadership positions, regardless of the gender of the hiring manager or influential organizational executive (Jackson et al., 2007; Warren, 2009). Second, people generally prefer to work with and associate with others who share their beliefs, values, and interest. Generally, people feel most comfortable with others most similar to themselves. Consciously or subconsciously, organizational leaders apply gender stereotypes to establish preferences

among potential candidates for executive openings and influence decisions about who is hired or promoted to top positions (Warren, 2009). Because the majority of organizational executives are male, it stands to reason that the majority of individuals promoted to executive positions will also be male (Rosenfeld, 2009; Warren, 2009). Senior leadership effect influences who gets assigned to high-visibility projects, takes part in networking opportunities, and receives mentoring (Sabattini, 2008; Sabattini & Dinolfo, 2010; Warren, 2009).

Stereotypes are built into talent management procedures, programs, and tools and contribute to *institutionalizing bias* (Warren, 2009). Career path planning, secession planning, and mentoring programs can magnify the influence of leadership bias on the hiring, development, and promotion processes built into talent management systems. Advancement and succession planning criteria are often established and dictated with top-down influence in organizations. Little consideration is given to whether criteria identified include characteristics or traits that incorporate or perpetuate gender bias.

Warren (2009) described *compounding biases* as "gaps between the design and execution of talent management programs compound the disadvantages faced by women, especially those seeking professional development and advancement" (p. 6).

Double-Bind

The double-bind dilemma for women in leadership established that women in organizations struggle to overcome contradictory demands for performance, behavior, and leadership. Catalyst (2007) described a double-bind as a set of conflicting demands that require women demonstrate contradictory behaviors that set them up for harsh judgment no matter which behavior is adopted and forces women to choose between equally unsatisfactory alternatives (Catalyst, 2007). The double-bind manifests itself in three predicaments—extreme perception, the high competence threshold, and competent but disliked—and is manifest in masculine leadership theory and stereotypes (Catalyst, 2007).

Extreme perceptions are a manifestation of gender stereotypes, which create the tendency for women to be described as nurturing and compassionate. Such stereotypes create a predicament in which, when female leaders behave as expected (nurturing and compassionate), they are labeled *too soft.* Alternatively, if a female leader is assertive and firm (unnurturing and uncompassionate), that woman will be labeled *too tough*.

High competency threshold describes a predicament in which women must deliver to higher standards than male counterparts, often for smaller rewards. As a result, women face the high competency threshold when they are required to prove leadership ability repeatedly or when they must perform more consistently and at a higher level than male counterparts only to receive the same or lower compensation, recognition, or opportunities.

The predicament described as *competent but disliked* describes the phenomenon in which female managers and executives are challenged with balancing passiveness with assertiveness to satisfy the expectations of colleagues and managers. Regardless of experience, performance results, ability, influence, or use of power, female managers must endure constant scrutiny and judgment from others who inevitably label them as *too-soft* or *too-hard. Competent but disliked* is a predicament that describes the dilemma of being seen either as someone who *takes-charge* or someone who *takes-care*. The result is that " . . . female leaders are perceived as likable or competent, but rarely both" (Catalyst, 2007, p. 8).

Unwritten Rules of Advancement

The theory of unwritten rules for advancement identified specific, undocumented behaviors that influence upward mobility in organizations. Sabattini (2008) described networking, gaining visibility, leveraging organizational politics, developing strong communication skills, demonstrating strong performance, obtaining mentoring, working long hours, and having a career plan as significant factors in the unwritten rules for advancement. Failures to identify, acknowledge, and adhere to the unwritten rules for advancement could delay or even derail one's career. The unwritten rules to advancement were identified as a hurdle for women seeking advancement to executive levels in organizations because female workers often learn about the unwritten rules through observation and trial and error, rather than from relationships built through mentoring or networking, and not knowing may delay or derail advancement (Sabattini, 2008).

Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry

A descriptive phenomenological design was appropriate for this research study because the purpose of this research was to explore and describe female executives' experiences and perceptions pertinent to career planning and advancement in organizations. Ten in-depth interviews and two focus groups were used to thoroughly investigate and describe experiences and perceptions. Focus group interviews involving three female executives each were leveraged to triangulate the data collected in the in-depth interviews and confirm the themes that emerged in the data. All study participants were female executives employed in organizations in Nashville, Tennessee, during the 2 years leading up to the study.

Data Sources, Evidence, Objectives, or Materials

This study used purposeful and snowball sampling of female executives in the greater Nashville, Tennessee area. Participants were recruited through email, in person, and over

the phone and were invited to participate in in-depth interviews or focus groups to share personal, lived experiences with career planning and advancement in organizations. Sixty-two women were invited to participate in this study. Sixteen agreed to participate; 10 participated in in-depth interviews and 6 participated in focus group interviews. The 10 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups that resulted in the collection of data for this study were held in classrooms on University of Phoenix campuses in Nashville, Tennessee, and Murfreesboro, Tennessee. In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted to the point of data saturation.

Standardized interview protocols were developed and peer reviewed prior to the study. The protocols were used in all in-depth interviews and focus group interviews to ensure that study participants in each session were provided with an opportunity to respond to an identical set of questions. Demographic and work history questionnaires were used to collect demographic data such as age bracket, marital status, education level, and work history detail including industry, size of current organization, and years of experience in executive positions. The researcher conducted the interviews following the in-depth interview and focus group protocol.

The in-depth interview protocol was designed to mitigate the potential for subjectivity and bias in individual interview settings and guided each in-depth interview. In-depth interview questions were developed to provide data that may be helpful to answering the research questions identified for this study. Questions were developed to ensure open-ended answers describing participants' perceptions and experiences with the phenomenon under study. Questions were developed in alignment with the research questions and to guide the interview process. In-depth interview questions were designed to gather data rich descriptions of female executives' lived experiences, beliefs, and perceptions relevant to career planning and advancement in organizations.

Validation of study protocol and data collection tools is recommended to ensure adequate design for eliciting data rich responses from the study subjects. Pilot interviews and focus groups are effective tools for validating study protocol (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Salkind, 2003). Expert review of study protocol and demographics and work history profile questionnaires ensured credibility and consistency in data collection. The expert was a senior director of human resources for a medium sized firm and possessed extensive experience with qualitative research, focus groups, and the development and validation of focus group protocol.

To evaluate the clarity of in-depth interview questions and the effectiveness of the interview protocol, a pilot study took place prior to the actual study. A pilot study is an effective way of validating study protocol (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Salkind, 2003). No questions were changed prior to conducting the actual in-depth interviews for this study. The pilot in-depth interview participant did not participate in the actual study. The pilot study revealed that the in-depth interview questions were clear and concise and elicited open-ended

answers sufficient to collect data capable of answering the research questions posed for this study. No changes were made to the in-depth interview protocol based on the results of the pilot in-depth interview.

The focus group protocol listed the predetermined questions that were applied in each focus group interview. Questions were developed before the focus group pilot interview based on themes identified in the analysis of data collected from in-depth interviews. The themes identified dictated the selection of the topics discussed and the format of focus group interview questions. Focus group questions were developed to provide data that may be helpful to answering the research questions identified for this study and relevant to verifying themes identified in analysis of in-depth interview data. Questions were developed to guide the focus group interviews, ensure open-ended answers in alignment with the research questions, and facilitate candid discussion among focus group participants. One pilot focus group was conducted to evaluate the appropriateness of the focus group and to ensure the clarity of interview questions. Based on feedback from the pilot focus group members, one question was modified. Participants from the pilot study did not participate in the actual study.

The demographics and work history profile were designed to gather demographic and work history details relevant to describing the sample relevant to this study. Work history and demographic data made it possible to identify and describe characteristics of the participants, the organizations, and the industries represented by the study sample. All study participants were asked to sign a signed consent form, were advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions, were assured of confidentiality, and were assigned pseudonyms to ensure protection of privacy. The in-depth interview protocol, focus group protocol, and demographics and work history profile were reviewed by the International Review Board (IRB) to ensure adequate consideration for participant privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Results and Point of View

A key finding of this study was that gender bias was the prevalent challenge experienced by women when applying career planning and advancement in organizations. Barriers to advancement for women in organizations were identified by Catalyst (2007), Sabattini (2008), and Warren (2009) as the double-bind, the unwritten rules to advancement, and cascading gender bias. These three barriers were also identified as obstacles women face as they pursue advancement to executive levels in organizations. Although the unwritten rules to advancement apply to all employees, networking and access to mentors were two of the unwritten rules identified as unwritten rules that can represent seemingly insurmountable barriers for women in male dominated environments (Herminia, 1992; Raggins & Cotton, 1991, 1999; Sabattini,

2008). Because women perceive a significant disadvantage in overcoming unwritten rules to networking (especially outside working hours) and gaining access to mentors (Raggins & Cotton, 1999), the unwritten rules to advancement were identified as gender specific challenges for the purpose of this study.

Experiences With the Double-Bind

Female executives who participated in this study shared perceptions and experiences with the double-bind, which was described by Catalyst (2007) as a set of conflicting demands that earns women a label of either *too nice* or *too brash*, requires women to work harder than male counterparts for the same or less reward and recognition, and creates a need for women to prove themselves capable and worthy of each opportunity, often doing the job long before receiving the formal promotion, whereas male counterparts are given opportunities and promoted based on potential rather than proven performance.

Cheryl explained her perceptions of the double-bind as a hurdle for women pursuing career planning and advancement in organizations when she stated,

> A female needs to be worried, much more, about the respect level around her than the like level. That's something a female needs to come to terms with. I think sometimes we are wired a little different, but when you get to that place, and accept that, you become a stronger leader.

Another participant shared concerns about gender bias in the workplace: "I'm in a very male dominated environment. Very male dominated. Very few women [organization name omitted], in my department, and at my level and above. So, again, you've gotta make sure you can hang in the meeting." She went on to say, "I feel like women almost have to try a little harder because there's an expectation that they're not going to be as business minded, if you will, as men. So it's a little bit harder to work."

One focus group participant commented on the need for women to vocalize their advancement desires because many managers assume women are not as career driven as men:

> It does seem to be with men. It's almost just assumed, well of course they wanna advance. With women . . . I don't know. And so, I think it's really really important for women to make it clear—you know—just to have an idea what else they want to do and try to be working and growing themselves to get there all the time.

A fellow focus group participant spoke up, vocalizing concerns about the double standard often faced by women who advocate for themselves. "Yes," she agreed, "And not in a bitchy way, because when we speak up we're bitches, but when men speak up they're just being assertive."

Pat described how gender bias could work against both male and female employees in low- and mid-level environments dominated by either gender. Pat pointed out that low-level males trying to build careers in female dominated industries such as health care may face more gender bias than women in the same roles, but observed that women may still be challenged by gender bias in pursuit of advancement to executive levels even in traditionally feminine industries. She stated,

> Well, I think not only for women but since we're talking about women, it's extremely important for women to have the degrees, to have the certifications, and to have the experience that they need. And sometimes, I find . . . that there is sort of a bias. You know, in nursing the bias is more toward men coming into those positions versus females, because it's generally a female career. You know, that's really the majority of people in those positions. In other positions, though, I think—depending on what it is—sometimes females are at a disadvantage because they are female.

In summary, data collected and analyzed for this study revealed evidence of female executive's experiences with the double-bind and supported the evidence of gender bias present in the three predicaments of the double-bind as presented by Catalyst (2007).

Experiences With the Unwritten Rules to Advancement

Female executives who participated in this study emphasized the importance of individual commitment to career planning, and the responsibility for women to take ownership for pursuing career goals. Diane, a CEO with 20 years executive level experience in organizations, emphasized the necessity for personal ownership in career planning and advancement, and the benefit of self-awareness gained through career planning: "I think if we're aware of ourselves and of the opportunities, I really think there's power in that. And it's up to us to take advantage of that knowledge." Another participant, Brenda, advised junior women to "Do it! Number one, I mean, you just gotta do it! And it's got to be YOU."

Another participant explained how awareness of self and surroundings helped her manage her career through a volatile and uncertain time:

> Changes were happening. The changes that were happening were out of my control, so how could I be more in control of what I could control? And that's only the . . . you know . . . just me. And how could I make my skills better or more marketable so if I did get cut, you know, that my next opportunity—that I'd be a better-prepared candidate.

Another participant said that women were responsible for taking action to manage the trajectory of their own career whenever possible. "You have to innovate," she said. She went on to explain how inequity in her work environment and a perceived need for change motivated her to develop and champion for the creation of a new position that resulted in her promotion to executive level:

When I was a director of sales I had three counterparts. Four of us were covering the whole country, and I was so much more effective and better at my position than the other three. Yet, I found out they were being paid more than me. They were three men, and I was the only female. That crawled all over me. So that's when I created the executive director level, sold it [to senior management], and then I was promoted to executive director.

Although every woman may not be in a position to create her own executive level position, a career plan is powerless without action. Erica precisely summed this up when she declared, "I think that what a woman actually does plays a larger role than the actual career planning."

Female executives who participated in this study described networking and building relationships with peers, mentors, and advocates as important factors in the lived experiences with career planning and advancement in organizations. One stated,

Women need to have strong supporters and strong sponsors within their organizations to help them move up. And we, as women, have a duty and an obligation. We just had a legal education thing on this the other day—lifting as we climb. We need to remember that there are people above us, women above us, who lifted us and we need to lift the people behind us. And I believe career planning is such a big part of that. We need to talk to the younger women that we see in our organizations about thinking about career planning, about being deliberate in the choices that you make.

Another said,

I heard somebody put it in terms of having a personal advisory board. Those people in your life that you can go and talk to and say, "I need to talk to you about my career," or "I need to talk to you about finances," or "I need to see how you handled this situation." And having those people that you trust to keep your confidences and you also trust to be brutally honest.

In summary, in-depth interview and focus group participants for this study described experiences with the unwritten rules to advancement, specifically those rules related to career planning and to finding mentors and advocates who provide support and act as champions.

Experiences With Cascading Gender Bias

The basic principle behind cascading gender bias is that senior leaders, the majority of whom are male, consciously or subconsciously apply masculine assumptions to evaluate leadership potential and capabilities for the purposes of hiring, promoting, and succession planning (Warren, 2009). Female executives who participated in this study described experiences and observations related to cascading gender bias.

Cascading gender bias was evident in one participant's reference to the *old boys club*. "I think women work harder than men," the female executive stated. "There are the old boys' clubs. And they are there, and they are prevalent." The participant paused a moment and then went on to say, "I don't think they are wrong. I'm not calloused by it. It's just . . . where do I fit in?"

When asked to describe the nature of the relationship between career planning and the advancement of women in organizations, another in-depth interview participant stated, "It really depends on leadership, in my opinion. It is a top-down perspective. If you work in an organization where women are seen as valuable in leadership roles then I think those things trickle down." The female executive went on to say, "In different years, in the company that I'm at, there have been ten women in top leadership positions. In other years, there have been two. It really just depends on who was president and CEO at the time."

And yet another female executive described cascading gender bias as a hurdle to career planning and advancement in organizations when she said,

I have faced hurdles. I have worked in environments where it was very difficult for women to advance, largely because the leadership roles were filled with men who were looking to promote other men and not females. I have left those environments in order to continue to move up, realizing there were no opportunities.

In summary, female executives who participated in this study shared observations and experiences in support of Warren's (2009) assertions that cascading gender bias influences and often dictates who gets recruited, hired, and promoted in an organization.

Summary: Results and Point of View

Gender bias was the prevalent challenge to career planning and advancement in organizations as described by female executives who participated in this study. Evidence of the double-bind, the unwritten rules to advancement, and cascading gender bias was evident in the data collected in 10 in-depth interviews and 2 focus group interviews involving 3 female executives each. Participants described how career planning and engaging the support of mentors and advocates played a significant role in their advancement to executive level leadership, which supports past research indicating that career planning may help women overcome obstacles to advancement in organizations (Sabattini, 2008; Sabattini & Dinolfo, 2010; Warren, 2009).

Recommendations

The findings of this study may help organizational leaders develop appropriate models and programs to address career planning and advancement and increase the potential for hiring and promoting the best person for the job regardless of gender. Women who desire advancement in organizations

must take the initiative to engage in career planning follow through on the resulting career plan. Women must recognize that successful career planning and advancement in organizations are dependent on people beyond the individual doing the career planning and seek support from peers, mentors, advisors, and advocates who can positively contribute to their success. Female executives must take responsibility for informing and educating junior women about the unwritten rules for advancement and encourage women, minorities, and men to engage in career planning early and often in their careers. Organizational leaders and human resource management professionals must develop and implement mentor programs that ensure women gain access and support from mentors at executive levels. Females who seek career advancement must make networking a priority and create visibility for themselves inside and outside their current organizations.

Women in organizations must find the confidence and strength to openly discuss gender bias as it presents itself in the workplace, and organizational leaders must implement policies and practices to ensure female workers can voice concerns without fear of retribution or negative implications for future advancement. Educational leaders must encourage career planning, in a broad sense, during the first 2 years of college and provide students with tools, information, and training necessary to develop a solid foundation for lifelong career planning. Women must take advantage of the tools provided by educational institutions and should seek support for career planning after graduating from college. Likewise, organizations must help women continue efforts toward career planning by offering self-assessment tools, access to mentors, training and development opportunities, and insights into career paths and potential advancement opportunities within the organization. Women who desire advancement to executive levels in organizations must engage in career planning activities that enhance self-awareness; increase visibility into development and advancement opportunities; facilitate networking; and establish mentoring relationships with individuals who can provide advice, coaching, and support.

Organizations must promote the formal career planning programs, development programs, and tools available within the organization to make it more likely that employees will become aware of and engage in career planning. Organizational leaders must empower human resource management teams to design and implement comprehensive career planning and advancement programs that inform and empower managers by making it possible to more efficiently and effectively match employees to development and advancement opportunities. Organizational leaders must provide managers and human resource departments with the necessary resources for successfully implementing and maintaining career planning and advancement programs. Finally, the findings of this study inspired the development of the comprehensive organizational career planning model,

which can be applied for women, men, and minorities in organizations (Figure 1).

Although the comprehensive career planning model developed for this study has not been tested, the model was developed by the researcher to address the need for career-planning support in organizations and incorporates the findings of this study. The model demonstrates a perpetual process for development, feedback, reflection, and learning that has a strong foundation of continuous organizational support. Investments in organizational development programs that address all elements of the comprehensive organizational career planning model would benefit individuals and organizations by cultivating employee engagement, increasing job satisfaction, providing visibility into opportunities for advancement, increasing employee retention, reducing turnover costs, increasing productivity, and enhancing visibility and insight for succession planning.

Limitations

The limitations of the study included population size and geographic area, which make it impossible to generalize the results across the broader population. Other limitations include self-reporting by study participants and researcher as interviewer, which may have introduced bias. Participant responses may have been consciously or subconsciously influenced through nonverbal cues or tone and manner in which the interviewer asked questions. Although research protocol was examined by experts prior to pilot studies to mitigate the potential for bias in interview questions and focus groups were used to provide validation through triangulation, a researcher's engagement in the process may introduce bias and affect results. Researcher bias was also possible in the interpretation of results.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have implications for individual career management, employee retention and productivity, and for closing the gender-gap in organizational leadership. Career planning can empower women, men, and minorities to seek out and pursue development and advancement opporutnities. Engaging employees in organizatioanl career planning programs and supporting career planning efforts may serve to increase employee retention and boost employee loyalty, while serving to close the leadership gap at senior levels in the orgnaization. Engaging highly motivated employees in career planning and advancement programs may also serve to better ensure that the best person is chosen for the job regardless of gender.

The findings in this study are significant for providing managers and organizational leaders with additional insights into the benefits for organizations and the benefits and barriers for women with regard to career planning and advancement in organizations. The findings may help policy makers
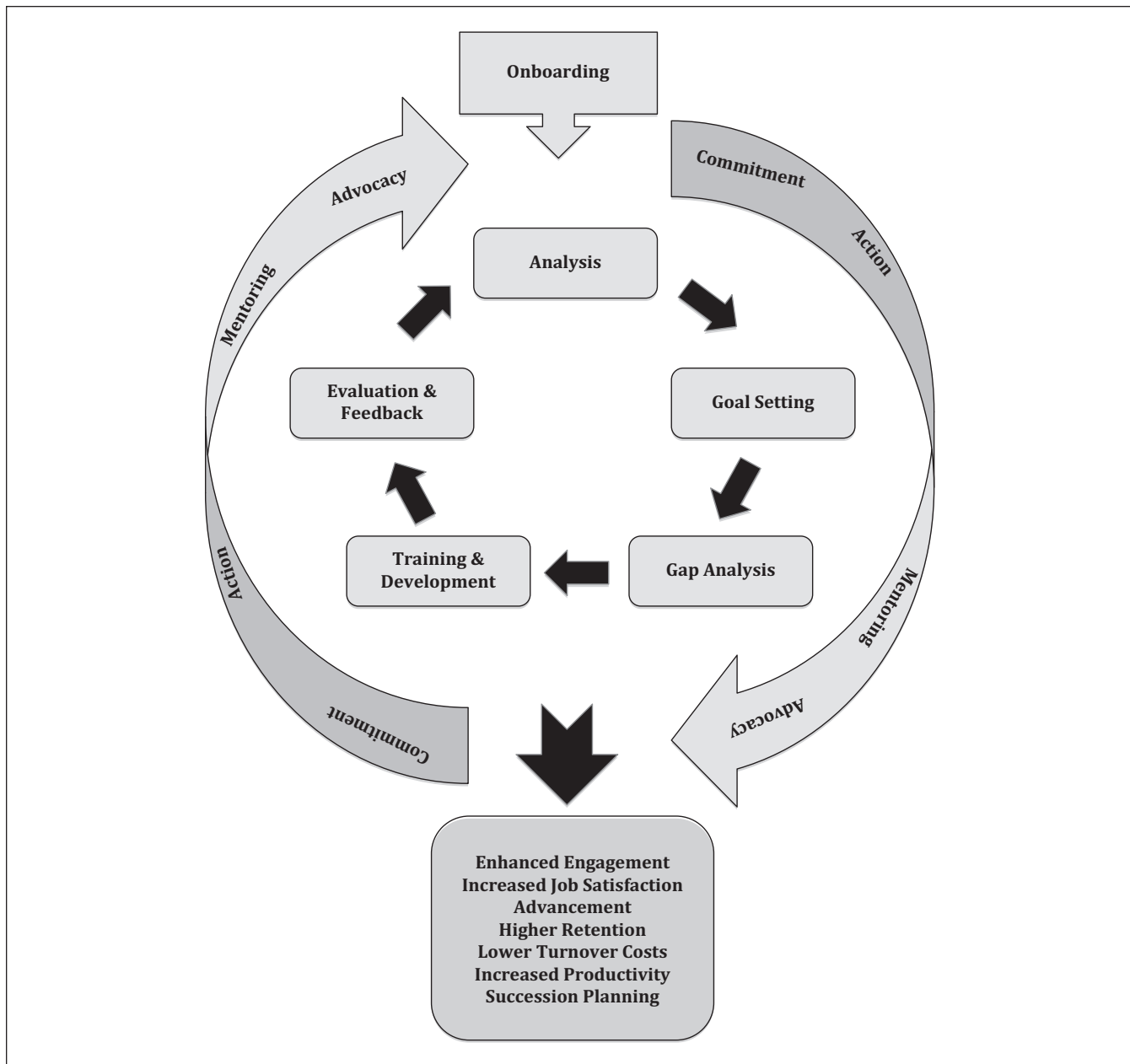
Figure 1. Comprehensive organizational career planning model.

and organizational leaders design future models and programs to aide with career planning and advancement in organizations and for creating organizational cultures and structures that are increasingly gender-neutral. These findings may also provide organizational leaders with additional information about the factors influencing the lived experience of female employees with career planning and advancement in organizations, and help educational institutions develop programs and tools that help students develop awareness for the importance of career planning to advancement.

Future research may include repeating the research design, method, process, and protocol in other geographic areas of the United States to further explore the lived experiences of female executives with career planning or to investigate the lived experiences of male executives with career planning and advancement. Recommended future research would also investigate the emotional and experiential implications for women who verbalize concerns about gender bias and gender inequality in organizational systems. Finally, future research should be conducted to explore the implications of incorporating the comprehensive career planning

model in an organizational talent management system to address the perceived need for support in organizations to address the challenges of career planning and advancement.

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