

Black Women Executives Research Initiatives

Executive Summary

CEOs and black women executives seem to have a significant disconnect about how they view some of the behaviors and experiences of senior black corporate women. This disparity of opinion was revealed through a year-long study that looked at the reasons black women executives succeed or fail to rise to corporate America's most senior positions. Commissioned by The Executive Leadership Council® and The Executive Leadership Council Foundation® and conducted by Springboard, this study includes interviews with 76 black women executives, 18 CEOs, and 38 peers.

The research found that CEOs and black women executives had different views about the quality of the relationships between the two groups and about black women's ability to network. Further, the study suggests that CEOs believe that black women executives are often not available or open to feedback and that they may not have the requisite skills or experience to rise to an organization's most senior ranks. Black women executives clearly view the matter quite differently.

Key Points from CEO Interviews:

What CEOs said about black women executives and performance

- 'Just say no' to leaving Profit & Loss (P&L) roles too early
- Seek big operating roles
- Those in staff roles should apply for P&L or significant operating roles

CEOs and black women executives' peers believe that black women executives fall short on the relationship meter

- Relationships between black women and senior white males need to improve; more trust and comfort is necessary to enable black women executives to have better relationships with senior white males.
- Black women spend too little time developing strategic relationships
- CEOs recommend that black women be the first to forge stronger relationships with white male executives

CEOs and black women executives' peers highlighted factors they believe would propel black women if they aspire to higher levels

- Increased risk-taking
- More visibility
- More optionality (making yourself valuable in and out of the company)

Key Points from Black Women Executive Interviews

Black women executives have mixed views about their relationships with white males and other executives.

- Black women are generally positive about the quality of their relationships with senior white males.
- Many black women have enjoyed strong mentoring relationships; fewer have experienced meaningful sponsorship relationships and sustained advocacy.
- Black women's networks are not providing enough strategic feedback about how they are doing or how best to advance.
- Black male executives have played important roles in translating between black women and white males.

For those black women in closest proximity to the C-Suite, alignment of values with the business goals and objectives of their company appears to be a crucial factor in their success.

- Passion for the business and the company matter.
- Non-alignment leads to lower retention rates, even at senior levels.

The most successful black women executives are effective at managing the integration of work and life.

- Black women who aspire to the C-Suite find ways to manage work life balance issues.
- Contrary to perceptions, 'off-ramps' and 'on-ramps' have been an important tool for aspiring black women.

Virtually every black woman interviewed talked about bias (race and gender) stereotypes and about being token executives—factors over which they have little or no apparent control.

- Black women executives neutralize bias and other 'no-control' factors with performance, political skill, and personal elements such as resilience and self-awareness.

Key Findings from the Research:

The study's eight key findings suggest a potential roadmap that can help Black women executives prepare for C-Suite roles.

Relationships with Senior Executives Need More Work:

Black women executives suffer from the lack of comfortable, trusted, and strategic relationships at the senior level with those who are most different from themselves, most notably white males.

Aspiration Is About Really Wanting It:

Every aspiring executive must ask: “Do I really want to do what it takes to compete for the top slot?” If the answer for a black woman executive is “yes,” she must have a plan to get there and put that plan into action at each step of the way.

Feedback Is Alive and *Not* Well:

Networks for black women executives do not provide enough strategic feedback about how they are doing and how best to advance.

Experiences That Lead to the C-Suite Are Not Visible Enough:

CEOs are often unaware of the breadth of skills and experience of black women executives. At the same time, the bar is higher for all C-Suite candidates.

Alignment of Values Is Highly Correlated To C-Suite Success:

The most successful black women executives are aligned with the values and culture of their companies. Having passion for the company’s mission allows black women executives to draw on their full capability and gain greater career momentum than would otherwise occur.

Work Life Balance Means Getting Your House In Order:

Mastering the personal dimension, and particularly being proactive about managing the integration of work and life, increases the ability of black women executives to compete at the highest levels.

Bias and Other Negative Factors Can Be Trumped:

Black women executives demonstrate daily through their own performance, political acumen and personal attributes their ability to overcome bias and other negative factors that are not within their direct control.

A New Leadership Model Emerges:

The interview data clearly defined a new leadership framework for black women executives based on critical success factors for rising to senior levels in their organizations. The framework provides the foundation for a leadership assessment that black women at all levels can use.