

Why Professional Development and Upskilling Is Vital to Women Of Color

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Rubina Malik, learning and development adviser and professor at Morehouse College

It takes just a glance at most business organizations to recognize that women of color rarely make it to C-suite positions. What has to change to see a different picture?

Women of color held just 13% of C-suite roles in 2021, according to a study by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org. To make matters worse, many women of color tend to face a larger gender wage gap than their white counterparts, with Latinas typically paid 49 cents per every white man's dollar, Indigenous women paid 50 cents and Black women paid 58 cents, compared to the average gender pay gap of 83 cents.

While systemic issues spanning centuries cannot be fixed by any one company, employers can put their own systems in place to create equity in their work culture — and upskilling and professional development programs could be the key, says Rubina Malik, senior assistant professor at Morehouse College and strategic adviser at Malik Solutions, a human capital development company.

Economic insecurity, changes to work and life patterns and isolation are taking a toll on employees. How can employers help?

"I wasn't given opportunities for professional development, even as I worked to develop others," says Malik, who is Pakistani-American. "Although I love where I am, where would I be today if somebody had seen the leader in me?"

After graduating college, Malik recalls entering corporate America with every intention of breaking the glass ceiling and positively influencing young women entering the workforce. While her purpose has not changed, she has shifted her path to advising and teaching, with a focus on leadership development. She knows firsthand that upskilling programs, workshops and one-on-one coaching can make a world of difference, especially for women of color who often find themselves in environments with little to no representation.

"It's sad to say, but back then there was nobody who looked like me," says Malik. "No one was brown. There were white men or white women. I had no one to look up to or a role model to seek opportunities from."

By the time Malik reached her third job, now as a leader within a nonprofit, she realized she would have to find the opportunities herself to further develop and advance in her career. She

signed up for a workshop through her employer and found a wealth of information she didn't have access to before.

"Once I started taking these workshops, I grew as a leader and had the opportunity to support other leaders developed inside that network," says Malik. "It became clear that creating equity is making sure everyone has the same set of skills and opportunities to develop themselves."

For Malik, leadership development was an opportunity to gain a level of self-awareness and feedback she previously struggled to receive from those in higher positions at her workplace. While Malik had noticed that white men advocated for other white men's career advancements, she was not offered the same chance. That consistent sponsorship, she observed, is often not offered to women of color.

"Sponsorship is about advocating for individuals to be promoted or moved into higher positions," she says. "If I am a white man, I will advocate for another white man. That's just what comes naturally."

That's why Malik underlines the importance of employers including upskilling and development opportunities; it can help even the playing field. However, this only works if leaders within an organization cultivate a culture of respectful curiosity. For example, if everyone is given the chance to participate in a leadership workshop, leaders and advisers will be more likely to identify workers with the potential to move up in the organization — given that leaders are pushed to think beyond their perspectives.

Every leader, adviser and potential sponsor or mentor should be examining employees based on the same assessment. Malik advises they consider the performance, purpose and presence of each employee and investigate their initial perceptions of everyone they are considering. Employer-provided bias training may be crucial here.

"When we are training our leaders, we have to make sure they are aware of their biases," says Malik. "They might automatically go to a white male or female, rather than looking at people all across the spectrum in their organization. But we have to interrogate the first thought that comes to us."

Malik asks that leaders are critical of their own thinking but keep an open mind about others in their organization. Curiosity opens the door to connecting with workers from diverse backgrounds, but critical thinking invites respect instead of objectification.

Given that replacing workers can cost as much as two times the employee's salary, employers cannot really afford to waste talent. Upskilling and professional development mean that companies do not have to recruit from outside their organization for managers or other leaders that are vital to the company's success.

On an individual level, Malik has seen workshops and advising change women's lives. She points to an individual she worked with from a multinational software company. After engaging in a company workshop led by Malik, the employee came to Malik to work on her communication skills.

"When I met her, she was a little reserved and definitely wasn't a chatty Cathy," says Malik. "Since we worked together, she has been promoted twice, and her boss has really seen the difference in how she communicates. Now, she not only advocates for herself, but others."

Malik advises women of color to demand opportunities from their employers and be willing to ask what comes next in their careers if they choose to stay at that company. If the employer cannot answer or is denying the employee opportunities to grow, then it may be time to move on.

"Don't wait for someone to give you the opportunity for professional development. Invest in yourself and ask for opportunities," says Malik. "You're in charge of your career and where it goes. What's the worst someone is going to say? If they say no, that's their loss."