Making good on fair play for women

Businesses turning pledges of gender equity into action

By Katie Johnston

Companies have been talking up their commitment to gender equity for years. Yet when it comes to female leadership, not much has changed.

Just 10 percent of the top executive positions in the 1,500 largest publicly traded companies in the country are held by women, according to Pew Research.

Recently, however, companies have started taking concrete steps to boost the ranks of women in management, going far beyond the vague promises of unconscious bias training and mentorship programs.

They are signing public pledges to interview women for every high-level position. Others are making an increase in female leadership a factor in employee bonuses. Some obsessively track male-to-female ratios department by department — and make adjustments when the numbers get out of whack.

“You make something part of a process, it normalizes it,” said Sandra O’Sullivan, chief people officer at Carbon Black.

Amy Appleyard (right) learned of the Parity Pledge when Carbon Black reached out to her.
if I happen to get this shot because I am a woman, that’s neither here nor there for me.'

AMY APPLEYARD, who was hired by Carbon Black after it reached out to her

Companies step up the drive for gender equity

Women actually got promoted more quickly than men, but lost ground as they progress through the management ranks, according to a new report by the ADP Research Institute, based on pay data from 13 million employees. Women make up 44 percent of managers at the lowest level, but drop to 23 percent four grades up, at the executive management level, and just 15 percent at the highest level — a decline ADP researchers attribute to women’s family obligations as well as to a cultural bias against promoting women.

Interest is growing in using systemic changes to increase the ranks of female leaders, including by source forms such as the investment bank Goldman Sachs, which pledged in March that half of all new analysts and entry-level employees would be women. The consulting giant Accenture previously announced a goal to have a 50-50 gender balance by 2022, with women making up a quarter of its management directors by 2025.

On Wednesday, Fidelity Investments launched the Women’s Leadership Fund, which invests in companies that have either one-third women board members or a woman in senior management, or that meet gender diversity initiatives. The Massachusetts Legislature is considering a bill that would require companies with 100 or more employees to report the races and genders of people in senior management.

"To empower women to move up in their careers, transparency is key," Boston Mayor Marty Walsh said. "We released this report last week, and that’s been worth its weight in gold." The report found that 64 percent of employees have a serious commitment to work for companies with female leaders. However, the report also found that women are still facing systemic challenges that are preventing them from advancing in their careers.

Companies that don’t make a serious commitment will soon be struggling to attract younger employees, Detjen said. However, there is hope for the future, as more companies are taking steps to address gender equity.

Women are making gains in the workplace, but there is still work to be done. Employers need to continue to promote diversity and inclusion, and to take steps to address systemic challenges that are preventing women from advancing in their careers.

Amy Appleyard is senior vice president at Carbon Black, which adopted the ParityPledge.

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