KORN FERRY®

THE BLACK P&L LEADER

INSIGHTS AND LESSONS FROM SENIOR BLACK P&L LEADERS IN CORPORATE AMERICA

THE EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP COUNCIL
The Power of Inclusive Leadership

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Table of Contents

The Rationale

Only **four** Fortune 500 CEOs are Black.

Four.

Today, only four Fortune 500 CEOs are Black—that's less than 1%. More than 10 years ago, there were seven. In five years, there may be none.

Even amid progress, corporate America is losing its diversity—and at a fast clip. Organizations have made strides to create more welcoming and inclusive cultures, and yet the number of senior Black executives, specifically senior Black P&L leaders, continues to decline. That has left the pipeline for Black CEO successors lower than ever before, with no real sign of change in sight.

It's an alarming reality, one that Korn Ferry wanted to understand in greater detail. In order to elevate the representation of Black CEOs, we first have to understand what prevents Black talent from advancing into senior profit-and-loss (P&L) positions—the function that, studies show, best prepares a leader for a CEO role.

What we've found is that all roads lead to bias against Black leaders' readiness. Unlike their counterparts, Black executives are often perceived by the majority as not having the intellectual rigor or leadership ability to manage large, highly complex P&L positions. But, as the research in this report shows, Black leaders are as capable and as prepared—if not more so—to meet the demands of those roles.

The Black P&L leaders who participated in our study are not only ready to take on tomorrow's business challenges but are in many ways as strong as, and in several cases more effective than, many of their peers. They believe in their companies' missions. They're driven to make an impact. They're determined to succeed—and pave the way for those coming up behind them. The senior executives in our study systematically manage—and take down—headwinds that have the potential to get in their way. They forge ahead despite the obstacles, and turn setbacks into growth opportunities. They walk into the office every day with confidence, courage, and commitment, prevailing and accomplishing what few do.

But they are not an anomaly. High-performing Black talent exists at all levels across the corporate community. Yet, despite investing in large-scale diversity-and-inclusion (D&I) initiatives, firms are still not bringing enough Black talent into the leadership pipeline. Instead, Black executives are more likely to be positioned in functional roles (think head of human resources, director of corporate social responsibility, or chief diversity officer) that are less likely to lead to a chief executive position. By overlooking Black executives, especially those who have the potential to be P&L leaders, companies are missing out on an important source of leadership talent—one that, when leveraged fully, can drive superior results.

After all, studies have found that diverse *and* inclusive organizations outpace the competition. Just consider the numbers: data shows that companies with ethnically diverse executive teams are 70% more likely to capture new markets than their less-diverse peers. If that isn't enough, they also generate 38% more in revenue from innovative products and services.

A sound business strategy alone won't grow a business. One critical factor to a company's success is having a diverse mix of talent who can tackle the complex challenges the organization will face now and beyond the horizon. And at a time when new technologies transform markets in the blink of an eye, there's never been a greater need for leaders who can contribute the new ideas, strategies, and approaches that are required to win in a dynamic and global business environment.

To maximize those profits, organizations will need to cultivate an engaged workforce that leads to a truly diverse and inclusive C-suite. If they don't, then they will only hurt their bottom line.

Executive Summary

Historically, Black leaders have faced considerable headwinds while ascending the corporate ladder, and only a select few have become successful P&L leaders. In fact, fewer than 10% of the most senior P&L leaders in the Fortune 500 are Black. So, what qualities and experiences drive these rare executives to take on the impossible and strive for some of the most sought-after corporate roles?

To find out, the Korn Ferry Institute, in partnership with The ELC, interviewed 28 senior Black P&L leaders at Fortune 500 companies. We analyzed these structured interviews as well as the results of Korn Ferry's Four Dimensions of Leadership (KF4D) psychometric-based assessment, which nearly three-quarters of the 28 leaders completed. In doing this, we learned that the leaders who participated in the study are among the most driven executives in corporate America. We also gathered some powerful insights about their shared experiences.

Among our key findings:

Masters of their own destiny

Leaving their careers to chance was never in the cards for 60% of these Black P&L leaders. They took highly strategic, analytical, and planful approaches to their professional development, taking the initiative and being accountable for their career progress. These executives made deep, personal commitments to gain the skills and experiences they needed to succeed and overcome barriers and challenges.

Willing to risk it all

Many of these Black P&L leaders weren't afraid to put everything on the line, even if it meant possible failure. More than 80% of the executives said they've experienced going out on a limb because they knew they would gain something of higher value. Perhaps it was a more visible role where they could have greater influence on the business; an opportunity to build or strengthen a valuable skill set to be effective in their current or future roles; or personal fulfillment in conquering a big challenge that would impact the future of their companies or the marketplace in which they operate.

Fewer than 10% of senior P&L leaders are Black.
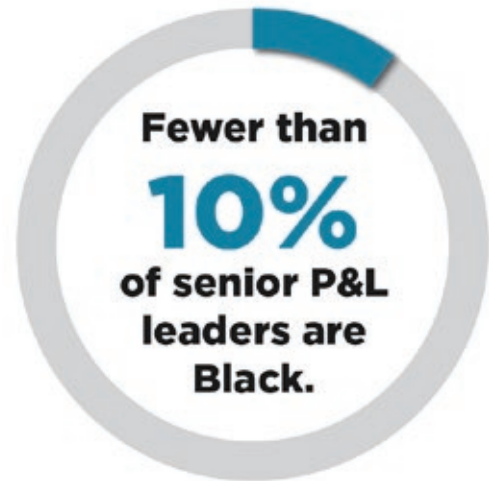
Not easily shaken

The Black P&L leaders didn't let setbacks *set them back*. Instead, they powered through obstacles and challenges, and faced adversity with maturity and grace. Many of these executives were guided by something much larger than themselves, whether it be a passion for their company's vision and purpose or their spiritual faith. Whatever it was, these executives found sources of inspiration to persevere and keep focused and forward-looking, never taking their attention off the business.

A need to overperform—and outperform

Being Black in corporate America means confronting misperceptions about skills and performance. Nearly 60% of the Black P&L leaders we interviewed reported having to work twice as hard—and accomplish twice as much—to be seen on the same level as their colleagues. Yet the executives in our study said, despite their success, they had to *repeatedly* perform well in tough assignments before they could climb the corporate ladder. The Black P&L leaders always had to demonstrate their capabilities and point out what they've already done, rather than have leadership take a chance based on what they think they can do.

Black P&L leaders match or exceed the best-in-class benchmark in many ways.

Competencies
- DRIVES RESULTS
- DEVELOPS TALENT
- ENGAGES & INSPIRES
- MANAGES AMBIGUITY
- BUILDS NETWORKS
- PERSUADES
- VALUES DIFFERENCES

Drivers
- CHALLENGE
- INDEPENDENCE
- POWER

Traits
- ADAPTABILITY
- PERSISTENCE

Percentile: 0   50   100

● Black P&L Leaders   ▌ Negative Difference
○ Best-in-Class Benchmarks   ▐ Positive Difference

In comparison to Korn Ferry's KF4D Best-in-Class benchmark profile for senior executives, Black P&L leaders scored highest with respect to the most important traits, drivers, and competencies for high-performing senior executives.

Evidence gathered from the interviews further corroborated what we learned from the KF4D assessment.

Beating the odds

Many of these Black P&L leaders broke through the glass ceiling only to find themselves standing on a glass cliff. In order to "prove their value" to the organization, they were given high-risk assignments where few could have succeeded. In fact, 36% of the executives said they were assigned extremely tough projects that no one else wanted to handle and that had a high risk of failure. What's more, many of these Black P&L leaders were given these risky assignments under the unspoken assumption that it was in order to prove their worth.

Sponsors are critical

Even with all the fortitude demonstrated by these P&L leaders, they also knew they could not make it by going at it alone. They recognized and understood the importance of having key people in their corner. One critical relationship was that of a sponsor. In fact, nearly 86% of the Black P&L leaders said having a sponsor was indispensable to their career progression. Their sponsors opened doors and provided exposure, which helped move the Black executives into bigger positions and advance their careers. What's more, sponsors promoted Black executives—or advocated for promoting them—which granted the P&L leaders access to opportunities and critical relationships that ultimately helped them gain the credibility required to advance.

Punching above their weight

Sometimes, the smartest move a person can make in their career is to run toward the fire—not away from it. And that's exactly what many of these Black P&L leaders did: 50% of the executives said they intentionally sought out tough projects with P&L responsibilities that would challenge them both professionally and personally, thus giving them greater visibility within their organizations. They were proactive in taking on complex stretch assignments that built skills and accelerated self-development, and embraced the opportunity to grow from difficult work situations.

The Research

For this research, Korn Ferry conducted structured interviews with 28 senior Black P&L leaders, whom we defined as senior executives within Fortune 500 companies who are CEOs—or report or had reported to a CEO—and who have full remit over a significant P&L operation or the business itself. Roughly 30% of the executives were women. We asked about key events in each leader's career progression, including pivotal experiences, obstacles, and factors that supported or impeded their successes. The interviews were analyzed and coded to identify common themes.

We also invited each leader to take the KF4D assessment, which 71% of the group completed. This assessment for executive leaders measures, specifically:

Traits: A person's inclinations and aptitudes, such as personality traits and intellectual capacity. Traits include attributes such as Assertiveness, Risk-Taking, Optimism, and Confidence.

Drivers: Deeply held values and internal motivators that guide a person's actions and decisions—for example, a desire for Power, Challenge, or Collaboration.

Competencies: The observable skills essential to management success, such as Resourcefulness, Courage, Cultivates Innovation, and Strategic Vision.

Throughout, we compare the average scores from the Black P&L leaders' assessments to Korn Ferry's best-in-class senior executive benchmark. The best-in-class benchmarks for senior executives represent expected scores on traits, drivers, and competencies for executives with levels of maximum (99th percentile) work engagement. Work engagement is repeatedly seen to be a strong correlate and precursor of job performance (Sorenson, 2013).

We reached out to more than 40 senior Black P&L leaders, and 28 were available for interviews. A normal expectation would be that any sample not specifically selected for outstanding performance would show up as lower than the best-in-class senior executives on key indicators. For the most part, that is not what we found; instead, our research shows that, in many ways, the Black P&L leaders, as a group, match or exceed the best-in-class benchmark. They are closer to the highest-performing executives than to the average.

Masters of their own destiny

"I've been very conscious about what I think I need to do to develop my career, and I'd say most people are not as conscious about it. I mean, I wrote down every job I was going to have up to CEO when I was in my 20s."

For 60% of the Black P&L leaders in our study, leaving their careers to chance was never an option. They didn't wait for opportunities to fall on their laps. Instead, these executives were strategic, proactive, focused, and determined in their professional advancement. They invested heavily in themselves in order to get ahead, and thought strategically about how to expand their contribution as a means of demonstrating their value to the business.

These Black leaders showed exceptional foresight, intentionality, and thoughtfulness about their career goals. They concentrated their energy on what they could control and what they could accomplish. They had a great thirst for learning and development, which helped them achieve at the highest levels. They insisted on providing a good return on investment to any development opportunity given to them.

What's more, the Black P&L leaders in our study made deep, personal commitments to gain the skills and experiences they needed to overcome barriers and gaps. They saw setbacks as a chance to grow, and treated failure as feedback to help them to determine what they needed to course-correct on their career path. They scored high on Persistence, being passionate and steadfast in their pursuit of personally valued long-term or lifetime goals, despite obstacles, discouragement, or distraction. These leaders pushed through obstacles and didn't give up on difficult tasks.

"Even if something goes well, you have to become really good at evaluating what happened and what could have happened differently."

*Executives who score high on **Adaptability** and **Persistence** in the KF4D assessment seem to be comfortable with unforeseen changes, whether in direction or approach, and appear able to push through obstacles. They're also unlikely to give up on difficult tasks.*

The Black P&L leaders in our study reflect this in the patience, persistence, and positive attitudes they display when they rebound from setbacks and adversity.

These executives also discovered that as they climbed the corporate ladder, they received less feedback. So, they learned the significance of self-reflection and learning from experiences, constantly assessing how well they did in each situation. One leader recalled that watching an executive fail as CEO helped them learn some "classic critical 'what not to do' lessons" that would help them in a future C-suite position. "I was literally conscious enough to pay attention and say to myself, 'If I'm ever blessed to be in a job like that, I'm never going to make that mistake,'" they explained. In a lot of cases, the executive added, there won't be many people with shared experiences who can help you through situations.

The leaders in our study made efforts to understand the corporate culture and unwritten rules of how work got done. This, in turn, helped the executives learn to adapt to situations that required them to operate "out of type"— going against their natural tendencies. Indeed, the Black P&L leaders in our study matched the benchmark on Adaptability: they can "adapt easily to changes in situations, adjust to constraints, and manage or rebound from adversity."

These Black P&L leaders understood that opportunities to lead don't come readily, so when they do, you must take advantage of them. Small wins beget more positioning, and more positioning begets great influence and success. Every moment counts for these executives, who are watched closely and evaluated constantly.

> *"I really am an introvert, and the whole idea of stepping up in that way would have been completely mortifying to me. But it was one of those moments where you realize, 'OK, if you say you want to be a leader, here's your chance. You don't wait for somebody to tell you to do it.'"*

Clearly communicating what they wanted in their careers—to leadership and their peers—was the most common way these P&L leaders took control of their climb to the top. They realized that to get what they wanted, they needed to be prepared to focus, plan, and articulate their career aspirations, which often included gaining experiences across many business units. The executives in our study also created personal brands that would support those aspirations. They were intentional about what they did—*and how they did it*—to be seen as high-performing executives capable of leading at the enterprise level. As one leader mentioned, "I started to communicate with intent: that it would be nice to run one of those businesses, as [running a P&L] would be the best experience to being head of a big division one day."

Another executive in our study talked about the importance of being intentional when communicating with others, specifically senior leaders in the organization. When asked how they were doing, a simple "fine" did not suffice. Instead, they were very deliberate about how they talked about themselves and their leadership on projects they were involved in, to shape the narrative about their capabilities and ambitions.

The Black P&L leaders also developed meaningful, substantive—and frankly, critical—relationships from early on in their careers as part of their personal strategy, understanding that building networks is key to success. They recognized

quickly that, as a result of being one of very few Black leaders, they needed to make strong, positive first impressions that would jump-start long-term, strategic relationships—especially when they felt their presence and value was quietly being questioned. "The good thing for me about being diverse is that a lot of times when you walk in a room and there's not a lot of people who look like you, everybody's paying attention," one leader said. "People are going to notice, and they're going to remember because you stood out when you walked in the room in the first place."

> *"You have to have a network of support that is wide-ranging. When you don't, ultimately that catches up to you."*

But Black leaders are often on the periphery. Many of the executives in our study shared that building relationships was not easy for them. They were not always included or welcomed in social networks. And this meant they had to work doubly hard to be noticed by their peers, managers, and others with influence in their organizations.

Being socially excluded created barriers to networking and exposure, hampering their chances of being positioned for stretch opportunities. As one leader explained, "If you're not around people who can develop some level of familiarity with you, and they're not comfortable around you, and then they don't trust you, chances are they're not going to allow you to be in those positions in which you're close to them and have a high level of responsibility."

Still, these leaders acknowledged that, as Black executives, having a personal brand was crucial to advancing within and outside their organization. Being respected for their work not only increased their visibility, it also gave way to more exciting and competitive career opportunities. They also recognized that proactively building diverse relationships and rapport in an open, friendly, and accepting way would pay dividends later on.

Or, as one Black executive put it, it's about "digging the well before you're thirsty."

What organizations can do now

Creating a culture of "shared responsibility" is essential to nurturing a culture of inclusion where everyone, including Black talent, feels valued, respected, and supported to reach their potential. This means leaders and their employees must work in tandem to advance Black talent—from entry level to mid-career and beyond.

An effective way for organizations to advance Black representation in the leadership pipeline is to be more intentional about creating opportunities for Black talent to move across functions and lines of business where they can take on new and challenging roles and assignments.

This should be done with an emphasis on opportunities that reflect P&L responsibilities. Companies can design rotational programs where Black talent get a taste of different kinds of work, giving them an opportunity to take hold of their own careers and decide where their skills best match with business needs. Providing a variety of development opportunities, along with needed support and coaching, can encourage junior and mid-career Black talent to take advantage of these opportunities for growth.

To that end, organizational leaders need to be held accountable for positioning Black talent for opportunities that will allow them to achieve their goals. They need to acknowledge that people come to organizations with different cultural experiences. Leaders, then, need to intentionally support Black talent at all levels better navigate organizational culture and become aligned in a way that helps them advance their careers.

Takeaways for Black talent

Take the reins and drive. Be the architect of your own career. Be intentional, be deliberate, be thoughtful, be open, and be honest. Constantly seek feedback from your direct supervisors and peers—their insights will help you expand your contribution both within your role and in the company. More importantly, actively build a network inside and outside of your organization. The support and guidance of others will allow you to develop a more strategic approach to your career progression.

Remember, "what got you here won't get you there." Develop skills beyond your technical capability. Work at strengthening your ability to build critical relationships and influence both people and outcomes.

And don't allow what others do to you, intentionally or otherwise, stand in the way of your owning your brilliance. Take control of your development. But be prepared that there are headwinds that you will have to deal with in corporate America. Build the resilience and muscle you need to manage obstacles and challenges. The higher you climb in an organization, the more these skills will prove to be invaluable.

Willing to risk it all

"You just have to believe in yourself. You just have to take chances and see them through."

Many of the Black P&L leaders in our study weren't afraid to put everything on the line, even if it meant they might fail. In fact, 82% of the executives said they took risks because they understand that risk-taking is a fundamental component of career progression. They knew that, by stepping outside of their comfort zone, they would gain something of higher value, be it about their work, their skills, or themselves.

These leaders took a leap of faith into unfamiliar territory, and it paid off in dividends. Their risks gave them the opportunity to learn from new experiences, feeding their continuous growth. Making bold and unconventional career moves stretched and challenged the Black P&L leaders in our study and taught them how to embrace uncertainty. But these executives also had the confidence to jump headfirst into ambiguous roles and assignments. They all had a fundamental belief in themselves and knew they could deliver on their accountabilities.

"My willingness to jump into unfamiliar territory, and keep learning and coaching myself, is one of the biggest differentiators."

The executives in our study weren't afraid to challenge the status quo, make unpopular decisions, and face detractors head-on, because they had sound business insight, strong networks, and an appetite to learn. These leaders strongly believed that they had what it would take to make an impact on their company, business, or sector at large. "I have been willing to take calculated risks within my organization to learn new things," one leader said. "I was just jumping in and seizing opportunities, and was never really afraid of immersing myself into a new dimension of our business."

"A lot of folks don't want to work on something that they don't know they'll be good at, but that keeps you in a pretty small box if you're only willing to take roles where you know you'll be successful."

These Black P&L leaders chose to leave behind the safety and security of their established career path to step into a steep learning curve to take on projects that advanced their careers. In many cases, these were stretch assignments with financial impact that could broaden their knowledge and capabilities; others involved relocating across the country or to the other side of the world. Some leaders even took a step backward in their career, like one executive who took a job two levels below their current pay grade in order to later jump five steps ahead.

"It's better to try and fail at doing something transformational than it is to succeed at things that don't make a difference."

Others may have doubted these decisions, but these Black P&L leaders weren't afraid to go for it. Even with failure a possibility, they knew if they let fear hold them back, their career—and ultimately their goals—would be held back.

*Executives who score high on **Challenge** in the KF4D assessment are motivated by achievement in the face of tough obstacles. Black P&L leaders reflect this in their ambition to be corporate leaders and in the risks that they often take to get there.*

*The Black P&L leaders also matched the best-in-class levels of **Manages Ambiguity**. Not only do these executives seem to find energy in ambiguous situations, but they're also able to operate effectively, even when the way forward is unclear. They can work productively despite uncertainty and welcome alternative solutions. This also allows them to step outside of their comfort zone, as well as navigate a sometimes-tenuous corporate environment.*

What organizations can do now

Organizations need to remember that professional development, specifically at the executive ranks, is an ongoing and ever-evolving process. It doesn't end when a leader makes it to or near the top of the ladder. All leaders need continuous feedback, support, and guidance, preferably from a more senior leader who has been in similarly challenging situations and can offer an evenhanded perspective on the good, the bad, and the ugly.

But for Black professionals, these scenarios are few and far between. Organizations must understand that these situations often do not happen organically for Black talent. Companies, then, need to be intentional about crafting stretch opportunities with ongoing mentorships where Black leaders can constantly evaluate what works and what they need to change in order to "conquer the mountain." For example, are there smaller P&Ls within the organization that can serve as great training grounds for leaders to develop solid business-management skills? Are there senior leaders who have managed similarly sized P&Ls and can serve as internal advisors who coach and guide them?

By taking a concerted approach to developing Black professionals, organizations will not only expand their bench of ready and available talent, but they can also begin to move beyond misperceptions that insinuate promoting Black talent is risky. Moreover, it helps to quash other assumptions that suggest that Black leaders who advance do so because of their race, not because they earned it.

Takeaways for Black talent

Be courageous in your pursuit of achieving your career ambitions. Remember that forward momentum doesn't always come in the form of a bigger role with greater visibility. Sometimes you may be asked to take on a new assignment that's outside your comfort zone and, frankly, your area of expertise. But stretch assignments are just that: projects designed to stretch you in ways you haven't previously developed. Lean into these opportunities. Don't let your own self-talk, microaggressions, or inadvertent outside messages deter you from taking full advantage of assignments that will position you for greater success.

Understand that failure is a part of success. Take risks, and leverage failure as a source of feedback by learning from it. Don't be afraid of walking the path less traveled, because career success rarely happens in a straight line. Often, you have to make strategic moves that seem counterintuitive—like moving two steps back in a position. But those moves will propel you five steps forward. Commit yourself to ongoing growth and development, seeking out people who can guide and support you all along the way. Find high-level executives who've already blazed the trail and can show you the path forward. As one executive shared, "Treat your career as if it's your own business."

Not easily shaken

*"You can't ever give up.
You just got to go for it."*

Giving up is the easy way out. But the Black P&L leaders in our study didn't let challenges pull them under.

Many of the Black executives had developed resilience throughout the course of their lives. Overcoming obstacles had been a constant aspect, which helped them prepare for dealing with the headwinds in their careers. They had a high-impact belief system and knew they could make a difference—that they could influence the outcome.

At least 90% of the executives we interviewed exemplified moments of resilience in either their careers or personal lives. They met difficult situations with maturity and grace, and called on their mental strength to overcome setbacks and adversity. The Black leaders in our study also had confidence in their capabilities to power through obstacles, focusing on what they could control rather than dwelling on external barriers.

For many of these Black P&L leaders, that confidence began to develop during childhood. It's clear from many of the interviews that parents, as well as teachers and school advisors, had a significant and long-lasting impact on their development. These positive role models instilled strong values in the executives, which influenced how they approached and managed their careers. And the messages that the leaders received in their youth continue to shape them today.

"One of the other things in my high school was, 'No excuses.' So, rather than blame the world, I'd figure out a way, always. 'OK, I've got an obstacle here, something I can't control. What am I going to do to overcome that obstacle in a way that catapults me forward?'"

Black P&L leaders are less motivated to collaborate with peers because of repeated experiences with mistreatment.

The executives in our study scored lower than the benchmark in both the **Collaborates** and **Communicates Effectively** competencies, as well as the **Collaboration** driver. High scores on **Persuades** suggest that Black leaders are confident in their ability to communicate convincingly, but they are less sure that others are willing to listen.

© Korn Ferry 2019. All rights reserved. | 20 leaders were assessed with KF4D.
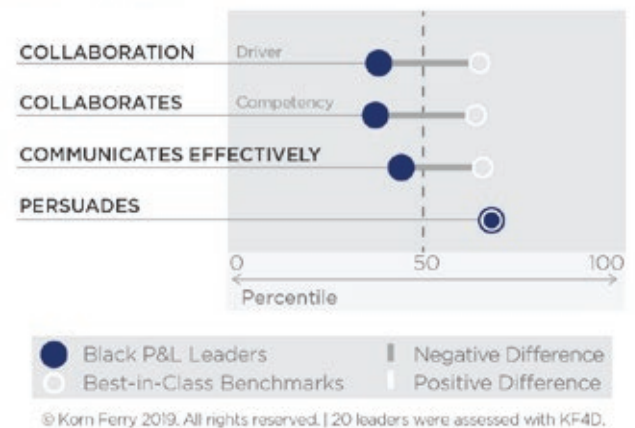
About 50% talked explicitly about confronting unfair treatment and microaggressions (subtle or unconscious behavior that expresses prejudice or bias). The most common experience: business partners or clients assuming the Black P&L leader was the direct report of a white colleague, when it was the other way around. Such microaggressions toward the Black executives can be traced back to the way the C-suite is portrayed in society: most often white and male. The lack of representation adds an undue burden for Black executives who either hold or are vying for senior leadership positions.

"You have to recognize that unconscious bias is real and it is at play, but you can't allow it to affect you."

But this doesn't only happen within office walls. One leader was misjudged as the bodyguard for his white male colleague, while another leader was mistaken for a cab driver. "I remember literally having somebody get into my car—my Mercedes—when I lived in New York," the executive recalled. He was stopped at a light when the person "opened up the back door, hopped in, and said, 'Hey, you want a fare to LaGuardia [Airport]?'"

"I'm not going to say we 100% control our own destiny, but we do control what we listen to and what we process."

But these high-achieving Black executives were not defeated by inequity. Instead, they were determined to rise above adversity with their actions and outcomes. This resoluteness speaks to their staying power: these leaders acknowledged that unconscious bias exists, but chose to focus their energy on devising constructive strategies to conquer obstacles that stood in their way. In fact, one executive shared that to be Black in corporate America, "you need to be consciously oblivious in that you have to acknowledge that bias is real, but you also have to be able to move through the organization in a way that lets others know that it doesn't bother you."

*Executives who score lower on **Collaboration** in the KF4D assessment are less driven by work characterized by reliance on social networks, interdependence, and sharing responsibility for work and decisions.*

This finding is consistent with what we learned from the interviews in our study. Although organizations have made collaboration more attractive in general, this courtesy is often not extended to Black leaders.

The Black P&L leaders in this study who are less motivated by Collaboration told us that they feel their competence, intelligence, and right to be at the table is frequently questioned. They are often asked to prove their value, which forces them to be less open and more skeptical of their peers' collaborative spirit. It is up to organizations to make their culture more inclusive so all leaders feel welcomed, supported, and able to contribute fully within the organization.

The leaders persisted despite the challenges they faced, maintaining a forward-thinking approach as they followed through on their work. "Sometimes, you're playing the long ball," one leader said. "You know you have to suffer a certain situation because there is a light at the end of the tunnel."

The Black P&L executives in our study also didn't allow others' misperceptions and mistreatment to impact the way they managed their careers and built their legacy. These leaders stood up to inequity so that the next generation of leaders wouldn't experience what they'd experienced. "I tend to have my voice be even louder because I'm representing not only myself, I'm representing a lot of people," one executive said.

> *"I don't allow anyone to feel that they have anything that's better than what I have."*

Some also called on their spiritual faith during tough times, which kept them focused and forward-looking. More than 17% of the executives in our study mentioned being grounded by faith, gaining stability and confidence in their spirituality. It has helped them realize a balance between what they can and cannot control, and find peace in an uncertain and volatile world—both in business and in life.

Although this group of Black P&L leaders persevered when their confidence may have been shaken, it appears that, at times, their confidence in their colleagues' desire to be collaborative weakened. The interviews contain many instances of bias, inequity, and other attributions that likely affect how some of these Black P&L leaders view collaboration.

Still, a pattern arises in the KF4D assessment results: our group scored notably lower than the benchmark in both the Collaborates and Communicates Effectively competencies, as well as in the Collaboration driver. Over time, repeated experiences of being talked over or ignored, or having ideas dismissed or appropriated by others, would tend to diminish a person's interest in or confidence around collaboration. These encounters would also likely taper confidence in one's communication skills (Communicates Effectively). We suspect that the lower scores on these competencies, as well as the driver Collaboration, may represent the cumulative effect of being treated differently than others. High scores on Persuades (using compelling arguments to gain the support and commitment of others) suggest that it isn't the ability to speak in a clear and convincing manner that's at stake, but rather the confidence that others are willing to listen.

Despite the very strong interview evidence of resilience, the KF4D assessment scores on Being Resilient for this group were just above average. We believe this happens because their circumstances call for *so much* resilience that they feel they always need more to continue moving forward in their careers. They expend so much energy managing headwinds and politics with their colleagues that they feel like they aren't resilient enough, even though their interviews suggest that resilience is an extremely strong characteristic for them. Korn Ferry researchers observed a similar pattern among the women CEOs interviewed for the firm's *Women CEOs Speak* report and study in 2017.

What organizations can do now

Organizations must invest in more than just unconscious-bias training if they want to rid their cultures of unfair and discriminatory treatment. Companies need to start at the top of the house, providing additional support for leaders to help them become more aware of how to create an inclusive culture. At the same time, leaders need to be held accountable for ensuring that undue headwinds, biases, or inequities do not prevent Black talent from moving through the leadership pipeline. This may mean taking a deeper dive into the organization's culture, structure, processes, and talent practices, among other systems, to better understand what challenges exist for Black talent so leadership can work collaboratively to mitigate them.

It is important to reduce these opposing forces, because these Black leaders are exhausted. The more headwinds they experience, the more drained they become. As a result, organizations are wasting invaluable resources. To lessen the impact, organizations must increase awareness of how assumptions can inform how people are treated—and therefore affect performance.

To that end, organizations need to encourage other leaders to listen without judgment. They need to be intentional about having diversity because one of the greatest—and most rewarding— benefits of having diversity is a diversity in thinking. Diverse talent will bring different perspectives and a wider range of ideas to the table that could drive innovation and, therefore, results. But those views may cause some discomfort for those who hold traditional views. Organizations, then, need to learn to become comfortable with discomfort. They need to encourage leaders, particularly those entrenched in roles, to become better listeners—not just listening for where they align, but for new ideas, approaches, and ways of doing things. In critical or tense moments, leaders must ask themselves, "Is my disagreement based in fact or opinion?" After all, research shows that organizations get a better return on investment when the room is truly diverse, so leadership can't afford not to listen.

What's more, placing limitations on Black talent based solely on stereotypes and misperceptions will have a detrimental impact on an organization's productivity—both in the short and long term. At a time when competition for talent is fierce, it's critical for leaders to create meaningful opportunities for Black talent to maximize their contributions. Therefore, the way for organizations to get full value from all their leaders lies in developing a culture of respect and belonging. That means organizations need to hold staff accountable for behaviors and decisions made that help or hinder Black talent from progressing.

Takeaways for Black talent

Recognize that microaggressions and bias exist, but take a solution-focused stance. Own the resilience you've already developed and bring it to work. Focus on the actions you can take to achieve the outcomes you strive for. Remember, your development and career are the most important to you. Recognize the platform that the organization gives you to achieve your goals, and live life by design—rather than assume things will happen on their own.

Be open to sharing more of yourself at work in order to develop trusting relationships with your colleagues. People advocate for people they know. As part of your action plan, build relationships with colleagues outside of the office. Try not to take the bias, microaggressions, and headwinds personally. You can't control what others do to you, but you can control your response.

A need to overperform—and outperform

"I've always had to distinguish myself through results, and being different, and doing more."

The feeling of always having to be "on"—of always being judged. Corporate America demands a level of emotional labor from Black leaders that many of their colleagues will never have to understand or worry about. Many Black P&L leaders talked about the mental gymnastics required: in addition to meeting the evolving demands of their complex roles, they also had to find the energy to manage through headwinds that clouded the perception of their contribution.

More than half (57%) of the Black P&L leaders in our study reported having to work twice as hard—and accomplish twice as much—in order to be seen on the same level as their peers. Yet, despite their achievements and exceeding expectations, these executives said they had to repeatedly perform well in tough assignments before they could climb the corporate ladder. Many of their coworkers, on the other hand, seemed to be judged on potential and given opportunities based on that perceived potential—a similar pattern revealed in our Women CEOs Speak study.

"If I think about my white counterparts, I don't know how many people can say they've run five multibillion-dollar businesses and still aren't top dog."

Black professionals face significant challenges getting on the radar at their organizations. Of the 57% of Black leaders in our study who reported needing to work twice as hard to be seen on the same level, more than three-quarters talked about having to prove themselves to show their worth to senior leadership, who often underestimated their skills. Some didn't view the executives as having potential until they first demonstrated that they could perform at a high level. And even then, these leaders continued to be tested, no matter how much they had delivered in the past.

This points to a prevailing, if unspoken, belief that Black executives in corporate America often face: that when Black professionals are selected to lead, they're selected primarily because of their race rather than their qualifications and capability. This unsubstantiated assumption puts undue pressure on Black talent, forcing them to work harder to demonstrate—and validate—their value. As one leader put it, "Once they see you as the person in charge, until you prove your worth in terms of intelligence or articulation, they assume you got the job because of your color."

"While I'm down here taking all these detours, I'm watching guys go around the world… and unfortunately, what that does to you, there is an aggressive part of you that says, 'I'm going to demonstrate that I can do this.'"
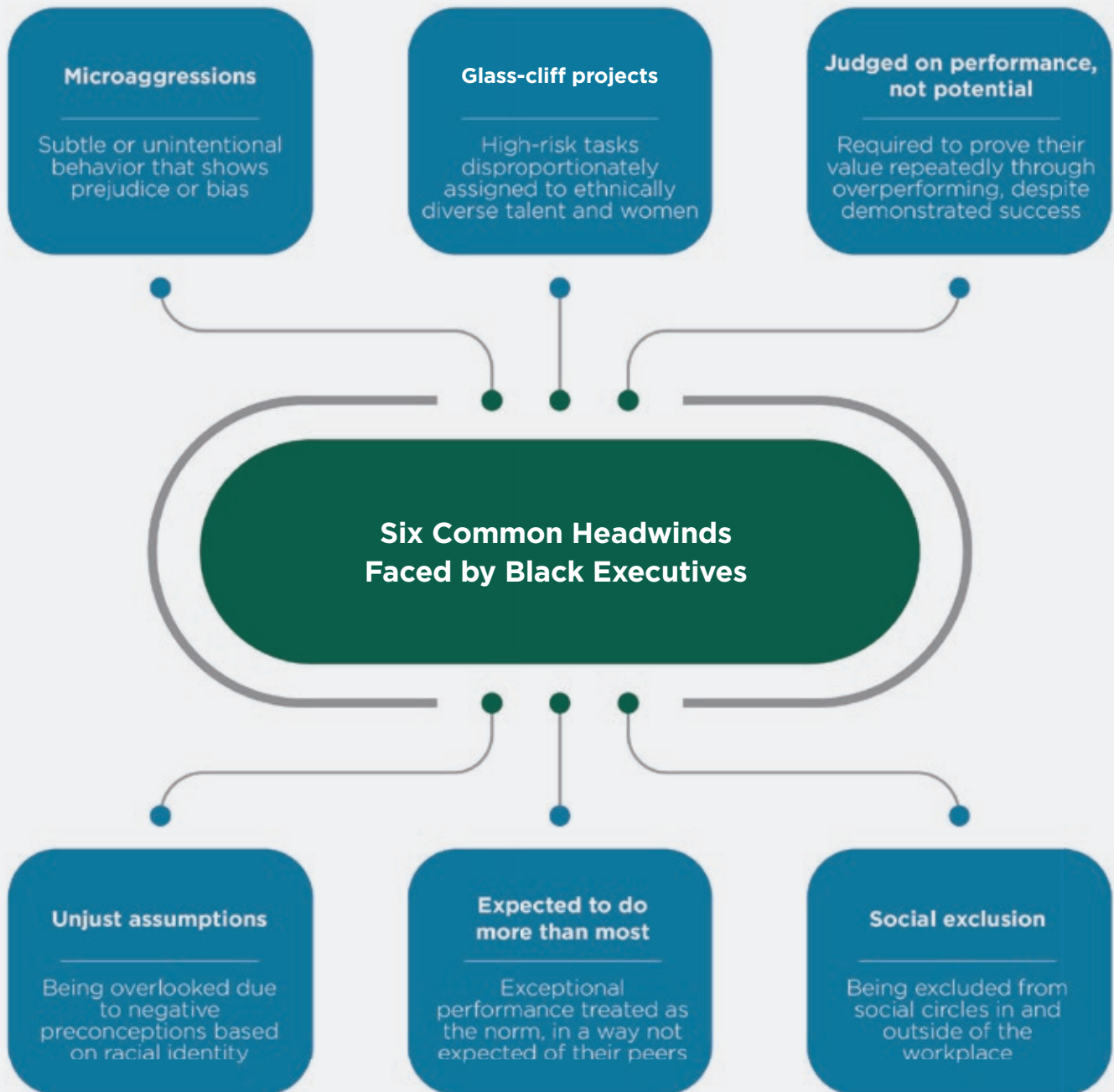
But when it comes to moving up the chain of command, Black women experience a double whammy. They're part of *two* underrepresented populations, which can, in many ways, double the odds stacked against them. The women executives in our study, many of whom are the first and only in their position, recalled having to work even harder than their male counterparts, with far less room for error, because "some people may not have had a conscious framework for Black women leaders." These women executives spent far more energy to manage the tremendous amount of scrutiny they faced.

"Everybody watches… I've got to mind my P's and Q's. I've got to look good every day, and I've got to come to work ready every day."

Still, all of these Black P&L leaders had to overperform—*and outperform*—their colleagues just to be in conversations for the same roles. They had to go above and beyond their peers (think running larger P&Ls, overseeing multiple units, taking on more responsibilities) in order to be considered; senior roles did not come to them easily. Some watched as their peers—and in several cases, direct reports—were promoted over them for doing less. They had to exercise patience and resolve, and hope that if they could demonstrate their outperformance just enough, they might be promoted, too.

Everyone faces headwinds. But Black executives, and talent at lower levels within organizations, also have to contend with unconscious bias and unfair treatment that create undue barriers to career progression.

Microaggressions

Subtle or unintentional behavior that shows prejudice or bias

Glass-cliff projects

High-risk tasks disproportionately assigned to ethnically diverse talent and women

Judged on performance, not potential

Required to prove their value repeatedly through overperforming, despite demonstrated success

Six Common Headwinds Faced by Black Executives

Unjust assumptions

Being overlooked due to negative preconceptions based on racial identity

Expected to do more than most

Exceptional performance treated as the norm, in a way not expected of their peers

Social exclusion

Being excluded from social circles in and outside of the workplace

What organizations can do now

Organizations must be as clear, detailed, and objective as possible when it comes to performance management and the promotion process. Focus on formal systems instead of informal practices.

Succession planning and talent discussions should be focused and intentionally worked through a diversity lens. Have someone be responsible for overseeing the mobility progress of top Black talent in the organization. To that end, organizations need to understand how bias impacts people and performance. It's everyone's responsibility to create an inclusive culture by working to mitigate the impact of those biases.

Organizational leaders also need to acknowledge that requiring more "evidence" of success from Black leaders compared to their peers perpetuates the notion that Black talent is less capable, and therefore less deserving of consideration for strategic growth opportunities. Leadership should challenge themselves—as well as one another—in talent reviews and other settings where development and leadership moves are discussed, to take similar risks and require equitable experience of Black professionals.

Takeaways for Black talent

Keep moving forward no matter what comes your way. Be deliberate about expanding your contribution and personal brand. Keep a detailed track record of your roles, responsibilities, and accomplishments to be able to make the case for attributing your outcomes. When possible, agree to—and work toward—objective goals that make it more difficult for someone to pass you up. Market the accomplishments of the great job you're doing already. Above all, don't give up on your rise to the top.

When the odds are stacked against you:

Black women's experience in corporate America

"I'm a black female in a world that has traditionally been white men. I can't afford to have a bad behavior day."

One. That's how many Black women have been at the helm of a Fortune 500 company. Zero. That's how many there are today.

The number of women who run a Fortune 500 business has improved. Yet not one Black woman sits among them. That's because, despite progress, Black women still see far less representation in the leadership pipeline than their male counterparts. Even when given the same access to opportunities, they have to overcome double the barriers—racial and gender bias—just to get ahead. In fact, one study found that 25% of Black women professionals are on guard in the workplace because they anticipate racial and gender bias.

Of the Black P&L leaders we interviewed, 29% are women. The interviews did paint a unique picture of what Black women experience in corporate America.

Among our findings:

More than 1,800 American companies were featured on the Fortune 500 list since 1955.

Only 1 of them has been led by a Black woman CEO.

Working for themselves—and everyone coming up behind them

"The stress that I put myself under to make sure that I'm showing up in a way that I can either prove people wrong or pave the way [is] so intensely all-consuming."

Everyone wants someone to look up to. But for underrepresented groups, the pressure to be a role model, in the face of misperceptions and bias, is far greater than what their peers may feel and requires tremendous energy. For Black women, it's twofold: not only do they want to see black people thrive, but they also want women to succeed. More than 85% of the Black women interviewed said they felt burdened to knock down walls and create opportunities for the next generation of Black talent. And that burden motivated them to work even harder—to make their voices even louder, to stand up even taller. They wanted to show others that it's possible to make it to senior leadership and excel, especially because some of these leaders became the first and only Black woman in their role.

Held back by the same qualities that other people assume are a "free ticket"

"'Oh, don't worry. You're going to go far because you're Black and you're a woman.' And that was sort of an 'ouch' moment."

Blood, sweat, and tears. That's what these women put into their work. Yet their coworkers—and even their bosses—discredit their skills and experience because of their race and their gender. Half of the Black women we interviewed said that, despite their credentials, they faced low expectations from colleagues. A few were even told that they'd advance in their careers not because they're high performing and capable but because they're Black women. What's more, some of the Black women recalled being turned down for promotions or new roles, even though they had stronger selection assessments and referrals than their less-experienced peers. One was told that it would take a "very bold move" by top brass to name her as a successor, because she represents "everything that's different from the mainstream today."

Taken under someone's wing

"The only thing that makes a difference is if somebody up there pulls you up."

Sponsors are critical. Not only do they help elevate Black talent to senior leadership, but they also act as advocates and guides. A quarter of the Black women executives described their sponsor as someone who sought out their potential, took them under their wing, and worked to cultivate their gifts. These sponsors advocated for the Black women leaders' strengths, and represented them when they weren't in the room. In one instance, the Black woman leader stood out to her future sponsor because she confronted him in a meeting. He reached out to her not long afterward and became an important sponsor and mentor to her throughout her career.

Being seen is just as important as who you know

"They put me on one of the highest visibility projects in the whole place, but I think they figured I was a free pair of hands."

Working under a spotlight comes with advantages. More than 37% of the Black women leaders in our study said they were either involved in high-visibility projects or had high visibility with senior leadership and the board, which proved crucial for their professional advancement. The more exposure they had, the better their chances that senior leadership would recognize them and learn about their skills and potential. By performing well in high-visibility projects, these women were able to gain access to a wider network and larger opportunities.

Trying to break into the old boys' club

"I have seen many folks with fewer credentials, less education, and lower career performance get positions quicker than I did.... They had advantages because of who they knew."

Deals are closed at the 18th hole; relationships are forged there. But the truth is, you won't find all high-potential talent on the golf course or in the tennis club. In fact, despite their high visibility, some of the Black women leaders in our study faced barriers to networking and getting sponsors because they didn't move in the same social circles as many of their colleagues. Because of their different interests, the Black women in our study missed out on relationship-building opportunities, whereas some of their peers "knew the right people," so they would be better positioned to get jobs as a result of their networks.

#MeToo in corporate America

"I've had the experiences, too, of having the guys [get] really handsy, but I've also had people who stepped in on that."

Despite reports of its decline, sexual harassment in the workplace is still widespread, and one recent study found that Black women are more likely to file grievances. One Black P&L leader talked about inappropriate behavior from senior men, which put her in a tough position, knowing that cultivating professional relationships with these men is key to corporate advancement. It's a fine and difficult line to walk—having to make the social contacts needed to advance your career, but also ensuring you're safe from misconduct. As Korn Ferry's *Women CEOs Speak* study shows, having women help and warn each other about toxic workplace culture is critical for navigating the social shoals. But what we don't know is how many high-performing Black women's careers have been derailed by sexual harassment.

What organizations can do now

Everyone experiences headwinds, but for underrepresented groups like Black women, those barriers are amplified. Improve selection and talent management processes so that they are increasingly equitable. Ensure the right people are getting the right roles, and stick to objective measures as much as possible when making hiring or promotion decisions. Ensure these processes don't discriminate against Black women, and level the playing field by creating a social system that allows Black women to build relationships just like their male counterparts.

Moreover, do not overlook Black women who aren't pounding the table and who are not constantly thinking about being CEO. Previous Korn Ferry research found that many women CEOs weren't aware of their potential to lead at the top, beyond their initial ambition, until a sponsor pointed it out to them. Black women, then, may still be qualified to be CEO, even if they aren't vocal about—or even aware of—their aspirations. Organizations need to widen their lens: let Black women know the firm's leaders believe in their capability to advance, and provide the experiences that will help them realize their potential.

Takeaways for Black women talent

Be comfortable self-promoting your brand and outcomes, and position yourself to take on complex assignments with high visibility. Focus on what it takes to exceed your potential, and prove doubters wrong by performing at the highest level. Be strategic in how you network by getting to know the right people who can advocate for you and provide you with crucial opportunities.

Look to your role models. Follow in their footsteps. Heed their advice. Seek honest feedback. Use their career path as a guide. And pay it forward: be a role model for the next generation, mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring younger Black women. Believe that there are people who want to support your success and build relationships there.

Punching above their weight

"I knew that I needed to have varied experiences across all those different dimensions if I were to continue to climb. So, I just thrust myself into new opportunities all of the time."

When you're facing tough assignments, going out of your comfort zone is painful. But in order to progress, it is essential.

Given the rapidly changing business environment we live in today, it's inevitable that leaders who make it to the senior levels of their organizations will need to be prepared to take on increasingly challenging and complex assignments. Of the Black P&L executives we interviewed, 50% said they intentionally sought out tough assignments with revenue targets that would test them both professionally and personally, and give them greater visibility within their firms. These leaders were proactive in taking on complex, high-risk projects that built skills and accelerated self-development, embracing the opportunity to grow from difficult work situations.

"This other business, which I knew nothing about [except that] business had been declining 9% the prior year… I chose to go there."

These positive stretch assignments with P&L responsibilities generally fell under two categories: turnarounds and international. Turnarounds, or "crisis" assignments, required the Black P&L leaders in our study to defy the odds and deliver results while getting the organization back on track, whether that meant repairing a department or improving client relations.

International assignments, on the other hand, tested these executives to see the world through a different lens, in and out of the workplace. Either way, the executives in our study seemed to realize results consistently, even under challenging circumstances.

"That turnaround was very instrumental because that was my first highly recognized position of success in the company, which got me on the map."

A number of the critical stretch assignments the leaders described were instances of turnarounds. For these Black executives, succeeding in these projects was both vital and valuable for career progression, as well as company success. The turnaround projects refined their business acumen: they learned how to run a company, engage different types of workforces (think wage vs. salary), and ultimately transform a corporation. Such assignments, which had significant financial impact, also gave the executives credibility across the organization—not just with top brass—and provided crucial exposure to opportunities that, in a few cases, led to higher-level roles. As one Black P&L leader put it, "I demonstrated success within three to four years of my time [there], and I thought about how the role would develop me. I was intentional about that."

As for international assignments, three leaders in our study discussed the inherent risk-taking involved in running projects that brought them halfway around the globe. After all, moving to another country means immersing yourself in a completely new, unfamiliar environment that you have to learn to navigate while also getting the job done. That's not to mention the personal obstacles they faced: settling their family in a different culture, finding the right schooling, and maintaining relationships amid extensive travel.

> *"I run a global company, and having literally lived, worked, and engaged people all over the world has been a big help for the job I have today."*

Despite the challenges, the Black P&L leaders in our study saw clear benefits. Not only did the experiences bring their families closer, but they also proved to be stepping stones to higher roles. The executives saw these assignments as significant, positive differentiators that gave them a more global perspective—one they've leveraged during and after these projects. "It really developed our family, and made us closer and stretched us," one leader said. "[It] made us very international and my children very international."

Sometimes, though, before you go big, you have to go small. Many of the Black P&L leaders in our study talked about taking on roles and assignments that were smaller in scope though still had revenue targets, in order to prepare for more visible, important, and complex projects. These assignments, they said, helped them gain the skills and experiences they needed to manage a larger, more sophisticated P&L role. In other words, when you're looking to stretch yourself, it's not always "go big or go home."

> *"I had to bring people along with me. I had to learn to delegate and let their ideas be the one that would drive things."*

No matter the assignment type, each executive built critical skills and competencies that continue to serve them today. For example, three particular P&L leaders developed the important competency of Engages and Inspires by involving themselves in stretch assignments. They learned to foster environments where their team felt empowered and motivated to achieve goals. They gave them enough space to express their ideas, take ownership, and excel in their roles.

What organizations can do now

No one is innately good at what they do. Therefore, organizations need to position and encourage aspiring Black business leaders to take on visible, important, and complex (VIC) assignments specifically with P&L responsibilities. What's more, organizations must provide these stretch assignments early enough in their careers so that they're seen as positive growth opportunities rather than additional hurdles or tests.

To that end, organizations need to remember that development is not one-size-fits-all. One rising star may need certain tools to hone their skills that their peer may not. Differentiated development recognizes that everybody has unique growth areas and tailors opportunities, including positive VIC assignments, to the individual. If you want a diverse group, you need diverse development.

Furthermore, there are known career paths and experiences that are considered prerequisites for the most senior levels. Organizations need to make sure that Black professionals are getting access to those opportunities so they're ready for broader roles when they arise.

Takeaways for Black talent

Be bold. Throw yourselves into new opportunities. Seek out challenging assignments that will stretch your skills and broaden your perspective. Be tenacious in your pursuit of developing new skills and experiences. Constantly seek out direct and honest feedback from colleagues so you are better able to develop a plan that will help you achieve your goals. Let those complex projects help you drive engagement and increase your visibility. Ask questions about what experiences are necessary for consideration and put yourself out there to take on those experiences.

Beating the odds

"A common bright-red thread in all of my experiences is getting something that other people didn't want."

Many of the Black P&L leaders in our study broke through the glass ceiling only to find themselves standing on a glass cliff.

These executives are highly strategic, foward-leaning, and in charge of their own development. Yet, to "demonstrate their worth" to the organization, they were given uncommonly high-risk assignments where few could have succeeded —a circumstance known as a "glass cliff." In fact, 36% of the executives in our study said they were assigned extremely tough projects that no one else wanted to handle and were at high risk of failure.

Managing a high-risk turnaround project can be a useful growth and credibility-building experience for any executive. But the Black leaders we interviewed found themselves in this situation with such frequency that it seems disproportionate to their peers. Likewise, the severity of the risk was often more extreme.

"The biggest difference is that I've had to take some really tough assignments, that had high failure-rate possibilities, in order to get people to take notice."

It's a prevalent—and inequitable—practice in corporate America: executives who are women or ethnically diverse talent receive tough assignments to "prove their value." If they fail, it was expected; if they succeed, they are deemed worthy—or sometimes, required to prove it again. As our research shows, the Black leaders in our study seem to have taken on these projects more so than their colleagues, which can further exacerbate inequity among senior leadership.

These types of assignments are siphoning Black talent from the leadership pipeline. For many, the experience can be so painful that they lose heart or leave the organization. As a result, corporate America is likely losing managers and executives who could have, with equitable treatment, contin-ued as valuable contributors.

"Frankly, there have been a few folks who were given some really tough turnarounds, and I'm not sure anyone could have made it work."

*Executives who score higher on **Manages Ambiguity** and **Situational Adaptability** in the KF4D assessment are good at handling uncertain situations and adapt quickly to changing conditions.*

Glass-cliff assignments are often ambiguous situations with a lot of risk attached. The Black P&L leaders had to dig deep within themselves to get the job done, making progress in spite of uncertainty. They also had to adapt quickly to shifting and competing demands to get results.

*In addition, the group showed high levels of **Persistence**, suggesting that these executives are tenacious in their pursuit of their goals or the challenges they are presented with. This was extremely important for leaders who faced a glass cliff, where there was no clear solution in sight and the risk of failure was elevated. The tendency for most people in this type of situation would be to give up, but these Black P&L leaders powered through, using the resources at their disposal to deliver outcomes.*

Two common glass-cliff themes emerged among the interviews: high risk of failure and unwillingness on the part of other candidates to take on the projects. In some situations, the Black executives were brought on to challenging, high-risk assignments that were almost impossible to recover from, but they felt compelled to take them on to gain visibility.

But those assignments, as revealed in the interviews, were often lose-lose: if the executive failed, it was expected, but if they succeeded, they were rarely applauded. Their success wasn't viewed as a feat of talent—rather, it was expected because it was their job to make it happen.

"I didn't always get the plum assignments. I always got the turnaround assignments," one leader recalled. "And I always looked at it from a Machiavellian standpoint."

"If the job was something that was bad and I turned it around, it was because I was supposed to turn it around. If I didn't do well, then I knew the feedback was, 'We knew he couldn't do it.'"

But accolades weren't limited entirely. Some Black P&L leaders in our study offered a few examples where superior performance was recognized by more senior executives. Leading successful turnarounds, even ones that were not intentionally sought, helped boost their reputation and credibility within their organization.

"If I look back at my career, almost every assignment I've taken I have raised my hand to say, 'Give me the tough assignment.' I'll take it because, A, I know that as a minority with limited contacts, that's going to be an opportunity to get a job that there's not a long line for. And B, if I can go in and truly turn it around, it's going to force people to take notice and then that may afford me the opportunity to get another opportunity."

Nevertheless, the P&L leaders in our study drove results in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances and, in many cases, unfair treatment and microaggressions. They may have been predicted to fail, but delivered success when it really mattered—and against all odds. The challenging assignments tested their will, but they didn't let setbacks break their spirit. Instead, the leaders learned from the high-risk situation and applied that learning going forward.

Many approached their projects with a growth mindset, which was critical to their achievements. "When it worked against me," one executive said, "I learned from that."

Having a positive attitude is indispensable in situations like these. Despite the barriers, the Black executives in our study consciously chose to make the best of the cards they were dealt and leveraged these experiences to advance their careers. And in the end, with unbreakable confidence, they prevailed.

What's the difference?

Positive stretch assignments vs. glass-cliff projects

Organizations will always have difficult projects to complete. They will also always need to develop leaders in their pipeline, and tough stretch assignments are an excellent way to build capabilities.

Yet not all challenging projects are created equal. Stretch assignments and glass-cliff projects both involve some risk and often include crisis situations, but one is about building your skills and the other is about proving your worth, despite your many successes. One is encouraging; the other is an affront.

So how do organizations guarantee that these difficult tasks truly are positive growth opportunities, and are tackled with confidence and enthusiasm?

Part of the difference lies in the framing of the assignment. Many of the assignments described by the Black P&L leaders as "glass cliffs" were structured as tests—as being needed in order to prove themselves. In contrast, projects that had a clear focus on growth and learning, and provided the right kind of support, resonated deeply with the executives and produced an optimistic and eager response.

The other part relates to timing. A crisis assignment that comes early in a person's career is generally considered a positive stretch. But if it is assigned later in one's professional life, it may be seen as asking a person to "prove your worth yet again," ultimately stalling his or her career advancement.

In other words, the implicit (or sometimes explicit) message in glass-cliff assignments is that "some people around here don't believe you're capable." But when organizations offer stretch assignments, they are telling the leader, "We have confidence in you. You can do this."

What organizations can do now

Given today's volatile and uncertain business landscape, high-risk and challenging assignments will continue to exist. But organizations that unconsciously mandate Black leaders to prove themselves in ways that their colleagues do not will only deplete their pipeline of excellent, high-performing talent that could contribute significantly to their bottom line.

Organizations must aim to create a more equitable and productive workforce by leveraging the power and fortitude of their diverse, high-performing leaders. They need to recognize that everyone needs support, including high-performing Black talent. Companies, then, must provide resources in the form of sponsors, advocates, and leaders who can remove barriers. Furthermore, organizations need to consider whether Black talent are asked to prove themselves more extensively than their peers, and why that is. As organizational leaders face this reality, they must intervene to ensure that their company isn't losing the talent that's willing to take the toughest of assignments. As the business landscape continues to change, organizations will need these individuals at the front line.

Takeaways for Black talent

Don't give up in the face of adversity and mistreatment. If things don't go as planned, continue to charge ahead, taking setbacks and failure as important feedback that will help you grow. Focus on leveraging the developmental opportunities your role presents. Tap into the knowledge and experience of colleagues who've faced similar projects and who can help you to better assess the opportunities and risks associated with them.

Trust in yourself and your capability to be a high performer. Be decisive and establish clear expectations with organizational leaders about what outcomes you are expected to deliver.

Sponsors are critical

> *"You really, really, really need to have somebody who's advocating, because you can't win this alone. You just can't."*

Sponsors play a pivotal role in moving Black talent into the upper echelons of corporate America. Due to their senior-level status, sponsors can leverage their relationships and contacts to position Black leaders for more visible roles and promotions. In many instances, sponsors establish close social and personal relationships with their protégés and actively contribute to and engage with their career growth. They advocate for talent during leadership discussions, offer challenging growth opportunities, and provide the support and cover needed for talent to succeed. They *pound the table* when it matters.

Effective sponsorship is, by nature, about career progress: 86% of the Black P&L leaders in our study said sponsors played a crucial part in their professional growth. These sponsors opened doors for them and provided exposure, which helped them move into bigger positions and advance their careers. The sponsors offered the rising talent a more advantageous career path—and sometimes pushed them into one.

Indeed, several executives in our study mentioned they at first contested the career moves their sponsors proposed, but ultimately accepted the role or project—and later were glad to do so. Often, the suggested moves were intended to broaden the executive's experience, positioning them to build their confidence and credibility, and in some instances, keep them within the organization for the long run. The initial resistance underscores the necessity of sponsorship: without these sponsors, the executives may have seen their career veer off track.

> *"My sponsor shaped my career because he pulled me up fast, and he kept me from leaving the company."*

Another leader mentioned how her sponsor, a high-level senior executive, pushed her to take on a great opportunity, even though she wasn't interested initially. "He calls me and he's like, 'No, no, no, you're taking this job,'" the executive recalled. "He continued by saying, 'They actually are questioning your financial skills. You've got to go in and do this so that you can prove you know this.'"
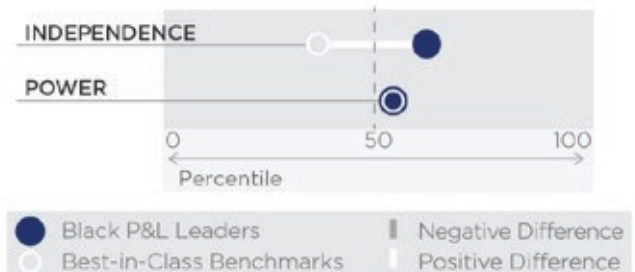
*Executives who score high on **Independence** in the KF4D assessment prefer an entrepreneurial approach to work activities.*

It's understandable to prefer Independence when faced with employment insecurity and undue barriers. Several of the interviewees mentioned switching organizations to find a place where it was possible for them to thrive.

*The Black P&L leaders also scored high on **Power**, suggesting they're motivated by work-related status, influence, and the ability to make an impact on the organization. They want to climb to higher levels of visibility and responsibility within an organization, and to earn a high degree of influence.*

Black P&L leaders prefer an entrepreneurial approach to their work.

High scores on Independence and Power suggest that the executives in our study desire freedom from organizational constraints, and are motivated by work-related status, influence, and the ability to make an impact on the organization.

INDEPENDENCE

POWER

0   50   100

Percentile

● Black P&L Leaders   ▮ Negative Difference
○ Best-in-Class Benchmarks   ▮ Positive Difference

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The Black P&L leaders who were recognized by potential sponsors made a conscious decision to be visible, to gain exposure with those who could advocate for them. They capitalized on opportunities to showcase their value and their potential to the organization. They delivered strong results consistently. This orientation is reflected in their high scores on Drives Results in the KF4D assessment.

Based on the interviews and KF4D assessments, these leaders also sought independence. They desired access but did not become dependent on their sponsor. They didn't want to be coddled. They wanted to be given a shot. Through effective sponsorship, they wanted to prove their value and contribution.

Even though these Black P&L leaders like being in control of their destiny, it's important for sponsors to recognize that Black talent faces significant headwinds within organizations. Sponsors should strike the right balance of comfort, familiarity, and trust with their protégé. Knowing who the protégé is, what drives them, and what they aspire to is essential. This means getting to know the whole person—understanding who they are beyond their day-to-day role within the organization.

> *"I've had some people willing to take some gambles on me, and then I've been crazy enough to take those risks."*

But for these Black P&L leaders, their sponsorships had much broader implications than personal career growth. Their sponsors, too, had experienced unfair treatment, barriers, and discrimination, and wanted to create an easier path for the next generation of Black leaders. This is vital to career mobility, because as one leader put it, "Sometimes, because of where we come from, you may not know the rules of the game. And that's where mentorship and sponsorship really come into play."

These sponsors made a deep commitment to support, counsel, and position the Black leaders in our study for more visible roles (often P&L, operations, or marketing and sales), and to diversify the C-suite. What's more, the Black executives often saw these sponsors as role models, compounded by their shared understanding of adversity, and spoke enthusiastically, even passionately, about how significant their sponsors had been to their advancement.

Be sponsor-ready

> *"As I was establishing these relationships, I always focused on how I could provide value, not what I thought was my next best move. In doing it that way, I had other people saying, 'What is your next best move and how can I help you get there?'"*

Effective sponsorship is about power dynamics. The Black P&L leaders we interviewed appreciate more than most the significance of sponsorship. They understand that sponsorship is a business deal where the currency is results. The sponsor creates access for the protégé, and in return the protégé delivers.

Building relationships with the right people is key—and the earlier in your career, the better. Who has influence? Who can open doors? Who can provide access and opportunities? Make yourself known to them and be intentional about how you cultivate these relationships. Performing at a high level is not enough; it's important to ensure you're working on projects that give you much-needed visibility.

Once you are seen as sponsor-worthy, you're likely to gain more visibility and attract the attention of other potential advocates. Sponsors take great pride in cultivating the next generation of high-performing leaders for their organizations.

What organizations can do now

Evidence shows that Black professionals often get stuck in middle management, typically in functional roles. Organizations that want to diversify leadership must explore what biases and barriers exist that may prevent Black talent from advancing in their companies, particularly in the line, delivery, or P&L jobs that prepare people for the most senior business leadership roles.

Because sponsorship is a deeply personal gesture that senior leaders commit to, sponsors must come to recognize and value the benefits of inclusive leadership. To that end, organizations should invest in training where senior executive sponsors can explore diversity and inclusion issues. Individuals should learn how to identify the headwinds that hinder Black talent's development, performance, and progression, and determine how to help remove or reduce those obstacles.

If they do not, organizations run the risk of weakening their talent pipeline at a time when talent continues to be a key competitive advantage.

Takeaways for Black talent

You'll impress senior leaders with your hard work, effort, and outstanding outcomes, so focus on expanding your contribution, influence, and impact. Be intentional about creating a personal brand that is aligned with the needs and strategic business objectives of your organization—or, put another way, fill a need that needs to be met. And remember: sponsorships are win-win partnerships. The more you consistently produce great results, the more cover and advocacy your sponsor will provide.

Leading
the way

"Being able to create great momentum through the power of the people around me has been huge. Then, of course, through that, you get a bunch of cheerleaders and champions around the enterprise. You have a chance to work with me and say, 'Oh, now she's the real deal and here's how she helped me grow.'"

A successful leader pursues everything with energy, drive, and determination—and pushes others to do the same. The Black P&L leaders in our study drive results because they are able to rally the troops, encourage their input, share ownership and visibility, and support people's contributions. But most of all, they empower others to bring their best selves to work.

The Black executives not only demonstrated the ability to deliver on their accountabilities, they also excelled at engaging and developing the next generation of leaders in their organization. They instilled a high level of confidence in leadership. They were strong at building relationships. They understood how the organization functioned. And they were highly skilled in managing the political landscape to influence outcomes.
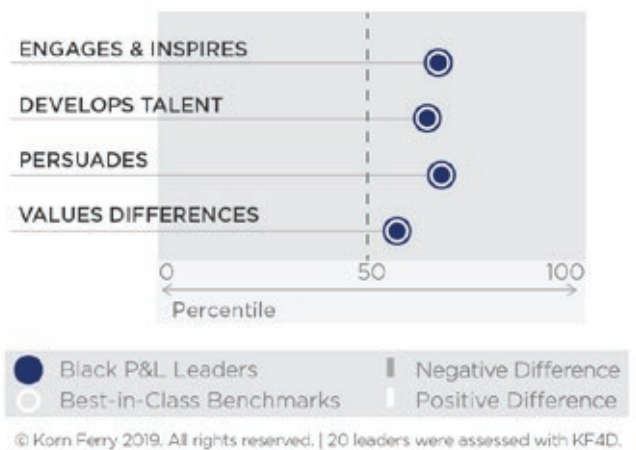
This is not at all surprising when you consider the executives' KF4D assessment results for Engages and Inspires, Develops Talent, Persuades, and Values Differences. On each one, the leaders met or exceeded Korn Ferry's best-in-class benchmark for senior executives. That means these Black P&L leaders are successful at developing others through practices like coaching and stretch assignments so that they can meet their career goals, as well as help the organization achieve its strategic objectives. Furthermore, by driving engagement, these executives have been able to gain the support and commitment of others.

"I'm proud of the fact I have been able to deliver these kinds of results, and do it in a style that is true to who I am and how I am —doing it with engagement, with laughter. You know, with personality and allowing people to be themselves, that's what I believe in. That's how I've always managed."

Because they were used to facing headwinds, many of the executives adopted a "player/ coach" leadership style that focused on collective success, rather than individual glory.

Black P&L leaders in the study excelled at engaging and developing the next generation of leaders in their organizations.

For the relevant competencies listed below, the executives in the KF4D assessments met the best-in-class benchmark for senior executives.

ENGAGES & INSPIRES
DEVELOPS TALENT
PERSUADES
VALUES DIFFERENCES

0   50   100
Percentile

● Black P&L Leaders   ▮ Negative Difference
○ Best-in-Class Benchmarks   ▮ Positive Difference

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The Black P&L leaders in our study had often been thrust into extraordinarily challenging situations, which equipped them to lead others in the face of adversity. They recognized that to achieve results, they needed to inspire and motivate people to give it their all. They knew that without the dedication and support of their teams, they would not have been able to achieve their goals and come out on top.

"During a crisis, you might have to get in the trenches and figure out what's going on. So that's what I've done: endorse people during a crisis and be very visible, and go down a click or two and be more directive, and then to communicate very, very directly, vertically up and down."

What organizations can do now

In today's global world, organizations require diverse and inclusive leaders who understand how to engage and inspire a diverse workforce that offers a wealth of knowledge, insights, and perspectives. These leaders not only deliver, they are responsible for cultivating the next generation of diverse talent who will keep the organization relevant in a constantly evolving business environment. But Black talent thrust into leadership positions have an additional headwind of managing non-diverse teams that may believe they are incapable of leading others. For this and other reasons, organizations need to be intentional about highlighting, leveraging, *and* celebrating their leadership and contribution, as the business depends on it—*period*.

Takeaways for Black talent

To advance within an organization, it is important to act beyond your current role. Leaders understand the power of leverage. They find opportunities to develop others so they can free themselves up to focus on the more strategic and visible assignments—assignments that will attract the attention of senior leaders within the organization.

Remember, sponsorship is essential for Black leaders. When given the opportunity to lead, be open and transparent, empathetic, encouraging, and intentional about positioning others for stretch assignments and development opportunities.

The ability to role model and mentor rising Black talent is also important. Black leaders at all levels of an organization need people whom they can trust and who will support them in navigating the unwritten rules and complexities of a corporate environment.

Don't forget to pull up the next generation behind you. Without them, you will remain one of few, rather than one of many.

Recommendations for Organizations

Korn Ferry and the Korn Ferry Institute studied 28 Black P&L leaders to understand what qualities and experiences helped them rise through the ranks and achieve success, despite the headwinds that often cause Black professionals to opt out of corporate America. However, in this initial research phase, we did not separately analyze the organizations they worked for now or in the past.

That said, the wisdom and observations of these Black P&L leaders, plus our own understanding of organizations, has led us to a number of recommendations for companies that are committed to diversifying their leadership pipeline. In the interviews, we heard isolated cases of effective talent management practices—like sponsorship and positive stretch assignments—that were critical to the leaders' career progress. But we also learned about significant barriers that made the executives' climb up the corporate ladder that much slower and that much harder. These impediments shouldn't exist. Implementing talent management best practices, including the elimination of diversity-related obstacles, needs to be a baseline for all organizations.

In addition, we recommend adopting the following:

Reframe the career trajectory.

Organizations should foster a culture where moving across functions and lines of business is both encouraged and expected. They should design rotational programs where Black talent can experience different types of work. This will allow them to own their development, much like the Black P&L leaders in our study did, and decide where their skills and the organization's needs match best. Offering a variety of development prospects can encourage Black talent to take advantage of these growth opportunities and, in turn, deliver results. It will also expose them to leaders across the organization who will get to know them and could someday support, mentor, or sponsor them.

Cheer on risk-taking.

The Black P&L leaders in our study succeeded, in part, because they took calculated risks and embraced challenges, rather than avoiding them. Organizations need to create and sustain a culture where taking risks is not only celebrated but also rewarded. They have a stake in the success of their Black leaders. Organizations should inspire people to think unconventionally, whether it's about projects or career moves, and ensure that leaders serve as role models for risk-taking and courage. As companies develop even more innovative cultures, it's important to take risks and recognize that failure is a possibility—and be able to move on. Organizations need to provide cover for difficulty or failure, which is an inherent possibility of risk.

Develop inclusive leadership skills.

Unconscious-bias training is not a magic pill. It won't eliminate undue barriers and discriminatory behavior entirely. Structural bias—when entrenched practices and processes favor one group over another—also hinders the success of Black talent. Organizations will need to support their leaders in developing inclusive skills so they can recognize when bias (be it subtle or unconscious) is at play, and then ease the impact it has on Black talent. Organizations also must offer strong support systems to provide feedback, guidance, cover, and positioning during challenges or setbacks in order to position Black professionals for success. It's about making conscious inclusion an accountability: people need to be held accountable just like anything else that is critical to the success of a business.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

- *Do you see Black talent as an important resource?*

- *Are you willing to recognize and appreciate the full potential of Black talent?*

- *Can you see the possibility of Black talent moving to the highest ranks of the organization?*

- *Will you fully embrace a rich pool of talent that has so much to offer your company?*

Disrupt biases and barriers.

Black professionals are often confronted with microaggressions and unfair treatment that prevent them from advancing in their careers. They expend more energy managing these headwinds, which distract them from achieving their goals. And even when Black professionals push through these challenges, it still comes at a great cost, as managing these biases—on top of doing the work—is exhausting. If organizations want to diversify their pipeline, then they must uncover and eliminate those barriers and biases, whether unconscious or conscious, that make senior leadership inaccessible to underrepresented groups. Organizations need to create a more equitable and productive workforce by leveraging—not hindering—their diverse, high-performing leaders. By addressing obstacles, Black talent can then redirect their energy, skills, and experience toward making the organization "more than."

Level the playing field.

Placing limitations on Black talent based solely on misperceptions will have a detrimental impact on an organization's bottom line. Organizations, then, need to be as clear, detailed, and objective as possible when it comes to talent management. This means that talent discussions and succession planning should be focused and intentionally worked through a diversity lens in order to minimize the potential for unconscious bias. Organizations should also have someone responsible for overseeing the mobility progress of its top Black talent.

Eliminate the double whammy.

Everyone faces headwinds, but for Black women, those obstacles are amplified. They experience biases and barriers not only because of their race but also their gender. Organizations can eliminate these inequities by improving their talent management practices, which includes recruitment and selection, career development, and compensation and benefits. They need to ensure that those processes don't discriminate against Black women. Organizations must make sure that the right people are getting the right roles, and stick to objective measures when making hiring or promotion decisions.

Accelerate development.

Stretch assignments provide Black talent at all levels with the experiences needed to grow their skills. Organizations must plan for the future, providing their rising stars with meaningful stretch opportunities that have a financial impact or revenue target, which will prepare them for success and offer career mobility. But make sure to provide these stretch assignments early enough in their careers so that they're seen as positive growth opportunities, rather than additional hurdles or tests. Believe in their potential to lead along with their performance.

Shatter the glass cliff.

Organizations that require Black professionals to repeatedly prove their value, despite their demonstrated successes, are only causing their pipeline to be depleted of high-performing talent that could have boosted their bottom line. Organizations, then, need to consider whether Black leaders are asked to prove themselves in ways that their peers are not. If Black leaders are typically more experienced, more credentialed, or more agile than other employees before being promoted, then organizations must examine their established practices and address the challenge head-on. Objectivity is critical.

Encourage soft networking.

Black professionals often don't move in the same social circles as their peers. Organizations need to provide Black talent with chances to soft network with other employees, specifically senior executives, from across the organization to develop critical relationships. This would mean organizing group activities and events that are inclusive of all talent and interests.

Promote sponsorship.

Effective sponsorship is critical for Black talent, especially early in their careers. Without sponsorship, rising Black talent may not get access to opportunities that are crucial to career advancement. That's because sponsors open doors, offer advocacy, and provide exposure to key people who can positively impact their careers, creating a clearer path up the corporate ladder. Organizations need to position Black professionals for support, mentoring, and advocacy leading up to sponsorship. They also need to encourage, recognize, and reward leaders who identify Black talent early and nurture them. They're the ones feeding your talent pipeline.

Be intentional about developing your Black talent pipeline.

Any leadership program that has cachet—and is seen as an important development experience that positions professionals for opportunities—should be open and available for Black talent. These types of programs are especially valuable for Black professionals, as they help create equity within the organization and reinforce the organization's commitment to them. But be clear, consistent, and objective in how you define potential. If you aren't, you run the risk of losing talent that will help your organization stay relevant and ahead of the competition today and in the future.

The Final Word

One-third of Black professionals work in corporate America. Yet a myopic selection process only lets a select few through to the senior ranks. As a result, corporate leadership is nearly devoid of Black talent, and the problem is only expected to get worse.

But succeeding in today's global market depends on diversity. The research is clear: diverse and inclusive organizations outperform the competition. They're more engaged, more innovative, and more profitable.

In other words: diversity boosts a company's bottom line, *full stop*.

That means, in today's disruptive landscape, organizations need leaders who are agile, determined, and resilient. They need leaders who greet challenges with open arms—who are willing to risk it all in order to succeed. They need leaders who empower others and inspire the best from everyone.

The Black P&L executives in our study are those very leaders.

According to Skip Spriggs, president and CEO of The ELC, The ELC's goal—its North Star—is to increase the number of Black executives on the top 500 corporate boards and in their CEO offices, and to keep the pipeline behind them full of the next generation of leaders.

Yet misperceptions, microaggressions, and undue headwinds (glass-cliff projects, success framed as "doing your job") makes the climb to the top *so much harder* for Black talent. They have to work twice as hard—and deliver twice as much—to see the same opportunities as their peers. Although the Black P&L leaders we studied achieved tremendous success, there are so many other high-performing Black professionals who don't. And that's not because they lack the ambition or the skills, but because they're overlooked by the organizations they work for.

These challenges will continue to exist if organizations do not change the way they think about recruiting, retaining, and promoting all talent within the company. Many organizations will continue to waste time and money on underdeveloped D&I initiatives if they aren't truly prepared to tackle this issue head-on.

In the end, organizations are missing out on a rich source of leadership potential, as well as a diversity of viewpoints, that can drive innovation, disruption, and profits. Companies therefore need to be more intentional about developing Black talent. They need to do a better job of creating an inclusive culture where Black professionals can thrive, excel, and ascend the corporate ranks.

After all, it could mean the difference between being a good company and being a great one.

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