

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



ANCHORING THE LEADERSHIP LADDER: PERCEPTIONS OF SYSTEMIC GENDER BIAS AND ITS ROLE IN WOMEN'S CAREER PROGRESSION ACROSS MULTIPLE INDUSTRIES

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ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

In 2019, the founders of Cardinal (pseudonym) believed that women leaders could benefit from small networking groups derived to provide the resources and support needed to sustain their careers. The organization started with 200 members. The members and founders were laser-focused on changing the “face” of leadership. “Cardinal is a private network designed for the most powerful women in leadership to strengthen their leadership, magnify their influence, and pave the way to bring others with them” (Cardinal, 2022). The organization has created a member experience to support women in executive leadership positions and their ability to influence the pipeline of diverse leaders. The organization now has over 12,000 members across the United States, with 42% of members representing the C-suite of their organization and the remaining VP level or above.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Cardinal wanted to take a fresh approach to curating updated content and was strongly interested in helping members deal with systemic gender bias. Their teams frequently heard that systemic gender bias was a career stopper for many women as they sought higher roles and wanted to arm their members with the best content to help them avoid career stagnation. Believing that systemic gender bias may be experienced differently across industries, we partnered to pulse-check their members and provide guidance on how they should proceed.



PROJECT QUESTIONS

PRQ: What perceptions of systemic gender bias exist among women in leadership roles across different industries?

Sub- Q1: How might the industry of one's employment affect how these perceptions of gender bias show up in the workplace?

Sub- Q2: How does the employee experience systemic gender bias in their organizational roles?

Our study relied on data collected from current Cardinal members through a pre-validated survey tool developed by Deihl et al. (2020) with eight optional open-ended questions.

FINDINGS

1: Bias was experienced greatest across higher-order factors classified as devaluation, hostility, and insufficient support. Lower-order barriers most experienced by members include unequal standards, lack of mentoring, and salary inequity. (PRQ).

2: Industry does not appear to have a statistically significant difference in how systemic gender bias occurs in the workplace. (Sub Q1)

3: Statistical significance exists for the perception of gender bias at the VP level through male privilege. (Sub Q2)

4: Women leaders experience intersectional bias across individual, organizational, and societal factors. (Sub Q2)



PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

#1: Consideration for Cardinal content should be focused on support and/or resources for recognizing and combatting devaluation, insufficient support, and unequal standards. This can be accomplished by creating training for each focus area. Resources should be provided to members on pay transparency, salary negotiation, and effective mentoring. As the current members lean into the training, Cardinal should implore the leaders to take what they have learned and action it, where possible, within their organization -- effectively making changes to the system.

#2 – Cardinal should expand its members' networks and develop additional programming for newer female leaders. This would directly benefit the VP level, who have yet to build the networks and experience to overcome the gender bias they face. Our recommendation will require Cardinal to revisit its membership footprint and expand programming to support and meet the different needs of that population while ensuring organic connectivity flourishes in core groups.

#3 – Cardinal should develop programming to address the intersectional nature of bias experienced by women leaders. As a women-led organization, it is not enough to focus on gender inequality. Programming must concentrate on the intersectionality of its members, focusing on their race, sexuality, ethnicity, age, disability, and stereotypes, including gender. Moreover, they should include diverse voices in the content creation to ensure it is effective for the target audience.

#4 – Cardinal should focus programming on the types of bias versus needing to specify by industry across their member base.