# MOCHA PROS ON THE MOVE

## An Exploration of Social Factors Affecting the Diversification of Corporate Boardrooms for African American (Black) Women

**Mocha Pros on the Move**

# An exploration of social factors affecting the diversification of corporate boardrooms for African American (black) Women

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# Acknowledgements

*"Don't let anything stop you. There will be times when you'll be disappointed, but you can't stop. Make yourself the best that you can make out of what you are. The very best."*

**Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander**

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# Dedication

**I dedicate this work to:**

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All current and future mocha pros everywhere who aspire to be their highest and best selves.

This is for all of you!

**With love,**

**Tricia (aka "LT")**

# 01. Executive Summary

**This capstone centers on studying** the diversification of corporate executive boards including the pathway to the C-Suite (traditionally known as the highest-ranking leadership team in the company) such that the Center for Workforce Excellence (CWE) can expand its offerings and provide increased executive support for leaders seeking to diversify their executive corporate boardrooms and leadership ranks. Through my research, I discovered that corporate boards (Bodies that govern publicly traded companies) are made up typically of current and/or former C-Suite leaders who understand the financial, political, and economic challenges that a company may face and provide guidance for how those companies operate. Corporate Boards have a vested interest in seeing increasing numbers of diverse women lead at the top of corporations. Through a deeper examination of social identity theory, power, and positioning, I explored how identity, power dynamics, and positioning influence the executive advancement of Black women to the C-Suite and beyond.

Women of color hold a miniscule amount of C-Suite power compared to their representation as part of the US population and compared to their buying power in the US economy. Women of color hold "just 4.6% of board seats in the Fortune 500; yet, they represent approximately 18% of the US population" (Catalyst, 2020; Editors, 2021; Perry, 2019). By 2060, the proportion of US women who will be women of color, will rise to more than half (Catalyst, 2020). As women of color grow into a larger share of the US population, they also will become more highly educated than their male counterparts (Catalyst, 2020). In addition, these trends position women of color to play a larger role in the workforce as well as to contribute even more highly to the economy because of their buying power (Catalyst, 2020).

With less than 5% of Black women as CEOs across the US, it is apparent that this population of leaders is being overlooked and underutilized (Catalyst, 2020). This underutilization also contributes to the wealth and equity gap that exists across the nation. My research explored what understanding needs exist to achieve the desired result of increased diversity in the C-Suite and in the boardroom, with a focus on the intersection of social identity, power, positions, and the influence these factors have on Black women's lack of promotion to the C-Suite and Corporate Board positions. Many questions explore the impact of having women in corporate boardrooms. However, limited exploration centers on the intersectionality of race and gender, and the path of diversity to the corporate executive suite (C-Suite).

**The questions addressed in this study are grounded in the overall theme, the role social identity plays in the ascension of Black women to corporate executive ranks. The primary research questions were:**

RQ1. What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks?

RQ2. How does race, gender or the combination of the two influence one's ascension to leadership ranks?

RQ3. What does agency or sponsorship really look like when success is realized?

RQ4. What are the barriers to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles and how can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation?

**Four themes were identified during data analysis to address the research questions. These themes were:**

THEME 1. Early exposure (as early as childhood) to risk taking using personal authority and social networks lead to opportunities that influence future executive readiness.

THEME 2. Intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be intentionally overcome.

THEME 3. Agency looks like readiness to seek and take advantage of opportunities, and sponsorship looks like earned advocacy. In this context, agency is referring to personal agency or willpower.

THEME 4. Homogeneity in social networks is a major barrier that must be intentionally overcome, both from in and out groups.

Recommendations included developing and adopting a persona-based leadership development centered around competence, confidence, courage, commitment, and connection (5C Framework). The adoption of the 5C Framework focused on the executive development of allies and sponsors facilitated through a consortium-based learning model. CWE can influence the diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership development market. By establishing a Consortium of Executive Development for Racial and Gender Equality on Corporate Boards with partner organizations (i.e., clients of CWE), consortium members can learn from one another through shared experiences, workshops, and peer learning in a psychologically safe environment. CWE would lead the design, development and implementation of content and curricula that reinforce the social and emotional learning strategies (5C Framework) that influence the ascension of Black women and other minority leaders to the C-Suite and Corporate Boards.

# 02. Introduction

**Since the beginning of American society,** African American (Black) women have been in the lowest tier of professional relevance. In this capstone context, Black women include any women who identify as African American or descend from the African diaspora. The narrative of the 'mammy' role, often assigned to Black women, is characterized as the selfless servant whose responsibility is to take care of everyone else but self, and to be seen and not heard (Pilgrim, 2012). Aunt Chloe, as mammy in the 1852 book Uncle Tom's Cabin; Hattie McDaniels, as the character "Ruth, the mammy" in the 1939 motion picture "Gone with the Wind;" and Nell Carter, as "Nell, the housekeeper" in the hit 1980s-era American TV show "Gimme A Break" are just a few examples. The belief that Black women should expect to be invisible, to clean up messes, to do jobs that no one else wants to do and to not be heard is consistently messaged in film and television (Bosman, 2014; Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Pilgrim, 2012; Sewell, 2013). Yet, the reality of how Black women are perceived is not limited to pop culture but based in similar notions of selfless servitude that remain prevalent today throughout professional workplaces.

Eighty years after the film introduction of the "Mammy," this fictionalized character presents itself in the workplace as having roles that are behind the scenes, with the least amount of power, authority, and financial rewards. As companies embrace increased diverse representation, it is necessary to get a critical reflection of the composition of the diversity mix and where that diversity sits within the ranks of the organization.

Companies inherently have a hierarchical structure, driven by the roles and responsibilities, scope, and financial influence of their employees. The financial rewards system aligns to this hierarchical structure as well. The most senior roles are the

executives, which have broad scopes of responsibility across the organization. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is accountable to the company's board of directors, whose responsibility is to govern the CEO's actions and to ensure the company is upholding its responsibility to all stakeholders. Executive work includes the development of goals, standards, and policies, which promote internal coordination of systems that create external value for shareholders (Emiliani, 2008). Corporate boards mainly are comprised of homogenous groups of people, primarily White men, who have the same or similar pedigree (i.e., same educational levels, attended the same schools and universities, and socialize in the same economic circles), and are within similar social networks (Brown, 2015; Catalyst, 2021; Drobnic, Mcpherson, Popielarz, 1992). Black women are members of one of the least proximate groups of people to these decision makers. Further, Black women are far less likely to have the social networks to provide them with the requisite experiences that will prepare and position them for executive leadership (Blake-Beard et al., 2021).

As companies seek to diversify their corporate executive ranks, corporate board level nominations must address the challenge of diversifying decision-makers' networks such that they are providing opportunities for Black women, among others, the chance to compete at the corporate executive level. If profit and loss (P&L) and chief financial officer (CFO) experience are key determinants of future promotion to CEO roles and board seats, companies need to do more to prepare diverse executives for these roles (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Executive leaders have an opportunity to shift the "Mammy" narrative by using their agency toward a more inclusive future.

The purpose of this study is to explore what factors influence the selection and placement of Black women on corporate boards at America's largest revenue-generating companies, with the desired intention to provide actionable guidance and recommendations to corporate leaders on strategies that can be applied to amplify diverse representation in executive ranks. The study provides the Chief Executive Officer and Principal Coach for the Center for Workforce Excellence (CWE) with key insights that will influence CWE's executive coaching offerings, ensuring greater success for the firm and her clients in diversifying the C-Suite and corporate boardrooms. In this capstone project, I explored how identity, power dynamics, and positioning influence the executive advancement of Black women to the C-Suite and beyond.

# 03. Organizational Context

**Since the beginning of the 21st century,** the founder of the Center for Workforce Excellence, Trudy Bourgeois, was one of very few women of color and Fortune 100 executives leading sales and marketing in the consumer goods industry. Trudy was a leader, an advocate, and a role model for so many; yet one Saturday morning, a conversation with her daughter became a defining moment. She had an event for which they were about to be late, and Trudy told her daughter to wait a moment as she finished "just one more email." Her daughter stormed away screaming, "There's always one more email." At that moment, Trudy knew that all the years of fighting bias, microaggressions, and discrimination would serve her better if she were to channel her passions as well as her sales and marketing skills into developing future women leaders to succeed in a corporate environment, but on their own terms. Trudy wanted to teach women how to position, engage, and strategize for success by learning how to navigate the huge ecosystem that was ahead of them. Yet, Trudy needed the autonomy and flexibility that entrepreneurship would provide to meet her goal and restore the relationship with her daughter. Thus, the Center for Workforce Excellence (CWE) was born.

CWE is a boutique leadership development, coaching, and consulting firm that provides Fortune 1000+ companies strategies to design, develop, and execute their diversity, equity, and inclusion agendas. CWE consultants provide a range of services including, but not limited to, executive coaching, program design and delivery, curriculum management, authorship of materials and books, keynote messaging, and program faculty supporting a diverse, inclusive, and collaborative strategic agenda CEO Trudy Bourgeois leads the company that is based in Dallas, TX. CWE operates as a hub for 14

independent consultants, with a special focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and is supported by three staff members including a chief financial officer, a chief of staff, and a social media manager.

CWE serves three primary groups of leaders, including corporate executives, mid-level managers, and underrepresented groups, such as women and people of color. These leaders encompass representation at all levels of a company. With corporate executives, CWE seeks to help organizational leaders accomplish their diversity and inclusion goals and aspirations for the overall organization. For mid-level management, CWE helps leaders develop skills and capabilities to support the growth and development of people within their direct chain of rank, particularly women and people of color. As these individuals seek to advance in their professional rank, CWE helps leaders learn how to support their growth and development. For underrepresented populations, CWE serves women and people of color who are either experienced or emerging leaders. CWE works with people in these talent pools to develop their voice, business acumen, executive presence, leadership skills, and confidence so that they stand out as premier, recognized talent ready for promotional opportunities. CWE calls attention to those women who are ready and capable to take on more responsibility as an executive leader.

Based on the perspective of CWE leadership, these parties (executives, mid-level managers, and emerging leaders) share responsibility to effect the change needed to have a more diverse and inclusive workforce. The primary stakeholders for this project include CWE staff, chief executive officers, chief people officers, board nominating committees, and chief diversity officers who are charged with diversifying corporations and driving greater innovation to achieve the bottom line. Another stakeholder group includes all leaders within an organization who seek to support greater diversity and inclusion strategies within their own business units. Finally, the most critical stakeholders benefitting from this study are women of color receiving greater access and opportunity for executive roles. These women are in positions to learn how to embrace the opportunities that surround them.

Stakeholders benefit from better research and greater understanding of what they can do individually and collectively to close the racial and gender gap for women of color in executive ranks. Specifically, regarding women of color, CWE believes that key stakeholders and recipients of this work are those who have the greatest influence on whether these women have access to opportunities to demonstrate their competence and their ability to lead in corporate environments. CWE will also gain greater clarity into what content changes would enhance their overall effectiveness through their offerings.

CWE seeks to support the development, promotion, and retention of women and racially underrepresented populations in the executive ranks at Fortune 1000 companies.

This research provides new insights for corporate executives who are seeking to build diverse, inclusive, and collaborative environments where women of color are empowered and positioned to effect change for the companies they serve. If properly positioned, empowered, and compensated, women of color could be the catalysts for the diverse representation that companies indicate that they are seeking, while continuing to provide value to the bottom line.

One decision that this project could inform includes determining who should be on candidate slates for executive roles. Through this research, specific traits executive leaders must embrace to welcome more diversity into corporate boardrooms are identified. Another decision that this project informs is identifying actions or behaviors diverse talent pool members must embrace to build relationships and proximity to people in power that influence their executive candidacy. Finally, this research informs all leaders on actions that they can embrace to lead more diverse and inclusive teams.

This problem is relevant to CWE's mission to create a business world in which every person, female as well as male can thrive. The vision is to create a business world where every person can be embraced, accepted, and valued for their own skills, talents, and diversity. Solving for this challenge aligns to the values of CWE, which include honesty, reliability, transparency, curiosity, lifelong learning, courage, authentic partnerships, and progress (https://workforceexcellence.com, 2021). With the knowledge and insights captured in this study, CWE could build upon its purpose and be able to accelerate the development and opportunities for diverse and inclusive leaders.

**04.** Area of Inquiry

**Research is mixed** as to the direct impact of having diversity in corporate boardrooms; however, many leaders agree that diverse representation on boards are beneficial to the company's operations, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and the bottom line (Brown, 2015; Carter et al., 2010; Goodman & O'Kelley, 2017; Harjoto et al., 2015). The problem of practice is that women of color hold a miniscule amount of C-Suite power compared to their representation as part of the US population and compared to their buying power in the US economy (Humphreys, 2019). Women of color hold "just 4.6% of board seats in the Fortune 500; yet, they represent approximately 18% of the US population" (Catalyst, 2020; Humphreys, 2019). By 2060, the proportion of US women who are women of color will rise to more than half (Catalyst, 2020). As women of color grow into a larger share of the US population, they also become more educated than their male counterparts (Catalyst, 2020). These trends position women of color to play a larger role in the workforce and contribute even more to the economy with their buying power (Catalyst, 2020).

With less than 5% of Black women as CEOs across the US, it is apparent that this population of leaders is being overlooked and underutilized (Catalyst, 2020). This underutilization also contributes to the wealth and equity gap that exists across the nation today. My research provides data on Black women's acceptance and promotion to executive roles. The research questions explored in this study center around the concepts of social identity theory, power, and positioning. Specifically, I explored how identity, social status, and power dynamics influence the executive careers of African American (Black) women and other women of color. Many research studies explore the impact of having women in corporate boardrooms; however, little discovery centers on

the intersectionality of race and gender, and the path to the corporate executive suite (C-Suite).

Diverse women's representation in the most senior-level executive roles in Fortune 1000 companies is still extremely small. CWE has been in business for over 15 years and has been able to sustain itself because companies and executive leaders continue to hire them to help solve this problem. While some progress has been made, it has been slow. The status quo is predominantly White men as the representation in the C-suite for these corporations (Brown, 2015; Catalyst, 2021). A critical need for inclusive leadership, shifting US demographics, and investor pressure in the United States have increased the focus on diversity in the C-suite and on public company boards.

CWE has previously developed and implemented diversity, equity and inclusion curriculum that supports mid-level and executive level professional talent. CWE delivers this curriculum through training and development, leadership and executive coaching with corporate entities and executive leaders. CWE also partners with think-tank organizations like the Executive Leadership Council, Catalyst, Coequal (formerly the Center for Talent Innovation) and the Network of Executive Women among others specializing in this field. This problem remains important because of the increasing evidence that having diverse representation, which leads to diversity of thought and yields better business results for companies and accelerates innovation and performance. Ultimately, this problem impacts the global economy when all members of society have an opportunity to build economic wealth and equality. The consequences of not addressing this problem are that companies continue to contribute to the educational, economic, and social inequity of the US. The problem that CWE faces is influencing executive leaders in a manner that accelerates the pace of change related to the inclusion of women of color as corporate board members. A belief is that if women of color are granted greater access to the center of power through proximity, empathetic leaders will use their personal agency to create the necessary space for those women to not only partner with them but to have both a seat at the table, and a voice, too.

Frustrated by the slow pace of change, the world's largest institutional investors are now taking the campaign directly to their investees, arguing that gender diversity at the board level is material to a company's financial performance (Goodman & O'Kelley, 2017). According to State Street Global Advisors (SSGA), "one out of every four Russell 3000 companies do not have a single woman on their board and nearly 60% have fewer than 15%. Women held 18.8% of the board seats of companies in the Fortune 1000 in 2016 (Goodman & O'Kelley, 2017).

The Selig Center estimated that "the nation's African American buying power will rise

to $1.54 trillion by 2022 (a 5-year estimated growth of 21% vs. 18% for non-Hispanic Whites), driven by inspirational gains in population, income, and education" (Humphreys, 2019) while Asian/Pacific Islanders are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States, with purchasing power of $986 billion in 2018, up 257% since 2000 (Humphreys, 2019). CWE has contributed to increased diverse representation for many women of color; however, the lack of representation in the C-Suite and Boardrooms is still evident.

# 05. Literature Review

**The purpose of this study** is to explore what factors influence the selection and placement of Black women on corporate boards at America's largest revenue-generating companies, with the desired intention to provide actionable guidance and recommendations to corporate leaders on strategies that can be applied to amplify diverse representation in executive ranks. Leaders of companies and educational institutions such as colleges and universities among others have publicly stated their desire for more diversity in their organizational ranks; however, progress has been slow (Brooks, 2019; Scales, 2011; Wilson, 2014). While Black people (13.4% of the US population in 2020) contributed over $1.4 trillion dollars to the US economy, their representation in corporations and executive ranks barely represented 4% of a corporate organization's executive ranks (Brooks, 2019; Catalyst, 2020). Black women influenced most of those spending decisions of their families as they often were the single head of households in their communities (Opoku-Agyeman, 2020).

While corporations are making more consciously public statements, this study was designed to explore what factors influence the selection and placement of Black women on corporate boards at America's largest revenue-generating companies, with the desired intention to provide actionable guidance and recommendations to corporate leaders on strategies that can be applied to amplify diverse representation in executive ranks (Sisodia, 2011). The study provided insights needed to understand and amplify the gap between corporate statements and actions taken to increase diverse representation on corporate boards to highlight critical success factors that ushered in these changes.

Investors want more C-suite diversity because it is good for business (Credit-Suisse

Research Institute, 2012; Goodman & O'Kelley, 2017). BlackRock, a financial services investment firm, explicitly ties diversity to board effectiveness and performance, stating that diverse boards make better decisions (Goodman & O'Kelley, 2017). When boards include women, the critical role of risk oversight and other legal responsibilities are seen as successful. Companies with gender-diverse boards have fewer instances of controversial business practices such as fraud, corruption, bribery, and shareholder battles (Lee et al., 2015). Gender-diverse boards are also associated with better collection and transparent disclosure of stock price information (Gul et al. 2011) as well as fewer financial reporting mistakes (Wahid, 2018).

While they are good for business, other research suggested that women of color do not have the same level of access to the networks that provide the opportunities for promotion to the executive suite. Women of color are held to higher standards, without the same levels of support for success for the roles in which they are placed (Roberts & Washington, 2019). Women of color are often left out of the informal networks that propel most high-potentials forward in their careers and they lack meaningful mentoring and critical sponsorship for getting ahead (Blake-Beard et al., 2021). This is not always a conscious decision on the part of managers. When looking for employees to sponsor, most executives apply the same rules used when they are seeking out new friends. Executives search for people like themselves, with similar life experiences.

While this is human nature, it can also reinforce existing gender and racial biases (Roberts & Washington, 2019). To combat these biases, leaders must learn how to eliminate the bias when it occurs. The desire to increase diverse representation is not new; however, large, revenue generating companies like these, have been challenged to balance the needs of their shareholders, with the needs of those for whom they serve. As such, the advent of corporate governance has become a new standard and norm for large publicly traded companies and the accountability and responsibility of those who govern continues to be examined.

Corporate governance for companies like these has been in effect since the mid-1970s when the US experienced an economic boom after World War II (Cheffins, 2011). As such, corporate governance became loosely defined as the oversight trifecta between shareholders, corporate managers, and board leadership charged with the responsibility of helping to alleviate conflicts between investors and managers (Cheffins, 2011). These three groups (shareholders, corporate managers, and board leadership), along with others like employees and customers, are commonly known as stakeholders.

Stakeholder theory is still considered a relatively new concept that was first coined in the early 1960s by Robert E. Freeman, an American philosopher and business professor

(Alves et al., 2011). Freeman's position was that shareholders are only one of several important stakeholders for which a company should consider important. Shareholders include those individuals who are affected by the company's success or failure (Heath & Norman, 2004; Alves et al., 2011). A company's stakeholders are broader than their shareholders. They are typically investors, customers, partners, and employees. Each of these shareholders has unique identities as key contributors to the bottom line (Harjoto et al., 2015).

Without employees, tasks cannot be accomplished that meet the needs of the customers who purchase and utilize the products and services that the company offers. Companies are becoming more attuned to the needs of all their stakeholders versus a select few because of the intersection of identities, values, and interests. This intersection begins to show up more systematically with the growth of the conscious capitalism movement (Harjoto et al., 2015; Sisodia, 2011).

Conscious capitalism is a phrase that was been introduced in the late 1990s but gained in popularity in the late 2000s, with the exploration of the idea that companies should do good work and contribute to society above and beyond their profit margins (O'Toole & Vogel, 2011; Sisodia, 2011). Characteristics of conscious capitalism include: (a) serving a higher purpose than just profits; (b) stakeholder relevance where companies judge themselves on a triple bottom line including profits, social, and environmental factors; (c) integrated strategies where ethics and social responsible are embedded in the business strategy, (d) healthy culture where employees are part of decision-making and ownership rights, and (e) values-based leaders where the chief executive officer (CEO) is driven by shared values of stakeholders versus a traditional command and control model (O'Toole & Vogel, 2011). As population demographics shift in the US and beyond, stakeholders continue to become more diverse (Poston, 2020). This demographic shift has an impact on buying power and decision making, which impacts the bottom line. Companies' leaders need to learn how to appreciate what their diverse stakeholders value.

Many diverse stakeholders value holding companies accountable for having a conscious culture. The imperative to do so has been reinforced with the onset of cancel culture, where corporations are being scrutinized publicly and often penalized when their public corporate social responsibility stance is lacking merit, particularly in the advancement of its diversity agenda. In the US companies have been challenged to do more to provide minority groups with access to opportunities in the wake of a global pandemic that disproportionately affected Black and Brown communities.

Add antiracism protests sparked by the videotaped death of a Black man, George Floyd,

who was killed brutally by a police officer, and companies are further expected to contribute to the racial reckoning happening across society (Healy & Searcey, 2020). Floyd's death was publicly recorded by a minor on a cell phone and later uploaded on social media platforms where the entire world could view the atrocity as it occurred in the presence of world viewers. Protests came as minorities were represented disproportionately in coronavirus deaths, and lower-income communities in the US were affected in the area of economics (Healy & Searcey, 2020). These protests also sparked a movement within companies and organizations, in which stakeholders of all demographics became more aware of racial and political inequities. As a result, leaders from all types of organizational demographics were impassioned to take personal steps toward driving increased equality (Brooks, 2019). However, knowing what steps to take often eluded those leaders in power who attempted to drive a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable workforce.

Since the early 2000, greater scrutiny of companies through corporate governance has continued to test the importance and influence of stakeholders on the company's overall effectiveness. Most recently, companies have been compelled to increase the diversity of their board members and executive leadership structure (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). In the US business world, the saliency of recent racial unrest particularly has increased the volume and intensity of calls for actions that would enlarge the number of Black leaders in executive positions, especially at the CEO level (Green & Hand, 2021). This increase is also directly related to the changing demographics of its stakeholders and the belief that having diversity on boards is good for business (Gross, 2020). Proponents argue that increased representation across gender and ethnic groups improves corporate decision making, which aligns to the previously described stakeholder theory (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). However, to increase representation in corporate executive ranks, one must understand the factors that influence how corporate board leaders are nominated and selected.

### Selection and Placement of Diverse Leaders on Corporate Boards

With the desire to combat the lack of diverse representation on corporate boards, leaders must first understand what the contributing factors are leading to the lack of representation that they seek. One such contributing factor is the perceived lack of pipeline often stated by leaders in executive ranks. This lack of pipeline is usually attributed to an insufficient pool of qualified candidates (Brown, 2015) for women and minorities; however, the key term to explore is qualified. This term is directly related to the criteria for which leaders are evaluated to determine their ability to be successful in executive roles. In addition, this term is embroiled in several different

biases that can be seen based on one's own social identity and one's perception of what qualified means.

At first glance, the pipeline challenge is commonly related to the number of minorities and women who have specific background training and experience in executive leadership or finance. Corporate board members typically are sourced from specific roles within the C-suite, the CEO, COO, or CFO ranks for which many women and minorities have not been granted access (Brown, 2015). In addition, board members are often selected for their propensity to support the CEO's agenda, which leads to the pool of individuals in the pipeline being persons with ties to the existing management structure, which is known to be limited in diversity (Brown, 2015). For executives to be viable CEOs or board candidates, they must first have the managerial and functional skills required for those jobs, including profit and loss (P&L) responsibility (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Over 90% of internally promoted CEOs served in a role with one of these responsibilities prior to appointment (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Rarely CEOs are promoted from functional groups outside of CEO and CFO roles, such as marketing, human resources, or general counsel (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). In the case of CEO promotions, being a direct report to the CEO is also critical (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Diverse executives are less likely to be board and CEO candidates, if they serve in non-P&L positions (Larcker & Tayan, 2020).

The research suggests other contributing factors to corporate board placement include social connections and proximity to decision makers. CEOs often are involved in the identification and vetting process for new director candidates (Brown, 2015). Trust and reliability are major factors. Reliability traditionally has meant the selection of directors with close personal ties to management (Brown, 2015). In the 1970s, reliability was established based on the nomination of family members and officers of the same company (Brown, 2015). Since that time, reliability manifests itself via social connections with corporate insiders. Boards commonly draw from the CEO's social and professional network to source for new board members (Brown, 2015). As a result, board members typically have same or similar backgrounds, including political affiliations, religion, and age as the CEO (Brown, 2015; Larcker & Tayan, 2020). While women and minorities or the intersection of the two have increased levels of educational attainment, their representation on corporate boards continues to lack growth in comparison to their credentialed achievements (Catalyst, 2021).

## ⊖ Selection and Placement of Women on Corporate Boards

Research studies about the selection and placement of women leaders on corporate boards highlights that this body of work needs further exploration. While there has been some success, increasing the number of women leaders in the C-suite, representation remains characterized by low representation of female executives and even lower representation of ethnically diverse executives (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Although many companies that make the Fortune lists publicly promote the importance of diversity and inclusion as a key business driver, women's representation has seen limited change during the 2000s (Boesch et al, 2018). Women severely are underrepresented in the C-suite, representing only 25% of total C-suite positions (Bowles, 2012; Larcker & Tayan, 2020; Mattis, 2004; Boesch et al, 2018).

Women are also underrepresented in the most common positions one level below the CEO where they hold less than 20% of the positions on average (Bowles, 2012; Larcker & Tayan, 2020;). In fact, women more commonly hold positions that have lower potential for advancement to the corporate boards, like the general counsel, human resources, chief risk officer, and so on (Larcker & Tayan, 2020; Boesch et al, 2018). That is, the representation of women in the C-suite is skewed toward lower potential positions (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Very few companies have an extensive pool of female executives, and no Fortune 100 company has a larger number of female than male executives in the C-suite (Branson, 2012; Larcker, & Tayan, 2020; Boesch et al, 2018).

Limited women's representation on the board extends beyond a lack of pipeline and leans into institutional influences on women's career paths (Bowles, 2012; Brammer et al., 2016). Family, education, economy, and government significantly influence women's rise to the board (Bowles, 2012; Brammer et al., 2016). Essentially, women's roles in society and their natural ability to ask questions and challenge the status quo positions boards to be less consensus driven. Women desire more robust analysis before agreeing to specific proposals and positions (Grosvoldet al., 2016). This factor means that women are more prone to ask questions and seek clarity before providing their approval to move in a particular direction. While women are less likely to rubber-stamp the CEO's decisions, having women on board's has proven to be financially fruitful (Brammer et al., 2016). Studies have shown that having women as part of teams increases productivity and financial gains, which aligns to both shareholders as well as other key stakeholders (Bowles, 2012; Brammer et al., 2016).

Another lens that has been explored regarding women's ascension to top leadership positions is anchored in how they position themselves in parallel to authority positions. Much research has been done to understand why women do not achieve specific leadership roles, but there is limited information on why some women do achieve higher level positions (Bowles, 2012).

By redefining gender roles and giving voice to underrepresented populations, women can reposition what the glass ceiling really is and where the glass ceiling lies today. The glass ceiling is a term that was first introduced in the mid-1980s to describe the invisible but very apparent limitation to how far a woman could go in their career attainment (Jackson, 2001; Mattis, 2004; Wilson, 2014). While progress has been made since the women's suffrage movement of the early 1900s, evidence exists that the glass ceiling is still prevalent given the stagnation of many women in career growth, wage attainment, and executive board representation. For Black women, which brings together the intersection of race and gender, even less progress has been made to achieve parity in career and wage growth and executive leadership role attainment.

## Selection and Placement of Black Women on Corporate Boards

Diverse representation is even less apparent considering racial and ethnic backgrounds at the executive level. Several research firms such as McKinsey, Catalyst, and Deloitte as well as prominent think tank organizations like the Executive Leadership Council have conducted demographic studies that showcase how underrepresented people of color are in executive ranks and in particular, women of color (Chen, 2020; Hunt et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2018; Green et al. 2018). Racially diverse executives hold fewer than 20% of C-suite positions (Larcker & Tayan, 2020) when one focuses on the CEO and CFO positions, Black and Hispanic people are underrepresented, while White people are overrepresented in these roles (Green & Hand, 2021). One of the questions that I seek to address with this study is how to shift this representation to increase diverse representation versus accepting the lack of representation today.

Out of the chief executives running America's top 500 companies, just under one percent or four CEOs, are Black (Chen, 2020; Hunt, 2015). The pipeline of leaders who are next up to be in these roles is not much more diverse. Among all U.S. companies with 100 or more employees, Black people hold just three percent of executive or senior-level roles, according to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission data (Chen, 2020). Stakeholders such as CEOs, executive recruiters and senior executives suggest that Black professionals face greater obstacles early in

their career, are viewed more critically than their colleagues and frequently lack the relationships that are pivotal to advancement" (Chen, 2020, p. 1). In addition, the absence of profit-and-loss experience also limits women's careers (Chen, 2020). Profit and loss experience is when a leader can demonstrate that he or she can generate revenue that exceeds the total expenses for a transaction or series of transactions.

## ⊖ What Works in Advancing Black Women to Executive Ranks

Another question that is not explored heavily in the research is the understanding of what has worked to increase diverse representation in executive ranks. What the perspectives of Black women are who have achieved these milestones is a question of concern. How executives from the dominant group who have successfully placed Black women leaders on their boards have overcome traditional norms to effect change is an issue for discussion. The leadership philosophies and perspectives of these two distinct audiences that seemingly accomplish the least probable results could lend insight to the conversation. There is a lack of literature that adequately captures the leadership perspectives of Black women related to their leadership development, beliefs, and perceptions of empowerment, especially considering the historical barriers that exist (Burke, Cannonier, & Sales, 2020). Perhaps one question that surfaces is understanding what factors contribute to the successful placement and engagement of diverse board members, particularly Black women where there is a limited trajectory of success.

Research has over rotated on the cognitive aspect of why diversity is important. There are many studies that demonstrate the financial and economic implications of having more diversity including women and people of color in leadership ranks (Bovino & Zafar, 2021). There are even specific studies that highlight the benefits of having Black women in executive roles; however, little progress has been made to achieve parity for this population. Black women consistently report not being treated fairly or not having their voices heard, even when they have a seat at the table (Bovino & Zafar, 2021; McClure, 2018; Scales, 2011). One theory that should be explored is how Black women are viewed in society and what role that plays on other's ability to see them as equals socially and emotionally.

## ⊖ Why This Matters

Many companies state their desires and promote their diversity efforts through social media and public stances. The C-suite and executive boards must adopt some of the same principles that they tout within their corporate ranks if they truly

wish to see change at the top (Larcker & Tayan, 2020).

To remain relevant with key stakeholders, leaders must find a way to address 'the all talk, no action' perception that they have amongst their employees, customers, and the changing landscape of investors.

*The development of future leaders in most companies is handicapped by the fact that promotional decisions to the C-suite level are based on a set of unstated criteria for advancement. The lack of clarity regarding the factors used to determine who does and who doesn't progress to the executive level presents special challenges for aspiring women executives. Effectively addressing these obstacles requires a new mindset toward talent development within organizations*

**(Beeson & Valerio, 2012, p. 417)**

# 06. Conceptual Framework

**To best understand and dissect the ascension of Black women** to corporate executive ranks, the conceptual frameworks of social identity theory (SIT), Hofstede's cultural dimensions' theory related to power distance and positioning theory are used. Social identity theory (SIT) is understanding how one's view of self-impacts how they view others within and outside of their social identity group (Bing, 2004; Erhardt et al., 2003; Hsu et al., 2019; Arnold et al., 2020). Identity is complex and multifaceted and can be evaluated from numerous lenses including how one is positioned within a social group or social construct. The concept of identity is the "self" is reflective and can been seen in relation to social categories or classifications (Burke & Stets, 2000).

Social identity theory is made up of several sub-theories including collective identity, which focuses on identity as it relates to social movements (Davis et al., 2019). It also encompasses identity theory which situates identities into three overlapping bases: person, role, and group/social (Burke & Stets, 2000; Fares & Stets, 2019). Social identities are a subset of an organization's culture, the complex group of forces that contribute to how people and organizations interact with the environment for which they are a part.

Social identities can be thought of as how one perceives themselves in relation to race, gender, age, class, social status, educational and or economic attainment. (Hsu et al., 2019; Burke & Stets, 2000). Group identity is another consideration that surfaces when thinking about social identity. It pertains to membership in a network of specific others while social identity pertains to identification with others who share similar status (Brenner, Serpe, Stryker, 2014; Davis et al. 2019; Fares & Stets, 2019). When considering how businesses function, culture, organization, and work are seen as the three primary

classifications of an organization's structure which facilitate the execution of tasks to meet specific business priorities (Hsu et al., 2019). Culture is a macro concept that is comprised of where individual functional performance occurs. As boards work to diversify their ranks and the leadership ranks amongst them, social identity must be evaluated as a key component of organizational culture.

Organizations are institutions in which "particular values, beliefs, practices, norms, assumptions, and rituals in an effort to promote and give meaning to its (organizational) existence" (Glazer & Kwantes, 2017). Corporate governance provides a structure or means to monitor and address how organizations use of physical spaces, apply division of labor, reflect different types of social groups, and distribute power via hierarchy structures (Porras & Robertson, 1992 as cited in Glazer & Kwantes, 2017). These beliefs, assumptions, and norms are what is challenging when considering how corporate governance roles are filled.

Executive board roles and positions typically are filled by drawing on the social networks and relationships of leaders that are already in positions of power. Power distance relationships are situated on a spectrum from low to high, reflecting how society accepts hierarchy (Everett et al., 2020). Those that have previous experience or are already have decision-making authority are deemed the most powerful. Due to the historical nature in which these roles have been defined or created, this ultimately has led to board diversity being limited.

When considering the diversity of board leadership roles, one first centers on the qualifications necessary to serve in such capacity; however, due to numerous barriers including lack of proximity to key decision makers, gender, and race show up as key factors earlier on in developing the pipeline for such positions (Arnold et al., 2020). These two factors are related to the "majority-minority group status" that influences workplace diversity (Arnold et al. 2020). Inter- and intra-group dynamics are key influences on one's inclusion in the talent pools that ultimately feed executive board nomination candidate slates. Top Management Teams (TMT) pride themselves on being the nucleus between an organization and its environment. They base their important decision-making on being able to help the organization gain a competitive advantage and survive. The purpose of studying TMT background diversity is to expand the information resources for a team, in the hope of strengthening the team's abilities to develop effective strategies and solve problems, identifying strategic opportunities, and ultimately, improving the organization's performance (Hsu et al., 2019). If given the opportunity, TMTs can use their power and influence to create a strategic space where multiple perspectives can be heard and valued.

During the mid-1990s, several studies explored the relationship between board diversity, CEO compensation, social identity, and social status. Often through these studies, the demographics of the board showed social similarity between the CEO and the full board, resulting in higher compensation for the CEO if his social status was higher than that of the board members (Belliveau et al., 1996; Erhardt et al., 2003; Westphal & Zajac, 1995). These similarities were attributed to functional work background, education, age, as well as insider versus outsider status (Erhardt et al., 2003).

Essentially, insiders who are most like the board have an advantage that leads to decisions that are also similar. As a result, boards require more independent reviews if bringing more diversity onto boards is important so as not to drown out minority voices or those who may not be perceived to have the same level of social status. Social similarity is attributed to career history and educational background. Social status is attributed to economic status, representation on other boards, membership in exclusive clubs, and prestige of educational institution. These factors reinforce the notion that power is held by a select few people and only those that have been invited into those circles can wield it and can benefit from it.

Power dynamics between two parties is influenced by how that power is positioned. Positioning theory was developed by Rom Harré, Bronwyn Davis, and Luc Van Langenhove-sociolinguists and sociologists who thought about the study of interaction. Positioning theory seeks to make sense of the ways that status, expectations, obligations, and interpretations influence human interaction (Harré & Langenhove, 1994). Positioning is fluid in that is dependent upon the situation or context in which the positioning happens and can shift or change depending upon how dynamics also change. In relation to Black women and corporate board diverse representation, positioning theory shows up in how members of a dominant group may apply cultural stereotypes to those individuals who are not members of their same social identity, thereby, precluding others from joining their social and professional ranks.

Stereotypes include both self-stereotypes as well as group or social stereotypes; some of which are applied to others and some of which one applies to self (Harré & Langenhove, 1994). Tajfel's Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals have motive to achieve or maintain a certain social status (Harré & Langenhove, 1994). When intermixing social status with stereotypes, one can surmise that people are positioned to be inside of a particular social class or group versus another. The way in which people navigate their own identity influences how they welcome or embrace the identity of others into their social network. Given the increased importance of diversity in leadership ranks, scholars must better understand corporate board demographics and the pathways that lead to board-level positions (i.e., executive roles and those rolls that comprise those specific positions) to make any headway in decision-making areas.

# 07.    Research Questions

**Through exploration of social identity theory, power, and positioning,** I identified some vital steps to achieve the desired result of increased diversity in the boardroom and beyond. The primary question explored is: What role does social identity play in the ascension of Black women to corporate executive ranks? Through addressing the following research questions, this primary question is answered.

- ⊖  What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network, and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks?

- ⊖  How do race, gender, or the combination of the two influence one's ascension to leadership ranks?

- ⊖  What does agency or sponsorship look like when success is realized?

- ⊖  What are the barriers to powerful social networks that are required for Black women seeking executive roles and how can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation in those roles?

Through this research, I identified critical success factors that complement the cognitive approach that most organizations use to influence leaders to hire and retain more diverse talent, particularly women of color. Knowing that Black women contribute so much to American society, this research provides an opportunity to showcase how leaders embrace diversity and inclusion.  This research also provides an opportunity to realize the contributions that embracing diversity and inclusion create for businesses and society at large. Black women are the least represented among demographic groups in corporate board rooms although they contribute $1.4T in buying power to the US economy

(Catalyst, 2021). Corporations have the measures and means to remedy this challenge. They have committed to making changes to diversity and inclusion in spirit but results still have not been realized. As a result of this study, I visualize moments in time in which executive leaders were impassioned to make a difference in the way that they staffed their boards and executive suites with a higher representation of racial and gender diversity. Through this body of work, I highlight where this practice has been conducted successfully and where there are continued areas for explorations.

# 08. Project Design

## Data Collection

After conducting an extensive literature review, I determined that social identity, power dynamics, and positioning were key areas to explore with existing corporate executives, regarding their journeys to the C-Suite. The C-Suite is often noted in the research as a precursor to corporate executive board placements. The methodology used for this research was a qualitative study of corporate executives who either serve on corporate boards or seek to serve on corporate boards in the future. This research is comprised of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews of executives from various demographic backgrounds (i.e., race, gender, educational and childhood social status) who have achieved career success that position them for board leadership roles.

People have a wide range of thoughts, ideas, and recommendations that are rich within the emotional context. Through these interviews, participants provided important takeaways and key insights to address the diversification of the corporate boardroom. Participants were recruited through the social network of Trudy Bourgeois, CEO of the Center for Workforce Excellence and I, the researcher. Through this process, the snowball sampling method was used to generate a pool of referrals and opportunities for introductions to other corporate board members or C-Suite executives (see Appendix E. Snowball Network Map). Eligible interview participants were current or former members of the C-Suite and/or executives within two levels of the C-Suite for large, publicly traded companies. Trudy introduced me to 34 corporate executives whom I invited for participation in the

research study. I supplemented the invitation list with an additional 14 executives from my own professional network. Four additional executives were recommended to participate upon interviewing the initial study participants. In total, 52 executives were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. Initially, 28 executives accepted and completed interviews, 5 agreed to participate but never completed interviews, 16 did not respond to the invitation, and 2 declined to participate (see Table 1).

Table 1: **Participation Invitees by Race and Gender**

| By Race and Gender | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Interview Completion Status** | **BF** | **BM** | **BW** | **HF** | **HM** | **WF** | **WM** | **Grand Total** |
| **No** | | 1 | | | | 1 | | 2 |
| **No Response** | 8 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 17 |
| **Yes, but Never Completed** | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| **Yes, Completed** | 8 | 5 | | 3 | | 7 | 5 | 28 |
| **Grand Total** | 17 | 8 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 11 | 8 | 52 |

***Note.*** Legend: BF (Black Female), BM (Black Male), HF (Hispanic Female), HM (Hispanic Male), WF (White Female), WM (White Male). No other ethnicities were interviewed during this study. All ethnicity data is based on self-disclosure from participants or LinkedIn photo considerations.

Trudy Bourgeois contacted interviewees to introduce them to the study partnership. Then, I sent subsequent email communications to schedule participant interviews. I conducted all interviews directly, using video technology such as Webex or Zoom and recorded each interview with each participant's permission. Interview questions were semi-structured, based on areas of inquiry that surfaced during my literature review. Interview responses from this diverse set of individuals primarily focused on (a) the social identities of participants, (b) how they ascended to their leadership ranks, (c) what factors influenced their career trajectories, and (d) what perspective they had on Black women as it relates to corporate board or C-Suite career level attainment (see Appendix D. Interview Protocol). In addition, curated questions explored their perceptions and recommendations for others who may be in similar seats as they in the future.

The Four-Phase Process to Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) was used to determine interview questions and ensure alignment with the research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This process included: (a) drafting initial interview questions based on literature review preliminary findings; (b) revising interview questions to ensure an inquiry-based conversation was held; (c) soliciting feedback and adjusting interview questions as appropriate; and (d) piloting the interview protocol with an initial set of interviewees. As additional interviews were held, primary interview questions emerged and remained standard throughout the research study process yet allowed for the conversation to be malleable based on the responses of the participants.

Twenty-eight executive leaders participated in the interview process. Executive leaders are those decision makers who form the goals, norms, and policies need to promote internal coordination, create value, and guide an organization's response to environmental contingencies (Buckley et al., 2010). Eighteen of the participants were female, and 10 were male.

Table 2 indicates the relevant demographic characteristics of individual participants.

Table 2: **Participant Demographics**

| Pseudonym | Race | Gender | Job title | Role for Interview |
|-----------|-------|--------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| P01 | White | Female | Chief People Officer | Senior Executive |
| P02 | White | Female | Board Chairman | Board Member |
| P03 | Black | Female | Chief People Officer | Senior Executive |
| P04 | White | Male | Chief Executive Officer | Board Member |
| P05 | White | Male | Chief Learning Officer | Senior Executive |
| P06 | Black | Female | Chief People Officer | Senior Executive |
| P07 | Black | Female | Chief Operating Officer | Board Member |
| P08 | Black | Male | Chief Diversity Officer | Senior Executive |
| P09 | Black | Male | Board Member | Board Member |

| Pseudonym | Race | Gender | Job title | Role for Interview |
|-----------|------|--------|-----------|--------------------|
| P10 | Hispanic | Female | Chief People Officer | Board Member |
| P11 | White | Female | Chief Sales Officer | Board Member |
| P12 | White | Female | Chief Executive Officer | Board Member |
| P13 | Black | Female | Chief Marketing Officer | Senior Executive |
| P15 | Black | Male | Board Member | Board Member |
| P16 | Black | Female | Board Member | Board Member |
| P17 | Black | Female | Chief Executive Officer | Board Member |
| P18 | Black | Female | Board Member | Board Member |
| P19 | Hispanic | Female | VP, Human Resources | Senior Executive |
| P20 | Hispanic | Female | Chief Marketing Officer | Senior Executive |
| P21 | White | Female | Chief Executive Officer | Board Member |
| P22 | White | Male | Chief Product Officer | Board Member |
| P23 | Black | Male | Board Member | Board Member |
| P24 | White | Male | Senior Vice President | Senior Executive |
| P25 | Black | Male | Chief Executive Officer | Board Member |
| P26 | White | Female | Operating Partner | Board Member |
| P27 | Black | Female | Board Member | Board Member |
| P28 | White | Male | Chief Government Officer | Senior Executive |
| P29 | White | Female | Board Member | Board Member |

*Note.* P14 was a speech and not an interview and was subsequently removed from this analysis

## Data Analysis

After completion of all interviews, I exported the recordings to my computer using Otter AI to transcribe the audio-recordings into text transcripts. With the help of Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology, I explored how identity, power dynamics, and positioning influence the executive advancement of Black women to the C-Suite and beyond. Jain et al. (2018) described NLP as a computer program that can do something smart like a human; it is a machine mimicking human to perform tasks "in the absence of a human and sometimes in a better as well as efficient way" (p. 161). Discussion from these diverse groups was analyzed in aggregate, using this technology to gain rich insight into key differences and similarities. NLP helped quickly and accurately identify statistically prominent words that best summarize or distinguish the content in a set of messages.

In addition, I manually reviewed each transcript and identified key phrases to validate sentiments identified by NLP. The presentation of the study results begins with a description of the participants' relevant demographic characteristics. Next, the data analysis procedure is described. A detailed presentation of the study results is then provided, followed by a summary of the results. Upon completion of each interview and using the Memoing technique for reflection, I captured notes based on the interview dialogues. I coded phrases and key questions that aligned to the key research questions. As each subsequent interview progressed, I noted recurring themes in my MS Excel tracker for further review and analysis. After interviews were concluded, I converted all audio transcripts to text format for ease of use in the NVivo 12 system. The data were analyzed in Nvivo 12 computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software using the inductive, thematic procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The first step of the analysis involved reading and rereading the data to gain familiarity with the content and make preliminary identifications of potential patterns of meaning across participants' responses. In the second step, the data were coded. Coding the data first involved reducing the comments into phrases or groups of phrases (data segments) that conveyed a meaning relevant to the conceptual framework of social identity, power dynamics, and positioning, relative to advancing an increasing number of Black women to corporate executive roles. In Nvivo, each of those data segments was assigned to a node, which represented an initial code. The initial codes were labeled with brief, descriptive phrases, indicating their relevant meaning. When different data segments had similar meanings, they were assigned to the same code. Table 3 indicates the initial codes identified during this

step. In the third step of the analysis, themes were formed by grouping similar or related codes.

The fourth step of the analysis involved reviewing the themes by comparing them to the original data to ensure they accurately reflected patterns in participants' responses. Themes were also compared to one another to ensure they did not overlap. The fifth step of the analysis consisted of naming the themes to clarify their significance as answers addressing the research questions. In the sixth step of the analysis, the presentation of findings in the following section was created. Table 4 (further below) indicates how the initial codes were grouped to form the finalized themes.

Table 3: **Initial Codes**

| Initial code (in descending order of data segments assigned) | Number of participants contributing (n=28) | Number of data excerpts assigned |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Advantage through education** | 11 | 24 |
| **Consciously going against the grain of systemic gender and racial discrimination** | 13 | 19 |
| **Leveraging social networks** | 15 | 18 |
| **Sponsors as earned advocates** | 12 | 18 |
| **Acting with intentionality** | 10 | 14 |
| **Diversity should be actively sought** | 9 | 13 |
| **Achievement-oriented work ethic** | 9 | 12 |
| **Past authority as a proven track record** | 9 | 10 |
| **Breaking down network barriers** | 5 | 8 |
| **Readiness to assume responsibility** | 7 | 7 |
| **Early exposure to diversity** | 5 | 6 |
| **Immigrant identity as a foundation for grit** | 4 | 6 |

| Initial code (in descending order of data segments assigned) | Number of participants contributing (N=28) | Number of data excerpts assigned |
|---|---|---|
| Receiving mentoring | 6 | 6 |
| Willingness to take opportunities | 4 | 6 |
| Knowing how to operate as a Black male in predominantly White environments | 5 | 5 |
| Finding a community | 4 | 4 |
| Looking for sponsorship outside of own race | 4 | 4 |
| Support from family | 3 | 4 |
| White male privilege | 2 | 3 |
| Get to know Women Of Color (WOC) candidates | 2 | 2 |
| Implement accountability | 2 | 2 |

Table 4: **Grouping of Related Initial Codes to From Themes**

| Theme/Initial code grouped to form theme (alphabetized) | Number of participants contributing (N=28) | Number of data excerpts assigned |
|---|---|---|
| **Theme 1. Past authority and social networks lead to opportunities that childhood background prepares executives to take** | 25 | 80 |
| Achievement-oriented work ethic | | |
| Advantage through education | | |
| Early exposure to diversity | | |
| *Leveraging social networks* | | |
| Past authority as a proven track record | | |
| Receiving mentoring | | |
| Support from family | | |

| Theme/Initial code grouped to form theme (alphabetized) | Number of participants contributing (N=28) | Number of data excerpts assigned |
|---|---|---|
| **Theme 2. Intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be intentionally overcome** | 22 | 33 |
| Consciously going against the grain of systemic gender and racial discrimination | | |
| Immigrant identity as a foundation for grit | | |
| Knowing how to operate as a Black male in predominantly White environments | | |
| White male privilege | | |
| **Theme 3. Agency looks like readiness to seek and take advantage of opportunities, and sponsorship looks like earned advocacy** | 19 | 35 |
| Finding a community | | |
| Readiness to assume responsibility | | |
| Sponsors as earned advocates | | |
| Willingness to take opportunities | | |
| **Theme 4. Homogeneity in social networks is a major barrier that must be intentionally overcome from within and without** | 20 | 43 |
| Acting with intentionality | | |
| Breaking down network barriers | | |
| Diversity should be actively sought | | |
| Get to know WOC candidates | | |
| Implement accountability | | |
| Looking for sponsorship outside of own race | | |

## ⊝ Data Analysis Rationale

Through these interviews, I expected to uncover synergies and differences on the perspectives of the current landscape of corporate America relative to Black women and diversity. I expected to understand better the contextual nuances of what led executives to increase board diversity including the impact of social and emotional experiences that created an awakening, leading to action toward increased inclusion. However, because of the realities of the limited representation of Black women on corporate boards, I uncovered considerable information related to how board nominations and placements are made, with initial contact highly dependent upon the social networks of existing board members or the CEOs.

Through these interviews, I also uncovered themes related to social networks, personal empowerment, sponsorship, social status, and positioning, and how each of these key factors influences the makeup of corporate executive boards and the C-Suite. I also learned of strategies Black women can adopt to position themselves more effectively for consideration on corporate board and in C-Suite level roles. Advice, interpretation, and expectations also were explored as well as context clues regarding how the interviewed individuals self-identify, and how that identity influences how they navigate their corporate careers. Data analysis for this study was conducted from August 2021 through February 2022 (see Table 5).

Table 5: **Interviewed Participants by Job Role and Institution Type**

| Row Labels | Private | Public | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Board Member** | **8** | **10** | **18** |
| Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus | 1 | | 1 |
| Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity | | 4 | 4 |
| Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| Doctoral/Professional Universities | 1 | | 1 |
| Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs | | 1 | 1 |
| **Senior Executive** | **2** | **8** | **10** |
| Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity | | 1 | 1 |
| Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity | 1 | 6 | 7 |
| Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Grand Total** | **10** | **18** | **28** |

*Note.* Source. https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/lookup/lookup.php

# 09.   Findings

**The primary question used to guide this study evolved during this inquiry:**

→  What role does social identity plan in the ascension of Black women to the corporate executive ranks?

This topic was addressed by four research questions derived from it. Four themes were identified during data analysis to address these four research questions. Table 6 indicates the questions and the themes used to address them. A more detailed presentation of the results is provided in the following subsections, which are organized by research question.

Table 6: **Research Questions and Themes Used to Address Them**

| Research question | Theme used to address question |
|---|---|
| **RQ1.** What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network, and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks? | **Theme 1.** Early exposure (as early as childhood) to risk taking using personal authority and social networks lead to opportunities that influence future executive readiness |

| Research question | Theme used to address question |
|---|---|
| **RQ2.** How does race, gender, or the combination of the two influence one's ascension to leadership ranks? | **Theme 2.** Intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be intentionally overcome. |
| **RQ3.** What does agency or sponsorship really look like when success is realized? | **Theme 3.** Agency looks like readiness to seek and take opportunities, and sponsorship looks like earned advocacy. |
| **RQ4.** What are the barriers to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles and how can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation? | **Theme 4.** Homogeneity in social networks is a major barrier that must be intentionally overcome from within and without. |

## RQ1 →

What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks?

### Finding 1.

Early exposure (as early as childhood) to risk taking using personal authority and social networks lead to opportunities that influence future executive readiness. Twenty-five of the participants contributed data to this theme, and no participants indicated disagreement with this theme. The participants reported that past personal authority positively impacted their ability to reach executive ranks by serving as a proven track record of successful leadership. Authority in this context associates with personal positioning, readiness, and ability to make decisions, based on how individuals' position and empower themselves. Social networks contributed to the attainment of executive positions through references and recommendations, participants said. Childhood home environments and education prepared participants to take advantage of the opportunities from their past authorities and social networks, through the education and work-ethic modeling they received.

**Most participants reported that their social networks were an important means by which they reached executive ranks.**

P3 attributed her attainment of high-level executive positions to "leveraging my network" by taking advantage of "relationships and networking. The job I have now is because the CEO is a dear friend of mine. The last job I had, I was the Chief People Officer. It is because this job came from another friend of mine."

P12 stated that she gained her first seat on a corporate board because the CEO was looking for a "diverse board member" and, "we'd shared set of networks. I mean, it was a no-brainer. We knew all the same people." P12 added of the other two boards on which she had served, "The [fast-food chain] board opportunity also came through my personal network. And the [consumer-goods board membership] opportunity also came through my personal network."

P26 said of a supplier she had worked with. Their CEO was a female. P26 added,

So it happened, in exploring different ways to utilize or build our partnership, she and I became pretty good friends. She got a call to do this board job, and she could not do this. It was a conflict of interest for her. And she said, can I tell you who to call?

As a result of the supplier CEO's recommendation, P26 gained her first board position.

P27 attributed all her promotions to leveraging her social network, saying, "All of those experiences I bring, that's because I learned over the years to continue to grow your network, because that continues to grow your net worth."

**Just as important as participants' social networks were their proven track records of leadership ability, which they gained through past authority.**

P4 said he was able to gain his first board membership because, "I came with a reputation of being able to think about the value of the company, building the value of the company, the investment, and helping the leadership team be successful at that."

P9 described his reputation as instrumental in gaining him a board position: "Large companies with boards are always looking for executives who are doing well…So all of a sudden, your name gets into the public domain, and you get a call saying, 'Hey, we have a board opportunity here.'"

P16 referred to her proven track record as essential in gaining her first VP position and all her subsequent leadership roles: "The first factor in every promotion I've ever gotten is really outstanding performance... it's a high-performance environment that you just cannot really succeed there without generating business results that are material to the company."

**Participants said they built their reputations and social networks, but that their childhood backgrounds gave them essential preparation for making and taking opportunities in their adult careers. Many participants did not grow up in wealthy homes, but they reported being raised in homes where education was highly valued. As a result, they gained a good education that prepared them for their later successes.**

P2 grew up in a working-class home where, "There was absolutely every expectation I was going to go to college."

P6 did not grow up in a wealthy family, but her parents valued education highly. P6 was precocious enough that she was given an opportunity to skip two grades when she was in fourth grade at a public school. When P6's parents decided to keep her with same-age students, she was granted a scholarship to a private school. Through high school, she commuted between her inner-city home and private schools in wealthy suburbs. Through her natural ability and her parents' support, she gained an education that was not accessible to most of the children in her neighborhood. As a result, P6 said, "I'm the first one [in my extended family] who went to college, and I'm the only one that's gone to grad school."

P15 stated that in his childhood home, "Education wasn't as stressed as I wish it was, it certainly wasn't stressed as much as I've stressed it with my kids," but he added that his parents still supported his education in a way that prepared him for his future successes: "I was really blessed because my parents decided to send me to a parochial school... And that really gave me confidence academically and led to me ultimately going to school at [redacted]," one of the most prestigious state universities in the country.

P9 attributed his successes in and beyond high school to his parents' support and modeling: "I was very fortunate, very blessed, very thankful that one of my most important role models in life were my parents. They provided the foundation and a platform for me to aspire to be all that I could be."

P9 was also supported by faculty and staff at the high school he attended: "Along with my family, my teachers in high school, my guidance counselors, my principals, they felt the same way: 'Look, you are as talented as anyone else.'" When P9, as a Black man, gained admission to a prestigious, predominantly White university, the encouragement he received from his parents and past educators kept him from being intimidated, "With the inspiration from my family, from my high school, I said, 'You are as talented and bright and capable as anyone else.' That was the environment I came from: 'There are no limitations on what you can accomplish.'"

**Other participants who are members of marginalized groups also reported that their backgrounds prepared them to operate and succeed in predominantly White environments.**

P13, a Black woman, did not come from a privileged background. Her father did not finish high school, and her mother finished high school but did not go to college. P13 was identified as gifted at an early age and placed in special classes, where she was the only child of color. P13 said of this experience, "When you're the only one [of color] in all of your classes, and you also know there might not be much receptivity, I learned to get comfortable being in an environment where there weren't people that look like me." P13 said that when she achieved executive positions, "As I've done corporate America, I'm okay being in the room. And there isn't another woman. There isn't another brown person. I'm counting them off, right? And I'm okay."

P3, a Black woman, said of the rural community where she grew up, "There are no Black people. We [my siblings and I] were the first in our school, and the only, for a long, long, long time." Participants who are White indicated that they, too, were exposed at a young age to people who did not look like them.

P5, a White man, attended a middle school that was 90% Black and, in college, he joined a historically Black fraternity. P5 said that as a result, "I've made sure that everything that I've done in my career…allowed me the opportunity to work with diverse individuals, with intention to make sure opportunities were available for everyone, not just for those that look like me."

**Participants reported that in addition to their education, they also gained their work ethic from their parents.**

P1 said, "My dad was incredibly hardworking. My mother was incredibly hard-working…work ethic was strong in our family…So that influenced my identity and made me work hard for what I wanted to achieve."

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P17 said of her parents' modeling of a strong and socially responsible work ethic, "At a very early age, responsibility and education and role modeling and giving back to and bringing people together…those were characteristics that I was brought up with."

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P23 said, "my mother…was really the more industrious type. My mother is my biggest hero. She was really wanting to make sure that because we didn't have enough money…we're gonna go to Boston," from Haiti. Participants reported that the strong work ethic they learned in their childhood prepared them to succeed in their careers.

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As P13 said, "I'm taking the assignment nobody else wants. I'm hungry…I believe, economically, I run the race a little bit harder. I don't leave much for chance. I'm practicing when other people think it's automatic."

**Conclusion from Finding 1.**

The primary question used to guide this study was: What role does social identity play in the ascension of Black women to corporate executive ranks? The primary question was addressed by exploring the four questions derived from it. RQ1 was: What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network, and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks? The theme used to address this question was: early exposure (as early as childhood) to risk taking using personal authority and social networks lead to opportunities that influence future executive readiness. Participants reported that past authority positively impacted their ability to reach executive ranks by serving as a proven track record of successful leadership. Social networks contributed to the attainment of executive positions through references and recommendations, participants said. Childhood home environments and education prepared participants to take advantage of the opportunities their past authority and social networks gained them through the education and work ethic they gained from it.

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When you're the only one [of color] in all of your classes, and you also know there might not be much receptivity, I learned to get comfortable being in an environment where there weren't people that look like me.

**Participant 13**

## Finding 2.

Intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be overcome intentionally. Members of traditionally marginalized identities reported that the discrimination they faced was a challenge of which they needed to be mindful and to overcome intentionally. Women participants reported that they faced and fought to overcome gender-based discrimination. Women of color participants stated that they faced both race- and gender-based discrimination and had to work hard to succeed despite of both. Black male participants reported that they needed to learn to succeed in predominantly White environments in which they had to fight against the current of systemic racism. White male participants acknowledged that their identity brought them unearned privileges. White women participants reported that they were both unconscious and conscious of the privileges they gained from being White and from the disadvantages they faced in the workplace as women.

P1, a White woman, said of advancing to executive positions, "I think it's just harder, it's harder for a woman." However, she acknowledged, "It's definitely harder for a woman of color... I, myself, have been privileged and didn't even recognize it [until recently]. I am a White woman, and I actually have privilege."

P2, also a White woman, said, "Many times, I was the first woman or the only woman in the room," and added, "I realize my journey is different as a White woman than a woman-of-color."

P10 is a Hispanic woman, but people assumed she was non-Hispanic White unless she told them her ethnicity. P10 described the challenges women faced in the workplace from a different perspective than P1 and P2, describing the frustration of being promoted in part because she is a woman (i.e., tokenism): "My gender helped me, and I hated that. There were comments when I was placed on the board, like, 'How many women do they have?' My translation of that is people were asking, 'Are you the token woman?' Yes."

**Women of color participants faced compounded racial and gender discrimination and worked intentionally to overcome this problem.**

P3, a Black woman, said, "It's harder being a Black person; it's harder being a Black woman. In my mind, I've been successful in spite of that." P3 said she succeeded despite compounded discrimination by, "Really working harder than everyone else. I mean, honestly, I worked 20 hours a day. My phone was always next to me. My colleagues were not doing that." P3 added that she made it her goal to perform so well that if she did not receive a promotion, racism would be the only possible explanation: "You were being racist if you didn't give me the role."

P6 said that the onus of diversifying board rooms should belong to gatekeepers who had benefited from privileged identities. P6 said of White women, "White women have to be accomplices [of women of color], not advocates. They must be like, 'we need to do this [diversify] on the board.'" P6 added that White men needed to realize that diversification of leaders was good for business and that they were not entitled to the benefits of their unearned privilege:

**Men need to recognize that the diversification of a boardroom is good for business. The data is out there that talks about boards that are more successful because they have that, and that diversification cuts across gender, it cuts across life experiences, it cuts across ethnicity, it cuts across cross culture. They need to recognize, most importantly, those are seats that should be available to everyone, and they are not entitled to them. They were not born to those seats. They don't belong to them. They belong to everyone.**

P16 talked about leveraging her identity as a Black woman into a positive difference from her majority colleagues, using their discriminatory underestimation of her abilities as an opportunity to make a strong impression on them when she revealed her extraordinary competence: "Being different could be very good, if different was effective...that dynamic of always having people not realize that I was going to be fabulous, and I was going to know my numbers inside and out. And I was going to be able to motivate and inspire teams differently. My way, it was different, and that was a wonderful superpower."

P20, a Latina, entered a leadership role and decided to use it intentionally to help other people who looked like her to overcome the effects of discrimination: "I remember one person coming to me and saying, 'Do you realize you're the highest-

ranked Latina in the company?' It was back in the days when they hadn't even looked at demographics. That company was just heads-down working." P20's response to her questioner was to ask, "Well, where are the other Latinas and Latinos? Where are they so that I can talk to them and get to know them?" As a result of that conversation, P20 said, "We started really forming our employee resource groups, and I became an executive sponsor to several of the resource groups, the Hispanic, African American, Asian, and I got very involved with the Diversity Council."

P13, P26 had experienced tokenism in being promoted in part because she was a woman. She said, "The tokenism can be very frustrating," but she added that she made it her conscious goal to challenge and refute the underestimation of her abilities that tokenism implied: "I spend less time worrying about the tokenism and more time figuring out, 'How can I fulfill this role in every possible way, such that it becomes less of a token and more about capability?'" P26 used an analogy of gambling to express how she converted her resentment of tokenism into motivation to prove herself: "I'm not going to wear a chip on my shoulder about being the only woman going in the room. I'm going to take all the chips off, put them all on the table, and say I'm playing all-in."

**Black men participants reported that they fought discrimination they faced by learning to be comfortable and succeed in predominantly White environments. P8, a Black man, said his experiences in a predominantly White university acclimated him to the kind of environment where he would spend his career: "When I came into the workplace, it didn't feel foreign to me, being a person of color, being in the minority."**

P9, also a Black man, reported that he learned to succeed in environments where he was the first person of color to lead a team or department by attending an Ivy League university.

P15 is a Black man who commuted from a majority Black inner-city neighborhood to a majority White private school, and he said of transitioning so frequently between those different environments, "It gave me great ability to know how to operate in a White world and in the Black world, and so, this notion of being ambidextrous." Participants who identified as Black males all described experiences that made them capable of the context-independent self-assurance that P15 compared to ambidexterity, the ability to work confidently whether they were among colleagues who looked like them.

**Participants who are White males affirmed that the privileges they gained through their identity were an unearned asset to them.**

P4, a White man, spoke of his intersectional identity as smoothing the way up the corporate hierarchy for him: "It helped, because I didn't have a lot of the barriers that other people had. Being a White male was certainly the least friction to move up the corporate ladder."

P5 said, "As a heterosexual, White male, I am one who gains from White privilege. I am one who gains from the systemic oppression that's been put in place for people of color." P5 said of the nature of the benefits he gained from his unearned privilege as a straight, White male, "I am given the benefit of the doubt." P5 added that one of the ways his awareness of his privilege had influenced him was to motivate him to become, "the key driver of development for Black professionals at a membership-based nonprofit organization whose sole mission is to increase the number of Black professionals in the C-suite and on corporate boards." Thus, for White men, awareness of their privilege could inspire them to help people of color to overcome the systemic racial and gender barriers that were the flipside of White, male privilege.

**Conclusion from Finding 2.**

In sum, intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be intentionally overcome. Participants of traditionally marginalized identities reported that the discrimination they faced was a challenge they needed to be mindful of and intentionally overcome. Participants who are women reported that they faced gender-based discrimination and fought to overcome it. Participants who are women of color stated that they faced both race- and gender-based discrimination and had to work hard to succeed despite it. Black, male participants reported that they needed to learn to succeed in predominantly White environments where they had to fight against the current of systemic racism. White, male participants acknowledged that their identity brought them unearned privilege.

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Many times, I was the first woman or the only woman in the room; I realize my journey is different as a white woman than a woman-of-color's.

**Participant 2**

What does agency or sponsorship look like when success is realized?

## Finding 3.

**Agency looks like readiness to seek and take opportunities, and sponsorship looks like earned advocacy.** Participants defined their agency as their willingness throughout their careers to actively seek and take opportunities rather than passively waiting for chances to distinguish themselves to be offered. One aspect of their proactive approach was a readiness to take responsibility for efforts in which they participated, including when acceptance involved assuming some risk of failure. Another aspect of a participant's approach was a willingness to take opportunities, including by actively soliciting opportunities. Agency also included finding communities of other professionals and entering relationships of mutual support. Sponsorship, participants reported, looked like more experienced professionals taking an interest in them after recognizing their potential, and then advocating for them for promotions and other opportunities.

**Participants described their readiness to assume responsibility, even when doing so involved risk, as an important part of exercising their agency during their rise through corporate hierarchies.**

> P17 said, "I take a lot on my own shoulders, in terms of responsibility, because I feel like that's the role, I'm in. It's my job to take on that responsibility."

> P26 gave an example of how assuming responsibility looked like asserting the claim of expertise when she gave presentations to boards:

**When you're presenting in a board meeting or meeting with more senior people, if you are called on to present, you are, in fact, the subject-matter expert. So, act like it every single time, because you invariably know more about that topic than they do. And even if you don't know some little minute detail, right, stand up and say, "I don't know," find a way to phrase the answer in such a way that makes it look like, absolutely, you have mastery of the topic.**

**Participants also described a readiness to take opportunities as an important aspect of their agency.**

P6 reported that she accepted opportunities almost indiscriminately when she was pursuing an executive position: "Whenever someone said, 'Would you be interested?' Even if I wasn't, I said, 'Yes.'"

P21 described a similar experience to P6's, reporting that she accepted opportunities others did not want, even when doing so involved assuming some risk: "I was willing to take opportunities that perhaps others weren't. It gave me the experience, the knowledge, the contacts. I grew up in the sales arena...willing to do things and take a bit of risk."

P12 emphasized the proactive nature of her readiness to seek and take opportunities:

None of my promotions, none of my upward movement, was handed to me. I was incredibly proactive...Every time I got [a promotion], it was two years later when I was pushing for the next [promotion]. No one was hitting this stuff to me. That's the mistake that a lot of people make is they think, "Oh, if you're good at your job, you just keep getting promoted." You must ask for it.

P26 reported that the principle that had enabled her to succeed was, "Take some risks...say yes to things that seem unusual if you think they will grow you." P26 added that this strategy was effective because it, "Helped me build that network," and because it helped her build her reputation: "It made people think of me as more courageous than I probably was. It also ultimately gave me all these experiences that when the big jobs came, they were like, 'She could do that." P26 reported that her principle of accepting opportunities did not mean indiscriminately taking every opportunity available, but instead viewing opportunities through the lens of how they might benefit her, rather than of why they might be wrong for her: "That does not mean to say yes to everything. That means I try really hard to deal with, 'How might we?' or, 'How could I?' as opposed to, 'Why can't I?' or, 'Why won't I?'"

**A further aspect of agency was building a community of supporters, participants said. P1 referred to the network of colleagues from whom she sought advice and support as her "personal board," and she reported that she initially built this network of supporters when she joined a company and started interviewing colleagues about what they expected from her in her new role.**

P1 said, I talked to over 25 individuals that I reached out to, and it was amazing. I started to form a bond with some of them. And some of them said, "Hey, if ever you need anything…" and so then I went back.

P2 also spoke of a community of coworkers and superiors who advised her as she was earning her first executive positions: "Part of the reason I'm successful is because a lot of people helped me be successful, and showed me the ropes, and taught me the unwritten rules."

P21 spoke of the importance for women of color of proactively building communities of colleagues on whom they could rely: "I kind of put myself out there. I think that's what women of color need to do. They need to find those environments where they can learn from others." P21 added that one of the ways she approached other professionals in leadership positions for advice and support was through professional associations, of which she said, "I think people need to put themselves in those environments where they feel they can do benchmarking, have safe conversations, real conversations, that then they can bring back to their workplace."

**Communities of colleagues from whom participants received support and advice were distinguished from sponsors, who participants described as superiors who put their names forward and advocated on their behalf when promotions or other opportunities became available. Thus, a community of colleagues supported participants by speaking directly with and advising them in a reciprocal fashion, while sponsors worked primarily by speaking with others who were in position to bestow some advantage or opportunity on participants.**

P5 spoke of having a sponsor as having, "An advocate in the room. That ally can easily be a sponsor. That ally can easily be the hiring chair on a committee or promotion chair on a committee."

P6 said of a sponsor who was also her boss in her first VP role, "He was sitting in the room saying things about me. He was my sponsor, he was also my mentor, and fundamentally, he was someone who believed in kind of a crazy way, 'She could do whatever I give her.'"

P19 also referred to sponsors as advocates who were "in the room" when decisions about promotions and other opportunities were being made, and she distinguished sponsors from mentors, who were guides but not necessarily advocates:

It's hard to find sponsors. You find a lot of mentors and a lot of people who give you good advice. But when there's critical decisions made in the room, I have found that it's just not as many as I had thought.

P10 referred to the difference between sponsorship and mentorship, saying that mentorship was preparatory, but sponsorship was what led to promotion: "Mentorship is important, but I think that's for our own development. Sponsorship is what gets you into the role." P10 added of how a sponsor contributed to her success, "When this role became open, the company wasn't sure what to do. And my sponsor was like, 'She's there. She's right there,' right? And had she not done that, I don't know if I would have landed the role."

P25 also distinguished between mentors and sponsors and added that sponsors were more important for helping rising executives to obtain promotions, reporting that she had tried to, "Work hard to get good mentors and sponsors. Especially sponsors, right? There's a very big difference between a mentor and a sponsor, and that [sponsorship] helps tremendously."

P16 emphasized that sponsors were earned and that rising professionals should work hard both to earn sponsors and to realize the potential those sponsors saw in them: "Sponsors are earned. You don't get a sponsor unless they know they can put you in their brand and you're not going to let them down. They've worked with you. They know what you're capable of." Thus, participants were different from mentors, in that they actively advocated for participants as candidates for opportunities. Sponsorship was earned, participants said, and as rising executives, they had benefitted from sponsors who put their names forward 'in the room' where decisions about promotions were being made.

**Conclusion from Finding 3.**

In sum, intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be intentionally overcome. Participants of traditionally marginalized identities reported that the discrimination they faced was a challenge they needed to be mindful of and intentionally overcome. Participants who are women reported that they faced gender-based discrimination and fought to overcome it. Participants who are women of color stated that they faced both race- and gender-based discrimination and had to work hard to succeed despite it. Black, male participants reported that they needed to learn to succeed in predominantly White environments where they had to fight against the current of systemic racism. White, male participants acknowledged that their identity brought them unearned privilege.

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"Take some risks…say yes to things that seem unusual if you think they will grow you"

**Participant 26**

**RQ4** →

What are the barriers to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles and how can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation in those roles?

## Finding 4.

**Homogeneity in social networks is a major barrier that must be intentionally overcome from within and without.** Participants reported that a major barrier to having powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles was that social networks tend to be homogeneous with respect to race and gender. White men, who are overrepresented in powerful positions, also tend to network primarily with other White men, while women of color, who are underrepresented in powerful positions, often networked primarily with other women of color who could not give them access to the high-level positions they sought. Participants reported that there were two ways of overcoming this barrier to women-of-colors' access to powerful social networks. First, members of powerful social networks should work intentionally to include women of color in those networks, participants said. Second, women of color should work intentionally to network with professionals who did not look like them.

**In reporting that networks tended to be race- and gender-homogeneous,**

P12 stated that she had researched the issue by interviewing more than 90 professionals about their networks. P12 said that what she called "network gaps," or the tendency of professionals to network with people who looked like them, was an important reason why women of color continued to be underrepresented on boards: "My big 'Aha!' coming out of my research was there is no pipeline issue. There's just a network gap. And if we just allied with those people already in the boardroom, we could close the network gap." P12 explained how network gaps worked in practice, citing the tendency of women to network primarily with one another as an example:

*What I've found is that underrepresented groups tend to network well within their underrepresented groups. So, you know, women with women, as an example...But if you really think about the math of that, if women are now so underrepresented in boards, and you're networking with women, you're not networking with people in power to get you out of that network on into this network.*

P22, speaking from the perspective of a White male, corroborated P12's conclusions in reporting his perception that networks tended to be homogeneous and that

referrals for promotions and board opportunities often occurred within a kind of closed circuit:

*The way boards work, it's weighted in the advantage of, quite frankly, men, because it's so network driven. And if you look at the folks that are CEOs and CFOs in IT companies, it's weighted toward men, and therefore the network they have are men, and it just feeds on itself.*

P19, Speaking from her experience as a Latina, P19 affirmed that her network was composed primarily of people of her own ethnicity: "I've seen this exercise...we're all sitting in a meeting, and they asked us to open our phones and [identify] your five best friends, and then the next layer of your five other friends. Most of mine are Latino."

**One way to ensure that women of color gained fair access to positions of power was for people in power—typically White men—to work intentionally to include those women in their networks.**

P23 referred to this strategy in stating, "We have to be intentional about... creating opportunities to do more cross-pollination, create opportunities for people who are non-traditional in those areas."

P12 corroborated P23's response, saying that business leaders should, "Set an intention that you're going to bring diversity into your organization."

P4 indicated that diversity should be a goal when hiring for leadership positions to facilitate "breaking through" network gaps: "I think forcing the candidate slates to have some diversity, of females, is the most effective way to do it."

P5 noted that cultivating diversity on boards should not stop with adding a token White woman: "It's always interesting to me that boards that are made up predominantly of White men who think having a White woman now means it's diversified. And it's not." P5 added that a diversity requirement should be written into board bylaws:

*When it comes to corporate boards, I think it should be a mandate in the bylaws of the*

*board...it should be a number [of allocated board seats] to ensure that it is specifically calling for a person of color.*

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P15 also referenced boards that comprised only White men except for one White woman, and he described them as, "toxic," and added, "If you're not considering diverse candidates, you as an organization are going to miss something, you're going to miss a perspective, you're going to miss a point of view."

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P8 spoke of the need for White males in positions of power to cultivate subordinates who did not look like themselves to ensure diversity in the promotion pipeline: "That's something you need to be intentional about is, 'How are you helping accelerate and grow all the talent in your company?' so that when you have an opportunity, you have a diverse talent pool to select from."

P8 added that White males in positions of power needed to be intentional about engaging with diverse professionals: "If you don't identify in any of these segments that we consider diverse today, you need to be very intentional about engaging with these individuals, and learning more about their experience, sharing more of your insights."

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P16 expressed a perception like P8's, saying of White males in positions of power, "The work they need to do is to embrace Black women. I'd say just get to know them. And I would apply that to anyone that you just you don't know a lot of people like them."

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P23 said, "A lot of White leaders...they might have grown up in communities where they've never exposed to people of color until they must work with people of color," and he added that to compensate for this deficiency, White leaders should engage in intentional relationship-building across racially homogeneous networks: "Relationship building is really critical...because it's not naturally going to come."

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P3 added that companies that did not try to achieve diversity in leadership were likely to lose talented people of color: "We're in a world where everyone thinks they want more people of color. It's the right thing to say. But they're not doing what it takes to keep those people of color. They're making us feel on the outside."

**Participants further reported that women of color should not wait passively for White executives to seek them out but should instead engage proactively in seeking access to social networks that included individuals in positions of power**

P8 said of crossing network gaps, "We don't always get to change the rules while we are playing the game, so [intentional networking] is a necessary ingredient," and added, "You may not be an extrovert, it may or may not come naturally, but you have to figure out a way that works for you."

P6 a Black woman, reported that she had benefitted primarily from the support of sponsors of other races: "My mentor, my sponsor? White man. The person who I talked to about board seats? White female. My advocates, the people that have gone to the mat for me, have been primarily out outside of our own race."

P12 said, "The boardroom was the most important room in business...and I looked at the data and saw it was largely occupied by men, White men." P12 added of the need to network with White men in power, "I knew we needed their partnership. You're not gonna see systemic innovation if you don't partner with the people in power." Thus, race- and gender-homogeneous networks were a barrier that kept women of color, who were underrepresented in positions of power, from accessing the powerful networks of people who could sponsor them for C-suite and board positions. Participants said that White men in positions of power should reach across network gaps and engage with women of color. Women of color could work effectively to gain access to powerful networks from the outside by intentionally cultivating the necessary contacts.

**Conclusion from Finding 4.**

Homogeneity in social networks is a major barrier that must be intentionally overcome from within and without. Participants reported that a major barrier to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles was that social networks tended to be homogeneous with respect to race and gender. White men who tended to be overrepresented in powerful positions also tended to network primarily with other White men, while women of color, who were underrepresented in powerful positions, often networked primarily with other women of color who could not give them access to the high-level positions they sought. Participants reported that there were two ways of overcoming this barrier to women-of-colors' access to powerful social networks. First, members of powerful social networks should work intentionally to include women of color in those networks, participants said. Second, women of color should work intentionally to network with professionals who did not look like them.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS →

**Participants reported that past authority positively impacted** their ability to reach executive ranks by serving as a proven track record of successful leadership. Social networks such as childhood home environments and education contributed to the attainment of executive positions. Participants who are women, women of color, and Black males reported that they faced gender-based discrimination and fought to overcome it. White, male participants acknowledged that their identity brought them unearned privilege. Participants defined their agency as their willingness throughout their careers to actively seek and take opportunities rather than passively waiting for chances to distinguish themselves to be offered. Agency also 'looked like' finding communities of other professionals and entering relationships of mutual support. Sponsorship, participants reported, looked like more experienced professionals taking an interest in them after recognizing their potential, and then advocating for them for promotions and other opportunities. Participants reported that a major barrier to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles was that social networks tended to be homogeneous with respect to race and gender. Participants reported that there were two ways of overcoming this barrier to women-of-colors' access to powerful social networks.

"

"The way boards work, it's weighted in the advantage of, quite frankly men, because it's so network driven...it just feeds on itself"

**Participant 22**

# 10. Recommendations

**The intersection of social identity, power dynamics, and positioning** plays a huge role in the ascension of Black women to corporate executive ranks, including the C-Suite and the Corporate Board room. How a person sees themselves, embraces their personal power and sees themselves in relation to others impacts their ability to navigate the complex landscape of Corporate America. Simultaneously, how others see an individual, empowers the individual, and the position the individual holds also influence the ability to navigate to the C-Suite. To accelerate the representation of Black women and other women of color in executive roles, strategic action by differing but complementary personas is needed.

To develop a robust executive offering targeting the diversification of the C-Suite and Boardroom for Black women executives, CWE must expand its curriculum using known factors that influence executive talent identification and selection process. First, for executive allies, leaders must be able to identify how they see themselves compared to those who are of a different race, gender, or socioeconomic status. They must recognize how these individuals have taken risks in their careers previously and how they have succeeded or navigated through those risks to achieve successful outcomes. They must be able to see how that risk-taking behavior can be a benefit to their executive suite in similar manners compared to their peers who are of their same demographic.
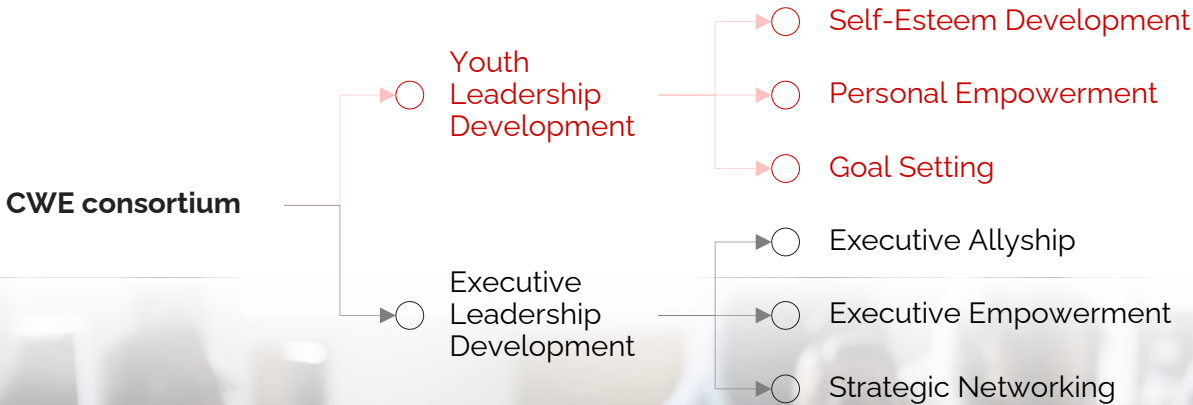
Through adoption of the 5C Framework (competence, confidence, courage, commitment, and connection) focused on the executive development of allies and sponsees facilitated through a consortium-based learning model, CWE can influence the diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership development market. By establishing a

Consortium of Executive Development for Racial and Gender Equality on Corporate Boards with partner organizations (i.e., clients of CWE), consortium members can learn from one another through shared experiences, workshops, and peer learning in a psychologically, safe environment. CWE would lead the design, development and implementation of content and curricula that reinforce the following social and emotional learning strategies (5C Framework) that influence the ascension of Black women and other minority leaders to the C-Suite and Corporate Boards based the capstone findings.

The 5C framework (see Figure 1) is a term that I have coined that is an agile, simplified amalgamation of the key themes identified in the capstone project: competence, confidence, courage, commitment, and connection. Taught in a persona-based environment, these competencies are key to changing the face of the C-Suite and Corporate Boardroom. Most interviewees shared stories of their need to excel in their day-to-day roles before being considered for next level opportunities. They also shared how confidence and courage influenced their ability to take on projects or initiatives that would expand their career footprint. They also spoke of being goal oriented, intentional, and committed to taking action to reach their goals. And finally, they all shared how they would not have achieved their various successes without the engagement of their networks and particularly their sponsors.

Figure 1: **The 5C Framework for Leadership Development**

Recommended Curriculum Development Model

CWE consortium

Youth Leadership Development
- Self-Esteem Development
- Personal Empowerment
- Goal Setting

Executive Leadership Development
- Executive Allyship
- Executive Empowerment
- Strategic Networking

**The 5C Framework for Leadership Development™**
Competence | Confidence | Courage | Commitment | Connection

## ⊖ Recommendation #1.

To address the findings from RQ1, the Consortium should develop a future executive leader's youth division focused on helping teens through college students build skills in understanding the power of their social identity, encouraging personal empowerment skills, and building the foundations of social networking with intention. Based on the findings from this research, intentional early exposure is associated with future executive attainment. A high level of exposure to building confidence, taking courageous actions, networking, building authentic connections, and goal setting/commitments could prepare future youth more efficiently for executive leadership opportunities, if they choose to follow the leadership path.

Executive leaders must engage in sponsorship programs earlier in the diverse talent professional's lifecycle. Through early engagement, future leaders are free to learn and ask questions sooner to develop muscle memory around handling complex and ambiguous challenges. Leaders must create space where diverse, young women have permission to dream beyond their wildest dreams and can also manifest those dreams into reality. This muscle begins before they even traditionally enter the workforce.

## ⊖ Recommendation #2.

RQ2 and RQ3 findings can both be addressed by executive development workshops and strategic experiential projects focused on building awareness and skills in managing power dynamics and positioning on a broader scale. Through participation in these activities, current C-Suite and board leaders become more aware of how they engage and are perceived by others as well as how they leverage their power intentionally or unintentionally. CWE can design and develop focused development and intentional action planning exercises where executives can jointly create shared learning experiences that accelerate transformation for all. Based on these experiences, leaders could be more prepared to address intentional action planning on how they build muscle memory to address disparities in nominating and promoting women and minority leaders to executive ranks.

In addition, CWE should develop a specific executive development workshop series for underrepresented women and minority audiences focused on building executive empowerment competencies based on the 5C Executive Development Framework (Competence, Confidence, Courage, Commitment, Connection). By leveraging the 5C Framework, situated in a context that supports authenticity in the

context of the rising executive, CWE could prepare leaders to build a personal executive development plan, including content related to personal branding and strategic networking that will increase their odds of being selected for C-Suite and Corporate Board opportunities.

Executive allies must also provide access to high visibility, strategic projects, and initiatives where women can take risks earlier with higher stakes and have their ability to demonstrate their grit as well as their agility. What often holds diverse executive women back from seeking and securing higher leadership roles is the lack of opportunity to demonstrate their skills and abilities. If active executives truly want to see change at the top ranks of their companies, they must be active participants in cultivating the pipeline so diverse women leaders are prepared to take on these next level challenges.

## ⊖ Recommendation #3.

Finally, C-suite executives and board members could increase access to their social networks through use of their personal agency. Most executive boardrooms are filled with men who have decades of connections through previous professional or social networks. As more diverse executive women seek the highest ranked opportunities, their limited access to social networks adds an additional burden to be overcome. If practicing leaders desire to increase the level of diversity within their ranks, they must begin to get to know people.

CWE should create a joint Executive Ally and Executive Sponsee experiential learning program where participants can build deep connections and engagement with one another leading to diversified networks. Activities could include but should be not limited to working together on joint stretch assignments or projects, joint volunteerism, and incorporate virtual networking, using collaboration technologies, pushing the edge of how people connect in the 21st century. Through these experiences, executive allies and sponsees could build lasting relationships that later translate into expanded networks and diversified talent pools in which power dynamics are leveraged to increase diverse representation in the C-Suite and in Corporate Boardrooms.

The concerns CWE should weigh as they consider implementing the recommendations include understanding the hesitancy of organizations to join the consortium given the contentious political and social climate. Efforts to address and mitigate discrepancies in racial and gender equality are often met with resistance

from communities who see such efforts as a challenge to their well-being and a departure from what, historically, has been comfortable for some dominant communities. CWE should embrace these challenges as teaching opportunities to build stronger relationships and connections with their clients and leverage the 5C Framework in conversation with prospective leaders who have a desire to create lasting change but do not know where to begin.

These recommendations could also interact with other elements of the organization as they are aligned closely to the company's overall mission. Currently, CWE already designs, developments and promotes leadership training for early and mid-career professionals. The lessons learned in this capstone enhance current curriculum content with updated stories and testimonials that can be referenced during existing program delivery.

The responsibility for intervention lies with the CEO and the curriculum developers. Additional research would be required to develop fully the curriculum, including additional testimonials and case studies that could be used to deliver on the vision of these recommendations. The CEO ultimately would be responsible for incorporating these strategies into the organization's current operating procedures. Using the literature outlined in this capstone, the CEO has sufficient information to build the curriculum for the new programs without any additional inquiries.

# 11.    Conclusion

**This capstone explored the diversification of corporate executive boards,** with particular interest given to how social identity, power, and positioning interlock to increase representation in some of highest paid, most visible roles in Corporate America. Through partnership with Trudy Bourgeois and the Center for Workforce Excellence, a critical lens on ascension to executive leadership ranks uncovered unique dynamics that influence what it takes for Black women to be successful in achieving these roles. Through my research, I discovered that corporate boards (the bodies that govern publicly traded companies) typically are made up of current and/or former C-Suite leaders who understand the financial, political, and economic challenges that a company may face and provide guidance for how those companies operate. Corporate Boards have a vested interest in seeing higher representation of diverse women leading at the top of corporations; however, significant progress has not been realized. Many questions are asked about the impact of having women in corporate boardrooms; however, little exploration centers on the intersectionality of race and gender, and the path to the corporate executive suite (C-Suite).

Through exploration of the following research questions, I uncovered a few of the factors that influence the successful ascension of Black women to the C-Suite and Corporate Boardroom.

**The primary research questions were:**

RQ1. What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks?

RQ2. How does race, gender or the combination of the two influence one's ascension to leadership ranks?

RQ3. What does agency or sponsorship really look like when success is realized?

RQ4. What are the barriers to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles and how can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation?

**Four key findings were identified associated with each research question.**

THEME 1. Early exposure (as early as childhood) to risk taking using personal authority and social networks lead to opportunities that influence future executive readiness.

THEME 2. Intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be intentionally overcome.

THEME 3. Agency looks like readiness to seek and take opportunities, and sponsorship looks like earned advocacy.

THEME 4. Homogeneity in social networks is a major barrier that must be intentionally overcome from within and without.

Essentially, early exposure to risk taking and building confidence, the courage to take on new opportunities without proven solutions but with a proven history of personal success, sponsorship, and mentorship by those who saw potential in leaders…each of these were contributors to leaders succeeding at each next level of their career. While stagnation has occurred for Black Women leaders achieving C-Suite roles and Board representation remains limited, findings throughout this report suggest that the possibilities are endless once the opportunities are made available.

The limitations that exist for utilizing these findings is that the access to Fortune 1000 CEOs was limited. This group of people primarily are responsible for the fiducial activities of the organization and reporting to the company's shareholders. The shareholders are truly the people who hold the organization accountable for their ultimate goals. For these findings to resonate, further incorporation and access to these leaders is needed to effect change. The avenues for future inquiry include partnering with organizations like Black Women on Boards, Extraordinary Women on Boards and the Catalyst organization for continued research and promotion of recommendations identified in this work.

> ❝
>
> The key to realizing a dream is to focus not on success but significance - and then even the small steps and little victories along your path will take on greater meaning.

**Oprah Winfrey**

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Table 7: **Study Timeline**

| Aug-Sep 2021 | Oct-Nov 2021 | Dec-Jan 2022 | Feb-Mar 2022 | Apr-May 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Identify study participants and collate contact information**<br><br>**Send recruitment emails**<br><br>**Collect responses and schedule interviews** | Conduct interviews and record responses<br><br>Memoing during/ post each interview | Conduct interviews and record responses<br><br>Memoing during/ post each interview | Conduct interviews and record responses<br><br>Memoing during/post each interview<br><br>Convert recordings to text transcripts<br><br>Analyze data and identify initial themes | Analyze data and identify initial themes<br><br>Compile summary report<br><br>Refine analysis |

Table 8: **Total Interviewees by Race, Gender, and Job Title**

| Row Labels | Black | Hispanic | White | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Female** | **8** | **3** | **7** | **18** |
| Board Chairman | | | 1 | 1 |
| Board Member | 3 | | 1 | 4 |
| Chief Executive Officer | 1 | | 2 | 3 |
| Chief Marketing Officer | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| Chief Operating Officer | 1 | | | 1 |
| Chief People Officer | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Chief Sales Officer | | | 1 | 1 |
| Operating Partner | | | 1 | 1 |
| VP, Human Resources | | 1 | | 1 |
| **Male** | **5** | | **5** | **10** |
| Board Member | 3 | | | 3 |
| Chief Diversity Officer | 1 | | | 1 |
| Chief Executive Officer | 1 | | 1 | 2 |
| Chief Government | | | 1 | 1 |
| Chief Learning Officer | | | 1 | 1 |
| Chief Product Officer | | | 1 | 1 |
| Senior Vice President | | | 1 | 1 |
| **Grand Total** | **13** | **3** | **12** | **28** |

## Table 9: **Consortium Based Leadership Curriculum per Key Theme**

| Research Question | Theme used to address question | Persona | Recommended Curriculum Development |
|---|---|---|---|
| **RQ1.** What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network, and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks? | **Theme 1.** Early exposure (as early as childhood) to risk taking using personal authority and social networks lead to opportunities that influence future executive readiness | Teen to College Student | RECOMMENDATION #1. Future Executives Leadership: Youth Development Program focused on social identity, personal empowerment, and networking skills (i.e., Intentional early exposure to building **confidence**, taking **courageous actions,** networking, and building authentic **connections,** and **goal setting/commitments**) |
| **RQ2.** How does race, gender, or the combination of the two influence one's ascension to leadership ranks? | **Theme 2.** Intersectional discrimination is a challenge to be intentionally overcome. | Executive Allies  Executive Sponsees | RECOMMENDATION #2. Executive Development Workshops focused on building **competencies** in **power dynamics** and **positioning** such that leaders are aware and intentional about inclusive actions to embrace others and **Action Planning.**  Coach Executive Board Sponsors on power dynamics, breaking traditional, vocal advocacy for equal racial representation and strategic networking |
| **RQ3.** What does agency or sponsorship look like when success is realized? | **Theme 3.** Agency looks like readiness to seek and take opportunities, and sponsorship looks like earned advocacy. | Executive Allies  Executive Sponsees | Gender & Minority Executive Development Workshops focused on building **executive empowerment competencies** based on the 5C Executive Development Framework **(Competence, Confidence, Courage, Commitment, Connection) and Action Planning.**  Coach Executive Board Sponsees on confidence, courageous action, personal branding, and strategic networking  Adopt best practices in **Change Management.** |
| **RQ4.** What are the barriers to powerful social networks that are required for Black women seeking executive roles and how can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation in those roles? | **Theme 4.** Homogeneity in social networks is a major barrier that must be intentionally overcome from within and without. | Executive Allies  Executive Sponsees | RECOMMENDATION #3. Executive Development Workshops, Coaching and Experiential Learning on strategies to diversify networks (i.e., Joint Projects & Volunteerism and Virtual Networking Simulations using Collaboration Technology)  Build interpersonal connections with Executive Board Sponsees through strategic initiative engagements |

Table 10: **Research Questions**

| Research Question | Associated Interview Questions | Follow-Up Questions (as needed) |
|---|---|---|
| R1.<br><br>What impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network, and past authority have on ability to reach executive ranks? | • How would you describe your current role? | |
| | • What factors contributed to you securing your first Exec position (VP)?<br>• What factors contributed to you securing your first Board seat? | • How would you describe your journey to the Exec suite?<br>• How did you learn about it? |
| | • Why did you attend the colleges that you attended? (if applicable) | |
| R2.<br><br>How do race, gender, or the combination of the two influence one's ascension to leadership ranks? | • How has your identity (i.e., race and/or gender) influenced your ascension to leadership ranks? | • How do you perceive its impact on others executive journeys? |
| | • From your perspective, what impact does one's socioeconomic status, social network and past authority have on one's ability to reach executive ranks? | • How did you grow up?<br>• What life lessons from your childhood still apply today in your leadership journey? |
| R3.<br><br>What does agency or sponsorship look like when success is realized? | • What factors contributed to you securing your first Exec position (VP)?<br>• What factors contributed to you securing your first Board seat?<br>• From your experience, what strategies have worked to increase representation of women (women of color) in executive ranks? | • How would you describe your journey to the Exec suite?<br>• How did you learn about it? |
| R4.<br><br>What are the barriers to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles and how can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation in those roles? | • What are the barriers to powerful social networks required for Black women seeking executive roles?<br>• How can those barriers be broken down to achieve greater diverse representation? | • What work do others' need to do socially or emotionally to embrace Black women or women of color on Executive Boards? |
| | • From your experience, what strategies have worked to increase representation of women (women of color) in executive ranks? | • What barriers, if any, still exist? |
| | • What recommendations would you give to African American (Black) women seeking to be successful in executive ranks or on corporate boards? | • How is it different for Black women seeking C-suite roles versus board roles? |
| | • Why did you attend the colleges that you attended? (if applicable) | • Affordability? Prestige? Location? |

Figure 2 : **Intersection of Critical Pathways**

Social.

Emotional.

**Critical
pathways**

Cognitive.
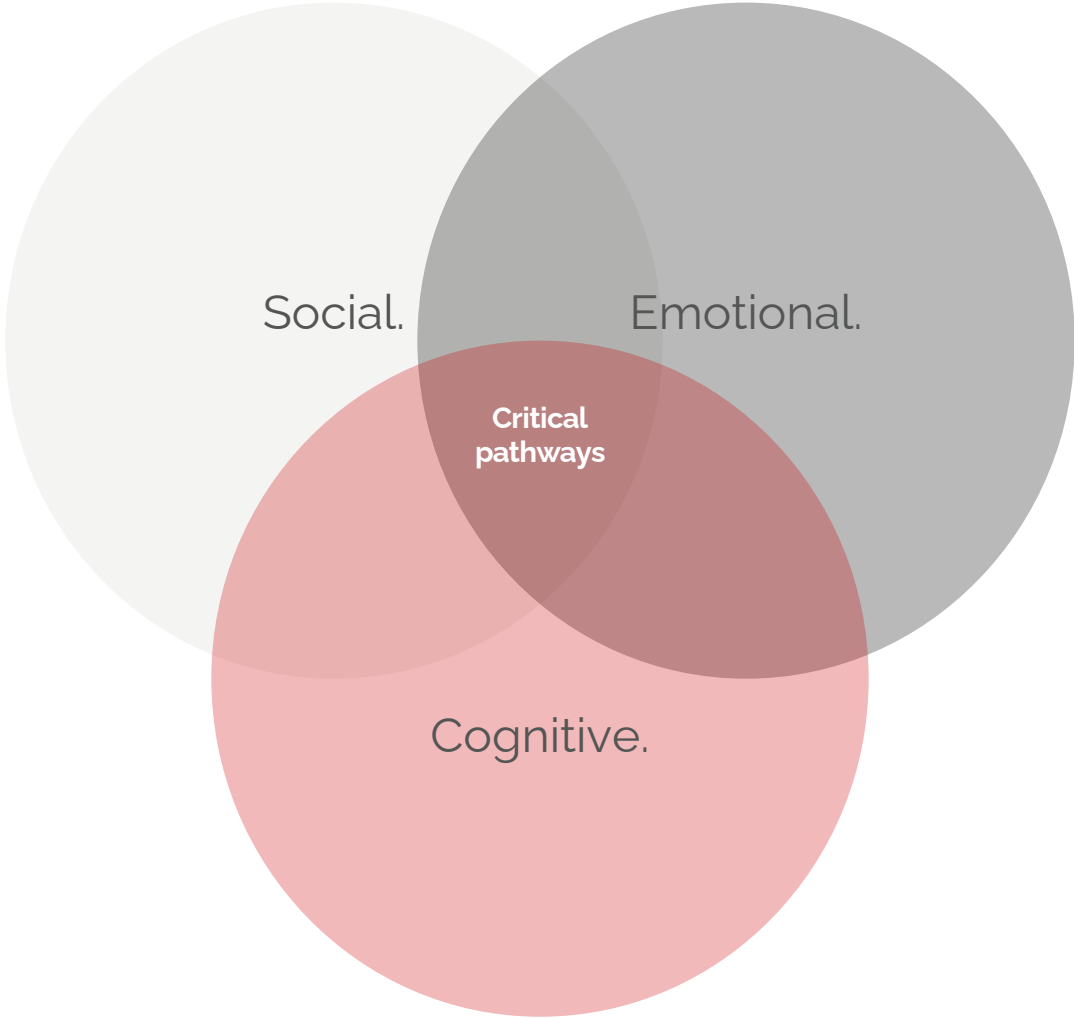
Recruitment Email:

**Dear [Name],**

We are contacting you on behalf of Vanderbilt University and the Center for Workforce Excellence to ask if you would agree to be interviewed about corporate board diversity and the recruitment and selection of African American (Black) women seeking executive leadership roles in Fortune 1000 companies.  We are contacting you for our study because you hold a role on a corporate board or have significant influence on the career trajectories of Black women executives.

Should you agree to participate, a researcher will contact you to set up a phone interview at a time of your convenience. During the 45-minute call, the researcher will ask you about your knowledge and experience of programs, practices, sentiments and processes in the recruitment and selection of diverse board members.

We hope you will choose to participate in this important study that will benefit corporate boards in the US and beyond.  If you are willing, please reply to this email a confirmation and a member of the research team will follow up to schedule a call.

I look forward to hearing from you.

**Thank you,**

**LaTricia T. Frederick,**
Doctoral Studies, Doctor of Education in Leadership and Learning in Organizations
Vanderbilt University

(email: latricia.t.frederick@vanderbilt.edu)

# Appendix C:
## Recruitment Materials

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Phone Script:

**Good [morning/afternoon] [Name]!**

Hello, my name is LaTricia T. Frederick and I'm calling on behalf of Peabody College of Education's Leadership and Learning in Organizations doctoral program. We recently sent you an invitation by email to participate in a study about the programs, policies, sentiments and practices in the recruitment and selection of diverse board members. The study is being conducted by Vanderbilt and is sponsored by the Center for Workforce Excellence. I am calling to invite you to participate in this important study.

I know that you're very busy, but do you have a moment to talk?

We hope you will choose to participate in this important study that will benefit corporate boards in the US and beyond.  If you are willing, please reply to this message and a member of the research team will follow up to schedule a call.

# Appendix C:
## Recruitment Materials

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## Live Interview Script:

To begin, I'd like to tell you a little about the study. The purpose of the study is to identify the combination of programs, practices, sentiments, and processes that explain why some corporate boards are particularly effective in diversifying their leadership ranks and to develop processes to transfer and scale up these practices to less effective corporate boards. We will be interviewing current and future corporate executive board members during the Fall 2021 and would like to conduct a series of interviews with persons like yourself.

Interviews will be conducted with corporate executive board members, C-Suite executives, and Black women executives, each lasting 45 minutes to one hour. These interviews will be conducted on video conference systems at a time convenient for participants. Questions asked will relate to individual experiences on or with boards, in the C-Suite and in the recruitment and selection process for board members. Meetings will be recorded, and observations will be noted using Natural Language Processing software to identify key themes and trends. We may ask for additional referrals of other persons that should be interviewed as part of this process.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with the study. We will work closely with you to maximize confidentiality. All responses will be anonymized for you and your company's protection. All participation is voluntary, and participants can stop an interview, focus group or observation at any time without penalty.

To thank you for working with us, you or your organization will receive public recognition in the acknowledgements and/or on social media channels (as agreed upon by all parties involved). Study participants will receive no individual compensation. Further, we hope that our research will contribute to improved corporate diversity in Fortune 1000 companies and beyond, benefiting both corporate boards, business leaders and employees.

Live Interview Script:

**[If participant indicates he/she cannot participate in research unless approval is obtained from his/her company]**

Absolutely. The Center for Workforce Excellence will provide a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) upon request for any participant who needs prior approval to participate. I can email or send you the NDA if you would like. Your participation is strictly voluntary and there is no obligation for you to participate.

**[If the participant declines to participate]**

Thank you for letting us know.

**[If the participant chooses to participate]**

Do you have any questions that I might be able to answer?

**[If there are no further questions]**

Thanks, and have a great day!

Through a semi-structured interview approach, I started with a set of pre-identified questions for the participants based on connections to my literature review and discussions with my Capstone Partner Organization CEO. As needed, I flexed with the participants to take the conversation wherever needed based on their responses. Interviews were recorded and were directly facilitated by myself, the researcher.

**Semi-Structured Format**

1.  I began with introductions including your name, role, willingness to be recorded and reinforcing confidentiality. Any quotes associated by name were cleared by participants before proceeding with any publishing. I also shared that each would be assigned an alias such that no identifying information would be shared.

2.  I started the conversations with associated interview questions below. Depending on the answers, I would ask follow-up questions. The general format was to:

    a.  Understand their identity

    b.  Understand and capture what experiences led to their C-Suite or Board positions

    c.  Understand and capture their perspectives on socioeconomic status, social network, power, and positioning as it related to their career journey and/or their views on how these affect others

    d.  Understand and capture perspectives on what works and what does not work related to securing C-Suite and Board seats

3.  I closed with the following question: "Based on our discussion today, is there anything else that you would like to share, or think would be relevant for this research?"