Creating a Corporate Culture that Empowers Women in STEM

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You might have heard mention of STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) more in the last year than ever before, with today’s increasing emphasis on achieving diversity in these fields. Employers in technology-related industries, or who have high-impact technology arms in their organizations, are realizing that they will miss out on opportunities if they do not expand their mission to include gender diversity in their STEM workforce.

Technology-based companies benefit when they actively recruit, develop, and advance women. Studies have shown that placing greater numbers of women in management and senior leadership positions are proven to increase the bottom line. The difficulty is in making that gender diversity happen, and to keep it going, even when all intentions are good.

PROGRAMS TAKE YOU ONLY SO FAR

You can develop and champion programs to encourage women in STEM to join your organization and stay with it—in STEM roles. If you have ever tried to make substantive change stick in your organization, though, you know it takes more than a program to achieve lasting success. Sincere commitment to the goal and its inculcation into the culture will bring about the changes you desire.

If you set up a mentoring program, for instance, with the aim of retaining women in STEM, you can increase your chances of success. First, ensure that the mentors know what their role is and are skilled coaches. Second, educate mentors on the systemic issues of gender diversity and unintended gender bias. Third, train your mentors and mentees on how to make their partnerships work. For example, have them both participate in the training together, so that “suitable fits” gravitate to each other and begin to forge effective relationships. Fourth, don’t presume that every participant knows what to expect from the mentoring exchange, in either the short or long term—paint them the total picture.

A mentoring program is only one of the interventions you can use to retain women in STEM roles, of course. Complete success, as with any change program, hinges on going deep enough to make a cultural shift. One of the best long-term ways to improve your odds of success is to develop and set objectives with your managers so as to create an environment of empowerment.

CULTURE IS YOUR KEY

Creating a culture of empowerment is the most important step you can take toward achieving attraction and retention of women in STEM. Incorporate the concepts and tactics
listed below in your corporate culture, and do
the work to bring them to fruition. Develop
these leadership qualities in your managers
and hold them accountable for making this
change happen. Break the task down so they
each know specifically what is expected of
them.

Any employee can benefit from the points
listed below, but you can particularly help
your women in STEM by equipping them
with these tools and tactics. They need to
know how to:

- Own their careers.
- Make their value visible.
- Expand their influence.
- Not go it alone.

Let’s consider each of these, in turn.

Career Ownership

Few employees, especially women in entry-
level STEM positions, know what it means to
“own” a career. For example, to advance and
develop in an organization, employees need
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One of my training participants told
me she remembered the day her supervi-
sor spelled out for her the process of how
a promotion happens. Beyond the required
performance and development, the supervi-
sor described how the subject is brought up,
who’s involved in the discussion, the buy-ins
and sign-offs that are necessary, and so on.
My participant described that “gift” of inform-
ation as a golden nugget.

This is the kind of ongoing support and
coaching that women in STEM need so they
can own their careers. Whether it’s accom-
plished through a supervisor, mentor, or HR,
this modeling and coaching helps a STEM
woman regularly check her career status, as
follows:

- Reassess job satisfaction and ambitions.
  Eight years into my first job, I realized
  I was not passionate enough about it to
  truly excel over the long term. I knew I
  needed a change. I had been implementing
  computer systems at a chemical plant in
  the early 1980s. I noticed that many peo-
  ple were afraid they were going to break
  something or look stupid, and I sensed
  that I could help them get past that fear
  and become more productive. By checking
  in with myself, I recognized that I really
  enjoyed working with people.

- Pay attention to values and goals. I saw the
  need to treat people more humanly, rather
  than just install a computer system or
  other project and call it done. By engag-
  ing the people I worked with, I could
  make any project more successful. I saw
  opportunities to combine my systems-
  integration experience with human
  resources (because, after all, the word
  human is in the title). I went on to earn my
  master’s degree in HR, and I transitioned
to an HR career with the same employer.

- Get perspective. After 20 years in my cor-
  porate job, I chose to leave it, concluding
  my career as an HR manager at a Fortune
  100 company. I talked to a lot of people
  for many months before I left. I couldn’t
  understand why some people could make
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this job work when I felt so unhappy. There came a point when I was finished listing the pros and cons. I could make the case to stay or leave, either way. I trusted what I knew was right for me.

Visibility

Employees may not initially see the value in performance reviews or acknowledge that performance reviews can add value to what they do, let alone help them develop their careers. They may think that if what they are doing isn’t noticed or their work isn’t valued, it isn’t their problem, per se. However, if particular decision makers aren’t familiar with the value a STEM woman’s work is contributing to the organization, it is her problem—harkening back to the point about owning her career. Managers can help make this point clear by reviewing organizational practices and processes at opportune times—times that are relevant to the employee’s career path.

Take advantage of those teachable moments. You want a STEM woman to feel empowered to own her career. Even if she trusts her supervisor, she needs reinforcement to take full responsibility for making her value visible. She doesn’t have to sidestep her boss or go over her or his head, but she needs to take charge of ensuring that her skills and her accomplishments are represented, comprehensively and accurately.

Many supervisors may not spell this out, but in addition to wanting a high performer, they also appreciate an employee who is low maintenance.

Of course, work performance is not just about hitting it out of the park. In fact, it can seem contradictory to say that an employee can distinguish herself in low-key ways, but that’s simply not the case. Many supervisors may not spell this out, but in addition to wanting a high performer, they also appreciate an employee who is low maintenance. The following are some generally unspoken tips to share with your employees. This advice can help STEM employees to distinguish themselves:

- Don’t complain about the nonnegotiable. Coach your employee to comply with the obvious. For example, if she doesn’t like the rule about submitting travel expense reports within ten days, she should definitely comply, or work to change it, but don’t only complain, and don’t linger about getting it done.

  You can try to expose and discuss unspoken expectations. Help your employee understand what bugs supervisors, even though it may seem minor in the scheme of things. Another way to describe this: Don’t give the boss anything to use against you. This is just as important for a high performer as for a less dynamic one.

- Complete tasks on time without reminders. Advise employees to keep on top of expectations, and don’t make someone constantly remind them about expense reports, for instance. Or if there’s online ethics training to complete by a certain date, the employee shouldn’t make HR or the legal department remind her or, worse, ask her boss to prompt her to complete the training. This can be the kind of thing that gnaws at a boss, despite an employee’s otherwise good technical performance. Underscore this important point: Get it done on time; don’t give anyone a reason to ding your performance rating for something like this.
Do the thing that others don’t want to do. Let your employee know she can make a quiet but strong impression just by taking seriously an unfamiliar or unattractive part of her job.

When I worked at a chemical plant, safety was a critical issue. We had safety audits regularly, but because I had an office job, I had a hard time feeling useful when it came to taking my turn at the inspection of maintenance shops or the areas that actually made the chemicals. Nevertheless, by the time I got to a certain management level, this was expected of me. I decided that rather than try to get out of it, I would make the most of it. I took my turn gladly, and I asked a lot of questions about things I saw during the audits. The technical people seemed pleased to show their knowledge. They got a fresh perspective on things they had started to overlook out of habit. It didn’t hurt to become known by the senior engineers and managers who joined the audits too. They knew who I was when my boss presented a case for my promotion.

Make the most of your relationship with your boss. A supervisor should call attention to employees the importance of cultivating a real working relationship with the boss; it’s a way to help keep communications flowing and to stay in touch with his or her expectations.

A quick and easy tip: Suggest to the employee that she start with one sentence, such as, “I’m bringing this up because I want to do a good job.” This is useful for your employee to keep in mind if she wants to initiate a conversation that may seem to be questioning a decision or that might put a supervisor on edge.

Present accomplishments in an effective way. Make sure your employee knows how to describe her accomplishments effectively. When I was an HR manager, I often saw performance reviews with sketchy documentation like this: “Developed five new protocols to process raw materials.” It gets the point across, but there is a better way to present this achievement. For instance:

I developed five new protocols to verify that the variety of raw materials we receive from outside vendors meet our specifications. I designed the protocols in a way that reduces the cost of testing and is also efficient for technicians. These protocols were necessary so that these high-value raw materials are channeled to the appropriate area, end-product quality is not compromised, and waste is minimized.

When I’m coaching employees on describing their accomplishments, I ask questions by using the prompts, “So that ...” and “In a way that ...” These phrases help them to be more descriptive. Also, keep this type of thinking in mind when you are talking about what they are doing, not just when they are writing it up. Help your STEM women to understand the benefit they bring to the job and the importance of articulating it effectively.

Participate in the process to the fullest extent possible. Suggest that your employees find out how much description their bosses want. Also, encourage them to learn how much will fit in the performance review system. Is it possible for them to write the first draft or add to what the supervisor drafts? Even if the supervisor or the
Expanding Influence

This tip includes building relationships with key people in the organization. We all get things done through working with other people. We also often get new opportunities because we have made a good impression.

We all would like for our skills and accomplishments to stand on their own. You can help your women in STEM understand the need to capitalize on their relationships. These relationships are important, as they can help in many ways now and later, whether it’s to get perspective, make a decision, or plan a change.

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Capitalize on the Value of a Network

Emphasize to your employees that, like it or not, who we know is nearly as important as the value we bring. Employees should learn to leverage the value of the people they know and the people those people know. Malcolm Gladwell mentions the concept of “weak ties” (i.e., acquaintances) in his book The Tipping Point and the value of tapping into that network. The intention is not to use the weak ties or others to get an assignment, an opportunity, or a job without having earned it. The point is that people like to be helpful. Your employee can pay it forward someday.

Gladwell mentions a study conducted in 1974 called “Getting a Job,” which is now considered a classic. Researchers surveyed...
suggest that your employees reflect on their motivations before approaching the hiring manager to ensure that they are not masking a hidden agenda, even from themselves. The following are a few questions that can help move the informational discussion along:

- On a typical day, what does a person in this position do?
- What training or education is required for this type of work?
- What personal qualities or abilities are important to being successful in this job?
- What part of this job do you find most satisfying? Most challenging?
- What special advice would you give a person entering this field?

Emphasize to your employees that such a discussion will help expand their networks and their thinking. If they are feeling stuck, this can allow them to begin to see new possibilities.

Approaching Weak Ties for an Informational Interview

Teach your employees about the informational interview, which can be described as a meeting between you and someone else, no matter his or her role. The purpose of this meeting is to help define career options or do research. Clarify that this is not a job interview.

There are so many ways to use an informational interview. If an employee is a little unsure about how to approach weak ties, explain how the backdrop of an informational interview can help. Whether you are her manager, or HR, providing support is especially useful and appreciated here. The employee can use an informational interview to explore an interesting position or even just to find out more from a person who is doing a job that intrigues her. This is also a way to begin to establish a professional relationship.

Many companies have an internal job-posting mechanism. Encourage your STEM employees to check it regularly if they are researching career options. Point out that even if they don’t feel they meet the requirements of the job, if it looks interesting, they should ask the hiring manager whether she or he is willing to talk to them about that type of work. Coach your employees to be clear that the purpose of such a request is to obtain information and to explore possibilities, not to be placed in a new position. Also, suggest that your employees reflect on their motivations before approaching the hiring manager to ensure that they are not masking a hidden agenda, even from themselves.

Don’t Go It Alone

Every employee is more than an occupation or a career. Women in STEM particularly need to hear that it is not realistic to think they can compartmentalize their work. They need to see managers navigating life as it affects their work and navigating work as it affects their lives. Explain that not taking care of their needs as whole persons is a recipe for burnout—for both managers and the STEM women they are trying to attract, retain, and help to flourish.

Good mentoring, coaching, and employee-assistance counseling can offer that necessary support. Find people who are patient and nonjudgmental to help establish a sounding
board for STEM women who may feel pressured to do it all, whether that pressure is external or self-imposed.

STEM employees also need to know that by building satisfaction in such areas as personal growth, physical activity, or fun, they also create a cushion for themselves. If things aren’t going so great at work, at least work is not the total focus of their lives.

An easy activity you can use in training or coaching is to ask an employee to draw a circle and then create a pie chart, with the slices proportional to the different areas of her life. As she draws her pie chart, let her know there is no one, perfect design. There is only what works for her. Let her know that if 80 percent of her pie is labeled “career,” and her work isn’t going so great, she should think about expanding another area that she is enjoying or that is going well. Mention that even if that 80 percent that’s labeled “career” is going well, she should be prepared if something falls apart. You can consider engaging a wellness expert or life coach to be available to support these activities as you deem appropriate.

When you work with a STEM employee, no matter what area she chooses to focus on, advise her to pick at least one thing that is likely to help her most quickly, and not to pick the hardest thing. Start with the easiest. Allow her to give it a try and get a feeling of success. Soon you will have increased her empowerment and that of other women in STEM; chances are, they will be performing and advancing like never before. And you will find that your company reaps the corresponding performance benefits as well.

NOTES


Mary C. Schaefer, principal and founder of Artemis Path, Inc., is an expert in empowerment. She coaches, trains, and consults on talent development, change management, and workplace interactions. Her clients include Fortune 500 companies and local businesses. Prior to establishing Artemis Path, she had a 20-year career at DuPont, concluding her career there as an HR manager. She is a prolific writer of articles on creating thriving work cultures and other topics, coauthored The Character-Based Leader: Instigating a Leadership Revolution … One Person at a Time (Dog Ear Publishing, 2012), and recently spoke at the 2014 TEDx Wilmington Conference on “Putting the Human Back into Human Resources.” This article is adapted from her presentation at the 2014 Inspiring Women in STEM Conference, held in Wilmington, Delaware. She may be contacted at mary@maryschaefer.com, or by visiting www.maryschaefer.com.