ViewPoint: Businesses should foster women's leadership roles

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Sandra looks like a rock star at her multinational company. She's risen to middle management. She embodies the "ideal:" working long hours, managing multiple projects and a team of performers. She gets work done. Her manager says, "We couldn't run the place without you." But look underneath the sheen and it's not so "perfect." Sandra works all the time, feeling guilty if she has to leave early for something personal. She is a gatekeeper: She takes care of her direct reports, gives them work, but also doesn't bring them to key meetings or delegate career expanding tasks.

She is regularly overwhelmed. Sandra doesn't spend a lot of time building her internal network. Her manager actually doubts her leadership skills. A colleague just got promoted around her. Sandra is burning out and her career is stalling. She is starting to blame her company. What should the organization do?

Sandra's dilemma is exactly where most efforts to bring women into leadership stall: middle management. But there are three steps to help:

Step 1. Agree that bringing in more women to leadership matters. There must be a will. It can't be a platitude; it must come from the top and permeate.

Step 2. Change the environment to become more equitable and open for women in leadership. Organizations must challenge their entrenched thinking on women, called second-generation bias. Businesses have the responsibility to create conducive conditions and support mechanisms such as sponsorship programs, opening up opportunities for women, changing the promotion process, and enabling more flexible work.

Step 3. Help women determine what they can control themselves. Women have a responsibility for this change as well. The process starts with shifting women's mind-sets. Women have been socialized to believe that they are "supposed to" act a certain way as a woman. But behavior is based on assumptions about how the world works. Organizations can help by fostering women's ability to recognize and rethink their internalized, unconscious biases of women and work.

And Sandra?
Highlighting Sandra's assumptions helped her think differently about how she approached work. First, she looked at her need for perfection. Instead of assuming that she was the only one who could "do it right," she reframed it to Imperfection, giving room for others' input. Her assumption that internal networking wasted her time shifted to building relationships within my organization helps me succeed. Sandra started prioritizing her most strategic tasks, delegating the rest, thereby developing her staff. She started letting others know what she was doing and the impact she was having. Today Sandra is not burned out and is in line for promotion.

Jodi Detjen is a professor of Management at Suffolk University and co-author of "The Orange Line: A Woman's Guide to Integrating Career, Family and Life."