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Easing into the New Year, one big hope we have for 2013 is that women continue to bridge the gender gap in terms of pay equality and access to leadership positions. So much of the news was good last year: women were better educated than ever, we continued to claim coveted CEO roles at companies such as IBM and Yahoo, and one study even reported that women were the primary breadwinners in a majority of households in the US. That sounds like progress.

Yet, in order to clear a path for greater advancement and parity in 2013, we need to address the difficult paradoxes that women leaders continue to face — these are the mixed messages and uncomfortable realities that complicate an arguably positive picture of progress.

1. The Pay Paradox. According to the latest figures, women are better educated than ever, earning almost 60 percent of all college degrees. Yet, we are paid [23% less than men](#) on average. Some of the gap can be attributed to career choice: more women than men choose to go into teaching and social work, for example, which pay less relative to “male” professions such as finance and technology. But career choice does not fully explain The Pay Paradox. An analysis of full-time workers 10 years out of college, for instance, found [a 12 percent difference in earnings that was entirely unexplained by choice of profession](#). The bottom line is that progress in wage equity has hit a wall.

2. The Double-Bind Paradox. Women must project gravitas in order to advance at work, yet they also need to retain their “feminine mystique” in order to be liked. Perhaps surprisingly, of all the stereotypes that women encounter, this is the one that most women tell us about in coaching situations. Research by Catalyst confirms that gender stereotypes make it difficult for female leaders to feel comfortable taking a commanding stance because [they are perceived as either competent or liked](#) — but rarely both. As Forbes recently [noted](#), “Studies show that assertive women are more likely to be perceived as aggressive; that women usually don’t ask for what they deserve but when

they do, they risk being branded as domineering or, worse even, “ambitious.” These are the double-bind dilemmas that we as a society need to banish before women can contribute fully within organizations.

3. The Promotion Paradox. It is as plain as day that women are equally qualified to lead in terms of skill and talent, yet we capture far fewer job slots at the top. Only [four percent](#) of the CEOs in Fortune’s top 1,000 companies are female and less than 20 percent of Congress is female. Even worse, progress has been relatively flat over the past several years. This is a sticky wicket because there are a dozen different ways to explain this sad situation and each one rings true to some extent: Women are less aggressive than men in stepping up to ask for the big jobs they want. Men at the top are more likely to pull other men up by their collars into the C-suite to join them. Women have fewer leadership role models and they arguably have greater demands outside of work competing for their attention.

Regardless of whether the mitigating factor is discrimination, the leadership pipeline, society, or something altogether different, the extreme disparity of women versus men at the highest levels provides fuel for many of us to push harder. Unfortunately, it also leads many of us wonder if the struggle for career parity is truly worth it. The effect is that the pool of qualified female candidates for top jobs gets smaller when the best women leave to raise families or pursue part-time work or other endeavors.

4. The Networking Paradox. Women are consummate relationship builders, yet we don’t use our contacts to get ourselves promoted. The women we coach say that time spent networking with each other leaves them feeling renewed. It gives them the strength to face the day, the next meeting, or the next crisis. Social exchange not only grounds women but it also allows them to share information and solutions to the common problems they face. Yet, our strong social networks also represent a tremendous, untapped opportunity. Men network in a much more transactional way – they exchange business ideas and establish a quid pro quo of career favors. They actively seek out sponsors and they ask for jobs. For women, networking is largely social. We are not as effective as men at using our strong networks to advance our careers. Women spend more time interacting with each other, yet we fail to ask for favors. In short, [we hesitate to trade on our relationships because it feels crass](#). What this means for 2013 is that women have a huge opportunity to convert their connections into career advancement.

5. The Start Up Paradox. Women make great entrepreneurs, yet we have a tougher time getting VC backing. A 2012 analysis by Dow Jones VentureSource shows that [women launch nearly half of all startups and the most successful startups have more women in senior positions than unsuccessful ones](#). Yet, despite these findings, less than seven percent of executives at the 20,000+ companies in the Dow Jones study were women. This tells us that the gender gap is even more pronounced in venture-funded start-ups than in corporate America. This points to the scarcity of women pursuing careers in technology and science, as well as the need for venture firms to wake up and acknowledge the leadership potential of female entrepreneurs.

6. The Careful-What-You-Wish-For Paradox. Women have more opportunities to work today, yet they are opting-out in high numbers. It has been nearly a decade since Lisa Belkin’s article “[The Opt-Out Revolution](#)” made headlines in 2003, yet [recent statistics](#) illustrate that more women than ever aspire to walk away from work to stay home full-time to raise children. This paradox underscores the reality that women today still feel pressure to have it all and can become stressed and discouraged when that dream is revealed to be impossible. All women (and many men) feel the pressure from conflicting priorities, yet when good women leave work it is organizations that suffer the most. Study after study proves that companies with more women board members perform better.

These paradoxes are important to address for a great many reasons — fairness being the most obvious. But even beyond creating a fair and just system that allows more women into the leadership pipeline, the practical problem created by mixed messages is that it robs women of confidence and squashes their desire to jump into the fray and become leaders. The world needs the best qualified women to step up to the plate, and women need to be able to weave their way through these most difficult of challenges.

Yet, the fact is that these paradoxes are not going to disappear in a year. What, then, is the solution in the short terms? The women we coach who manage to sustain and fuel their ambition amid so many mixed messages use two tools.

First, they remain true to their own leadership style. The skills that many women bring to business naturally — a collaborative style, a talent for listening, and a natural ability to manage interpersonal relationships — are some of the aptitudes that all leaders need now and in the future. Women don’t need to imitate men in order to be persuasive and authoritative, they simply need to be authentic. Second, we coach women to have their own definition of success. The reality is that, historically, men have been the ones to define ambition — and so that leaves it to women to redefine it for themselves in 2013. When we ask women what ambition looks like to them it runs the gamut, from becoming the CEO to leaving the corporate ladder behind altogether to start a small business. If ambition leads one woman to Wall Street it may lead another to Silicon Valley. Who is to say which of these endeavors will require more ambition or have more impact?

These paradoxes and others mean different things to different people. What did they mean to you this year?

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