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IT'S NOT US, IT'S THEM: Advancing Your Career Despite Decision-Makers' Struggle to Recognize Latina Potential

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At what point, in your career, will you feel the cool sensation of the invisible glass ceiling pressing against you? Perhaps it will be when your firm vaguely explains hiring an external candidate over promoting you internally. Maybe it will be two years later, in a new office setting, where the Chief of Staff dismissively minimizes your contributions after you discover that you are the lowest paid staffer. Or maybe it will be fifteen years into a career, which includes advising the mayor of the third largest city in the country, when a recruiter presses you to take a junior role, stating that your experience simply is not executive-level enough. While I hope young Latina professionals never experience the frustration, anger, and sadness of seeing their leadership, talent, and value viewed with suspicion, the reality is that throughout your career, you will likely encounter a barrier to advancement based on other people's misperceptions.

The statistics tell us Latinas aren't making it to the boardroom and C-suite.¹ I refuse to believe it is because of a lack of talent. Rather, there is a lack of vision by those who hold decision-making leadership roles. Over 22 million Latinas live in the United States, yet Latinas make up less than 1 percent of C-suite executives.² We make up less than 3 percent of all U.S. attorneys and an even smaller percentage of partners and general counsel.³ Despite our powerful economic contributions, Latinas are often the lowest paid across industries, creating a wage gap

¹ Lean In & McKinsey & Co., *State of Latinas in Corporate America* (2021), <https://leanin.org/research/state-of-latinas-in-corporate-america> [<https://perma.cc/WR2M-DRAM>].

² *Id.*

³ Hispanic Nat'l Bar Ass'n, *Still Too Few and Far Between: The Ongoing Struggles of Hispanic Attorneys in the United States* (May 2024), <https://hnba.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/STILL-TOO-FEW-AND-FAR-BETWEEN.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/6WXE-QW3R>].

so large it would take us until 2206—182 years—to achieve pay parity.⁴ Further, decision-makers judge women based on their record of work, while giving men the grace of being evaluated on their potential.⁵ When faced with such statistics, it is easy to feel overwhelmed or resigned to the fact that there are limits to how far our career can grow. Worse, you may internalize this data and blame yourself for not understanding how to navigate an unfamiliar professional landscape. However, focusing solely on internal factors is a mistake.

If we want to advance in our careers, then we must recognize how detrimental it is when decision-makers lack the ability to see our full potential. This is a difficult and complex task, as it involves recognizing the sexism and limitations imposed by colleagues, bosses, and industry leaders. But we cannot afford to ignore the external factors any longer. The question, then, is how do you prepare to overcome these barriers as you progress in your career?

Start where you are; look around your place of work and have an honest conversation with yourself. What plans for growth have leadership created? Do people who look like you end up in executive roles? Have they ever? Even in a space where you are comfortable, it is important to stop and assess opportunities. If you recognize that there is no pathway to advance, you must make the hard decision to either stay where it is comfortable or find a new environment that will value your leadership skills.

It is also crucial to look both ways as you develop your career. First, look towards the future to identify opportunities to develop your skills, network, and resources. To do this, study leaders you wish to emulate, whose careers you admire, and see if there are patterns you can mirror. Perhaps there is a leadership course you can take or an affinity group that will expand your network to better position you for future opportunities. Then, look behind you—how are you making your space better for those who come after you? It is an additional responsibility to

⁴ Inst. for Women's Pol'y Res., *The Latina Wage Gap: Latinas are Paid Less than White Men in Every State* (Sept. 2023), <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Latina-Wage-Gap-Fact-Sheet-2023.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/WR7J-XBPQ>].

⁵ Kelly Hughes & Jennifer Dannals, *Women Aren't Promoted Because Managers Underestimate Their Potential*, Yale Insights (Mar. 22, 2024), <https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/women-arent-promoted-because-managers-underestimate-their-potential> [<https://perma.cc/6ZMQ-G25N>].

advocate for others, but fighting for others strengthens your resolve to fight for yourself.

Beyond the hyper local, it benefits us to think bigger picture, outside of our day-to-day space. It may not seem immediately connected, but the policies set by your government representatives and elected officials can either advance or delay your career. How does your city government address gender equity in the workplace? Is there a law prohibiting employers from asking about your previous salaries, preventing a new employer from continuing to underpay you? Where do your federal representatives stand on matters like universal childcare or reproductive justice? All these issues are interconnected, affecting the career mobility of working Latinas. If we truly want to smash the glass ceiling, or break down barriers, or whatever euphemism makes the impact of sexism on our careers feel a little less heavy, we must be vocal and active on every level about areas that change our quality of life and ability to thrive.

As a seasoned attorney, I often share how I left a job I loved after being passed over for an internal promotion; how I negotiated a higher salary despite the tension and frustration in order to keep doing the work I valued; and how I landed an executive role without having to first take a step back. Yet, in those moments, and the many others in between, it was hard; it was gut-wrenching to recognize how little others thought of my ability to contribute and lead. I wish I could say that eventually there are no more barriers. But despite all your skills and talents, there will be those in positions of power who question you because they cannot envision all that you bring. The kindest gift you can give yourself is to go into your career eyes wide open, knowing there are external factors at play, to allow yourself to recognize when it is time to leave, when it is time to stay and fight, and to remember that the time is always right to advocate for a better system for yourself and others.