

The Double-Double Shift: Supporting Women's Performance Management During a Pandemic

Author: Stacia Sherman Garr



Contents

About Workhuman	3
About RedThread	3
Introduction	4
Key Findings	7
Modern Performance Management & Leveling the Playing Field During COVID-19	8
Culture	9
Capability of Managers	21
Clarity	24
Getting Started	26
Conclusion	27
Appendices	29
Appendix 1: Self-Assessment of Gender & Performance Management Practices	29
Appendix 2: Research Methodology	30
Appendix 3: Authors & Contributors	31



About Workhuman



Workhuman® is the world's fastest-growing integrated Social Recognition® and continuous performance management platform. Our human applications are shaping the future of work by helping organizations connect culture to shared purpose. With a consistent stream of gratitude fueling unparalleled, provocative workplace data and human insights, Workhuman® Cloud is a critical software engine for global companies seeking to motivate and empower their people to do the best work of their lives. Workhuman (formerly known as Globoforce) was founded in 1999 and is co-headquartered in Framingham, Mass., and Dublin, Ireland.

About RedThread



Sure, we're experts in performance, people analytics, learning, and D&I – and we're well-versed in the technologies that support them. But we're also truth-seekers and storytellers in an industry often short on substance, and too full of @#\$. Our mission (indeed, our very reason for existing) is to cut through the noise and amplify what's good. We look for the connections (or red threads) between people, data, and ideas – even among seemingly unrelated concepts. The result is high-quality, unbiased, transformative foresight that helps you build a stronger business. If you want to learn more, reach out to us at hello@redthreadresearch.com or visit www.redthreadresearch.com.

Introduction

As leaders, we want to create an environment in which people who work with us have equal opportunities to advance. The problem: Collectively, we're failing. Men and women enter the workforce with similar qualifications¹ but have vastly different experiences of promotion and compensation.² Our recent deepdive research³ shows that, while effective performance management (PM) can be critical to helping address this systemic inequality, most organizations still struggle to create an equitable experience.

That was the case in the best of times. We are, clearly, no longer in those times.

The current global pandemic is throwing an unforgiving light on the problem of inequality in the workplace.⁴ Research by Lean In.Org⁵ has found that, so far, more than 1/3 of women in the U.S. have experienced a major disruption to their income because of the pandemic, including being laid off, furloughed, receiving a pay cut, or having their hours reduced. This is even worse for women of color: Black women are twice as likely as white women to report one of these setbacks.

Not only are women bearing the brunt of the pandemic in the workplace – they are doing it at home, too. Recent data show some women are taking on at least 20 hours per week of extra work during lockdown, the equivalent of a part-time job.⁶

Men and women enter the workforce with similar qualifications, but have vastly different experiences of promotion and compensation.

Due to COVID-19, some women are taking on at least an extra 20 hours of work each week while on lockdown – the equivalent of a part-time job.

1 [Women in the Workplace 2018](#), McKinsey & Co., Lean In / Alexis Krivkovich, et al, 2018.

2 ["Where Are All the Women CEOs?"](#) *The Wall Street Journal* / Vanessa Fuhrman, February 2020.

3 ["A Tale of Two Perspectives: How Men and Women Experience Performance Management Differently,"](#) RedThread Research / Stacia Garr & Emily Sanders, 2020.

4 [UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women](#), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) & United Nations Secretariat, 2020.

5 ["Lean In research: How COVID-19 is impacting women,"](#) Lean In, 2020.

6 "Women are spending an average of 7.4 more hours per week than men on childcare (39.8 hours vs. 32.4 hours, respectively), and 5.3 more hours caring for elderly or sick relatives (10.4 hours vs. 5.1 hours, respectively). Most women are also spending at least 7 more hours than men on housework (57% of women are spending 21 hours or more, while 60% of men are spending 14 hours or less). That adds up to a difference of almost 20 hours per week." ["The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on gender equality,"](#) CEPR Policy Portal / Titan Alon, et al, April 2020.

As *The Atlantic* warned⁷, “School closures and household isolation are moving the work of caring for children from the paid economy – nurseries, schools, babysitters – to parents, and especially to mothers.” Meanwhile, May 2020 University College London research⁸ found that women in the U.K. with children were:

- 47% more likely than men with children to have permanently lost or quit their jobs since February 2020
- 14% more likely to have been furloughed
- Dedicating 2.3 hours more per day on childcare than fathers
- Spending 1.7 hours more per day on housework than fathers

This underscores what one of the most prominent women in technology, Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg, has pointed out:

“That many women already work a ‘double shift’ of their day job, and then return home where they are responsible for the majority of childcare and domestic work. Homeschooling kids and caring for sick or elderly relatives during the pandemic have now created a ‘double-double’ shift.”⁹

This is obviously putting many women in serious risk of critical mental and physical damage to their health.¹⁰

This situation also means that work is being done differently by many women. They’re working in chunks of time – around teaching, feeding, caregiving, and other home responsibilities. For many women, this means they aren’t available electronically during every minute of the workday. That isn’t to say the quality of the work is less – on the contrary, in many instances people say their outcomes are as good as or better than when they were in the office.¹¹ But, that is to say the way they’re working has changed. And, as a result, so too must PM.

The COVID-19 pandemic has moved the work of caring for children from the paid economy – nurseries, schools, babysitters – to parents and especially to mothers.

With working from home, the way women are working has changed. As a result, so too must PM.

7 “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism,” *The Atlantic* / Helen Lewis, March 2020.

8 “Moms are far more likely than dads to be interrupted during their paid working hours. Nearly half (47%) of mothers’ working hours are split between professional duties and other activities like childcare. That figure is 30% for fathers.” “Parents, especially mothers, paying heavy price for lockdown,” UCL News, May 2020.

9 “Sheryl Sandberg: The coronavirus pandemic is creating a ‘double double shift’ for women. Employers must help,” *FORTUNE* / Sheryl Sandberg & Rachel Thomas, May 2020.

10 “Women are maxing out and burning out during COVID-19,” Lean In, May 2020.

11 “Working From Home Increases Productivity,” *Business News Daily* / Sammi Caramela, March 2020.

Unfortunately, we know from our previous PM research¹² that many of the hurdles women face with performance management are likely amplified during this pandemic.

For example, research shows that women who are also mothers are recommended for promotion less often than women without children or men (with or without children).¹³ We wonder: Given it's harder in a work-from-home environment to ignore that so many women are also mothers, will women's performance scores / recommendations for promotion be impacted?

In a similar vein, research suggests that, when people have more "passive face time" – during which people are observed working but aren't actually interacting while working¹⁴ – they receive higher performance scores. In light of this research, how will women's performance scores be affected when they may not always be accessible or "seen" virtually?

And those questions are just the tip of the iceberg. Given these issues, we wrote this special report to review what we learned in our detailed study on performance management and gender – and to put it in the context of how people are working now, during this global pandemic. Some of our most burning questions include:

- How might the unconscious biases women already face worsen in – and be mitigated by – a long-term work-from-home environment?
- Given what we know about how to make performance management more equitable for women, how might we alter our practices in this current environment to level the playing field?
- How can leaders address these challenges now, before less effective practices solidify in this new working environment?

We hope this report provides you with some thought-provoking questions and ideas to consider as you design your strategies for how to effectively manage through the next few weeks, months, and year(s).

We wrote this special report to review what we learned in our detailed study on performance management and gender – and to put it in the context of how people are working now, during this global pandemic.

12 [The Makings of Modern Performance Management](#), RedThread Research / Stacia Garr, Dani Johnson & Emily Sanders, 2019.

13 ["Status incongruity and backlash effects: Defending the gender hierarchy motivates prejudice against female leaders,"](#) *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* / Laurie A. Rudman, et al, 2012.

14 ["Why Showing Your Face at Work Matters,"](#) *MITSloan Management Review* / Kimberly Elsbach & Daniel Cable, June 2012.



Key Findings

1. Modern performance management is more effective than previous approaches but is still experienced unequally by women.¹⁵
2. COVID-19 has resulted in a much higher percentage of employees working from home. This may have especially negative consequences for women,¹⁶ as preexisting biases could be exacerbated. However, specific steps and approaches can be taken by leaders to lessen the impact.
3. Leaders must make performance management fairer by establishing consistent expectations for performance and promotion. When employees are working remotely, this is especially crucial. Our data indicates that, before the pandemic, women craved goal clarity more than men – we believe this is even more critical in the current work-from-home environment.
4. Organizations must improve and expand the feedback women receive. Employees should be given more frequent feedback from their managers, in addition to receiving more feedback from more sources. While this may be hard to do in remote working situations, leaders need to deliberately plan when and how they will deliver this additional feedback.
5. Organizations need to lean hard into ensuring men and women develop at the same rate. This is especially critical with remote working, as the networks that typically provide access to information critical for development are currently constricting. Therefore, organizations should reimagine sponsorship / mentorship efforts and internal “gig-work” project marketplaces to ensure women’s networks remain strong and growing.

¹⁵ [“Gender Inequalities in the Workplace: The Effects of Organizational Structures, Processes, Practices and Decision Makers’ Sexism,”](#) *Frontiers in Psychology* / Caitlin S. Stamarski & Leanne S. Son Hing, September 2015.

¹⁶ “Women are more than twice as likely as men to be experiencing physical symptoms of severe anxiety, such as a racing heartbeat (25% vs. 11%, respectively). More than half (52%) of women are having sleep issues, compared to about a third (32%) of men. And women who work full-time and have partners and children are more than twice as likely as men in the same situation to feel that they have more to do than they can possibly handle (31% vs. 13%, respectively).” [“Women are maxing out and burning out during COVID-19,”](#) Lean In, May 2020.

Modern Performance Management & Leveling the Playing Field During COVID-19

RedThread research¹⁷ shows that the success of performance management is driven by “the 3 Cs”:

- Culture
- Capability of managers
- Clarity

Organizations that excel at these levers perform better. For example, organizations that scored high on culture¹⁸ are 32% more likely to experience high employee engagement and 97% more likely to experience high organizational performance.¹⁹

Organizations scoring high on culture are:

32% more likely to experience high employee engagement

97% more likely to experience high organizational performance

In this report, we review how these levers can differ for women and provide suggestions on how to make performance management more equitable for them.²⁰ We focus specifically on the levers and recommendations that are most relevant in the context of the

17 *The Makings of Modern Performance Management*, RedThread Research / Stacia Garr, Dani Johnson & Emily Sanders, 2019.

18 This means that the organization consistently scored a 4 or a 5 on a 5-point scale across these and other items related to culture.

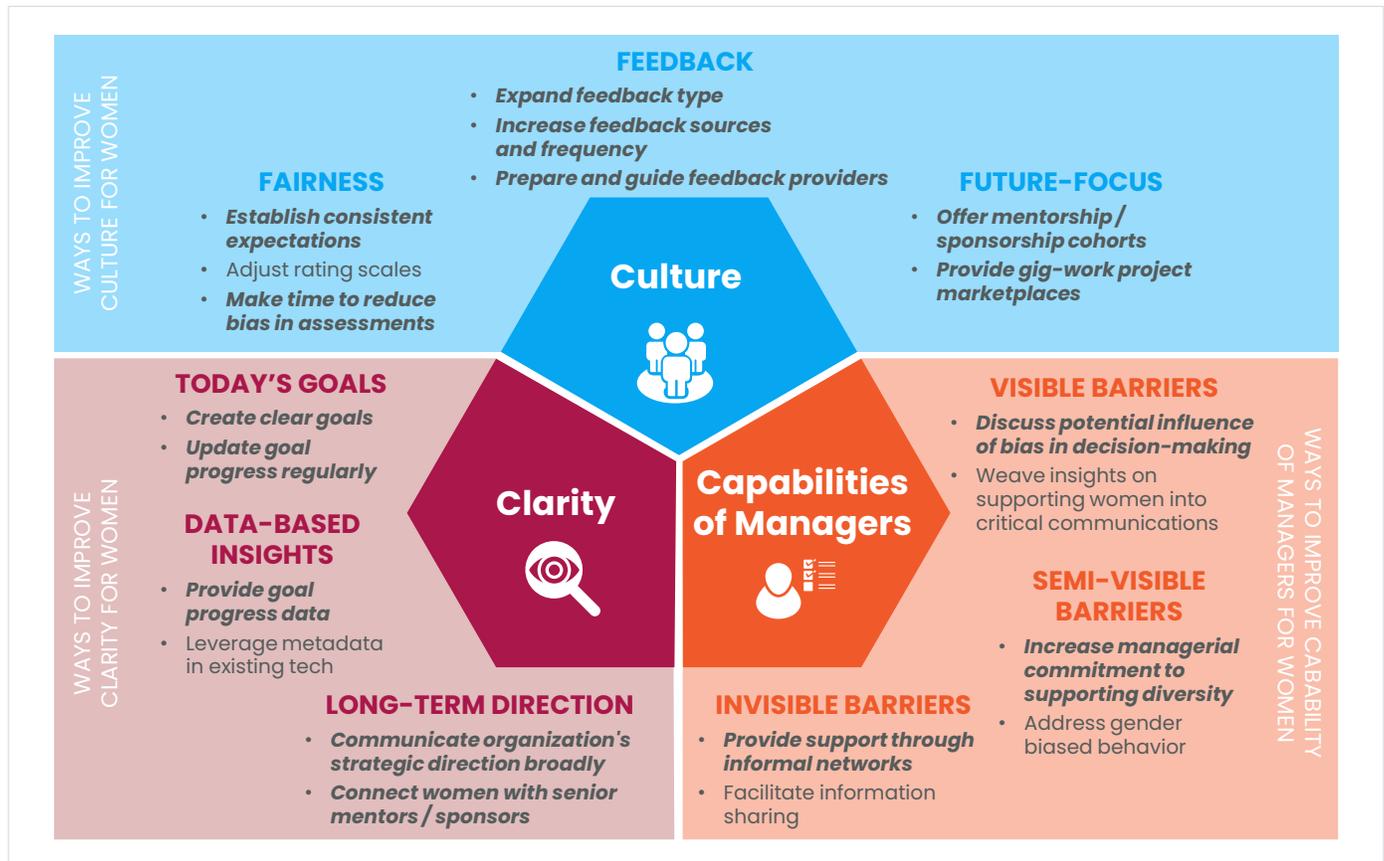
19 *Embrace the Business Imperative of Diversity: Winning the '20s*, Boston Consulting Group, 2019.

20 *Leveling the Field: Making Performance Management Work for Women*, RedThread Research / Stacia Sherman Garr, Emily Sanders & Priyanka Mehrotra, RedThread Research, 2020.



existing COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing work-from-home environment – they are bolded and italicized below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Practices to Level the Playing Field for Women*



*The bolded and italicized text in this figure represents the levers and recommendations that are especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Culture

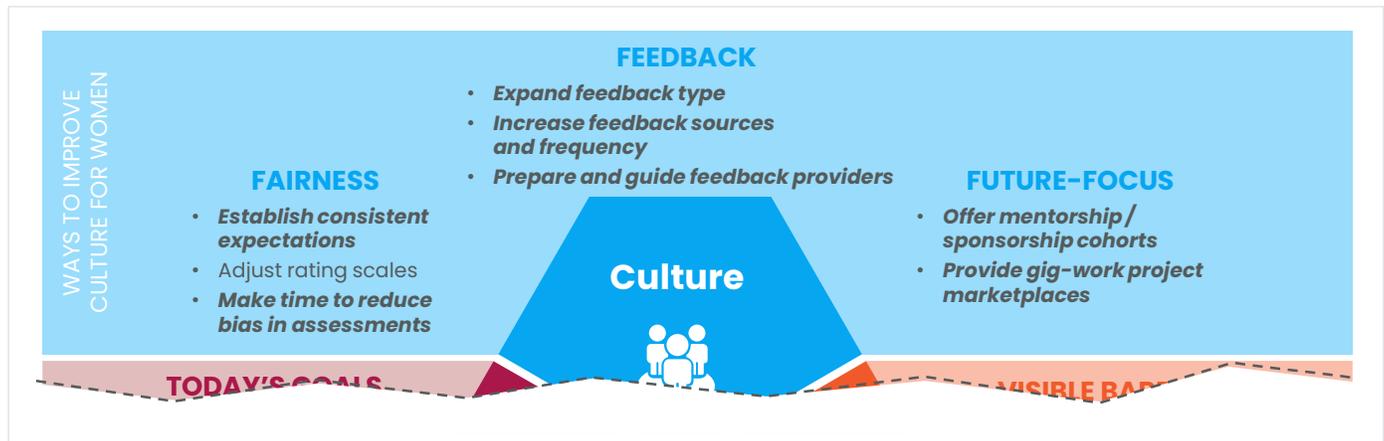
Culture is a set of shared assumptions, values, and behaviors that determine how we do things around here.²¹ Our research shows 3 areas that organizations need to focus on when it comes to the intersection of culture and performance management (see Figure 2):

- Fairness
- Feedback
- Future-focus

Culture is a set of shared assumptions, values, and behaviors that determine how we do things around here.

²¹ *The Culture Cycle: How to Shape the Unseen Force that Transforms Performance*, James Heskett / Pearson FT Press, 2011.

Figure 2: Culture – Practices to Level the Playing Field for Women*



*The bolded and italicized text in this figure represents the levers and recommendations that are especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Fairness

Fairness has always been critical to performance management. However, as PM has evolved, some of the newer practices, such as rethinking rankings or more frequent performance conversations, haven't addressed all of the inequities inherent in performance management for women.

For example, women are still less likely to be rated as “superb” than men,²² especially in a male-dominated field.²³ Women tend to be evaluated more poorly in situations involving complex problem-solving²⁴ and are less likely to be recommended for promotion or to be given challenging roles. Especially concerning in these times of work from home, women who are mothers are recommended for promotion²⁵ less than women without children or men (with or without children).

22 [“Scaling Down Inequality: Rating Scales, Gender Bias, and the Architecture of Evaluation,”](#) *American Sociological Review* / Lauren A. Rivera & András Tilcsik, March 2019.

23 [“Gender and the evaluation of leaders: A meta-analysis,”](#) *Psychological Bulletin* / Alice H. Eagly, et al, January 1992; and, [“Gender stereotypes and the evaluation of men and women in military training,”](#) *Journal of Social Issues* / Jennifer Boldry, Wendy Wood, & Deborah A. Kashy, 2001.

24 [“When What You Know is Not Enough: Expertise and Gender Dynamics in Task Groups,”](#) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* / Melissa C. Thomas-Hunt, & Katherine W. Phillips, December 2004.

25 [“Male-Female Differences: A Computer Simulation,”](#) *American Psychologist* / Richard F. Martell, et al, February 1996; and, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about how Women Become Leaders*, Alice Hendrickson Eagly & Linda L. Carli / Harvard Business School Publishing, 2007; [“Benevolent Sexism at Work: Gender Differences in the Distribution of Challenging Developmental Experiences,”](#) *Journal of Management* / Eden B. King, et al, April 2010; and, [“Gender & Work: Challenging Conventional Wisdom,”](#) Harvard Business School / Peter Glick, 2013.

In this particular time of COVID-19, we suggest organizations focus on the following 2 actions (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: 2 Areas of Focus to Increase PM Fairness During COVID-19



Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Establish consistent expectations

In the absence of objective criteria, assessors tend to allow gender stereotypes to fill in the missing information.²⁶ Therefore, it's essential to set clear, objective, and consistent performance expectations and promotion criteria. While this may seem obvious, it's not necessarily happening.

It's essential to set clear, objective, and consistent performance expectations and promotion criteria.

Today, even with "modern performance management," only 66% of organizations require clear objective metrics for evaluation and 59% of organizations check promotion criteria for fairness and relevance.²⁷ It's critical to ensure that the language used clearly establishes behavioral expectations at each stage of tenure or project cycle.²⁸

²⁶ "Sex stereotypes and their effects in the workplace: What we know and what we don't know," *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality* / M.E. Heilman, 1995.

²⁷ *Women in the Workplace 2017*, McKinsey & Co., Lean In / Alexis Krivkovich, et al, 2017.

²⁸ Specifically, in this study, managers were split into two groups in which both groups were given training on being good coaches, but one group was also provided with training that showed no differences in men's and women's self-confidence levels. All participants were then given hypotheticals in which an employee (of either gender) was not meeting standards and asked to write down feedback for that employee.

Only:

66% of organizations require clear metrics for evaluation

59% of organizations check promotion criteria for fairness & relevance

In our current and essentially universal work-from-home environment, the criticality of setting clear performance expectations is even greater – without those expectations, measures that are unrelated to performance may fill the void.

For example, research²⁹ shows that “passive face time” (when workers are not in active interactions with coworkers or clients, but instead are just seen in the workplace) positively influences supervisors’ performance scores. Specifically, employees who performed equally based on objective measures received higher performance scores if they had more passive face time. However, with employees working from home, managers cannot always see them. Employees may turn to the digital equivalent of passive face time – always being accessible – as a proxy to fill the void. However, given the additional responsibilities women are shouldering, they may not be as accessible as men – and thus potentially see a negative impact on perceptions of their performance.

More modern PM approaches, which tend to include ongoing reviews of goals and progress, are a great first step in establishing clear expectations. However, in the current environment, it’s critical to increase the frequency of those conversations. In our interviews with leaders, we’ve heard of these conversations now taking place as frequently as weekly, whereas before they might have been on a monthly or quarterly basis. Critically, employees need to be actively involved in determining these expectations and how they will be measured.

The ongoing reviews of goals and progress are a great first step in establishing clear expectations – but, in the current environment, it’s critical to increase the frequency of those conversations.

29 [“Why Showing Your Face at Work Matters,”](#) *MITSloan Management Review* / Kimberly Elsbach & Daniel Cable, June 2012.

Make time to reduce bias in assessments

When managers have more time to evaluate people and are held accountable for explaining their ratings and decisions, we believe they tend to make less biased assessments. We expect appraisals to be on ice until the economy restabilizes post-COVID, but for now, remember that this means:

- Conducting performance assessments during less busy times³⁰
- Creating different opportunities to assess performance, not relying on a single period
- Requiring managers to discuss direct reports' performance with leaders and peers
- Analyzing performance scores by gender and discussing potential anomalies

With the work-from-home environment, organizations need to build in even more time to review their assessment practices and to take steps to reduce bias even more than they might have otherwise. Be sensitive to the fact, too, that leaders will be assessing workers who have been working in completely different circumstances than in the past.

It'll be extremely difficult to assess performance – if it's possible at all – and so any process needs to have extreme organizational justice (an individual's perception of fairness within the work setting)³¹ and be as free of unconscious biases as possible. At a minimum, organizations need to remind team leaders of potential unconscious biases they may encounter when assessing remote workers' performance.

Feedback

The quality and breadth of feedback women receive can make it hard for them to improve at the same rate as their male colleagues. For example, one study found that women tend to receive more

Organizations need to build in more time to review their assessment practices and to take steps to reduce bias.

³⁰ "Sex Bias at Work: The Effects of Attentional and Memory Demands on Performance Ratings of Men and Women," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* / Richard F. Martell, December 1991.

³¹ "Justice at the Millennium: A Meta-Analytic Review of 25 Years of Organizational Justice Research," *Journal of Applied Psychology* / Jason A. Colquitt, et. al, 2001.

critical feedback than men (88% vs. 59%, respectively).³² Further, it tends to be less actionable, specific, and business-related than that given to men³³ (i.e., “you did great this year” vs. “you excelled at building effective client relationships”). Furthermore, vague feedback also correlates with lower performance ratings for women – but not for men.³⁴

In one study, 88% of women felt they received more critical feedback than men at 59%.

Given work-from-home environments, it’s more important than ever for organizations to create more opportunities for women to receive high-quality feedback. Our research shows 3 things organizations should do, all of which are even more critical in the current environment (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: 3 Ways to Increase High-Quality Feedback for Women



Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Expand feedback type

We’ve seen an expansion of the types of feedback employees are receiving. It used to be primarily “constructive,” focusing on what employees should “stop” or “start” doing in the future, typically delivered through performance evaluations. Now, though, we see

³² [“The One Word Men Never See in Their Performance Reviews,”](#) Fast Company.com / Kathleen Davis, August 2014.

³³ [“Research: Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back,”](#) Harvard Business Review / Shelley J. Correll & Caroline Simard, April 2016.

³⁴ Ibid.

more positive feedback – recognition of what employees should “continue” doing.

During the pandemic, we’ve heard that a lot of organizations have doubled-down on positive recognition of employees. As we all know, many employees have worked under extremely difficult situations and many leaders have recognized that effort. That said, initial research on recognition by gender³⁵ shows that women’s and men’s experiences with recognition tends to be different³⁶ (i.e., different types of networks recognized, a tendency to recognize tasks for men and relationships for women). We expect this trend to continue during this work-from-home time – potentially, even to be exacerbated.

One way to address this bias is to ask managers to self-check on which networks, genders, and groups of people they are recognizing, and the language they use. It would be even better if organizations use a recognition technology that could make this information available to managers and leaders. No matter what, it’s important to acknowledge that recognition of a peer someone has only worked with over video conference may be harder, but there are still guidelines organizations can put in place to nudge people to be more equitable in their recognition.

Increase feedback sources and frequency

Today, performance management typically draws on at least 4 feedback sources in addition to managers: direct reports, peers, managers, and senior leaders (see Figure 5). A fifth source, technology,³⁷ is also beginning to emerge.

35 Based on a comparison of Workhuman’s 2011 and 2019 full-time employee surveys. The survey question was: “When was the last time you were recognized at work?”

36 [“Bringing AI to the workforce: Companies seek to overcome psychological barriers that limit transformation,” Nashville Post / Lena Anthony, May 2019.](#)

37 While technology can aggregate and provide the other four sources of feedback faster, it can also be used as a new feedback source when it is used to analyze digital exhaust (e.g., email, calendar, or Slack data) and provide employees with new insights about their behaviors.

One way to address this gender recognition bias is to ask managers to self-check on which networks, genders, and groups of people they are recognizing, and the language they use.

Figure 5: 5 Sources of Feedback for Employees



Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Research shows that “crowdsourcing feedback” can yield better performance insights.³⁸ It can address issues of recency bias and also brings in more people who may have observed performance. One option is to weight feedback so that the reviewer indicates the amount of time they observed the employee.³⁹ This could be especially important during work from home, since the overall exposure to individuals may be limited.

Especially with remote work environments, continuous performance conversations need to create a clearer line of sight on employees’ work.

Especially critical for people working from home: Significantly increase the amount of feedback and interaction they have with their managers. Research⁴⁰ finds that, when employees interact more with their managers, their performance ratings tend to be higher.⁴¹ In remote work environments, these continuous performance conversations need to create a clearer line of sight on

38 “Crowdsourced feedback” is a practice used to collect more perspectives on performance and development in that it creates open, two-way discussions in which individuals can ask for and receive feedback from anyone in the organization.

39 “How Gender Bias Corrupts Performance Reviews, and What to Do About It,” *Harvard Business Review* / Paola Cecchi-Dimeglio, April 2017.

40 “Working Relationships in the #MeToo Movement: Key Findings,” Lean In, 2019.

41 “The interactive effect of leader-member exchange and communication frequency on performance ratings,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* / Micjnelle K. Kacmar, et al, 2006.

employees' work – so employees can better understand and meet expectations.⁴² Given the current level of additional family work many women are taking on right now, this greater level of visibility could help reduce potential biases.

Prepare and guide feedback providers

While we know there are significant benefits of training managers and employees to ask for, give, and act upon feedback, this is especially important for women – and critically important for people working remotely. When people have a standardized framework for feedback, they are much less likely to allow biases to creep in.⁴³ Further, if everyone knows how to receive feedback, then there's less fear of an "emotional" response,⁴⁴ which some research points to as being the reason for more vague, "feel-good" (but ultimately unhelpful) feedback for women.

The following offers some common advice for individuals providing feedback to remote employees:

- **Use a standardized framework for conversations.** People may not be used to frequent discussions about their work and may not be clear what they should discuss. Providing a framework or predefined questions can help. Some examples include:
 - What are you most excited about right now?
 - What are you most worried about? Both work- and COVID-19-related?
 - What is one thing – or one barrier – I can address to help you do your job better?
 - What is one thing you can do better to improve in your job?
 - What are your immediate next steps? When and in what ways do you need my help?

⁴² *Women in the Workplace 2019*, McKinsey & Co. & Lean In / Jess Huang, et al, 2019.

⁴³ "Gender, Race, and Meritocracy in Organizational Careers," *American Journal of Sociology* / Emilio J. Castilla, May 2008.

⁴⁴ According to Lean In / McKinsey, 43% of female managers and 35% of male managers hesitate to provide feedback out of a fear of "seeming mean or hurtful." A further 15% of female managers and 6% of male managers hesitate out of a fear of an "emotional breakdown." *Women in the Workplace*, McKinsey & Co., Lean In / Lareina Yee, et al, 2016.

Especially critical for people working from home: Significantly increase the amount of feedback and interaction they have with their managers.

- **Build relationships constantly.**⁴⁵ When working remotely, it's easy to push meetings to another day or simply to focus on getting down to business immediately. More importantly, feedback providers must build trust through regular (e.g., several times a week) interactions and by spending time to focus on the whole person – not just the worker showing up in a video call.
- **Turn on video for conversations – and especially when giving feedback.** As much as 55% of people's ability to communicate comes from nonverbal cues.⁴⁶ Given that feedback may be constructive, it's essential that both the feedback giver and the receiver use as much (and as many) of the communication channels available to them as possible.

That said, we know people are experiencing an overload of video conferencing these days. Organizations should consider setting some clear ground rules that may lessen the burden of video calls, such as clarifying (likely lowering) expectations on clothing formality, supporting shorter calls (not every call has to be 30 minutes), and encouraging people to be authentic and not to be “on stage” during calls.

- **Make needed behaviors explicit.** When people work in physical proximity to each other, their behaviors spread from one another.⁴⁷ However, when people are in a virtual environment, this doesn't happen and therefore requires explicit communication of expected behaviors.

One way to do this is for feedback providers to share stories that reinforce expected norms. They can also talk about successes or failures to clarify how the organization should think about challenges.

Future-Focus

While traditional PM practices look at the past (i.e., how someone did over the past year) or the present (i.e., what skills are necessary to perform better in the current job), our research shows that organizations need to focus on developing employees for the future as part of their performance management practices.

45 [“Providing Performance Feedback to Remote Employees,”](#) Reflektive / May 2017.

46 [“The Power of Proximity: Influencing in the Era of Social Distancing,”](#) HR Exchange Network / Michael Arena, May 2020.

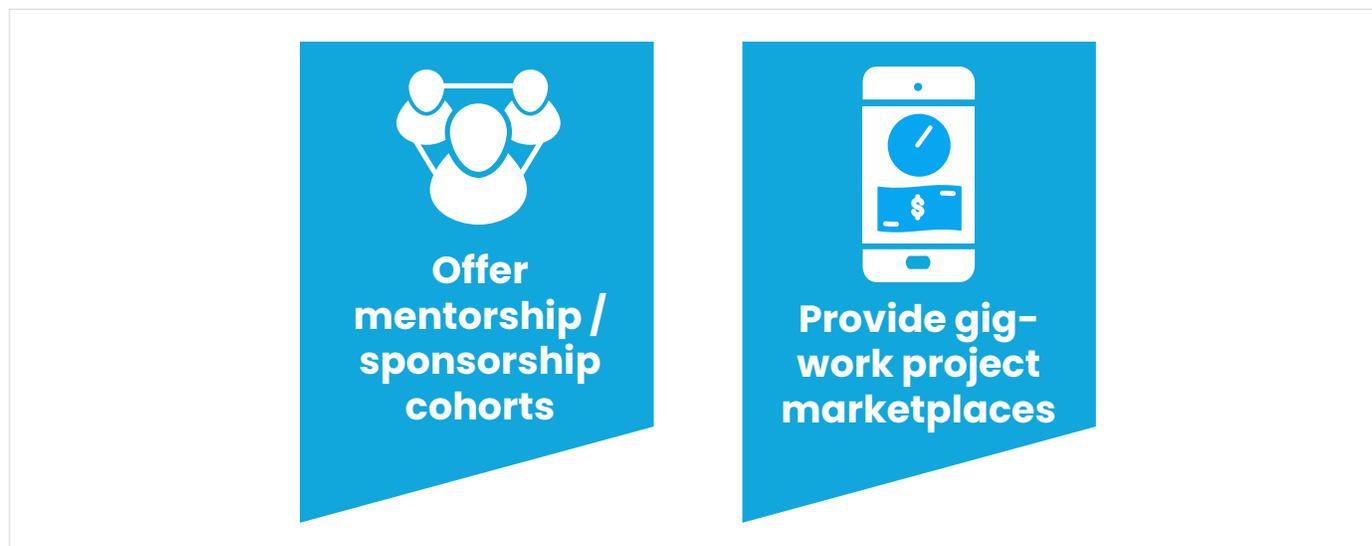
47 Ibid.

As much as 55% of people's ability to communicate comes from nonverbal cues.

One way to explicitly communicate expected behaviors in a virtual environment is for feedback providers to share stories that reinforce those behaviors.

Our research uncovered 2 areas we think organizations should still focus on, even in light of the current pandemic (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Future-Focus Areas



Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Offer mentorship / sponsorship cohorts

Many organizations leverage mentorship or sponsorship to help up-and-coming leaders – often women – form meaningful connections and have champions who can support their development and promotion. Given the high stress and challenges of the pandemic, it would be easy to let these relationships slide.

However, we suggest organizations continue to focus on developing them for 2 reasons.

- First, some organizational network analysis data shows that people’s professional networks are contracting during the pandemic, which means that information is not being shared broadly. Given that women are less likely to be in high-power networks, then they’re less likely to get access to this information – which can inhibit their ability to advance.
- Second, senior leaders need to maintain access to individuals at different points in the organizational network, so that they can stay attuned to what’s happening outside their bubble in this time of pandemic and work from home.

Organizations should leverage mentorship / sponsorship to help up-and-coming leaders – often women – form meaningful connections and have champions to support their development and promotion.

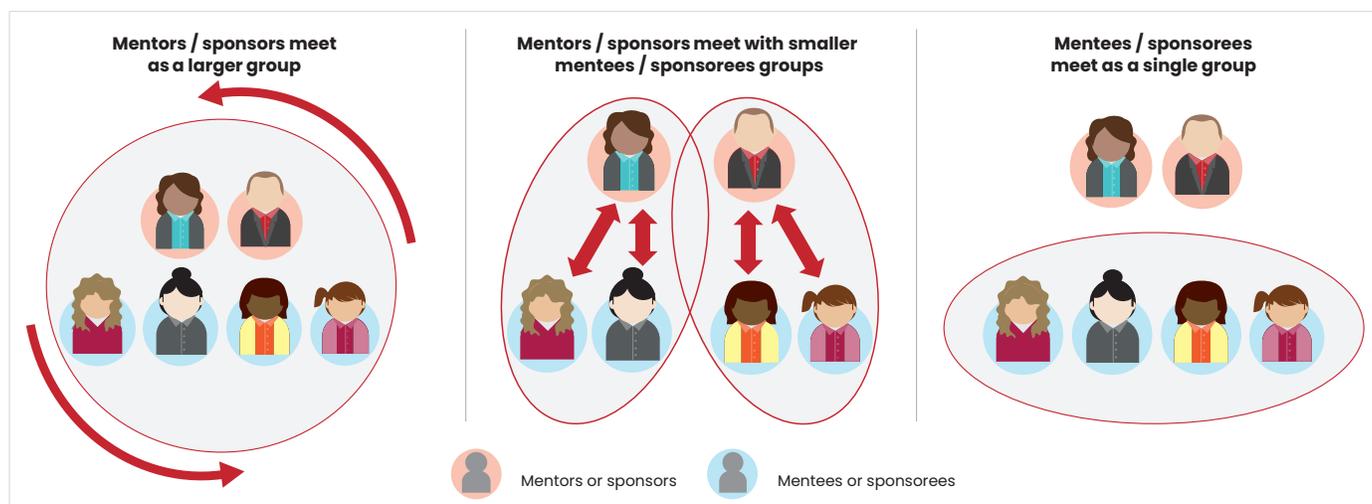
Given this, we suggest leaders consider evolving their organization’s approach to mentorship and sponsorship relationships. Instead of relying on one-on-one relationships, we suggest viewing mentors and sponsors as teams or cohorts.⁴⁸ In Figure 7, we outline how this could work – with the team meetings at times as a larger group, sometimes with 1 mentor and 2 mentees, and in other instances with just the mentees.

This approach offers these benefits:

- Providing a broader network of people for both sponsors / mentors and the sponsorees / mentees
- Reducing the burden on any 1 mentor / sponsor
- Creating opportunities for mentees to be connected into higher-value networks through more than 1 individual

Instead of one-on-one relationships, we suggest viewing mentors and sponsors as teams or cohorts.

Figure 7: Suggestions for How to Take a Team-Based Approach to Mentorship / Sponsorship



Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Provide “gig-work” project marketplaces

One way to advance women is to help them gain access to meaningful work through which they can collaborate with new peers, and connect with diverse groups and leaders to showcase their abilities. “Gig-work” project marketplaces allow people with small projects to find other employees interested in working on

⁴⁸ *Helping Women Rise: How Networks and Technology Can Accelerate Women’s Advancement*, RedThread Research / Stacia Garr & Emily Sanders, 2019.

those projects. Employees with extra time can contribute to projects while engaging with new people in a meaningful way and learning new skills.

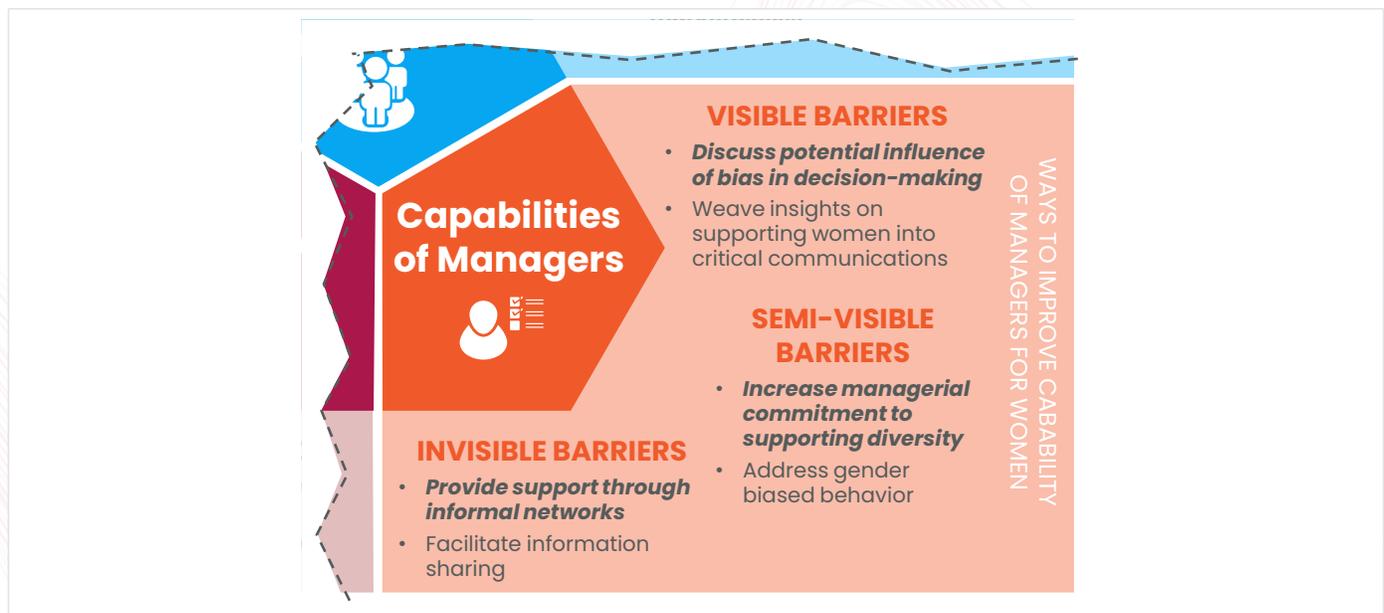
While it may feel overwhelming to offer these project marketplaces now, this may actually be the right time to do it. With so many changes happening around us, many in organizations are open to thinking about new ways of doing work. In addition, as roles and expectations change and – quite frankly – organizations furlough or lay off employees, creating a way for people to connect with work that needs to be done within the organization is critical. Gig-work project marketplaces can provide ways for women to augment or showcase their skills, broaden their networks, and provide additional value to organizations all at once.

Gig-work project marketplaces can provide ways for women to augment or showcase their skills, broaden their networks, and provide additional value to organizations.

Capability of Managers

When it comes to manager capability, in addition to providing coaching and candor, managers also need to take an active role in clearing barriers employees face: visible, semi-visible and invisible (see Figure 8). This continues to be the case in the current work-from-home environment.

Figure 8: Capability of Managers – 3 Types of Barriers That Managers Can Help Remove*



*The bolded and italicized text in this figure represents the levers and recommendations that are especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

Visible barriers

Visible barriers can include:

- Providing access to resources
- Creating opportunities to showcase work
- Promoting direct reports' contributions to others

Unfortunately, research⁴⁹ shows that men tend to receive higher levels of support from their managers in overcoming these types of barriers under normal circumstances. When employees are working from home, it's especially important that managers work with them to identify how they can help their employees with each of these visible barriers, both publicly and frequently.

Semi-visible barriers

Semi-visible barriers are challenges that you may not directly think of (such as managers' perspectives or attitudes) which can make it more difficult for women to feel they have their manager's full support. For example, many managers (49%) report they don't know what they can do to support gender diversity.⁵⁰ As a result, only 39% of women think that gender diversity is a high priority for their manager.⁵¹ Here, the managers' lack of action / commitment is the result of their perception that there's nothing they can do.

Research shows that men receive higher levels of support from their managers in overcoming visible barriers under normal circumstances.

Managers' lack of action / commitment is the result of their own perception that there's nothing they can do to support gender diversity.

With gender diversity:

49% of managers don't know how to support it

39% of women believe it's a high priority for their managers

Organizations can provide managers with discussion guides on how to better support all employees during these times, along with

49 [Women in the Workplace 2018](#), McKinsey & Co., Lean In / Alexis Krivkovich, et al, 2018.

50 [Women in the Workplace](#), McKinsey & Co. & Lean In / Lareina Yee, et al, 2016.

51 [Women in the Workplace 2018](#), McKinsey & Co., Lean In / Alexis Krivkovich, et al, 2018.

information about the challenges that women may be facing – featuring a list of questions for discussion on how best to support their female employees, including:

- What additional flexibility might you need right now?
- How can I help you more efficiently use your time?
- How can I help promote the great work you're doing right now?
- What additional information can I provide to help you succeed?
- What barriers can I help remove?

Invisible Barriers

These barriers tend to be political or social in nature, and prevent women from making the connections or gathering the information they need to advance. As mentioned above, the current pandemic is constricting social networks, so women are even less likely to gain access to the information they may need to perform well.

To address this, organizations can train managers on their role in helping direct reports navigate organizational politics and getting connected into the organizational network. They can also set expectations that this will happen: Making “connecting direct reports to other critical leaders” a documented role expectation for managers would go a long way. Better information-sharing can also be supported through formal communications and discussions, such as those highlighted above in the semi-visible barriers section.

Another approach – one that's in HR's control – is to document some of the “hidden” information that exists, but which women may not have access to as a result of not being in high-power networks.

One organization we interviewed found that, when women went up for a certain type of promotion, they often lacked recommendations from a specific level of leader. Because these women didn't know they needed that recommendation, they weren't forming relationships with appropriate mentors / sponsors before the promotion process. Instead, women relied on their performance to be the deciding factor in promotion. To address this, the organization made the recommendation requirement explicit to everyone, so that no one was left wondering why they weren't promoted, even though they had strong performance scores. This quickly addressed the deficit.

Organizations should train managers on their role in helping direct reports navigate organizational politics and connecting into the organizational network.

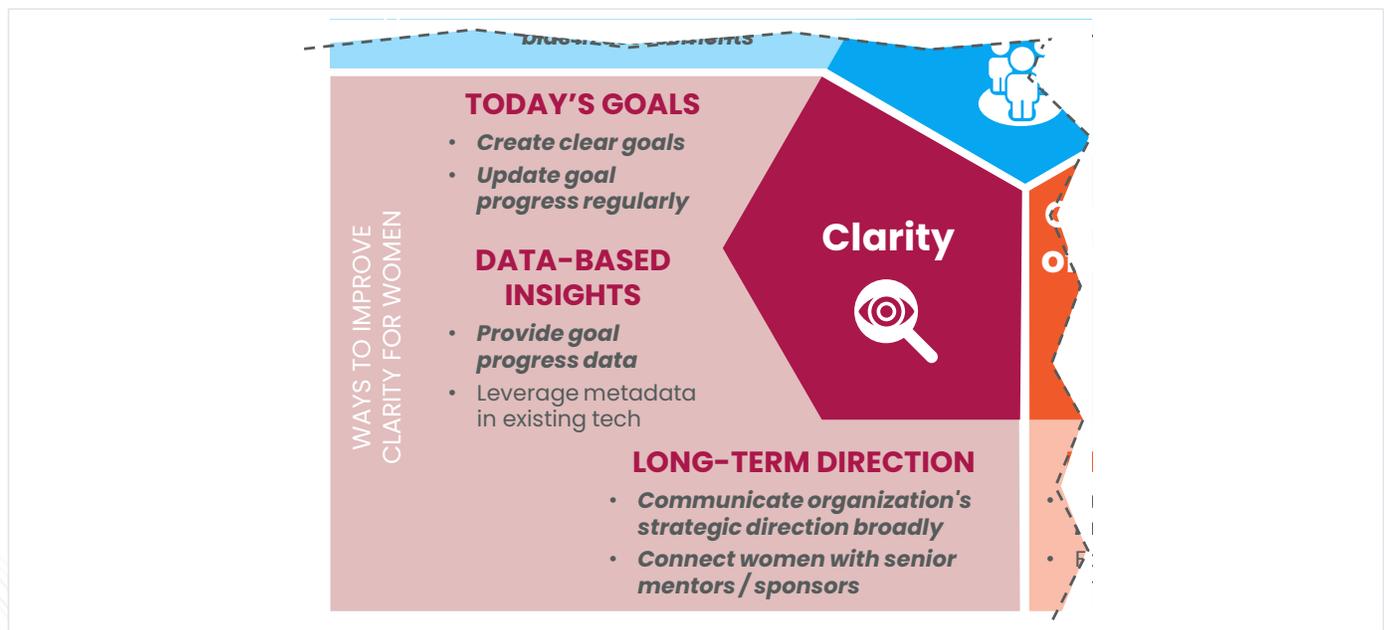
Ask yourself:

- Is there information that may have been shared in informal conversations previously that's essential to helping women succeed?
- To what extent is that information being shared now – and can it be made more explicit?
- How could we easily share this information so everyone in the organization could access it?

Clarity

The final area that's critically important is creating clarity for all employees, but especially for women. We identified 3 ways organizations can do this (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: 3 Areas of Focus to Increase Clarity*



*The bolded and italicized text in this figure represents the levers and recommendations that are especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: RedThread Research, 2020.

All employees should understand their roles, responsibilities, and goals – especially when in a remote working environment. Unfortunately our research⁵² (before COVID-19) found that women

52 *Leveling the Field: Making Performance Management Work for Women*, RedThread Research / Stacia Sherman Garr, Emily Sanders & Priyanka Mehrotra, RedThread Research, 2020.

are 4 times more likely to say clear goals would be helpful in improving performance, implying their goals aren't adequate..

Further, women are 16% less likely to find the current data they receive to be useful in helping them improve – and nearly twice as likely as men to say that having data-based insights on their performance would be useful to improving it. Women were nearly twice as likely as men to say having data-based insights on their performance would be useful.

Women are:

4x more likely to say clear goals would help in improving performance

16% less likely to find current data they receive useful

2x as likely as men to say having data-based insights would help in improving performance

This reinforces the importance of ongoing, frequent, guided performance conversations between employees and managers, as discussed in our sections on fairness and feedback. Leveraging more sources of feedback (from the 5 we listed) can be extremely helpful.

In addition to providing clarity on goals, companies also need to give employees clear information about broader strategic goals – especially now, when priorities and strategies have likely changed in light of COVID-19. Since women tend to interact with senior leaders less than men, managers must communicate to female direct reports that they're aware of this. Some approaches to address this include:

- Providing clarity through formal channels, such as all-hands meetings
- Publishing useful content on company intranet sites
- Leveraging other internal communication methods (e.g, blogs, video platforms, etc.)

Companies need to give employees clear information about broader strategic goals – especially now, when priorities and strategies have likely changed in light of COVID-19.



Getting Started

The first step is acknowledging that the topic of women and performance management must be focused on today – not at some time pre- or post-COVID-19. There'll be long-term implications of what's happening right now to women's ability to advance. If your organization truly values creating an equitable playing field for women, then it should commit to addressing some of these issues.

With a commitment firmly in hand, start by figuring out where you are today, making use of the self-assessment tool we provide in the first appendix. Determine areas in which your organization could make improvements, as well as how those changes could align to other (likely brand-new) priorities for the next 6 to 12 months. For example, if your organization is worried about how to keep employees feeling connected while working remotely, then explore the group sponsor / mentor cohorts. Or if your organization is trying to improve managers' capabilities at managing remotely, then include content on unconscious biases when working remotely.

Regardless of the exact path you pursue, all critical stakeholders must be onboard with your plan.

We recommend gathering feedback from other leaders – within HR and the broader business – to understand their perspectives. Given some of the structural issues identified in this document that act as brakes on women's visibility and chances of participation in the enterprise, work on acquiring more sensitive instruments to better capture all the feedback you can. Share these insights with senior leadership to start the conversation about how your organization can better prepare women as strong contributors to and leaders of your organization.

If your organization truly values creating an equitable playing field for women, then it should commit to addressing these issues.



Conclusion

To improve women's experiences of performance management, leaders must first understand there's a difference that needs to be addressed – and, critically, that it still needs to be addressed even under the current trying times. Much of this report is dedicated to outlining where and how these different experiences occur for women, and diving more deeply into how they might be exacerbated and addressed, when women are working remotely.

In particular, we focus on:

- Culture
- Capability of managers
- Clarity

Within **culture**, organizations need to address the frequency, quality, and fairness of feedback. This may mean increasing the frequency and number of sources of both formal and informal feedback, and exploring the potential of crowdsourcing and technology to give managers better, unbiased insights. Organizations must also devote more resources to helping women develop – in particular, investing in resources that will help women expand and strengthen their professional networks, such as sponsorship or mentorship cohorts and gig-work project marketplaces.

With **capability of managers**, we reinforce the importance of managers addressing visible, semi-visible, and invisible barriers to women's performance. And finally, **clarity** must exist for women when it comes to their goals, their performance, and the future of the organization, which is now also a changing future because of the pandemic.

We recognize that we've made a lot of recommendations – and we've done that knowing you will pick the ones which make the most sense to implement in your individual context. We are also aware that, for many, this will be the first step on a journey to addressing the

Critical work still needs to be done – and we strongly encourage you not to wait until after the COVID-19 pandemic to begin the journey.

Organizations must devote more resources to helping women develop – especially investing in resources to help women expand and strengthen their professional networks, such as sponsorship or mentorship cohorts and gig-work project marketplaces.

systemic unfairness which exists within performance management. No matter where your organization is, though, there's likely critical work still to be done – and we strongly encourage you not to wait until after the COVID-19 pandemic to begin the journey.

We believe that organizations can make meaningful changes to level the playing field for women, even if they don't totally fix the system. But it's important that we continue to work toward the goal of creating stronger businesses and equal opportunity for all. COVID-19, with all of the terribleness inherent with it, has also created an incredible opportunity to disrupt how we were doing work before. We encourage you to use this time of significant disruption to make meaningful changes that'll help women have the equal opportunity to advance – and, to help your business do better, in the process.

As always, we appreciate your thoughts and perspectives on this research, and even more so on how we can make it better (hello@redthreadresearch.com).

COVID-19, with all of the terribleness inherent with it, has also created an incredible opportunity to disrupt how we were doing work before.



Appendices

Appendix 1: Self-Assessment of Gender & Performance Management Practices

For all of the following questions, ask yourself, “To what extent has our organization...” Mark the rating, with 1 to indicate “Not at all” and 5 to indicate “To a very great extent.” At the end:

- **Circle** those areas you scored low in and where you think you could drive change within the next 3 months
- Put a **square** around those areas you scored low in and where you think you could drive change within the next 6 to 12 months
- Place a **star** on those items you scored low in and think you could drive change within the next year

<i>To what extent has my organization...</i>	1 = Not at All 5 = To a Great Extent
1. Determined if all employees have consistent performance objectives against which they are assessed?	1.....5
2. Integrated content into our learning resources that dispels myths between differences in men and women, particularly around effectiveness at negotiation, risk tolerance, and self-confidence?	1.....5
3. Provided a performance management (PM) playbook that highlights the role bias can play in accurate assessment?	1.....5
4. Reassessed / remodeled HR practices, especially around PM, to take into account the increased use of remote working? And adjusted your assessment, feedback, and support for all workers, but especially for women?	1.....5
5. Analyzed performance feedback language for differences by gender (e.g., vagueness, specific types of words, lack of connection to business objectives)?	1.....5
6. Provided training and ongoing learning resources on how to give high-quality feedback and to avoid bias?	1.....5
7. Looked into ways to provide data-based feedback directly to employees?	1.....5
8. Analyzed the extent to which men and women participate in different development opportunities or are given critical development support?	1.....5
9. Offered internal project marketplaces?	1.....5
10. Communicated with employees your awareness of the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on their home and working lives, and that the future will be different (i.e., possibly very different shift- and office-time usage, increased use of digital, disrupted supply chains, and potentially new business models)?	1.....5

Appendix 2: Research Methodology

Our original PM research commenced in April 2019, with an intent to understand both how PM has evolved in the last decade and what is happening with it right now. We conducted a 50-article literature review, and collected data through the following methods:

- 20 interviews with vendors and organizational leaders
- 2 roundtable discussions with PM practitioners
- A 30-item survey open to HR leaders and individual contributors

The survey was open from June 2019 to July 2019; data was analyzed between July 2019 and August 2019. The results of this study were published in September 2019, in *The Makings of Modern Performance Management*.

In November and December 2019, we reanalyzed all individual survey responses and factors by gender. We used ANOVA tests to identify statistically significant differences ($p < .10$), ultimately identifying a total of 10 items. We coupled this analysis with another 40-article literature review focused on women in performance management / leadership. We also conducted 5 additional interviews, focused specifically on women in PM. This article was completed in February 2020, but was not published until June 2020 (due to COVID-19 reasons) as *Leveling the Field: Making Performance Management Work for Women*.⁵³

This article takes the key learnings from *Leveling the Field*,⁵⁴ and makes them relevant to the situation during COVID-19. We conducted another review of literature – covering roughly 30 articles on COVID-19 – and incorporated them into this work.

Finally, and very importantly, we would like to acknowledge that gender is nonbinary, and that many people affected by the issues raised in *Leveling The Field*⁵⁵ and this study may be in transition. Much of the available sociological and social psychology analysis we have drawn on is often fuzzy about the ethnic background of the women being studied. Therefore, these important distinctions and facts of life for many working women may not be adequately captured in this research, for which we apologize.

⁵³ *Leveling the Field: Making Performance Management Work for Women*, RedThread Research / Stacia Sherman Garr, Emily Sanders & Priyanka Mehrotra, RedThread Research, 2020.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.



Appendix 3: Authors & Contributors



Stacia Sherman Garr, Co-founder & Principal Analyst

Stacia is a researcher and thought leader on talent management, leadership, D&I, people analytics, and HR technology. A frequent speaker and writer, her work has been featured in *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* as well as in numerous HR trade publications. Stacia co-founded RedThread Research in 2018, after leading talent and workforce research for eight years at Bersin by Deloitte. Before Bersin, Stacia spent approximately five years conducting research and creating learning content for the Corporate Leadership Council, part of CEB / Gartner. She has an MBA from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master's degree from the London School of Economics.

This report was based on the original research conducted by this author with **Emily Sanders** and **Priyanka Mehrotra**.

In addition, for this specific article, **Gary Flood** provided writing support, **Catherine Coughlin** edited the report, **Jennifer Hines** created many of the graphics, and **Jenny Barandich** completed the layout of the PDF.

