

GENDER

How We Closed the Gap Between Men's and Women's Retention Rates

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MAY 19, 2017



Many companies continue to struggle with advancing and retaining women. As we've studied our own progress at BCG, we have found that gender disparities in our senior cohorts are not completely explained by traditional workplace concerns, such as work-

life balance, maternity leave, unequal pay, and differential ambitions. We have identified a very different explanation, which is just as critical: **the quality of the day-to-day apprenticeship experience.**

Apprenticeship, the working relationships of junior team members learning alongside experienced colleagues, is critical to mastering the consulting craft and succeeding in professional services. It's a model that's increasingly used in companies of all kinds looking to accelerate the development of their high-potential people. Management consulting is a challenging environment in which to cultivate apprenticeship, because staff regularly jump from project to project and manager to manager. As in many fast-paced companies today, consulting staff operate without formal job descriptions or handbooks. So relationships are where employees develop critical skills and leadership capabilities.

However, when we analyzed the annual employee survey data specifically for high-potential, mid-career women who regrettably left the firm, we found the lowest scores were around the statement "I am satisfied with the apprenticeship and feedback I received." Moreover, **in a survey of employees leaving BCG, departing women ranked mentorship, not work-life balance, as the number one topic that the firm needs to improve on. Finally, in a survey of all North American staff, asking about 16 options of what people seek from a manager, "forming a strong relationship with my manager(s)" and "having someone in leadership who cares about me and reached out long after the project ended" were the most valued dimensions for women.**

Equipped with this data, BCG teamed with leadership development consultancy BRANDspeak to launch a bold transformation across North America: Apprenticeship-in-Action (AiA). The AiA program focuses on the three components of apprenticeship that drive satisfaction and retention: relational connectedness, strengths-based development, and coaching for a range of effective communication styles – levers that are relevant to any manager who strives to get the best from individuals and teams.

Five years into the journey, we have seen remarkable improvements. Female promotion rates have increased nationwide across all cohorts, with a 22-percentage-point rise among senior managers, while the attrition of senior women has slowed by five percentage points. Retention of women in mid-career levels is now at parity with that of men. Satisfaction with BCG's efforts to retain women has increased by 20 percentage points for all women and by 30 percentage points for senior women.

While it would be difficult to attribute all of this improvement directly to AiA, we believe it is a clear driver. Here's why.

Improving Connectedness

Our research found that both genders, but particularly women, viewed many work relationships as transactional. To remedy this, AiA equipped managers to be more deliberate about investing in relationships, focusing on four elements: (1) making personal connections, (2) investing in individuals' success, (3) guiding and advising, and (4) staying in touch between projects. We gave tactical suggestions for how managers could do this (e.g., use travel time to connect with team members and establish an open-door policy). We also reinforced connections through mentorship and sponsorships.

Since the program's rollout, the firm has seen a nine-point improvement across both genders for those who report having a manager that proactively coached and developed them in their first year. One male partner shared that he now tracks check-ins with teammates on his to-do list and spends time "making sure they are meaningful conversations." A female partner commented, "Now I'm vocal about the importance of having a personal connection, and someone who is invested in and is watching out for you."

Using Strengths-Based Development

Our research showed that 63% of BCG staff across all levels and genders felt that our feedback focused too heavily on areas for development.

To address that, AiA introduced training and tools to enable managers to ground personal development in an individual's differentiating strengths by creating a strengths inventory and linking each strength to a specific area for development. This allows people to leverage their strengths to accelerate improvement. For example, instead of telling someone who is quiet that they need to speak up in meetings, we may highlight their ability to extract insights out of analysis and suggest they think about what insights to share at the next meeting. This linkage has enabled a powerful transformation in the way managers and advisors give feedback and coach. One female consultant reflected that "understanding how my core strengths can help me to address my development areas and propel me forward in my career is much more helpful than focusing solely on where I need to improve."

Training around leveraging strengths has contributed to an 18-percentage-point drop in the number of senior managers who think that feedback centers excessively on development areas. One male senior partner said, "Personally, I had my own philosophy about how to give feedback, but AiA has evolved it." The female senior partner who leads the firm's career development process commented, "We've introduced an entirely new vocabulary into our apprenticeship model. Our old rubric was that you're 'missing something.' Now we're looking for linkages between strengths and development areas, and all our written and verbal communication reflects that."

Acknowledging a Range of Effective Communication Styles

As with many workplaces, BCG has traditionally operated according to male communication norms. Before AiA, women reported receiving feedback from managers to "be more aggressive" or "take up more space," advice viewed by many women as ineffective or inauthentic (among other reasons, it's difficult for a five-foot-tall woman to internalize how to take up space). BCG recognized that many talented leaders, particularly women, have strong communication skills that differ from the dominant style. The most effective communicators span a range of styles and tailor their approach to fit the audience.

AiA acknowledges the importance of communication range and has pioneered a new, comprehensive training, which includes coaching around “building rapport” and “reading the room.” More women and men now see a range of styles as being necessary to navigate diverse situations. Coaching helps individuals identify where they have gaps in their range and develop new skills. For example, while coaching previously focused on delivering tough messages and landing a point of view, today we are focused on facilitating two-way dialogues and building connectivity. This portion of the program is in the early stages, but the firm has already seen an eight-percentage-point decrease in the number of people who report that their own communication style is different from that of successful BCG employees. One male partner noted, “I’m much more careful of not trying to force-fit everyone to be like me.” Similarly, a female partner reflected, “Before AiA, the fights in career reviews were insane. Now I hear, ‘She needs to be more aggressive,’ and I hit the pause button and ask the room, ‘What if she doesn’t want to be more aggressive?’”

Reflecting on our five-year journey and the results we have achieved, we recommend three actions for any company in which talent management defines competitive advantage:

Embed apprenticeship into the delivery of core products and services. Identify a model that develops the talent you need and resonates with the diverse set of individuals you employ, and embed it: Make it part of training, professional development, the way managers are coached and evaluated. Monitor the impact – are your employees more satisfied on key dimensions? Are you retaining more top talent? As a leadership team, take ownership for addressing individuals and behaviors that don’t meet the target model.

Prioritize and monitor relationships. Build opportunities for relationships to develop and flourish. Incentivize leadership to invest in relationships and monitor their effectiveness. For high-performing talent and underrepresented groups, ensure they have

performance-enhancing relationships at all levels. Collect information from individuals on which work relationships they consider their strongest, so you make sure there is someone who is supporting key talent.

Encourage diverse strengths and styles. A lot of organizations state that they want people with diverse backgrounds on their teams – but then coach people to behave uniformly. A truly diverse organization that reaps the benefits of diversity, better serving customers or clients in different situations, needs to value a range of communication and working styles. Feedback needs to build on the differentiating strengths of the individual, rather than their weaknesses.

BCG is in the process of implementing the AiA model beyond North America, aspiring to a global rollout. We also have plans to introduce AiA to other companies through our client work. And while originally designed with a gender focus, the program has benefited both men and women, with broader applicability to other diversity networks, including ethnic diversity, LGBT employees, and veterans.

We recognize that we have further to go before we reach our ambition of gender parity. Nonetheless, our experimentation offers a rare example of long-term progress on diversity goals. Results to date make us optimistic that transforming the day-to-day apprenticeship experience is fundamental to improving the satisfaction, retention, and advancement of our diverse workforce.



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