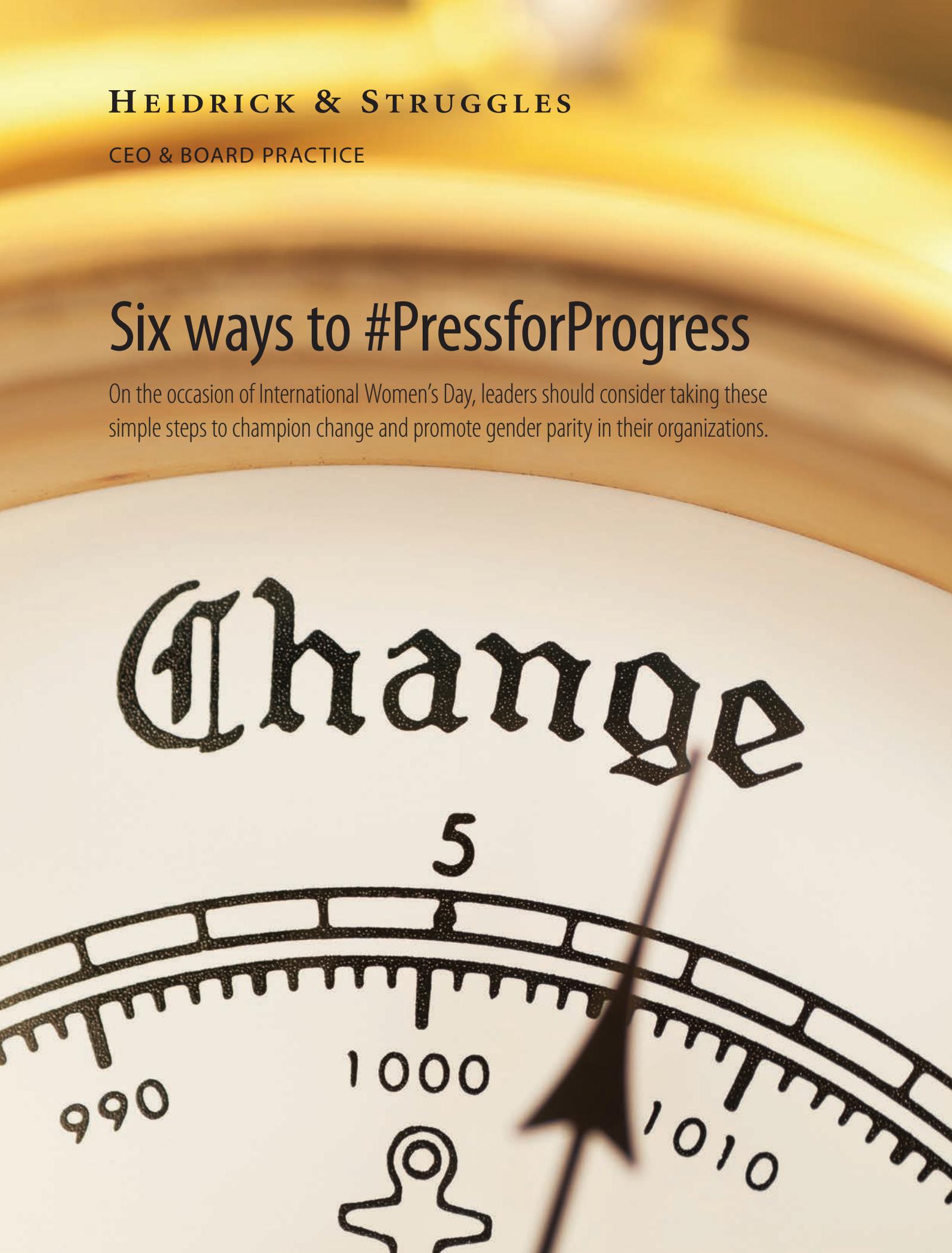


HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

CEO & BOARD PRACTICE

# Six ways to #PressforProgress

On the occasion of International Women's Day, leaders should consider taking these simple steps to champion change and promote gender parity in their organizations.



Change

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Another day, another headline related to gender disparity—it can seem overwhelming. What can we do about some of the major systemic issues around pay, promotion, even power? It can feel like too much to tackle. But while debates continue about the big-picture solutions, I would argue that there are things individual leaders, men and women alike, can tackle—in fact, any leader can do their part to #PressforProgress, this year’s theme for International Women’s Day. These simple actions take a little time and a bit of effort, but in my experience they can make a real difference in the careers of aspiring female leaders.

First, let’s take a look at some of the latest research:

- **Progress is still too slow:** According to the World Economic Forum’s 2017 *Global Gender Gap Report*, the proportion of female leaders across 12 industries has been increasing over the past decade by an average of little more than 2%.<sup>1</sup>
- **There is a lack of representation in the C-suite:** The most recent *Women in the Workplace* study, a joint project of LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, found that although 57% of recent college graduates are female, fewer women than men are hired at the entry level, with the representation of women declining at every subsequent level. The result: only “one in five C-suite leaders is a woman, and fewer than one in thirty is a woman of color. Moreover, compared to the modest gains women made in prior years, there are signs this year that women’s progress may be stalling.”<sup>2</sup>
- **Board parity isn’t around the corner:** Board Monitor 2017, my firm’s annual analysis of trends in non-executive director appointments to Fortune 500 boards, found that given the stalled rate for appointment of female directors, gender parity with male appointments won’t arrive in the boardroom until 2032.<sup>3</sup>

So what can each of us personally do? Here are some suggestions based on my experience:

**Women: Ask for what you want.** The research on the willingness of women to ask for promotions is mixed. Some researchers say that women are more reluctant than men to put themselves forward for advancement.<sup>4</sup> Other researchers, like those with the *Women in the Workplace* study, say that women ask for promotions with the same frequency as men. In any case, one thing seems indisputable: men don’t generally have to ask. Their bosses assume that they are always reaching for the next

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2017*, 2017, [weforum.org](http://weforum.org).

<sup>2</sup> LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2017*, 2017, [womenintheworkplace.com](http://womenintheworkplace.com).

<sup>3</sup> Heidrick & Struggles, “Board Monitor 2017: Is diversity at an impasse?” November 8, 2017, [heidrick.com](http://heidrick.com).

<sup>4</sup> Augusta Dwyer, “Why are women less likely to lobby for promotion?” *Globe and Mail*, September 6, 2012, [theglobeandmail.com](http://theglobeandmail.com).

rung on the corporate ladder. Not so with women. Their failure to speak up for themselves is often taken for lack of interest. And too many women believe the expression “Men are promoted on potential, while women are promoted on performance.”

**Bosses and mentors: Tell women to ask.** When a significant promotion (that I really wanted) opened up some years ago, I hesitated to throw my hat into the ring. I was worried about putting myself out there—what if I didn’t get the job or was “unqualified” for it? Then a highly respected senior colleague encouraged me to proactively write a plan describing how I would tackle the role and send it to the CEO. I did, hit enter, and waited and wondered. To my surprise, the CEO called to offer me the position. The moral of the story: asking counts, and passion counts even more.

**Reach out.** When I was beginning my career I tried to always wear my game face, making sure to look and act hypercompetent at all times. (I hadn’t yet learned the important lesson that vulnerability as a leader doesn’t mean a lack of strength.) But, like many young women, I was far less confident than I let on. In addition, I was a new mom trying to balance work with the demands of raising two young boys. Two different (and wonderful) senior women in my firm understood and weren’t fooled by my can-do demeanor! They knew how lonely the career journey can feel and how much a simple gesture can mean to a younger colleague. Both went out of their way to call, stop by, and ask, “Bonnie, how are you doing? How are things going?” It was a small thing, but their interest was heartfelt, and it made me feel a part of the firm in an authentic way and offered me a safe place to talk about my career.

Today I see more and more women, in my firm and elsewhere, reaching out to more-junior colleagues. I hear from different senior women who are initiating brown-bag get-togethers to talk with new female colleagues about their careers, inviting them to team lunches to encourage networking, and just letting women know that they have someone they can talk to candidly. Such actions may seem obvious, but many organizations provide surprisingly little feedback outside the annual performance review. Experienced executives—both women and men—can introduce the human element early in the careers of younger women with just a

15-minute phone call, a casual lunch, or a friendly chat now and then. That might not seem like much, but it could be the difference between promising young women flourishing or floundering in your organization.

**Ask “why not?”** It sounds simple, but we don’t have to accept the status quo. Asking “why not?” is a very powerful tool. More of us need to do so—and then ask “how?”

**Be an assertive champion for change.** We should all insist that consideration of gender issues be grounded in facts. (The *Women in the Workplace* researchers found that “nearly 50% of men think women are well represented in leadership in companies where only one in ten senior leaders is a woman.”) And we should insist that we all listen to women who choose to leave companies—are they resigning because they see their career path blocked by institutional bias?

Ask your colleagues—in the boardroom, in the C-suite, on your management team, in your department—what they think the group should be doing to move the needle on gender parity. For instance, my firm’s board-search practice concluded some time ago that we should make it a priority to present diverse slates of director candidates to clients, show them how their peer boards were performing on the issue, and talk about the demonstrable business advantages of a diverse board. What can you personally do to move the needle at your company?

**Consider your impact.** Think about #PressforProgress this way: What do you want to be remembered for? When executives are considering an offer for a new role or a board, I often urge them to think about the mark they want to make. What do you want to be remembered for by the people you work with? How do you want to spend your time? On the occasion of International Women’s Day, we should all ask ourselves a similar question: How can I be part of the solution? #PressforProgress! ■

## About the author

**Bonnie W. Gwin** (bgwin@heidrick.com) is a vice chairman and co-managing partner of Heidrick & Struggles’ CEO & Board Practice; she is based in the New York office.

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We pride ourselves on being our clients' most trusted advisor and offer an integrated suite of services to help manage these challenges and their leadership assets. This ranges from the acquisition of talent through executive search to providing counsel in areas that include succession planning, executive and board assessment, and board-effectiveness reviews.

Our CEO & Board Practice leverages our most accomplished search and leadership consulting professionals globally who understand the ever-transforming nature of leadership. This expertise, combined with in-depth industry, sector, and regional knowledge; differentiated research capabilities; and intellectual capital, enables us to provide sound global coverage for our clients.

## Leaders of Heidrick & Struggles' CEO & Board Practice

### Global

#### **Bonnie Gwin**

New York

[bgwin@heidrick.com](mailto:bgwin@heidrick.com)

#### **Jeff Sanders**

New York

[jsanders@heidrick.com](mailto:jsanders@heidrick.com)

### Europe and Africa

#### **Sylvain Dhenin**

Zurich

[sdhenin@heidrick.com](mailto:sdhenin@heidrick.com)

#### **Jan Hall**

London

[jhall@heidrick.com](mailto:jhall@heidrick.com)

### Asia Pacific

#### **Fergus Kiel**

Sydney

[fkiel@heidrick.com](mailto:fkiel@heidrick.com)

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