



## **Women in Facility Management: Role of Mentors, Sponsors, Gender-Based Assumptions**

*Women in facility management: How women are reaching leadership roles — and how companies can help them grow. Part 4 of a 6-part article.*

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By Naomi Millán, Senior Editor April 2015 - [Facilities Management](#)

Other strategies executives can use to try to get more women into leadership positions in facility management include mentoring and sponsoring, as well as avoiding falling into inaccurate gender-based assumptions.

Cross-gender sponsoring relationships can be difficult to navigate because they can come across as unseemly — a male senior executive taking a young female associate out for a networking lunch may raise speculation in a way that would be far less likely were it two men, says Joanne Cleaver, president of Wilson-Taylor Associates, a consulting firm focused on advancing women in business. This then results in it being easier for men to tap into the informal network in an industry and for women to lose out on opportunities to showcase their abilities so that they subsequently get set aside.

"It's easier for men to get clarity from other men, and it's easier for men to see a route that has been forged by other men," Cleaver says. "It's partly gender politics, partly cultural barriers. That's the moment when the industry and the employer needs to recognize those cultural barriers and be very explicit, clear, and consistent in how it does explain and outline these opportunities so that they're equally understandable and available to all."

And lastly, senior leaders can focus on not reflexively counting women out when they are considering whom they're going to invest in. It's highly unlikely that this is being done on a conscious level, but assumptions made about a woman and her career can alter what opportunities she's presented with.

"Oftentimes there are cultural expectations that discount the contribution or the availability or the willingness of women to advance to the next level," says Cleaver. For example, it is classically assumed that a man is available to travel as part of the duties or training for a new position. "If a woman has a family, it's assumed she won't travel," Cleaver says. "They're just quietly put aside because everyone makes assumptions. If you don't ask her, you don't know."

## **How To Avoid a Common Breakdown in Communication**

In an effort to be proactive in her career, a woman will approach her boss and ask what she should be doing to get to the next level.

Often the reply is: Just keep doing what you're doing.

This is a common breakdown in communication, says Joanne Cleaver, president of Wilson-Taylor Associates, a consulting firm focused on advancing women in business. The supervisor thinks he's saying, "We have our eye on you for promotion, just sit tight," but what she hears is, "We have nothing more for you but what you're doing right now," Cleaver says.

This leads to frustration and often precipitates the candidate leaving for perceived greener pastures, to the utter confusion of management.

"You need to change the script: 'What one or two experiences or skills do I explicitly need to qualify for XYZ job, which I believe to be the next logical step for my career?' So get specific," says Cleaver.

"And then for the bosses to respond as well by being more specific: 'Oh, we have you in mind for XYZ rotation. It won't be coming up for six months but just know we have a Post-it note on you for that opportunity. Meanwhile, it would be great if you could step up a bit on your industry volunteer experience to complement your internal leadership experience with something that's more outward facing.'

"Now you've got a meaningful conversation."

— *Naomi Millán*

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