

Shattering Glass Ceilings: Break Barriers and Pave the Way

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ABSTRACT

Project Management Methodologies for Shattering the Glass Ceiling

The "glass ceiling," a metaphor for invisible barriers hindering career advancement, particularly for women and underrepresented groups, persists despite progress. This research synthesizes current statistics on gender and ethnic disparities in workplace advancement, drawing from the 2024 Women in the Workplace Report and global leadership projections for 2025. Key findings reveal that for every 100 men promoted to manager in 2024, only 81 women were, with variations across racial groups: White women at 89, and Asian women at 99 per 100 men. While women's representation in senior leadership is projected to increase (e.g., 22.8% of CEO/Managing Director roles globally in 2025), significant gaps remain. Addressing these systemic barriers requires proactive strategies. This paper proposes leveraging project management methodologies – specifically SWOT and PEST analyses for personal career planning, the initiation phase for opportunity identification, monitoring and controlling for navigating backlash through self-advocacy, and the closing phase for legacy building and mentorship. By applying these frameworks, individuals can strategically plan their career trajectories, overcome obstacles, and actively contribute to dismantling the glass ceiling for future generations.

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Introduction

Deconstructing the Impenetrable: Applying Project Management Principles to Dismantle the Glass Ceiling

The metaphor of the "glass ceiling" has become a ubiquitous descriptor for the intangible yet potent barriers that impede the upward mobility of individuals, particularly women and those from underrepresented groups, in their professional lives. This phenomenon, where aspirational career goals remain visibly within reach yet frustratingly unattainable, manifests in various forms, including persistent underrepresentation in leadership, entrenched pay disparities, and the insidious influence of limiting stereotypes.

While societal and organizational awareness of these inequities has grown, statistical evidence continues to underscore the recalcitrance of these barriers [1]. The imperative for "Accelerating Action," as highlighted by the theme of International Women's History Month 2025, underscores the urgent need for practical and actionable strategies to transcend these limitations.

Traditional approaches to addressing the glass ceiling often focus on systemic organizational change and policy reform, which are undoubtedly crucial. However, this paper posits a complementary perspective: the proactive application of individual agency, guided by the well-established principles and methodologies of project management. Drawing upon recent statistical data highlighting the persistent disparities in promotion rates and leadership representation, this article argues that individuals can strategically

navigate and actively dismantle the glass ceiling by adopting a project-based approach to their own career development.

This research will explore how key project management phases – planning (through self-administered SWOT and PEST analyses), initiation (for strategic opportunity identification), monitoring and controlling (to navigate workplace backlash via self-advocacy), and closing (for legacy building and fostering future advancement) – can be effectively leveraged as a framework for personal and professional growth.

By reframing career advancement as a personal project, individuals can gain greater control over their trajectories, proactively address potential obstacles, and ultimately contribute to shattering the invisible barriers that have historically limited their potential. This paper aims to provide a novel and empowering perspective on overcoming the glass ceiling, shifting from passive observation of systemic inequities to active engagement in personal and collective advancement.

Research Evidence of Persistent Disparities in Workplace Advancement

To contextualize the enduring challenge of the glass ceiling, this research draws upon key findings from the Women in the Workplace Report, a comprehensive analysis of gender representation in corporate America. The data reveals a persistent disparity in promotion rates at the managerial level [1]. Specifically, for every 100 men promoted to manager in 2024, only 81 women experienced similar upward mobility. While this represents a marginal improvement from the 79 women promoted per 100

men in 2018, the rate still indicates a significant impediment to women's early career progression into leadership roles.

Further disaggregation of this data by race and ethnicity reveals nuanced yet concerning trends. Promotion rates for White women to manager positions exhibited fluctuation over recent years, reaching a high of 94 promotions per 100 men in 2022 before declining to 89 per 100 men in 2024. This suggests that even within the broader category of women, progress is not linear and can be subject to regression. The promotion rates for Asian women to managerial roles demonstrated even greater volatility, peaking at 116 promotions per 100 men in 2021 but subsequently dropping to 99 per 100 men in 2024 [1]. This instability highlights the complex and potentially less predictable pathways to advancement for specific racial and ethnic groups.

Examining representation at more senior leadership levels on a global scale, projections for 2025 indicate a gradual increase in women's presence. Women are expected to hold 22.8% of CEO/Managing Director positions globally, a modest increase of 1.6 percentage points from 2024. Similarly, the projected percentage of women in Chief Finance Officer roles is 38.9% in 2025, a more notable increase of 5.1 percentage points from the previous year. Human Resources Officer roles continue to exhibit the highest representation of women, projected at 47.6% in 2025, reflecting a 2.6 percentage point increase.

While these projections suggest incremental progress in women's representation at the highest organizational echelons, the persistent disparities in managerial promotions and the still significant gap in overall senior leadership underscore the enduring impact of the glass ceiling. The data reinforces the timely and critical need for proactive strategies to "Accelerate Action" (International Women's History Month, 2025 theme) and dismantle the invisible barriers hindering equitable career advancement. The subsequent sections of this paper will explore how the principles of project management can offer a novel framework for individuals to actively engage in this process.

Discussion: A Project Management Framework for Navigating and Shattering the Glass Ceiling

The statistical evidence presented earlier underscores the persistent reality of the glass ceiling, manifesting as disparities in promotion rates and underrepresentation in leadership despite incremental progress [1]. To actively address these "invisible barriers," this paper proposes a novel framework rooted in the principles of project management, empowering individuals to take a proactive stance in their career development.

Planning for Career Advancement as a Project

Drawing parallels from established project management practices, individuals seeking to overcome the glass ceiling can initiate a strategic planning phase for their career trajectory. Just as organizations utilize tools like SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and PEST (Political, Economic, Socio-cultural, Technological) analyses to formulate strategic initiatives, individuals can adapt these frameworks for personal and professional development.

Conducting a self-SWOT analysis enables a critical evaluation of one's internal capabilities and external challenges. Identifying "strengths" as personal assets and "weaknesses" as areas for growth aligns with the project management principle of resource assessment and risk identification. Framing "opportunities" as potential pathways for advancement and "threats" as potential

roadblocks (which can include systemic biases or lack of sponsorship) allows for proactive strategy development to mitigate negative impacts and leverage favorable conditions.

Similarly, a self-PEST analysis encourages a broader environmental scan, considering external factors that might influence career progression, such as changes in organizational culture ("socio-cultural"), economic shifts impacting opportunities, or the emergence of new technologies ("technological") that could be leveraged for skill development. This detailed planning phase provides a structured foundation for setting ambitious yet achievable career goals, directly addressing the need to "defy the odds" in the face of systemic barriers [2].

Initiating Strategic Action and Seizing Opportunities

The initiation phase in project management involves defining and authorizing the project. In the context of career advancement, this translates to actively identifying and pursuing opportunities that align with the goals established during the planning phase. As the data on promotion disparities indicates, upward mobility is not always passively bestowed. Individuals must proactively seek out projects and responsibilities that offer visibility, skill development, and networking opportunities [1]. This requires a strategic assessment of one's current workload and a willingness to take on challenging assignments, even amidst ambiguity. Viewing these opportunities as strategic "chess moves," as opposed to potential pitfalls, fosters a proactive mindset.

By aligning chosen projects with identified strengths and opportunities from the self-SWOT and PEST analyses, individuals can strategically position themselves for advancement. This proactive approach directly counters the systemic inertia that contributes to the slow rate of progress in women's and underrepresented groups' ascension into leadership, as evidenced by the modest increases in CEO/Managing Director roles globally.

Monitoring and Controlling for Navigating Backlash and Advocating for Progress

The monitoring and controlling phase of project management focuses on tracking progress, managing risks, and ensuring the project stays on course. In the context of career advancement, this phase is crucial for navigating potential backlash that can arise when individuals from underrepresented groups actively pursue advancement. As the previous points suggest, seeking higher-level roles or increased responsibility can be met with resistance from various sources. Employing project management principles of risk management and stakeholder management becomes vital. Proactive self-promotion and self-advocacy serve as key strategies for mitigating this backlash [3].

Research indicates a strong correlation between self-advocacy and positive career outcomes, including greater satisfaction, organizational rewards, and improved hierarchical status [4]. By clearly articulating their contributions, advocating for their needs, and strategically navigating the organizational culture, individuals can effectively manage resistance and ensure their progress is recognized. This proactive self-advocacy directly addresses the systemic biases that can hinder advancement, ensuring that individual merit and capabilities are acknowledged, thereby contributing to a more equitable pathway to leadership than the current statistics reflect.

By applying the structured methodologies of project management to individual career development, this paper offers a tangible framework for actively challenging and dismantling the glass

ceiling. The planning, initiation, and monitoring/controlling phases provide a roadmap for individuals to strategically navigate systemic barriers, seize opportunities, and advocate for their advancement. While organizational change remains paramount, empowering individuals with these proactive tools can accelerate the "Action" needed to achieve more equitable representation in leadership and ultimately shatter the invisible barriers that persist.

Fostering Legacy and Future Advancement: The Project Closing Phase and Beyond

The culmination of individual efforts to navigate and shatter the glass ceiling, marked by the attainment of desired leadership positions, necessitates a strategic "project closing" phase focused on leaving a lasting legacy and fostering the advancement of future generations. Just as project closure involves documenting lessons learned and ensuring project benefits are realized, individuals who have successfully overcome barriers have a responsibility to evaluate their journey and actively work to simplify the path for those who follow. The persistent underrepresentation of diverse individuals in senior leadership roles, as highlighted by the limited number of Black VPs, Hispanic executive directors, and LGBTQIA+ team leaders in visible positions, underscores the critical need for those who break through to become accessible mentors and knowledge-sharers.

A significant challenge lies in the tendency for successful individuals to become isolated or fail to actively cultivate the next generation of leaders. The reluctance or inability of those in senior positions to share their expertise and provide clear pathways for advancement perpetuates the very barriers they may have overcome. While the demands of leadership are significant, consciously creating opportunities for mentorship, sponsorship, and knowledge transfer is paramount. This involves actively "paving the way" for teammates and peers by formalizing new processes, creating "playbooks" of successful strategies, and sharing the insights gained through personal experience. The emphasis should shift from holding onto hard-won knowledge to democratizing access to the tacit understanding required for upward mobility.

By posing the "right questions to the right people" and then disseminating this knowledge, those who have shattered the glass ceiling can empower others to do the same. This proactive approach to legacy building transforms individual success into a catalyst for broader systemic change, ensuring that the progress made is not an isolated achievement but a stepping stone for a more equitable future of leadership [3].

Conclusion

This paper has argued for the application of project management principles as a novel framework for understanding and actively dismantling the glass ceiling. Drawing upon statistical evidence highlighting the persistent disparities in workplace advancement for women and underrepresented groups, the discussion has outlined how the phases of project management – planning (through self-SWOT and PEST analyses), initiation (for strategic opportunity identification), monitoring and controlling (to navigate backlash via self-advocacy), and closing (for legacy building and mentorship) – can be strategically employed at the individual level.

By reframing career development as a personal project, individuals can gain agency in navigating systemic barriers, proactively seek opportunities for growth, manage resistance through self-advocacy, and ultimately contribute to a more equitable leadership landscape by fostering the advancement of those who follow. The

adoption of this project-oriented mindset, coupled with ongoing organizational efforts, offers a powerful approach to accelerating the action needed to truly shatter the glass ceiling and cultivate inclusive leadership for the future.

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