Reimagining Leadership Through Self Advocacy, Networks and Feedback

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Introduction

The contemporary workplace in 2025 is marked by profound disruption, recalibration, and the enduring aftershocks of a global pandemic that reshaped how we lead, live, and work. Post COVID-19, organizations around the world adopted hybrid and remote models, engaged in conversations around inclusion, and encountered pressure to address systemic disparities in the workforce. While some progress was made, recent trends suggest major setbacks, performative behaviors, and widening gaps in advancement. These irrevocable shifts are unfolding alongside rapid technological advancement, and growing organizational distrust, raising new inquiries about effective strategies, leadership, and performance in these uncertain times.

As organizations collectively navigate the evolving workplace, the unique experiences of women of color offer guiding principles. Many of the most effective strategies for advancement emerge from those navigating the deepest systemic barriers. The experiences of women of color offer powerful insight into how leadership is accessed, perceived, and where it falls short. Women of color consistently experience compounding demands, including biased executive presence, burdens of caretaking, harsh reprimands, and exclusion from power networks. Their pathways, successes, failures, setbacks, and constraints reveal essential lessons for navigating and transforming the workplace. The experiences of women of color surface among the informal rules of advancement, the realities of organizational culture, and the specific conditions that either support or suppress leadership potential. What emerges are rich insights about persistent gaps and clear pathways to sustainable leadership advancement.

This report offers timely insights and strategies from original research to illuminate next steps. We focus on three actionable areas: self-advocacy, strategic networking, and feedback, which emerged as critical levers of personal and professional growth for women of color. Through qualitative interviews, survey data, and storytelling, we deepen our understanding of how power operates in professional settings. We offer guidance on building meaningful relationships, expanding access to influence, and creating conditions where talent can thrive. This report primarily focuses on insights extracted from qualitative data

Importantly, while our research foregrounds the experiences of women of color, the strategies are not exclusive to this population. Practices that support access and empowerment are better for everyone. When workplaces center the needs of the most marginalized, organizations become healthier, creative, and effective overall. The insights in this report offer individual strategies for advancement, tools for more collaborative professional relationships, and a collective blueprint for reimagining organizational culture.

"You are fighting your whole career… fighting to be heard, to be visible, and for them to believe that you are halfway intelligent and that you have that job because of you and not because of the color of your skin or your gender."

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Relevant Literature

Women in the workplace navigate broad complexities shaped by intersecting factors involving gender bias, age discrimination, and the desire for leadership (Ibarra et al., 2010; Settles et al., 2019). Despite progress, mature women often encounter age-related stereotypes that inhibit their authority and opportunity to lead. Younger women in the early stages of their careers report struggling with perceived credibility and executive presence. Women in managerial and director positions report difficulty navigating the "messy middle," a mid-career phase marked by stagnation, limited advancement, and increased burnout. McKinsey's Women in the Workplace research (2023, 2024) confirms that many women remain underrepresented in leadership, have fewer pathways to promotion, experience a lack of sponsorship, and endure higher attrition rates, despite being qualified, credentialed, and willing to lead.

Recent studies highlight several challenges shaping women's workplace experiences (Ibarra et al., 2010; Smith & Johnson, 2020). There is growing angst around the perceived backlash to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, leading to stalled or reversed progress for inclusion. Simultaneously, the rapid advancement of AI technologies has raised concerns about job displacement, homogeneity, lack of creativity, and the amplification of existing biases. Many women have also experienced mounting pressures as part of the "sandwich generation," juggling careers while caring for children, physically disabled or ill loved ones (siblings, spouse, family members), and aging parents. Maternity re-entry has also been highlighted as an inconsistent and unsupported obstacle in many organizations, leading to complications with retention and career derailment.

These issues are often compounded and heightened by race, creating unique and distinct challenges for women of color (Chaudry & Crichton, 2020). The intersection of gender, race, and socio-economic status can intensify barriers to advancement, reduce access to support, and increase scrutiny in leadership roles (Wingfield, 2015). Accordingly, women of color frequently experience workplace dynamics that differ significantly from their counterparts and require specific attention to create opportunities for equitable growth.

Research Approach

Our study explores the unique experiences of women of color in the workplace. Insights presented an opportunity to focus on how gender identity and organizational culture shape professional outcomes. We collected data in three phases: an exploratory questionnaire and listening session, a quantitative survey, and in-depth qualitative interviews. We received 181 survey responses and conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with participants from historically excluded backgrounds.

Survey participants represented a predominantly multicultural demographic: 75% identified as women, 22% as men, 2% as transgender, and 2% as non-binary. Regarding racial and ethnic identity, 58% identified as Black/African American, 20% as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, 18% as Asian, and 14% as White.1 All our interviewees identified as members of Historically Excluded Groups (HEGs), with 70% identifying as women, including 45% Black/African American women, 15% Asian women, and 10% Latina.

Our research approach allowed participants to share their stories in their own voices. These conversations provided rich insights into the workplace's emotions, challenges, and organizational dynamics. Semi-structured interviews revealed themes such as tone policing, career peril, success and satisfaction, racialized expectations of executive presence, and the pressures of career pivots. We transcribed and coded all interviews, identifying recurring patterns and emergent themes.

Our investigation documented a myriad of perspectives illuminating the complexity of professional experiences across workplaces. Generally, women of color did not reflect high degrees of psychological availability, and HEGs frequently reflected upon disruptive career upheaval and professional pivots. Despite the broad range of experiences, Black women demonstrated unique patterns, perceptions, distinctions, and striking themes surrounding harsh reprimands. Similarly, Asian women encountered specific nuances shaped by cultural stereotypes that often silenced their contributions, shrouded their leadership potential, and complicated perceptions of assertiveness. These issues, rooted simultaneously in interlocking systems and nuanced cultural dynamics, revealed a need for a comprehensive and culturally responsive approach.

This report summarizes key insights, such as self-advocacy, strategic networking, and feedback, as critical pathways to leadership and career progression for women of color in the workplace. Even with such rich findings, the topic and dataset offer more opportunities for deeper analysis and further exploration. Through sparking ongoing research, we aim to expand conversations that address evolving and intersectional needs of women of color in the workplace to promote personal growth, leadership development, and organizational advancements.

Intersectional Realities in the Workplace

This section includes several core themes from our research, offering insights, skills, and strategies for women of color navigating today's workplace. Persistent dichotomies were revealed, echoing a central theme shared across interviews – the ongoing desire to be fully seen, heard, and understood, particularly about the layered complexities of intersectional identities. One participant reflected, "You are fighting your whole career... fighting to be heard, to be visible, and for them to believe that you are halfway intelligent and that you have that job because of you and not because of the color of your skin or your gender." In this context, self-advocacy, strategic networking, and giving and receiving feedback are essential for survival, advancement, and leadership. The following sections explore these themes in depth, beginning with self-advocacy: a foundational yet often underdeveloped skill that many women of color can leverage while contending with organizational dynamics that have neither recognized nor valued their contributions.

Self-Advocacy

"We don't tend to advocate for ourselves, but when it comes to others, we do."

– Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Self-advocacy remains a critical skill that is neglected among women of color, in part because it can feel like a luxury – something easier to do when your job isn't on the line or when the stakes don't involve proving your worth every day (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2009; Settles et al., 2019). For many, particularly Black and Brown women, the workplace is still a space where assertiveness is misread, and confidence is questioned.

Speaking up requires courage and strategy and does not always yield the respect or affirmation it should. In many instances, the courage to speak up was often motivated by the desire to advocate for others, rather than themselves. As one participant shared, "My team motivates me. If I have a team that I need to lift, protect, and advocate for, I tend to be louder, especially in those moments where I see that there's unfairness. If it's coming towards me, I can handle it; I'll be quiet. When it comes to people respecting or pushing my team in a way that I don't feel is sympathetic or fair, I tend to be a lot more vocal, so it almost feels like an advocate role, which empowers me. Maybe because I'm a mom too, like, you know, mess with me, fine, mess with my kids, there's gonna be a problem."

This insight reflects a recurring dynamic: Women of color often find it more acceptable to advocate for others than for themselves. Advocacy for one's team becomes a pathway to empowerment, even when self-advocacy still feels risky, odd, or uncomfortable. In many cases, participants did not begin using their voice to advocate for their needs, advancement, or well-being until much later in their careers. However, developing self-advocacy skills earlier is vital to fostering personal confidence and creating cultures where fairness and voice are normalized and expected. When women of color advocate for themselves, they challenge harmful norms, model leadership, and create space for historically excluded professionals to advance and experience workplace belonging. Self-advocacy remains a critical skill that is neglected among women of color, in part because it can feel like a luxury – something easier to do when your job isn't on the line or when the stakes don't involve proving your worth every day (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2009; Settles et al., 2019). For many, particularly Black and Brown women, the workplace is still a space where assertiveness is misread, and confidence is questioned.

Speaking Up and Using Your Voice

“Quiet doesn’t cut it.”

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Women of color consistently walk a fine line between being seen as too quiet or too aggressive. Speaking up is often unsupported, especially in predominantly White or male environments where assertiveness is often only tolerated from certain people. In our research, women (54%) were more likely than men (33%) to express having felt the experience of being muted. Age correlated positively with feelings of invisibility, with 75% of those older than 45 reporting such feelings, compared with around 40% of those younger than 35 years old. Many interviewees spoke about needing to “manage” their tone or being penalized for expressing frustration or urgency – experiences that amount to tone policing and contribute to widespread workplace silence. One participant noted, “It ranges from you need to watch your tone, to you need to watch your tone of voice. You're too passionate about your idea. Or even when I raise questions. Or when I create boundaries, like say, hey, this is my boundary – I don't think I have time or the bandwidth to work on this. Can this get pushed? I get reprimanded, and then, if I hold back, kind of like tone it down, I get the opposite end of the spectrum of it, like, you’re too quiet, you're not speaking up enough. We think you're withholding your opinion. There's no winning.”

Still, using one's voice is a tool of survival. Those who have navigated the “messy middle” of their careers often learn how to pick battles and build allies to support their interventions. In many instances, tone policing can be an obstacle that persists throughout one's career. As one participant noted, “I’ve had to work on my tone, my delivery, and even the tenor of my voice. This is something that's been a thread throughout my career. I have to be very, very conscious and careful about how I say things, as people interpret them in a very different way. I don't like people interpreting that I don't have the skills or the experience necessary for my job.” Organizations must recognize that voice, especially dissenting or critical, is not antagonistic; it is often the clearest signal of commitment.

Asking Questions

“Ask the questions… Gather as much information as possible before walking into the room. And if you can’t get the information, be in alignment and association with someone else in that room who has some knowledge.”

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Curiosity is often encouraged in theory, but in practice, many women of color feel penalized for not knowing the "rules" or punished for challenging them. One participant noted, “It is clear to me that speaking up and asking questions can be very detrimental. It makes you not a team player, no matter what.” This reveals an underlying culture where women are expected to be omniscient or silent. Asking questions, especially strategically, can expose cracks in an organization’s logic and promotional pathways. When these questions come from women of color, they are often met with defensiveness rather than engagement. We must create environments where critical inquiry is seen as a sign of leadership readiness, not insubordination.

Confidence and Power

"Black Women Are Exhausted, But Confidence is the Fuel."

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Confidence is an internal trait and a socially constructed, contested resource. Women's confidence can erode when they are consistently interrupted, excluded, or undermined. For women of color, this erosion is compounded by systemic inequities. Across career stages, participants in our research identified a persistent need to strengthen confidence, power, and self-advocacy.

During preliminary explorations of workplace experiences of women of color, confidence continually emerged as a critical issue among participants. Feelings of career fragility and peril, especially during transition and early career phases, surfaced as defining experiences. Participants pointed to unsupportive and/or culturally incompetent managers and leadership as issues that intensified professional instability and self-doubt. "I was told that I was emotional as an area to improve. And this is when I'm working with a White guy who was yelling at me all the time. I went to a mentor and asked, 'How should I deal with this?' Because my instinct always is to be like, 'What am I not seeing about myself, so let me self-reflect first.' And so I went to the mentor, and I was like, 'What do you think about this?' And so, I was able to use that as confidence to then go back to my manager and say, 'Can you tell me about a time where I was emotional, and it affected my work?' And they couldn't. So, I was like, I'm not going to sign this until you take that out, because this is not real feedback. So, I think there are two parts. There's the making myself small and/or feeling small, and then, pushing back against that and knowing who I am and what I would stand for." These workplace experiences marked periods of vulnerability among participants, emphasizing the need for confidence, power, and organizational support.

Black women described grappling with internalized racism and oppression in the workplace. Many assumed responsibilities for mistreatment and infractions, rather than questioning the external, often racialized, forces at play. For many, it was not until much later in their careers that they began to challenge these dynamics, recognize broader structures, discern insufficient resources, and identify patterns influencing their professional experiences. One interviewee highlighted, "Over the years, I had saved up a bunch of money, and that allowed me the confidence to speak up. I want to acknowledge that because it was a huge thing. Money gives you a level of safety where you could tell people, 'This is how to treat me, this is how not to treat me. This is what I want. This is what I don't want.' So that was a big part of it. Another part of it was time. I had been on the team long enough and done enough that people knew me, trusted me, and believed in me. And so, me saying something now that was maybe different or louder than I would have before, there was now space for that. I didn't come off as a threat, because they knew me and they knew my skills."

The theme of *invisibility* also appeared across narratives. Many women of color reported feeling marginalized and "othered" in predominantly White male-dominated spaces. Participants noted internalizing the racism and sexism embedded in their workplace environments. Some said it wasn't until much later that they gained the perspective, wisdom, and language to identify what issues they were experiencing. Participants described how, over time, confidence, maturity, and a focus on well-being helped them resist invisibility and reclaim agency. "A lot of times I felt really small, virtually invisible. And I think as I have progressed in my career, as I have built confidence in my own understanding and expertise, I can take up space in a room because I know what I'm talking about. I do have something to contribute and add value to. That confidence has grown over the years." Notably, a sense of internal power also emerged with career development.

Mid-level to senior career stages were identified as the most precarious, routinely lacking specific guidance, mentorship, and advocacy. Participants reported experiencing self-doubt, undermining, and second-guessing themselves when they exhibited confident workplace behavior. Black and Asian women shared that they were reprimanded and frequently penalized for speaking up, following their instincts, and raising questions surrounding legitimate concerns. "I speak up, I have a one-on-one conversation with the person. It just kind of feels like a now or never thing where, I'd rather just be reprimanded for standing up for what I believe in and trying to plant the seed that this shouldn't happen to me or other people than like, just kind of be complicit." The experiences of women of color in the workplace have affirmed that confidence is not only a personal asset. Confidence is also an early intervention, professional protection, and an internal compass that helps women navigate leadership and mitigate professional disruptions.

Power, like confidence, is often gate-kept through invisible mechanisms: who is invited to high-stakes meetings, who receives stretch assignments, and who is deemed "leadership material." For women of color, building confidence often begins in peer networks and affirming relationships, and deepens when women of color refuse to shrink themselves to fit limiting molds. The cultivation of power is relational: it requires being seen, mentored, and sponsored, and the freedom to take risks without disproportionate consequences.

Even amid burnout and chronic exhaustion, Black women have noted the need for continued commitment and confidence. "You cannot afford to keep quiet. You cannot afford to keep your head down and do the job, because there is so much swirling around you, you will miss it. If you just keep your head down and do the job, you become the workhorse, and you will be labeled and probably never get out of that spot like others around you. No, speak up, have the confidence, and have the conversation because otherwise they will think you are asleep, and you''e satisfied." Confidence was named as an essential fuel to endure, reignite, transform, and elevate the workplace.

Strategic Networking

"No, I don't have a sponsor. I don't even know what that is."

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Networking is often framed as a skill that women of color lack. However, many are already doing it, just not in the ways that get rewarded by traditional systems. Strategic networking is not simply about chatting with people at a happy hour or playing golf. Strategic networking cultivates relationships that lead to professional opportunities, protection, visibility, power, and sponsorship. It goes beyond casual guidance and insights about executive presence to create intentional and cohesive ecosystems of influence, advocacy, and support across multiple and overlapping levels of power (Chaudhry & Crichton, 2020; Ibarra et al., 2010; Thomas, 2001; Wingfield, 2015). Our data suggests that strategic networking involves understanding power, identifying gatekeepers, and working laterally across verticals to create peer-based coalitions. For women of color, especially those navigating the "messy middle," strategic networking must be driven by intention, intergenerational collaboration, and advancement.

Survey responses to questions about sponsorship revealed that up to half (50%) of participants selected "Do Not Know/Rather Not Say," highlighting the need to define sponsorship more clearly in future studies. Quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews reinforced that many women of color were unfamiliar with the concept of sponsorship and had an incomplete understanding of what strategic networking entails. Many participants noted that in their quest for career guidance, they often sought out people who looked like them. While there is great value in receiving guidance from those who share your identity or experience, relying primarily on this criterion can be limiting, exclusionary, or counterproductive.

When individuals support or advocate for those who mirror their experiences, values, or social norms, gatekeeping can arise from interpersonal dynamics that promote favoritism, conformity, confirmation bias, and insularity. These factors can contribute to networks that limit access to opportunity, regardless of talent or potential. Rather than wasting time in situations where advancement or growth is unlikely, strategic networking encourages the recognition of gatekeeping to avoid barriers, energy drains, or burnout. One participant asserted, "I am more exhausted than my White counterparts. I have to be excellent in my craft, but I also have to ensure that I am keeping up with the incredibly high standards of the (gate)keepers who feel that I should be doing extra 24/7." In some cases, women of color, especially those in senior levels, experience additional pressures to provide professional guidance to others, often leading to increased and unpaid labor without adequate organizational resources.

Strategic networking thrives within diverse perspectives and is strengthened by powerful relationships that offer proximity to decision-making, access to influence, and alignment with long-term goals. Recognizing the systemic concentration of organizational power among White men is also essential to developing effective advancement strategies. One interviewee reflected that her most impactful sponsors were White men who recognized that her vision and work ethic aligned with their professional goals. As noted, they trusted that she would "march the ball down the field."

To maximize the return on their networking efforts, women of color must cultivate meaningful relationships across all organizational levels. Focusing solely on peer or subordinate connections may limit access to influence and opportunity. As one participant acknowledged, "I tend to form stronger relationships with my lower level, the people that I lead, versus the people that I follow. I've had mentors, but those mentors have not always advocated for me in a way that I felt has helped me get ahead – not in the way that I would be there for my mentees." Although understandable, this pattern reflects a broader challenge. Many women of color are excluded from traditional sponsorship pathways and must also be strategic in forging ties with individuals who can champion their advancement.

Too many women of color are over-mentored and under-sponsored. While mentoring can offer advice and affirmation, sponsorship provides the crucial currency of visibility and advocacy in high-stakes spaces. Sponsors put their reputations on the line to promote someone else's advancement. As participants noted, performative behaviors contribute to further complexities regarding sponsorships and career advancement for women of color. "Especially in the last couple of years, there were a lot of people who claimed that they were allies or were doing things vocally. Their actions were more for their attention or to be seen a certain way by other people, versus a lot of the work that a sponsor does behind the scenes, like you're not constantly getting pat on the back or nominated for an award for allyship sponsorship." Many women affirmed that they had mentors but few, if any, sponsors. Our research revealed that sixty percent of respondents said they had an early-career mentor, although only 37% said they currently have a mentor. 62% said they are currently mentoring one or more people. Only one out of the five respondents in the youngest age category of 18-24 (20%) said they currently have a mentor, compared with almost half of those slightly older in the 25-34 age range. Women were more likely (41%) to have a mentor currently than men (18%). Those identifying as heterosexual were more than twice as likely (42%) to have a mentor than were those who were LGBTQIA+ (16%). Creatively focused respondents were twice as likely (42%) to have a current mentor as those whose jobs were not creatively focused (20%).

Although traditional career strategies focus on vertical relationships that climb upward, lateral relationships can be just as powerful. One respondent affirmed, “My network has been more of my peers, as opposed to people ahead of me. Moreover, I think it’s also because organizations have been comfortable with the leadership, or whoever they had before, and they were not really looking to make changes, just to keep with the status quo.” Colleagues at the same career stage can offer emotional support, skill-sharing, and collective strategy. These lateral networks also serve as early coalitions for change, particularly when institutional advancement is slow. According to one interviewee, “There is momentum in surrounding myself with people who have similar interests, vision, energy, and values.” These networks can also function as pressure points, shifting norms, and creating alternative organizational power bases. We must recognize their value and elevate lateral networking as a powerful, legitimate pathway to momentum and progress.

The gap that strategic networking seeks to close is partly structural: women of color are less likely to have organic access to power brokers within their organizations. Nonetheless, gatekeepers continue to define leadership potential through a narrow lens that often excludes culturally grounded leadership styles. To navigate and disrupt these dynamics, women of color should ensure their networks include diverse peers, colleagues within their organizations, and external connections across industries. This multifaceted approach expands opportunities and creates resilience in the face of systemic exclusion. Ultimately, we must shift to recognize that real change demands individual support and organizational accountability.

Intergenerational Perspective

“The challenges are different, but there are always challenges at every stage of a career.”
–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

The workplace is not age-neutral. Each generational cohort has unique challenges. As of 2025, five generations are active in the workplace: Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation. Each cohort brings distinct communication styles, sometimes contributing to friction around collaboration, mentorship, knowledge diffusion, and strategic networking if not intentionally addressed. Persistent age-related stereotypes can contribute to misconceptions that some generations have it easier than others, masking barriers that each group faces. Without awareness and inclusive practices, intergenerational dynamics can reinforce isolation and exclusion, especially for women of color whose age and intersecting identities already complicate access to sponsorship, visibility, and career progression.

Younger women of color are often navigating spaces where their credibility is questioned due to a perceived lack of experience. In comparison, older women face marginalization based on assumptions about adaptability or ambition. Adopting an intersectional approach is incredibly helpful in understanding and developing support for women of color and their unique experiences. As one participant noted, “Not only am I a Black woman, I'm heterosexual, I'm a caregiver. I am over a certain age. However, I’m just looked at it dimensionally, and I think it is hard to understand the whole Black woman if you don't recognize the intersectionality that we have. So, I think that's critical. I just wish people could get that.”

Intergenerational tension can emerge among cohorts that have developed distinct strategies for navigating systemic barriers. Building meaningful cross-generational alliances to alleviate these tensions requires intentional dialogue, mutual respect, and debunking assumptions that knowledge flows from the top down. Research shows that organizations that practice reverse mentoring report increased empathy among leadership, higher retention, and greater innovation. Wisdom flows in all directions. Younger women have important insights, especially about cultural fluency and the future of work, while seasoned professionals bring historical knowledge and institutional navigation skills critical for sustainability. These dynamics strengthen collaboration and support across generations.

Managing Up

"Things have been very unclear. Moreover, I think the higher you go, the more unclear it is on what you should expect… Moreover, the credit is almost always unclear."

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Learning to "manage up" is often an unspoken requirement for survival and growth. For women of color, this can be especially complicated by cultural disconnects with supervisors or an absence of shared identity. Managing up includes anticipating leadership needs, setting boundaries, and advocating for oneself within hierarchical structures. It also involves deep listening and strategic communication skills; many women of color have had to master these skills to stay in the game. However, this labor often goes unnamed, unrecognized, and unrewarded. We need to talk more openly about this skillset, provide training, and name it as the essential leadership capability it is.

Participants noted that ambiguity surrounding "managing up" often contributes to confusion, career dissatisfaction, and inhibits retention among women of color in the workplace. Among survey participants, job satisfaction levels varied widely, with 6.7 (on a 10-point scale) as the overall average. More than one in four (27%) selected "5" or lower, indicating below-average job satisfaction. Factors that correlated with overall satisfaction levels included race/ethnicity (Asian and White were higher overall), position (Mid-level employees were lowest), creative focus (higher), and inclusive environment (higher). Major factors contributing to dissatisfaction included lack of growth, career stagnation, toxic work culture, insufficient compensation, lack of resources, burnout, understaffing, and lack of inclusion. Individuals feel stuck when career paths lack opportunities for progression or professional development.

Feedback

“Please ask for the feedback, because that way, you do not get surprised.”

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Feedback is one of the most potent tools for development, but it can also be the most damaging when delivered without cultural competence (Fletcher, 1999). Women of color report receiving vague or overly harsh feedback that lacks actionable detail and often feels deeply personal (Dutt et al., 2016; Smith & Johnson, 2020). One participant noted, “I was blindsided. In no way had I thought that I was going to be reprimanded for something that I wasn't even aware of, but I was.” Others are told they need to work on their “executive presence” without clarity on what that means (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). The double standards are persistent: while their White peers are encouraged to grow, women of color are often judged as lacking. This feedback gap can lead to stalling or opting out altogether. Participants continually emphasized the critical importance of feedback in acquiring the momentum needed for advancing, upskilling, and professional development. One interviewee noted, “Get feedback on a constant basis. You literally have to make them feel comfortable with giving you feedback. It is a collective win and eliminates surprises in your review.”

Cultural Competence

“As a woman, as a person, you’re exhausted because you’ve had to do all of this work of thinking about how to rephrase things, or how to make sure that they have the context so they don’t shoot down your idea because they don’t understand culture.”

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Feedback is not neutral. It is always filtered through assumptions, values, and power. When supervisors lack cultural competence, feedback can become a mechanism for assimilation rather than development. In addition to feedback, several women shared examples of other obvious and subtle ways that the lack of cultural competence in the workplace has inhibited their professional experiences. Participants noted adverse effects on team cohesion, inclusive leadership, decisiveness, poor communication, and microaggressions. “I'm constantly questioning, was that a microaggression, or was that just the person being an asshole? There’s lots of competition, lots of egos. Lots of male aggression at the top. So, you can't lead in the way that feels natural to you.” Participants noted strong desires for leadership to model culturally competent feedback in hopes of diffusing that knowledge, practice, and expectation throughout the organization. Culturally competent feedback considers the realities of employees, avoids generalizations, and is rooted in the desire to support, not control. We need more managers trained to give feedback that recognizes diverse leadership styles and affirms identity while fostering growth.

Documentation: Formal and Informal

“Make sure everything is documented. And if they run from you, in order not to give you feedback, document that too.”

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Documentation is a protection strategy and a paper trail of progress, or lack thereof. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of personal documentation and diligent record-keeping. One participant advised, “Document everything. Do not become sacrificed, eliminated, or offered up.” Women of color are frequently hyper-documented when mistakes are made and under-documented when successes occur. Formal evaluations often omit key context, ignore the impact of workplace dynamics, or misattribute outcomes. Informal feedback, meanwhile, can be inconsistent, cloaked in friendliness, or withheld entirely. Encouraging women to document their wins, keep records of meetings, and follow up on feedback with written clarification can create a measure of control and clarity. Organizations must also review who gets written up, praised, or reprimanded and why.

Evaluation

"I'm having a very difficult time transitioning upward in my career. Despite having enough years of experience, it's been very hard to transition up."

–Research participant from ADCOLOR 2024 Women of Color Talent Pathways Research

Performance evaluations are not just assessments; they are narratives. And too often, those narratives reflect bias, misperceptions, and structural inequities. Participant responses revealed that toxic organizational cultures often coincided with weak or flawed evaluation processes. Dynamics such as ageism, overwork, and pigeonholing were also present in the experiences of women of color in the workplace. "I feel scorned. Ageism at my last organization forced me to work exclusively in a line of work I did not want to do. When I started here, I hoped that I would be able to advocate and push for diversity, but I was used as a puppet to highlight bare-minimum efforts. My awards and accomplishments never translated into promotions or raises. In my evaluation, the extra work I took on was overlooked." Survey respondents ages 35-44 were least likely (38%) to have worked in environments that included clear pathways for their growth and success. Women (42%) were less likely to agree that they were exposed to clear career pathways than were men (64%). Hispanic people (61%) were more likely to have experienced career success pathways than other racial groups, as were those who had DEI responsibilities as the majority or part of their jobs. We need evaluators to be accountable for fairness, more transparency in how evaluations are conducted, and what metrics will be used.

Recommendations: Pathways Forward

Self-advocacy and strategic networking are dynamic strategies that advance leadership development, career mobility, and organizational equity for women of color navigating the contemporary workplace. These practices are essential for promoting well-being, challenging structural inequities, and cultivating inclusive professional cultures. Self-advocacy entails building confidence, speaking up, managing, soliciting, applying feedback, asking critical questions, and maintaining documentation. Strategic networking involves securing sponsorship, navigating gatekeepers, and fostering peer collaboration, coalitions, and intergenerational support systems. Feedback serves as a continuous learning loop, enabling leaders to refine their approach, align with organizational goals, and build trust through openness and responsiveness. Together, these approaches empower individuals and contribute to cultural shifts within organizations. Next steps involve highlighting culturally competent feedback and the performance evaluation processes as training focal points to offer practical, real-time opportunities to model inclusive practices, disseminate knowledge, and prepare women of color and their organizations/institutions for long-term growth and success.

The following recommendations, drawn from our research, address the evolving needs of women of color by equipping individuals and institutions with actionable pathways towards leadership and optimal workplace culture:

- Amplify the voice & visibility of women of color in predominantly White, homogeneous, and/or male-dominated workplaces.
- Build coalitions that provide career momentum and diffuse cultural competence.
- Apply targeted strategies to navigate complex power structures and relationships, building with clarity and purpose.
- Design intentional sponsorship programs that track the advancement of women of color, with accountability measures for sponsors.
- Embed self-advocacy training and coaching into leadership development programs, de-stigmatizing assertiveness in feedback systems.

Recommendations: Pathways Forward

- Help teams bridge generational divides and unpack cultural assumptions in communication and feedback.
- Adopt review processes with racial bias safeguards and offer feedback coaching to managers.
- Encourage informal affinity-based networks and formalize peer mentoring and strategic networking opportunities across departments.
- Ensure that promotion pathways are transparent, accessible, and equitable. Include women of color of various backgrounds, ages, and career stages in designing these systems.
- Promote access to culturally responsive professional coaching to amplify self-awareness, challenge limiting beliefs, strengthen inquiry/questioning strategies, and enhance the ability to navigate politics and complex workplace dynamics with nuance and professionalism.
- Create ecosystems that support upskilling, growth, feedback, and psychological safety.

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Appendix A: Terms

The following definitions are provided to clarify terms used throughout this report. Language evolves and may vary by individual or cultural preference.

Women of Color
A collective term encompassing women who identify as Black, Latin, Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, and/or multiracial. This designation acknowledges shared experiences of gendered racialization and systemic inequities, while also honoring the diversity and nuance within and across communities.

Black Women
Women of African descent, including African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, African immigrants, and others across the diaspora.

Asian Women
Women who identify with East Asian, Southeast Asian, or South Asian heritage and Pacific Islander and Asian American identities. This group reflects various ethnic, linguistic, and migration experiences.

Latina/Latin Women
Women of Latin American descent, including those who identify as Latina, Latine, Latinx, or Hispanic.

Historically Excluded Groups (HEGs)
Communities and individuals who have been systematically denied and refused access to power, resources, and legal rights and protections in society and institutions due to race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or other intersecting identities. The term centers the history and structure of exclusion experienced by specific groups of people, including the denial of civil rights, disenfranchisement, restricted voting access, and limited economic freedoms. This term inherently acknowledges the impact of deliberate policies and practices that have excluded and marginalized these specific communities over generations.

Joanna Jenkins, Research Scholar & Leadership Coach at The Samuel Dewitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice.

Joanna L. Jenkins is a dynamic and accomplished creative, scholar-practitioner, educator, and executive coach with a diverse range of expertise. With a rich background in coaching, Joanna has guided corporate leaders, recent grads, early and pivoting professionals through career navigation, assessments, doctoral dissertation, master's thesis, and the ideation and completion of writing, research and creative projects. Her coaching extends beyond professional realms to encompass the nuances of life's transitions. Joanna also utilizes her creative and graphic design background to coach through design thinking, empathy, confidence, crisis and cultural competencies. She brings a unique blend of empathy, optimism and practical wisdom to create a space for individuals to explore and navigate their aspirations, challenges, and personal growth.

As a Scholar with Rutgers's Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity & Justice, Joanna's research and teaching encompass a range of interconnected topics including convergence, media representation, inclusive leadership, and visual/cultural studies. Leveraging qualitative and mixed methods, she uses creativity, storytelling, history, and lived experiences to promote deep understanding, emotional intelligence, and equity. Among her notable works are the textbook "Advertising Creative, Strategy, Copy & Design" (Sage Publications), "Insecure #Awkward and Winning: Intersectionality in the works of Issa Rae" (Peter Lang Publications), and ADColor's "State of the Workplace Study: Retention Outlook Through a DEI Lens" (JoannaJenkins.com).

Marybeth Gasman, Executive Director at The Samuel Dewitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice.

Marybeth Gasman is the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Endowed Chair in Education, a Distinguished Professor, and the Associate Dean for Research in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. She also serves as the Executive Director of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity & Justice and the Executive Director of the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions. Prior to joining the faculty at Rutgers, Marybeth was the Judy & Howard Berkowitz Endowed Professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author or editor of 36 books, including Doing the Right Thing: How to End Systemic Racism in Faculty Hiring (Princeton University, 2022), HBCU: The Power of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), Educating a Diverse Nation (Harvard University Press, 2015 with Clif Conrad), Envisioning Black Colleges (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), Making Black Scientists (Harvard University Press, 2019 with Thai-Huy Nguyen), and Why Historically Black Colleges Matter: 25 Years of Research for Justice (Teachers College Press, 2025). Marybeth has written over 300 peer-reviewed articles, scholarly essays, and book chapters. She has penned over 850 opinion articles for the nation's newspapers and magazines and is ranked by Education Week as one of the 20 most influential education scholars in the nation. Marybeth has raised over $26 million in grant funding to support her research and that of her students, mentees, and MSI partners. She has served on the board of trustees of The College Board as well as historically Black colleges – Paul Quinn College, Morris Brown College, and St. Augustine College. She considers her proudest accomplishment to be receiving the University of Pennsylvania's Provost Award for Distinguished Ph.D. Teaching and Mentoring, serving as the dissertation chair for over 85 doctoral students since 2000. Marybeth is an avid photographer, loves to write, and believes balance and harmony are essential to achieving life goals.