African American Women in Corporate Leadership Roles: Creating a Leadership Shadow

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Abstract

This study investigates why African American women, through the years, despite challenges have been able to succeed in leadership positions within corporate America. The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to examine the leadership experience of 10 African American women, how African American women have been able to navigate their careers and be promoted to leadership roles, their journey, and the impact equity and equality had on their careers. Specifically, what knowledge and skills related to power and influence, relationship with supervisor, leadership skill practice, commitment, climate, culture, hiring, promotion practices, employee engagement, and teamwork impacted their journey. Participants were asked to voluntarily participate in the study, answering 15 questions through 60min interviews. The data was then collected utilizing the hand coding method ensuring the participant identity was anonymous. Although the participants had different experience, they can be summarized in seven themes; power and influence are subjective, sponsors make a difference, education and training matter, level of commitment will change, cultural diversity matters, and recruiting and engagement are essential. The study highlights factors that helped support the success of African American women while identifying areas of improvement and future recommendations for further research.

Keywords: African American leaders, African American woman corporate America, race in corporate America, African American woman employee engagement, African American lives matter, African American woman and COVID 19

Introduction

African Americans represent 13.6% of the total population, and 52% of that is African American women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Specifically, African American women represent the highest number of women in the labor force, as of 2019, African American women represented 60.5% of the total labor compared to white women at 56.8%. However, in 2021 African American women only held 4.4% of the total management positions, despite being 13% of the total female population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Comparing the 4.4% of total management positions held by African American women to white men holding 82.2% and white women 40.9% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022) represents a significant difference. White women are still 4.5 times more likely to hold a leadership position, and white men are nearly eight times more likely than African American women, according to the State of African American women (2020). For every 100 men promoted to a manager position, only 58 African American women were promoted, based on these trends, it would take African American women 95 years to catch up to the number of men in leadership roles (State of African American Women, 2020). As these African American women have navigated corporate America to obtain leadership positions, this qualitative study will examine the framework according to Beckwith et al. (2016). The framework focused on power and influence, relationship building, the practice of leadership skills, commitment to the organization, climate and culture, hiring practices, employee engagement, and teamwork within an organization (Beckwith et al., 2016).

African American women play a vital role in corporate America, businesses that promote a more ethnically diverse executive team are 33% more likely to outperform their counterparts on profitability (Pace, 2018). The African American women that have successfully reached a leadership role have broken the “glass ceiling” in their careers and have done so by focusing on these categories; power and influence, relationships building, the practice of leadership skills, commitment to the organization, climate and culture, hiring practices, employee engagement, and teamwork within an organization (Beckwith et al., 2016).

African American women are highly motivated to succeed and ultimately positively impact the company culture (Roberts et al., 2019). By continuing to see the growth of the population of African American women but not the continued growth of African American women in a leadership role, it supports the narrative around lack of diversity, cultural racism, and prejudice within corporate America. This study aimed to explore the cultural, educational, and social factors that have contributed to successful African American women in leadership roles within corporate America.

There are limited studies on how African American women have broken the "glass ceiling" and achieved leadership roles. It is imperative to understand how these African American women have successfully gained leadership positions in corporate America and what can be done to support and grow African American women wanting this level of success in the future. Understanding why this continues to be a significant issue in today's society will help not only African American women in the future but corporations as they look to expand the lack of diversity within their organizations. As of 2022, only two African American women are running an S&P 500 company (Fraser, 2022). In cases like George Floyd, where movements for racial injustice are not only being pledged but incorporated into the business, people have only recently started paying attention to why African American women cannot break the glass ceiling (Fraser, 2022).

This study utilizes the qualitative method to study what African American women have done to successfully break the “glass ceiling.” The information obtained through interviews provides the first-count narrative of African American women who have successfully reached leadership positions. At the same time, identify the obstacles they have faced along their journey. Reviewing African American women's experiences in corporate America will provide a proposed model that future African American women leaders can utilize to break the "glass ceiling. " Providing an understanding of the experiences African American women have had in accomplishing leadership roles within a corporation. As African American women have journeyed into manager-level positions and higher, what experiences have worked, both positive and negative. This study aims to understand the challenges African American women face as they journey into manager-level positions and higher within the structure of Corporate America.

Problem Statement

African American women have a great deal to offer corporate America, however with African American women only representing 4.4% of the total management positions in the United States displays a continued lack of African American representation in corporate America leadership positions (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The percentage of African American women in leadership positions continues to be low. Understanding how African American women have successfully made it to leadership positions within corporate America will provide a framework that African American women aspiring to be leaders can follow. African American women who have successfully reached leadership titles of manager, director, vice president, and higher have broken the “concrete ceiling.”

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how African American women in corporate America have been successful in obtaining leadership roles and the journey they have taken to achieve these positions. At this stage in the research, African American women in leadership roles will be generally defined as African Americans women in manager-level or higher positions within a corporation of at least 100 employees.

Findings from interviews with African American women who have obtained these roles will provide an opportunity for African American women to understand what barriers and successes exist to assist them in pursuit of similar leadership roles in the future. African American women can utilize this study to understand the experiences from similarly-situated women based on the framework developed by Beckwith et al, (2016); power and influence, relationships with supervisors and organization, use of leadership skills for career development, commitment, climate and culture, hiring and promotional practices, and employee engagement (Beckwith et al., 2016), and how these essential elements can help promote African American women into leadership roles. Individuals will be selected based on gender, race, and leadership title (manager, director, vice president, or higher).

Central Question: What factors contributed to African American women obtaining leadership positions in corporate America?

Research Questions

1. What role has power and influence played in the advancement of an African American women's career?
2. What type of relationships have African American women had with leaders in their career?
3. What are the leadership skills and practices that have helped African American women advance?
4. What commitment level do African American women have at the start of their career versus now?
5. What type of work climate and culture do African American women succeed best in
6. What hiring and promotional practices have African American women experienced within a company?
7. What ways does employment engagement empower African American women within a company?
8. What roles has a diverse team played in your career?

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to understand how a) African American women have been successful in obtaining leadership roles within a corporation, b) what factors within a corporation have helped in promoting African American women c) what information can help guide future African American women leaders. A review of the literature provided summarizing power and influence, relationship with supervisors and organization, leadership skills for career development, commitment, climate and culture, hiring and promotional practices, and employee engagement based on the framework created by Beckwith et al. (2016).

African American women's journey to leadership positions is complex. African American women face the "concrete ceiling," which more accurately depicts the reality of what women of

color face within the workplace (Norman et al., 2018). The origins of the term "concrete ceiling" can be traced to Victoria Sepand's (2015) thesis on "The African American Ceiling," a study conducted on the barriers in the United States that impact an African American woman's career advancement due to the double discrimination they face in organizations' cultures, policies, and practices (Norman et al., 2018)

In 2016 a study provided insight into how power and influence, relationship with supervisors and organization, leadership skills for career development, commitment, climate and culture, hiring and promotional practices, and employee engagement impacts the success of African American woman in corporate America (Beckwith et al., 2016). The study was conducted to understand what barriers prevent and identify a model to help African American women achieve leadership-level positions (Beckwith et al., 2016). According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2021), 34.1% of claims were based on racial discrimination, and 30.6% were gender-related representing the "double whammy" that African American women face in corporate America. African American women have several barriers within corporate America in addition to the "double whammy" there is the concrete ceiling according to Beckwith et al., (2016), there are four primary obstacles impacting African American women within corporate America; high visibility assignments, informal networking with influential colleagues, the lack of influential sponsors or mentors and company role models of the same ethnicity. The framework focused on these themes and how African American women could garner leadership roles if applied. The focus of this literature review was to examine the themes related to the Beckwith et al., (2016) framework. The categories within the framework promote leadership among African American women, identify barriers, and provide insights and tools to assist others in ascending to this level (Beckwith et al., 2016).

Figure 1

Conceptual Leadership Advancement Framework



(Beckwith et al., 2016)

Power and Influence

African America women that make it to c-suite level roles have a level of power and influence that has an impact on society, impacting social, financial, cultural, and economic aspects of life (Baskerville et al., 1991). In a study conducted of 21 African American women who were in leadership-level positions; not only did these women have a form of higher education, many from Ivy League schools and even some with law degrees, but they also participated in not-for-profit boards, ensuring that they have well-connected mentors (Baskerville et al., 1991). Although Kamala Harris made history as the first woman with African American and Asian background to be sworn in as vice president of the United States, African American women in CEO positions represent a little more than 1% within organizations and boardrooms, the majority of corporate executives can agree that minorities in these positions help to promote innovation and enhance the diverse customer outreach (Sawyer, 2017). Although these are highly visible roles, individuals within these roles are not often treated with the same level of respect as white men and women (Baskerville et al., 1991). The lack of visibility and respect limits these women's true level of power and influence. Within the level of c-suite roles, the lack of power and influence is also represented by the salary inequality for African American women, as African American women in these roles should meet a minimum salary requirement of $250,000 and often do not (Baskerville et al., 1991).

Although African American women continue to make strides in corporate America, they only represent 5.9% of professionals and 5% of officers and managers (Tucker, 1994). Their influence is limited and rarely represented in the organization's core business. During a roundtable of seven professional African American women, Tucker (1994) focused on the perception versus reality of an African American woman's experience in corporate America, understanding that although they might hold these positions, they still lack the power, influence, and financial gain that would be associated with positions at these levels (Tucker,1994). In these roles, failure is perceived as a symptom of their race and gender, not an individual characteristic; this stereotype impacts African American women's ability to garner the appropriate level of power and influence they deserve (Tucker, 1994).

Being a part of a corporate board of directors further drives influence within the organization and the ability to bring up future African American women to these roles (Brown, 2012). In the 1980s, the median age was 45.5 for African American women on the board of directors (Baskerville et al., 1991), the median age now for African American women in board of director positions is 41.5 (Baskerville et al., 1991), having younger high-powered professionals is necessary to create a pipeline for future African American women wanting to obtain these positions. Only 4% of board seats within an S&P 500 company are held by African American women (Kidwai, 2022). According to Bogan et al., 2021 corporations with racially homogeneous boards are less likely to appoint a minority board leader. Since the events of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movements, there has been an increase of 120% of African American board members, pointing to the racial bias that played a part in diverse board seats.

The African American women in these positions can use their influence to support up-and-coming African American women, to gain a board seat, African American women need to possess the right network of sponsors, mentors, and peers. “Diversity leads to more innovation, more outside-the-box thinking and better governance when directors are too alike... they look at problems and solutions the same way (An et al., 2021).” Being on a corporate board is a form of power and influence however, women are also underrepresented amongst chairs of compensation,

audit and overall nominating committees which are just as influential as a board of directors (Rhode et al., 2014).

African American women have played a significant role in leadership throughout history, leading the underground railroad, freedom fighters, and protections against sexual discrimination, and continue to be one of the most consistent voting blocks in the United States in fighting for the rights of underrepresented people (Rhode et al., 2014). African American women in executive roles are more likely to be motivated and desire to positively influence the company culture and be role models (Elstad et al., 2012). Empowering African American women and ultimately leveraging their power and influence to impact business and society will ensure the United States is fairer and more prosperous (Elstad et al., 2012). Although the Alliance for Board Diversity (ABA) has made strides to actively increase diversity in board seats, it would take until 2046 for minority women to reach even 20% of the Fortune 100 seats (Oven et al., 2021).

Relationship with Supervisor

A key element to ensuring African American women are promoted to leadership positions is to ensure they have the appropriate sponsorship. According to Smith (2021) "Sponsorship is the act of using one's social capital to propel the career advancement of an individual who is commonly referred to as a protégé." There is a difference between sponsorship and mentorship, the distinction is what helps individuals succeed in c-suite-level positions (Smith, 2021). Sponsors provide the needed exposure to resources and individuals that drive the decision to appoint a company's next C-suite-level management team (Smith, 2021). Although sponsorship drives a higher chance an individual will be promoted to these roles, many African American women choose to go it alone in hopes their experience and skills will create the opportunities they want (Smith, 2021). In a study performed by Smith (2021) of the African American women that did have a sponsor, only 43% of the sponsors were African American, supporting the increase of sponsorship among individuals of color would help the growth of African American women in leadership positions by providing a resource of individuals that understand the challenges that African American women face.

A relationship with a manager and the organization drives and promotes a potential board seat in the future. Having a sponsor already on the board supporting and actively pushing diversity will provide a greater chance of success. As African American women are less likely to be promoted to manager, their representation of them in corporate America continues to dwindle, African American women do not feel they have the same opportunities to advance because they do not look like the people making the decisions (Sowell, 2022). Sponsorship is an opportunity for African American women to receive coaching, protection as well as exposure within the corporate environment, sponsorship is a coaching mechanism that helps to improve the individual’s performance by providing direct feedback and support (Sowell, 2022). Sponsors and mentors are not the same, although an individual might have a mentor that supports them, maybe professionally and personally, a sponsor is an influential individual whose primary focus is on helping an individual advance to a higher-ranking position (Sowell, 2022). Sponsorship is vital to driving the upward mobility of African American women in corporate America, many times African American women don’t realize they even have a sponsor, a sponsor can be an individual who continues to recommend you for a stretch assignment or gives you an opportunity to present in front of executive leadership, sponsors play a more vital role for women than men in their career development (Sowell, 20220). Corporate capital helps to promote African American women into

higher-ranking positions, the concept of corporate capital includes mentoring, sponsorship, and networking which drives power and influence within the organization (Lewis, 2016).

While the intentions with organizations are to provide diversity, two-thirds of all employees, including African American employees, report having no sponsor (Williams, 2021). African Americans feel they cannot be themselves in the work environment, and their leadership does not have the experience to properly lead diverse teams (Williams, 2021). In an annual study focused on women in the workplace, only 22% of African American women stated their manager helps them manage their career path, and 41% of African American women stated they have never interacted with a senior leader (Study Highlights Barriers, 2020). While 80% of white men and women feel they are strong allies for African American women in the workplace, only 26% of African American women agree with having strong allies (Study Highlights Barriers, 2020). African American women face a different set of challenges than "people of color" many times, corporations deploy programs that assist white women or "people of color" that do not address the challenges that African American women face (Danaher, 2019). African American women are ambitious and are not making it to c-suite level positions not for lack of trying, 16% of African American women feel someone of their race/ethnicity would never achieve a top position within their organization (Danaher, 2019). African American women do not have the same opportunities to forge relationships with key decision-makers, and the line to the top, in many cases, is elusive due to the lack of sponsorship (Danaher, 2019).

Sponsors take a chance on the individual by promoting and helping to drive opportunities that get them into leadership roles within the organization. African American women benefit from sponsors who look like them and understand the challenges they face in corporate America (Gray, 2021). Over the years, sponsorship has been focused on white men, often referenced as the “good ole boy club” there is a level of quad pro go that is associated with a sponsorship relationship that implies the sponsor is equally benefiting from the relationship and potential level of power and influence the individual will have in the future (Gray, 2021). Going beyond sponsorship and coaching by making connections with African American women and other female executives early in their careers that can impact their path and professional experiences is key to promoting career sponsorship in an individual’s career (Ellis, 2013).

Practice of leadership skills

As African American women enter leadership roles, they must develop strong leadership skills that enhance their leadership ability, African American women face an additional stigma and microaggressions in the workforce, making interpersonal skills and communication critical to their success (Hughes, 2014). Teaching young people how to describe their moods and deal with their emotions early on develops interpersonal skills within the workplace (Hughes, 2014). There is a level of appreciation that African American women have for just being present and having a job that limits them from wanting to grow their careers (Hughes, 2014). The Super Theory of Career Develop "Is an ongoing process by which individuals progress through a series of stages, each of which is characterized by a relatively unique set of issues (Hughes, 2014)." Super theory focuses on nine significant roles within an individual's life that drive career development: child, student, leisure, citizen, worker, spouse, homemaker, parent, and pensioner (Huges, 2014). As African American women develop their careers, these nine roles play a role in the development of self-efficacy. However, many career development theories, such as Super's Theory, do not consider the social and cultural constructs related to African American women (Hughes, 2014). African American women face social constructs related to being a "Strong African American Woman",

this stereotype leads to the social constructs related to stress and social support, building the narrative that African American women are struggling internally but will represent themselves as coping adequately (Hamin, 2008). African American women are aware of the stereotypes and social constructs that exist and are constantly trying to disprove them; however, this can also create self-fulfilling prophecies where the expectation is fulfilled unintentionally (Hamin, 2008).

There are hidden barriers African American women face in leadership that impact their skills, perceptions of their leadership qualities, personal leadership philosophies, and potential employers (Apugo, 2020). With the existence of these barriers, they start their career already at a disadvantage compared to white men and women (Apugo, 2020). African American women continue to find ways to fight the resistance against them to advance their careers (Newman, 2021). Historically, African American women have been stereotyped, which drives the narrative of a "crooked room" this exists because the perception of society limits African American women (Newman, 2021). Within the "crooked room," African American women are restrained by a lack of opportunities and stereotypical perceptions while being forced to develop their leadership skills within the bounds of a racist system (Newman, 2021). African American women have been categorized and stereotyped as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire – all used to describe a negative connotation of African American women (Newman, 2021). African American women have developed leadership techniques based on their survival through the ages due to; personal activism, political values, culture, and societal norms (Newman, 2021).

African American women's struggles have created a level of resilience and steadiness in the African American developing three essential skill sets crucial to being resilient: emotional intelligence, authenticity, and agility (Kalev, 2006). Self-efficacy influences the potential advancement of African American women and how these beliefs impact their careers (Jackson, 2012). To gain executive leadership roles within an organization, a random study performed by Jackson (2012) determined African American women in fortune 500 companies are highly efficacious and able to overcome many challenges and obstacles. However, they are still plagued by stereotypes and ill-formed perceptions (Jackson, 2012). Self-leadership adds a personal aspect to how management philosophy is formed, understanding oneself and working towards not only gaining a personal goal but achieving it; African American women throughout history have been able to prove that repeatedly (Jackson, 2012). Providing African American women with a safe space where their leadership coaching is focused on cross-cultural coaching and relationship by adding in cultural relevance is key to the success of African American women (Avery, 2021). Cross-cultural coaching should focus on building psychological safety, trust, relatability, and vulnerability (Avery, 2021).

Commitment

As the world continues to change with Black Lives Matter and COVID-19, African American women are starting to leave the workplace (Roberts, 2019). More African American women are seeing the advantages of staying at home, and the continued lack of promotional opportunities within their careers is enforcing the idea of staying home or becoming entrepreneurs (Branch, 2012). African American women continue to receive workplace harassment; they are held to a higher standard, receive less support from their managers, and feel unseen, as many employees do not understand the work experience endured daily by African American women (Branch, 2012). If African American women see getting a higher education does not equal a career path leading to a leadership role, their commitment to corporate America will change. Unconscious bias is a phrase many organizations are starting to use to understand how the bias minorities have

in the workplace impacts their engagement, commitment, and success within the organization (Branch, 2012).

African American women face an obstacle course at work that many do not know about it. A study of two dozen graduating seniors found women, in particular, felt empowered by the change occurring in their place of work (Ammerman, 2021). Even without the change, they felt confident their skill sets would beat white men and women (Ammerman, 2021). However, as the study followed these individuals over five years to understand their experience in the workplace, the themes were very different, and women quickly discussed the discrimination and inequities within the workplace (Ammerman, 2021). As African American women college students enter the workforce with optimism that their skills and background will ensure they make it to the appropriate levels of their career, that quickly changes as they experience the realities of corporate America for an African American woman (Ammerman, 2021). As African American women start to move into leadership roles, they realize the representation is not there, and the ability to maintain the role or continue to move up the ladder is limited; that doubt will impact their commitment to stay within the career (Ammerman, 2021).

Employee turnover for any organization can be difficult, the cost to retain employees is less expensive in most cases than to hire new employees (McKay et al., 2007). When you add in the additional cost that corporations are spending on investing in minorities and diversity programs, the cost of losing an African American woman employee can be critical to an organization's success (McKay et al., 2007). The annual voluntary turnaround is 30% higher amount racial minorities but many studies are unclear why the assumption is due to racial and cultural differences in the workplace that could cause the increased turnover (McKay et al., 2007). Human Resources and development practices should be examined within an organization to find ways to not only recruit but retain African American women (Moreland, 2017). Retention can also be tied to sponsorship, individuals of color are more likely to stay if they have a sponsor than not, individuals are becoming more concerned about culture in the workplace than in prior years and understand the racial composition of an organization can make a difference for a new African America women prospective leader (Moreland, 2017).

African American women are outpacing other races as entrepreneurs by 322 percent since 1997. African American women are key to the workforce by continuing to work after marriage, compared to white women who typically stop working after marriage and children the increase in African American women becoming small business owners decreased the contribution they make to corporate America (Thomas, 2021). African American women earn, on average, 14 cents less for every dollar compared to their white female counterparts, this is compounded by the fact that African American women tend to work more in the service industry, which historically has lower wages (Thomas, 2021). With systematic racism continuing in the workforce going back to the days of slavery African American women are continuing to look for other ways they can be successful becoming an entrepreneur offers them a successful solution with less discrimination (Thomas, 2021).

Climate and Culture

The climate and culture of an organization can impact how African American women are perceived and their ability to grow within the organization to reach C-suite-level positions. In many cases, the conversation regarding race within organizational leadership is still considered taboo or off-limits (Roberts, 2019). As organizations dive more into their organizational culture, race is still a challenging topic to tackle in a culture where Black Lives Matter is a movement in the 21st

century more than before (Roberts, 2019). There is a concept that inclusion undermines the advancement of African American women in corporate America (Roberts, 2019). As of 2018, only three fortune 500 companies were led by African American CEOs, there should be a resolution to create a targeted inclusion program focused on African American people (Roberts, 2019). As organizations look to design an inclusion program with an African American focus, they should strive for: 1) effective racial identity management, 2) cross-racial partnerships, and 3) growth-based skill opportunities (Roberts, 2019).

Over the years, companies have pledged to make an effort against systemic racism within corporate America and society. As incidents like George Floyd and Breonia Taylor have occurred, CEOs have taken a public stand against racism and ensured promotional opportunities for minorities within their organization. However, very few corporations have taken action to stand against racism and inequity involving African American women and all individuals of color (Reny, 2021). The events since 2020 have created the movement of Black Lives Matter which is made an opportune time for employers to look at the workplace differently by changing policies focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (Baum, 2021). The power of Black Lives Matter has been evident from May 26 to June 7, 2020, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used over 47.8 million times, however, companies are still behind in having equality in the workplace, many organizations are bringing in new roles such as a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) looking for ways to pioneer the challenges in the field of diversity (Baum, 2021).

In the year 2020, we experienced more than just Black Lives Matter, which made a relevant impact in shaping society. A global pandemic hit (COVID-19), which significantly influenced not only corporate culture but how corporate America interacts with its employees.

The corporate environment of going to the office was turned upside down as individuals were forced to work remotely to combat the effects of the virus (Couch et al., 2022). African American women were hit the hardest with related job losses to the industry their jobs are typically concentrated in, not allowing the option to work remotely (Couch et al., 2022). Due to the change in culture and environment, companies were at risk of not only losing female employees, but female employees not returning to the workforce in the future (Couch et al., 2022). This shift and experience that not only women and African American women are having creates a negative impact and decreases gender diversity for future generations (Couch et al., 2022). Organizations must recognize society affects the diversity within their organization. Create steps by supporting African American women with clear communication, following through with plans to stakeholders, and having a complete zero tolerance for microaggressions (Couch et al., 2022). Implementing the proper organizational programs for diversity and inclusion is critical, corporations must provide the proper processes and measures in place to track the outcomes of the program; this is the next step organizations should take (Baum, 2021). Executives should look for their successors not only for their positions but two or three levels down, taking the opportunity to groom and promote African American women (Baum, 2021). Changing a generation of thinking includes educating executives that Black Lives Matter (Baum, 2021).

Hiring and Promotion Practices

Corporate diversity programs are meant to promote minorities within an organization (Stewart, 2016). The goal is to examine roles and determine if enough minorities are present. If not, companies should look for opportunities to actively recruit individuals of color to ensure a proper level of diversity is represented. (Stewart, 2016). Unconscious and conscious bias is present in the workplace, with hiring managers trying to discourage African American women from

applying for the role or, once seeing the candidate during interviews, looking for ways to discredit their skills or discuss the negatives of the position (Stewart, 2016). If African American women only earn 62 cents to every dollar a white man earns, the idea of receiving a promotion without equal pay limits the individuals pursuing these opportunities (Stewart, 2016). In hiring, there is also the term "affinity bias," in which people have a favorable bias toward individuals that look like them or have similar experiences (Roberts, 2019.)

In many cases, African American women are the sole providers in their households; since most are single mothers, the systematic race and gender bias that impacts the severe pay gap continues to perpetuate low-income African American families (Bleiweis, 2022). There are numerous reasons for the African American women's wage gap: differences in industries, hours worked, and years of experience, which represent 62% of the wage gap (Bleiweis, 2022). However, the remaining 38% of the wage gap cannot be so easily explained. In addition to the wage gap, there is a disproportionate number of African American women within the service, care, and domestic work sectors (Bleiweis, 2022).

For companies trying to hire minorities, locating individuals within the talent pool with the appropriate skill set is complex. Companies have been trying to expand their recruiting pipelines, but the imbalance of African American women is still present (Orupabo et al., 2022). As recruiters are pushing more minorities to interview, hiring managers are making it challenging to hire African American women (Orupabo et al., 2022). During the interview, they continue to look for ways to discredit and discount their skills, African American women with college degrees are less likely to make it past the interview phase (Orupabo et al., 2022). Gen Z candidates have more options in the workplace. They have expressed the importance of choosing a company where the commitment to diversity is prevalent. Companies see benefits to hiring a diverse workforce, greater profits, and the ability to track and retain high talent (Ahn et al., 2014). An organization should look for ways to weed out bias and deliberately create solutions to address it, although bias cannot be 100% removed, organizations can utilize hiring criteria, neutral language, avoid overstuffing, blind evaluations, and diverse set of evaluators in their hiring practices to promote more diversity (Ahn et al., 2014). Hiring with the intention of targeting underrepresented groups and hiring multiple people for a role at one time to promote diversity within the organization are practices that corporate America can institute (Ahn et al., 2014).

African American women have endured systematic racism in employment, housing, and education (Kohout et al., 2018). African American women have historically primarily worked in the domestic field of work, displaying a form of institutionalism that limits their ability to be in corporate America to ultimately garner leadership positions (Kohout et al., 2018). African American women continue to be overrepresented in the service industry but severely underrepresented in management positions within corporate America (Kohout et al., 2018). As of 2016, the American gender pay gap on average for full-time workers was 82 cents for every dollar earned by a man compared to African American women earning 63 cents for every dollar earned by a white man. Understanding the reason for the divide not only between men and women but minority women groups will promote more diverse and fair hiring practices in corporate America (Kohout et al., 2018).

Employee Engagement and Teamwork

African American women are less engaged in the workplace due to the feeling of being less valued than other team members and not being treated with respect, only 33% of African American women felt valued and respected in the workplace (Llyod, 2021). As researchers study

microaggression in the workplace, there is a direct correlation between microaggression and employee engagement (Holder, 2015). A study of 10 senior-level corporate African American women in the 21st-century show continued experiences of subtle racism in the workplace (Holder, 2015). Race-based stereotypes and behaviors impact the employee's ability to form relationships with co-workers (Holder, 2015). African American women will look to engage with circles that validate racism within the workplace, further alienating them from sponsors (Holder, 2015). According to Gibson-McCrary (2018), African American women take a journey to success that requires the assistance of many individuals within their life; having a mentor increases the potential engagement of an African American woman. Mentors are usually like-minded individuals who can relate to the individual and what they are going through but also provide guidance; it is equally critical for individuals who do make it to reach back and offer assistance to others trying to climb (Gibson-McCrary, 2018).

There is still little research about the actual developmental experiences African American women undergo in executive-level leadership roles. They understand what they learned from their experiences to pass down to other inspiring African American women (Greaux, 2010). According to Greaux (2010), in a case study of 10 African American women executives, their advancements were attributed to four factors 1) relationships with family and friends, 2) mentors/sponsors, 3) sisterhood relationships, and 4) business networks.

African American women are stereotyped as not being effective in a team environment at work; in many cases, this is driven by the history and the survival methods they have deployed over the years to deal with the racism and discrimination they have had to endure (Gostnell, 2021). African American women, when promoted to executive leadership roles, often carry the experiences of injustices on their shoulders that impacts their ability to be successful; the past infractions will result in disconnected relationships (Gostnell, 2021).

The lack of relationships will result in a lack of sponsorship (Kellerman, 2007). Team struggle to address the cultural issues within their organization while still cultivating a team environment. Understanding how men and women handle authority will allow individuals to understand the team dynamic (Kellerman, 2007). A supportive team environment is related to the individual's direct team and the relationships the leader makes with their co-workers and other departments. Building relationships helps advance African American women's careers; it provides a forum for African American women to show their personality against the stereotypes against them, support from their peers, spirituality, and self-determination to increase the odds of becoming an executive leader (Reeves, 2018).

Methodology

Creswell (2007) provides the common characteristic of a qualitative research study; natural setting, the researcher is the key interpretive instrument, multiple data sources, identifying the participants meaning, apply a cultural lens and integrating interpretations with a holistic view. The qualitative research method provides value to a complex phenomenon by illuminating the experience and giving a voice to those whose views are rarely heard (Sofaer, 1999). This study used interviews to gather data through open-ended questions to elicit information from the participants regarding their experiences. A phenomenological approach is used when the purpose of the study is to understand the meaning of a certain phenomenon (Landridge, 2007). This study was to determine how African American women have been able to achieve a manager or higher position and how the Beckwith (2016) framework impacted that success.

The focus of this study was to understand the experience African American women had related to career growth within corporate America. More specifically, how the (Beckwith et al., 2016) framework of power and influence, relationship building, the practice of leadership skills, commitment to the organization, climate and culture, hiring practices, employee engagement, and teamwork within an organization played a role in their journey.

Participants

The participants of this study were 10 African American women in leadership roles (manager-level or higher), between the ages of 37 and 82, within a corporation with a minimum of 100 employees. Individuals were selected based on current occupation and willingness to participate in the study, through a snowball sampling method, The snowball method of finding research subjects is where one individual might give the name of another subject, this method has been determined to be an effective form of sampling used in minority populations where identifying subjects might be difficult, such as the studies subjects of African American women (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). All individuals were recruited through acquaintances, contacts, and social media. Participants were volunteers and made aware of the study's details and importance, to ensure an appropriate sample of participants' experiences, the study consisted of 10 chosen individuals. The survey consisted of 15 open-ended questions, conducted to gather data on the journey these African American women have taken related to their career growth within the framework of; power and influence, relationship building, the practice of leadership skills, commitment to the organization, climate and culture, hiring practices, employee engagement, and teamwork (Beckwith et al., 2016).

Apparatus

In this study, a semi-structured, one-on-one interview was conducted as it provided the ability to ask detailed questions about the participant's experience to ensure the information gathered was appropriate and reliable for this study. The interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams which allowed the conversation to be transcribed, the open-ended question responses were direct first-hand accounts of the participants.

Procedure

The 10 African American women, once identified, were contacted to determine if they met the requirements of the study and were willing to participate. They were asked to participate in a voluntary interview of up to 60 mins, with 15 questions focused on eight categories related to their experience in achieving leadership roles within corporate America. The interview protocol ensured the participant's information was kept anonymous, each were assigned a number 1-10 (P1-P10), and information was stored based on a numbering system to ensure protection of the participant's identity. Participants were interviewed via the internet utilizing Microsoft Teams for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Each participant was informed and provided a consent document to participate in the interview and informed they would be able to withdraw from the interview at any time. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information was removed during the transcribing process, and a naming convention was applied to keep all participant's information anonymous. The criteria for the 10 participants were;

1. All participants were female
2. All participants were of African American descent
3. All participants were in manager positions or higher within a corporation

4. All participants were employed at an organization with a minimum of 100 employees

Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to understand what factors related to power and influence, relationship with supervisors, use of leadership skills, commitment, climate and culture, hiring and promotional practices, and employee engagement have led to African American women obtaining manager-level or higher leadership roles within corporate America. Qualitative data was gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews and collected from 10 African American women who had obtained a manager or higher leadership role. The data was collected through recorded personal interview via Microsoft teams and analyzed through the method of hand coding.

The researcher's role was the data collector and interview and the participants where the interviewees during the interviews. To check for the accuracy and credibility of the findings, several steps were taken to ensure validation of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher limited interaction during the interview to ensure bias was not introduced into the participant's answers. The researcher refrained from utilizing her own opinions related to the study and only shared the participants' experiences (Newman & Benz, 1998). Validity is used within a qualitative study to describe trustworthiness, by providing credibility and dependability to the instruments being used (Newman & Benz, 1998). Researchers utilize validity and reliability to check the dependability of the data and rely on the consistency of the information obtained from the participants (Newman & Benz, 1998).

Findings

Participants in the study ranged in age from 37 to 82 with the majority of the participants between the range of 45 and 55. All participants had a minimum of a bachelor's degree and fifty percent having a master's degree or higher. All participants were asked how they identify themselves, only two individuals identified as being African American all others identified as being Black. Seventy percent of the participants reside in the United States within a Southern state. Table 1 describes the demographic information for the 10 participants chosen for the study. Participants were labeled 01 through 10 (P01-P10)

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	State	Title	Company Size	Highest Degree	Identification
P01	55	Texas	Director	10,000	Doctorate	Black
P02	45	North Carolina	Director	200	Doctorate	Black
P03	55	Georgia	Director	34,000	Doctorate	African American
P04	56	New York	Director	1000	Bachelors	Black
P05	48	Maryland	Manager	100,000	Bachelors	Black
P06	53	Delaware	Manager	1,000	Bachelors	Black
P07	37	Missouri	Director	100+	Masters	Black
P08	52	Georgia	Director	300,000	Bachelors	Black
P09	47	Georgia	Director	10,000	Bachelors	African American
P10	82	Michigan	Vice President	5,000	Doctorate	Black

Analysis of the data was completed after all interviews were conducted. The researcher identified common themes through the interviews and the data was analyzed using the hand coding method. As the researcher identified themes, they were exemplified by providing direct quotes from the interview(s). Below are the themes identified from the interviews.

Theme 1: Power and Influence is Subjective

An individual's power and influence can be determined by the journey they have taken to achieve the role, the structure of the organization, how they allow leaders to utilize it, and how they choose to use that power and influence once they achieve it. The participants' experience provides different levels of power and influence in the role. A consistent theme among the participants was ensuring once you have power and influence, it should be utilized to help create the pipeline for other African American women. Brown (2012), references African American women must make an effort to fill corporate board roles to help influence and drive future African American women into being appointed into board roles.

There is consistency within the literature findings that African American women might receive a level of power and influence when obtaining leadership roles but are not treated with the same level of power and influence as other individuals (Baskerville et al., 1991). Power and influence is subjective based on who holds the power, how they received, and what they will ultimately do with it (Baskerville et al., 1991). Participants were asked how they have achieved power and influence and the importance of it, and responses such as: "I had to learn how to navigate corporate America as a black or African American woman and the stigmas," (P06) "There are times that I feel like regardless of title or regardless of what I'm doing, I don't actually have power or influence," (P07) and "I think sometimes, especially earlier in my leadership, I did not feel like I always had a voice," (P09). This further validates the research from Tucker (1994) that African American women still lack power and influence associated with these positions and levels. Although they might receive the title, the actual power and influence that comes with it is not always recognized (Tucker, 1994). Within the participant interviews, there is still a difference in perception versus reality that African American women face in Corporate America, "It's challenging as an African American female, you know you have to build the right types of relationships with those you know in those key areas." (P01)

Theme 2: Sponsors Make a Difference

The participants had strong feelings when discussing the role of a sponsor or a mentor. Those who had them saw the value and clearly outlined examples and situations where a sponsor was beneficial. According to Sowell (2022), a sponsor is an influential individual whose primary focus is helping an individual advance to a higher-ranking position within their career. Whereas a mentor is someone likeminded who might assist personally and professionally but isn’t solely focused on career growth (Sowell, 2022). Those without a sponsor were required to be self-motivated and look for ways to obtain leadership levels on their own. It is beneficial for the sponsor to look like the individual, and work within a similar field with the same experiences to provide the best level of feedback related to the career journey. Having a mentor although not as career focused as a sponsor is still valuable to supporting African American women by providing guidance related to similar situations, they may have experienced (Sowell, 2022).

Kidwai (2022) discusses the need for African American women to create a pipeline of future leaders to increase representation in leadership positions by becoming sponsors and mentors. Eight of the ten participants had a sponsor or mentor that impacted their career, out of

the eight participants, two had mentors and six has sponsors. The participants with a sponsor or mentor shared their experience on how it impacted their career journey and how the absence of one could impact their success. Many of the participants expressed that although having a sponsor is important, it is equally as valuable as having a sponsor that looks like the individual "it is a kind of mirror for you to look at think through what you plan to do" (P03) "you need someone in these positions that can represent you and remember you," (P04), "bring in other Black females, African American women, into the organization, so being able to hire, being able to be on hiring boards and being able to, you know, put them in positions of influence," (P05). As P07 reflected on the sponsors in the past, she said, "the biggest difference was the two black women that served as sponsors for me, they were able to walk through or provide a level of feedback that was very very different." Participants speak of the confidence, knowledge, and direction having a sponsor or mentor provides through examples of guidance, direction, and empathy. The sponsor role, as Participant 1 describes, "someone that sits at a table you don't, and speaks on your behalf, someone that supports you through your career and you the guidance needed." Within the literature, Ellis (2013) gives insight into not only sponsorship but coaching and making connections with African American female executives, paving a career path for the future.

Theme 3: Education, Training and More

Becoming a leader is a combination of education, training, coaching, and the right role at the right time. When becoming a leader, there is a responsibility for individuals to continue to learn, educate and coach the teams they lead. Providing a safe environment for you staff helps to promote a efficient, diverse and successful team. Ultimately this allows you to create a leadership shadow others want to follow can help drive the leader's success and create a collaborative team that helps others to be successful within their career path.

Within the literature, there is a reference to the struggles African American women face within the workforce and the stigmas they have to overcome, according to Hughes (2014) having strong communication and interpersonal skills within the workplace can assist African American women in overcoming these stigmas. Due to social and cultural constructs African American woman can utilize additional training and education to understand their interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence (Hughes, 2014). The participants recognized how critical communication and interpersonal skills are to their growth within their career, "I have a lot of different types of personalities, different types of environments that I deal with on a daily based, based on the situation I alter my style," (P01) "truly being transparent, equitable and communicating," (P08). Many of the participants discuss coaching and the role it played in their leadership style, "I'm gonna give you more coaching because people done learn the same way," (P02) "things are picked up from watching other leaders being collaborative." (P07) Although participants were asked questions related to their leadership experience and style contrary to the literature participants did not disclose hidden barriers, stereotypes, and social constructs that existed (Apugo, 2020). African American women recognize the stereotypes that exist and according to Hamin (2008) will work towards disapproving however the participants in this study focused on the positive aspects of being a leader and coaching others, not what has hindered them through their career "the greatest gift for me as a leader is to develop other leaders," (P03) "the better your communication skills, it is going to help you in the long run," (P04) "when you build on trust you can work together as a team to get things done." (P06)

Theme 4: Commitment Level May Change

Commitment can represent the drive for someone to overachieve within their career, typically, when starting a career, the drive and motivation is high, increasing commitment to the organization and career (Ammerman, 2021). According to the participants over time their commitment level was changed due to other priorities in their life, and it redefined what they value. It is natural for commitment to change over time, as people get older, and what is considered important in life changes. When individuals are younger, motivation to climb the corporate ladder is important but with time individuals get older and evaluate their lives, valuing more of a work-life balance.

For African American women, other aspects can also impact their commitment, such as the journey to get to leadership, the support along the way, and if the benefits of overachieving within their careers over the years has provided value. Branch (2012) references how an African American women's commitment will change over time; if they see getting an education or working more than 40-hour weeks is not elevating their career to where they would expect with the effort the commitment will change. Participants were asked how and if their commitment has changed, "the beginning of my career 100% totally committed, I was ready to help get this company get to where it needed to go and after a while it became exhausting," (P02) "at the beginning of my career, I was ridiculously committed because I was so driven," (P04) "level of engagement has definitely decreased" (P05). Some participants continued to sustain drive and commitment, "its not that my commitment has changed, but I do believe my trajectory has changed," (P10) "oh my god, I am highly committed, and the reason why I am is because I'm a very driven individual," (P6) "I found myself more and more committed" (P07).

Consistent with the reading, the experiences of the participants changed their level of commitment while some had increased commitment others experienced a decline. Ammerman (2021) identifies African American women as they move through leadership; not seeing individuals like them, or feeling limitations on what they are capable of achieving, will impact commitment and drive to be successful. African American women are held to a different standard and do not have the same opportunities to get promotions as other individuals (Branch, 2012).

Family

As the participants reflected on what has driven them to be successful, a common theme was family "I wanna be example for my kids and niece," (P01) "I think my drive comes from my family, my mother especially,"(P03) "I think my upbringing, you know I had a very strong mother, who was you know a single parent who was driven to make sure I was successful,"(P4) "my family has been most influential in setting the tone" (P08).

Money

Another driver is money, as African American still make significantly less than white men and women, the drive to reach to leadership levels is also driven by financial gain P07 said, "one of the things that has pushed me is financial stability", As commitment changes overtime P06 said "you may not always be winning, but that is not just the view of success, that's why I keep pushing because I want to make a difference, I want to make an impact." Making an impact not only adds value but provides a means of making a financial impact on individuals family and generational wealth.

Theme 5: Cultural Diversity Matters

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is an important movement within an organization. How organizations implement and follow through with programs leaves a perception on their employees, especially African American women. Both COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter had a significant impact from 2020-2022 on how the participants experienced the engagement of their organizations ability to provide culturally diverse programs. As outlined from the literature the movement of Black Lives Matter created an opportune time for organizations to engage employees in culture diversity programs (Baum, 2021).

As the events Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 increased the commitment from organizations to introduce programs to support diversity and address issues that have impacted hiring of females and other races (Roberts, 2019). Although it is the 20th century, the topic of race is still a significant issue. Black Lives Matter is a challenging topic to tackle and even more challenging for organizations (Roberts, 2019). Participants were asked about their experience with Black Lives Matter and how their organizations have reacted, "Black Lives Matter it brought to the forefront many issues that we have to address on a daily basis," (P01) "the company immediately decided, oh you know we need to more in regard to diversity, equity and inclusion," (P04) "whenever any organizations offer something that's going to help build you professionally or personally, I think it's a positive," (P06). Consistent with the reading many of the participants experienced changes within their organization and introductions of diversity programs with organizations being committed to make the change “It's the entire organizations commitment to that goal and achievement and the willingness to be a partner and with that is the trust.” (P10)

Although many of the participants reference the programs of diversity, equity, and inclusion their organizations have offered, there was a common theme that represented a lack of follow-through within organizations offering these programs or providing the tools for employees to utilize them successfully "I actually sat on a DEI committee when it first rolled out, then all of sudden it just went away," (P01) "feel like it was a phase (diversity and inclusion programs) at first it was oohh my gosh ok these people are here, this is happening, we've got to make sure everybody's good," (P02) "Black lives matter, do something about it, or say that they're supportive of it. And I think there's definitely glimpses within my organization that tell me that there are people that are trying, but I think there's such a lack of education," (P05) "we are saying things to our employees, but our actions aren't there" (P07). Participant describes an experience she had after the Black Lives Matter movement:“My son actually was handcuffed, thrown against a car and everything for no reason. I had to call and tell my boss, while I'm sitting at a prison and trying to get my son because I don't know why he was arrested and they're telling me nothing and they have a video and they're showing me what they did to him. I said I won’t be in. I'll be in a little later, but when I came back the next day, my boss did ask me about it. As soon as I started talking about it. Not in great detail, but just, you know, having that conversation. I was shut down” (P06).

COVID-19

The effects of COVID-19 brought a different insight than Black Lives Matter, consistent with the literature companies were forced to adapt to a new culture created by the need for employees to work from home (Couch et al., 2022). Participants describe how COVID-19 has impacted them by uncovering unconscious bias and the lack of resources based on a person ethnicity, “I think COVID has proved that discrimination, retaliation and things like that in the workplace, I noticed that there is more scenarios that are examples of some of the undertones”

(P09) “COVID certainly brought out the awareness of the great divide, COVID showed us how access to digital technology wasn’t equitable.” (P10)

Theme 6: Recruiting Matters

Recruiting experiences varied based on level of the positions needed and the importance within the organization. As candidates are selected diversity practices can be seen within the selection, interview process and job offers that are presented to hiring managers (Orupabo et al., 2022). It also can be associated with how an African American woman in a leadership role are allowed to choose/hire the teams they lead. Organizations need to recognize the differences to address and resolve diversity-related issues for each scenario.

Contrary to the literature, participants did not focus on the financial impact related to inequity within the workplace. “You know it's always a difference when a person of color versus person of non-color. It's not the same. but that in equity is not there for me.” (P01). Within the literature, there was a theme of inequity in pay, African American being sole providers, race and gender bias, and severe pay gaps were a focus (Bleiweiss, 2022). The participants were asked to describe their experience with recruiters "push one type of candidates, not until we had DEI initiatives did we see more diverse candidates," (P01) "recruiters are just checking boxes and doing their jobs it seems," (P02) "I haven't had challenges with recruiters," (P09) and "I think I've had some relatively good success with recruiters and hiring" (P10). Although several participants discuss not having challenges, several participants describe situations that impacted their ability to be hired "they scream diversity, we hear inclusion and equity, and you don't see it," (P02) "there have been some recruiters who offline have said that they are looking for a particular person, looking for particular race of people even in 2022," (P03) "I would get an interview and first it would either first time or maybe a couple times would be a phone interview. And they would hear me and not be able to know or determine if I was black or white" (P05). As organizations drive diversity based on the participants' experience, it is essential for organizations to find bias and deliberately find ways to address it (Ahn et al., 2014).

Diversity hiring practices play a role in developing diverse teams. Within the literature, there is continued underrepresentation of African American women in management positions within corporate America. Participants discussed how they try to promote diversity hiring within their own teams "if everybody is all the same or like me, eventually you're not gonna grow, why? Because everybody's thinking the same," (P06) "people just want to be treated like people," (P07) "the state that I'm in we have heavy African American leadership, and I think because of that it was easier for me to navigate up through leadership," (P09) "I had to push for promotions for me, there was a person who had seven promotions in the time I was there" (P10).

Theme 7: Experience Impacts Engagement

Engagement for the participants is critical to the success of their teams. Participating in engagement and diversity programs supports their leadership journey and creates an environment and culture within their teams that drive success.

A common theme within the literature is how the lack of engagement impacts African American women's commitment and success within corporate leadership positions (Lloyd, 2021). However, contrary to the leadership, when the participants were asked about their own experience with engagement, they focused on the positives related to the teams they lead and their own personal experiences "I've always enjoyed employee engagement, I've always did whatever I could to engage the team, embrace the team," (P10) "when your team is engaged, I had very good

outcomes," (P06) "employee engagement is critical I think the way that it has contributed to my career is the feedback I've gotten from associates who report to me or who are my peers," (P03) "It's contributed to my career because I have been able to engage with people and understand who they truly are and develop a really good rapport with them" (P02).

Engagement and Performance

Diversity within the team can support employee engagement, when teams see the difference and opportunities related to minorities, it supports the company values driving performance across the organizations. Participants were asked to describe the role diverse teams have played within their career "trying to figure out that that balance between recruitment and engagement, encouragement practices programs, but not being isolated at the same time," (P05) "my current organization has a lot of diversity programs, that address I think it's about 10 or 11 different opportunities that you can get involved with," (P06) "diversity in leadership is important because it was the first time that I had the opportunity to talk about being black, being a woman and being young in a leadership position and it also helps," (P07) and "having a diverse team allows people to see talents and everybody, and not just people that look like them" (P10)

Discussion

The central question was to understand what factors contributed to African American women obtaining leadership positions within corporate America. In this study, 10 participants shared their experiences and journey that led to a role as a manager or higher within corporate America. In relation to the Beckwith (2016), framework, power and influence, relationships with supervisors and organization, use of leadership skills for career development, commitment, climate and culture, hiring and promotional practices, and employee engagement, how did these factors impact and play a role in the leadership journey. Participants discussed their experiences within corporate America, what contributed to their ability to gain leadership roles, and factors that continue to contribute to the lack of African American women representation in corporate America. Each participant's journey is different however, their experiences can be summarized into several themes; power and influence are subjective, sponsors make a difference, education and training matter, level of commitment will change, cultural diversity matters, and recruiting and engagement are essential. These themes contributed to not only the journey but the impact it had on their career.

Understanding how to navigate corporate America can be critical to the success of anyone but specifically African American women. However, for African American women, power and influence can represent how they use it to create a pipeline of future leaders. In the absence of power and influence, they see the impact on their careers and a level of inequity related to their power compared to others in similar positions. This aligns with the findings of Kidwa (2022), and Tucker (1994), who describe that even when African American women gain a title of power, board seats, and advancement within their career, they still lack the power and influence that should be associated with these roles. Ultimately supporting the findings that African American women in these positions should continue to help drive and create a pipeline to increase the level of representation to create equality. This further promotes the idea that sponsors and mentors do, in fact, matter in the journey to leadership positions. Although the terms sponsor and mentor are not interchangeable, they each provide value to African American women by helping drive career progression or providing advice and leadership in challenges within their careers. Sponsors and mentors can make the journey less challenging and promote the goal of creating a pipeline of

African American women leaders. Findings in this study validate research conducted by Sowell (2022), although sponsors and mentors are not the same, they play vital roles in getting African American women to c-suite level positions. African American women with a lack of sponsors and mentors will have a more challenging journey to obtaining leadership positions compared to those that have individuals that can play this vital role in their careers.

This study found that education and training were critical factors in African American women's journey. The participants shared having as much education and training as possible helped to level the playing field when applying for leadership positions against other races and ethnicities. The general theme emerged that education and training provided the needed credentials for African American women to be qualified for these positions, going above and beyond those basic requirements would only further solidify their success. This supports the findings of Aupgo (2020), African American women face hidden barriers and challenges, putting them already at a disadvantage; driving education and training helps close that gap. The participants shared their need to obtain more training and education, with many having advanced-level degrees even though it is not required for their role. Contrary to the findings of Kalev (2006), the study participants did not focus on the barriers, biases, and stereotypes that have prevented their success, a significant finding is that resilience and motivation where key factors that led to their success. African American women have many obstacles in obtaining leadership roles however, the role of training and education is critical to their success and something they can control and drive in their journey.

Many participants in the study noted a change in the level of their commitment to corporate America during their journey. The level of commitment changes can be attributed to motivation, success, family, financial gain, and age. Research by Branch (2012), suggests as African American women see a lack of progression through their careers, it will impact their level of commitment and engagement to the organization. The present study's findings support the drive and motivation that existed early in their career however, time and success or lack thereof represented a decrease in the commitment they were personally willing to make to succeed within corporate America. Contrary to the findings of Ammerman (2021), the lack of representation in leadership roles did not deter the participants but helped to drive their need to be committed to the organization and obtain these roles in the future. African American women's level of commitment to corporate America can help guide and facilitate the success they will receive. As challenges occur within their career, staying steadfast, engaged, and committed to their career goals will offer opportunities for success.

As found within this study, Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 did impact the climate and culture of corporate America. The study participants shared their experiences during the Black Lives Matter movement and the changes they experienced within corporate America with an increase in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programs. The study participants describe the promotion of these programs but the lack of follow-up, action, and consistency in seeing the results of these efforts. This is additive to the findings of Reny (2021), that few organizations have taken the appropriate stance against racism by creating and promoting efforts against systemic racism within corporate America. Participants consistently noted that Black Lives Matters had brought forth a level of change within corporate America to drive diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace by creating an opportunity for companies to do better. African American women can leverage the opportunities that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs represent to drive opportunities for leadership positions within their organization. Corporate America should be accountable for actionable tactics to promote African American women while providing equitable power and influence. As participants described the impact of COVID-19 contrary to the findings

of Couch (2022) that COVID-19 impact saw an increase in job loss and employee interactions, the participants in the study describe an increase in unconscious bias and lack of equitable technology resources across races. African American women's ability to adapt through their journey is crucial to their success. COVID-19 uncovered unexpected outcomes that impacted African American women in the workplace. The ability to adapt to change, lack of resources, and unconscious bias can be critical on the road to leadership.

Participants in the study experienced various recruiting experiences, whether related to their ability to hire diverse teams or their name and background had on being selected for positions. This is additive to Orupabo (2022) study that diverse hiring practices make a difference, and how recruiters drive this can impact the pipeline created. The present study adds the importance of African American women in leadership positions to ensure the teams they manage are also diverse. Participants in this study consistently noted the need to push for promotions and diverse hiring practices within recruiting. While corporate America may promote a diverse work environment, gaps within the hiring process limit diversity within teams and leadership roles within an organization. This study found that engagement is critical to African American women's success and how many participants promote active engagement within their teams. Contrary to Lloyd's (2021) findings that can contribute to lack of success to lack of engagement, the participants in the study focused on the positive aspects of engagement and how it has helped to grow their careers. African American women represent a diverse culture and bring different views and opinions to the table that can help an organization's culture. African American women should continue to promote engagement and drive engagement within themselves to support their journey to leadership.

Limitations

The researcher has personal and direct experience as an African American woman in a leadership position within corporate America, which may have influenced the study, including understanding the participant's answers to the interview questions. The researcher's bias was addressed by documenting verbatim what the participants stated in their interviews, including limiting responses during the interview so as not to influence the participant's responses. The study was conducted during the winter of 2022 in which the movement of Black Lives Matter was still active, some experiences shared by the participants may have been more notable to the climate of society during this time.

Depending on the length of the participant's career, the study was limited because it is based on self-reported memories. Depending on the timeframe from the start of their career to the present, they may only remember some experiences, which may limit the process or information shared during the interview. An additional limitation is the selection of participants and the respective industry or field (e.g., healthcare, technology and operations) missing the experiences of African American women in other sectors. Further, the study was limited to African American women in manager or higher positions, and the study could have been expanded to other women of color gaining their perspective of being supervisor roles or higher. The final limitation is the participant's willingness to be open and honest in sharing their life experiences with a sensitive topic such as race.

Recommendations

This qualitative study has reviewed the Beckwith (2016) framework on what is preventing African American women from reaching executive leadership positions. This phenomenological

study allowed the researcher to understand better the Beckwith (2016) framework and how these factors have impacted African American women and their journey to leadership.

The results of this study added value to the African American women in search of obtaining leadership positions within Corporate America, however, further research would be beneficial in the following five recommendations: The first recommendation could be for additional research on the meaning of power and influence and how it can be wielding by African American women in c-suite level positions, understanding how African American women in these positions have utilized power and influence to support the pipeline of further African American women.

The second recommendation is for further research to understand other minority's journey in addition to a quantitative study to understand the inequities present for African American women in corporate America. Thirdly based on the information provided in the interviews, the participants did not focus on the financial inequity present in African American women compared to others in similar roles, additional research could be conducted to understand how relevant pay equity is today and the impact it has on African American women wanting to obtain these roles. The fourth recommendation is based on the participants the researcher interviewed feeling their educational background and training played a role in their success, it could add value for future African American women leaders to understand what training and education would be most beneficial to obtaining a leadership role.

The final recommendation is that diversity, equity, and inclusion programs within organizations are becoming increasingly prominent with the movement of Black Lives Matter; additional research could be conducted to understand the effectiveness of these Diversity programs within organizations. Understanding how these programs are created and their impacts on promoting diversity in leadership. These programs will play a critical role in increasing African American women in leadership positions additional studies to understand their effectiveness would add tremendous value.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to obtain feedback related to the Beckwith (2016) framework and how those factors have contributed to African American women obtaining leadership positions in corporate America. The study provided information for future African American women seeking leadership roles and the factors that led to similar women gaining this level of success. Within the study of the 10 participants, seven themes and key findings were identified; power and influence is subjective, sponsors make a difference, education and training are critical, commitment level may change, cultural and recruiting matters, and experience impacts engagement.

While the participants mainly focused on the positive factors that have aided their success from their past experiences, there is still room for growth and change within corporate America to help African American women obtain leadership positions and increase the less than 9% of African American in management positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). One of the consistent themes noted in the participant's interviews was the continued drive and motivation not only to succeed but to ensure others succeed as well by casting a leadership shadow for others to follow. The researcher hopes that through this study, African American women starting their journey in corporate America will utilize the feedback from the participants to help guide their journey into leadership.

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