Closing the Strategy Gender Gap

Idea In Short

Organizations that want sharper strategic plans should start by fixing who gets to write them. Women remain underrepresented in strategic planning roles not because of a skills gap but because of unconscious bias, a persistent double bind that punishes assertiveness and promotion pathways that favor familiar faces. The fix is not another training slide deck. It requires reviewing hiring criteria, publishing clear promotion pathways, auditing pay and giving women visible ownership of major initiatives. Companies in the top quartile for executive-team gender diversity are 39 percent more likely to outperform financially and women score higher than men on most emotional intelligence competencies that planning work demands. The recommendation is direct: treat gender balance in strategic planning as a performance lever, not a compliance exercise and measure it the same way you measure revenue targets.

Strategic planning teams that exclude qualified women are not simply behind on fairness. They are leaving performance on the table. The evidence on this point has moved past debate. Companies with more gender-balanced executive ranks post stronger financial results. Women score higher on several of the emotional intelligence traits that planning work rewards. The barriers keeping women out of these rooms are well known and well documented. What remains is action:

> name the bias at work, apply clear fixes and track whether those fixes move the numbers

The Bias Mechanics Keeping Women Out of Strategy Rooms

Unconscious gender bias in strategic planning rarely announces itself. It shows up when a hiring manager assumes a technical planning role suits a man by default. It shows up when a promotion committee reads two identical resumes differently, based only on the name attached. These are not isolated slights. They pile up across a career and quietly decide who ends up setting direction for the business. A woman passed over for one planning assignment early on loses the track record she needed for the next promotion and the gap widens with each missed cycle.

The clearest example is the double bind documented in Harvard Business Review's research on how women navigate leadership norms.1 The researchers interviewed 64 senior women across 51 organizations. They found that women leaders are expected to show both warmth and authority, two traits the workplace often treats as opposites. Former Hewlett-Packard chief executive Carly Fiorina summed up the trap in blunt terms:

> she was called too soft or too hard, depending on which way she leaned

That trap explains why so many capable women hesitate before pushing for a strategic planning seat. No version of assertiveness reads to them as simply competent.

The double bind gets sharper for women of color. They face the same warmth-authority trap, plus thinner networks of sponsorship and fewer senior allies willing to speak up for them. Fewer mentors means fewer people who can vouch for a woman's readiness when a planning role opens. Most planning roles fill through internal recommendation, not open posting, so this matters. The result is a pipeline that looks fair on paper while quietly favoring whoever already has a champion in the room. Women in these roles also carry a heavier mental load, staying alert in workplaces that have not built inclusion into how planning teams operate. That vigilance is a real cost and men in equivalent roles rarely have to pay it.

Why Assertiveness Reads Differently by Gender

An assertive man who proposes a bold market expansion is usually read as decisive. A woman making the same proposal in the same tone is more likely to be called pushy or difficult. That label carries real weight beyond hurt feelings. It shapes whether her plan gets adopted, whether she gets invited back to the next planning session and whether she gets considered for the promotion that would put her in charge. Strategic planning depends on people speaking candidly about risk, so anything that discourages half the room from speaking plainly weakens the plan itself. Organizations rarely measure this cost directly. It shows up instead in planning cycles that miss risks a more candid conversation would have caught.

What Organizations Can Do to Close the Gap

Closing this gap does not require reinventing the organization. It requires a set of specific, measurable changes, applied consistently rather than once and forgotten. The steps below target the exact mechanisms described above, rather than treating gender balance as a vague aspiration.

- Run recurring unconscious bias training rather than a single annual session, since one-time exercises fade quickly and biases reassert themselves within months
- Review hiring criteria and screening tools for planning roles, including software that anonymizes applicant information during early screening
- Publish clear promotion criteria and succession pathways so advancement depends on defined milestones rather than informal sponsorship
- Give women ownership of visible strategic initiatives, since visibility is what builds the internal reputation promotion committees rely on
- Conduct regular pay equity audits and correct disparities as they surface rather than waiting for a formal complaint
- Support working mothers with flexible scheduling, parental leave policies that apply to men as well and mental health resources available to the full team

None of these steps needs new headcount or a large budget increase. A pay equity audit uses data the organization already holds. A review of promotion criteria is mostly a documentation exercise, not a financial one. Both require a willingness to look directly at where the current process produces unequal outcomes, then change the process instead of explaining away the results.

Making Promotion Pathways Actually Transparent

Vague promotion criteria are one of the quietest drivers of the gap, because vagueness gives bias room to work undetected. When advancement depends on "executive presence" or "strategic thinking" with no defined rubric, evaluators default to matching whoever previously held the role. That pattern skews male in most strategic planning functions today.

Publishing specific, observable criteria, such as the number of planning cycles led or the size of budget managed, removes much of that discretion. It also gives women a concrete target to aim for, rather than a vague sense that they need to somehow seem more like leadership. Succession plans built around these criteria and reviewed on a fixed schedule, keep the pathway from quietly sliding back into informal sponsorship once the policy announcement fades.

The Performance Case for Gender-Balanced Planning Teams

Fixing bias is worth doing on fairness grounds alone. But the financial data removes any need to debate the point. McKinsey's long-running Diversity Matters research found that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on their executive teams are 39 percent more likely to beat companies in the bottom quartile financially.2 That gap has grown a great deal since the firm's first report in 2015. The pattern holds at board level too, where top-quartile gender diversity lines up with a 27 percent greater chance of financial outperformance. These are not small effects. They rank among the more consistent findings in corporate performance research over the past decade.

The World Economic Forum's look at gender-balanced investment teams backs up the same pattern from a different angle. Private equity and venture capital funds with gender-balanced senior teams generated returns 10 to 20 percent higher than funds run by male-dominated teams. Portfolio companies with balanced leadership beat their peers on valuation growth by as much as 25 percent.3 Closing the broader gender gap in labor force participation and management roles could add an estimated $7 trillion to global economic output. That figure alone makes it hard to justify treating gender balance as a side project rather than a core strategic priority.

> Investing in women is not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do

That line, attributed to former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, holds up because it can be measured rather than just believed. Strategic planning benefits from diverse input because planning is really an exercise in stress-testing assumptions. Teams built from one narrow slice of experience are worse at spotting their own blind spots. A planning team drawn from a narrow slice of the workforce will, almost by definition, miss risks and openings that people with different backgrounds would catch.

The Emotional Intelligence Advantage in Planning Work

Strategic planning is often described as a technical discipline, built on market analysis, financial modeling and scenario testing. Those skills matter. But planning also leans heavily on soft skills:

> aligning stakeholders, managing disagreement and adapting a plan when new facts arrive

Research from Korn Ferry's Hay Group, drawing on data from 55,000 professionals across 90 countries, found that women outperformed men in 11 of 12 measured emotional intelligence traits.4 Women scored notably higher on coaching and mentoring, on reading organizational dynamics and on adaptability. Each of those three traits maps directly onto what strategic planning demands, from building buy-in across departments to adjusting course when the market shifts.

These traits matter because strategic plans fail almost as often from weak execution and poor alignment as from flawed analysis. A plan that is technically sound but never wins buy-in from the departments that must run it delivers no value at all. Emotional intelligence is what turns a spreadsheet into a plan people actually follow. The data suggests women bring a measurable edge to that part of the work. Pairing that edge with the analytical rigor already present on most planning teams produces a stronger process than either skill set alone.

The Gap That Remains and What Closing It Requires

Despite the performance case, representation has not caught up. Only 10.4 percent of Fortune 500 chief executives are women, according to Catalyst's tracking of corporate leadership.5 The pay gap compounds the representation gap. Women in the United States earned 85 cents for every dollar men earned in 2024, according to Pew Research Center's latest analysis, a figure that has barely moved in two decades.6 Both figures matter for strategic planning specifically. Pay and promotion signal whose judgment an organization values and that signal decides who is willing to compete for a planning seat in the first place.

Closing this gap takes years, not a single policy change, but the sequence is clear. Start with a pay equity audit, since it produces hard numbers instead of impressions. Follow with a review of promotion criteria and publish specific milestones instead of vague executive-presence language. Add recurring bias training, visible sponsorship for women leading major initiatives and support for working mothers, so experienced planners are not pushed out at the exact career stage where their knowledge compounds. None of these steps is exotic. None requires waiting for a broader cultural shift before starting.

The organizations that act now will build stronger planning functions before their competitors catch up. The financial data suggests that advantage compounds the same way the bias currently does:

> quietly, over years, until it shows up in the numbers that matter most

- 1How women manage the gendered norms of leadership
- 2Diversity matters even more: the case for holistic impact
- 3Gender equality is smart economics. It's time to invest accordingly
- 4New study shows women consistently outperform men in emotional intelligence
- 5Women CEOs
- 6Gender pay gap in US has narrowed slightly over 2 decades

Summary

Strategic planning suffers when half the workforce is filtered out of the room by bias rather than by judgment. The double bind, the pay gaps and the thin promotion pathways described here are not abstractions; they show up in fund returns, in outperformance data and in the emotional intelligence scores that predict planning quality. Organizations that treat inclusion in strategic planning as a leadership discipline, backed by audits, transparent criteria and visible sponsorship, see the return in sharper plans and stronger financial results. The opportunity is not moral posturing. It is a strategic planning function that finally reflects the market it is trying to win and the companies that move first will set the pace for everyone else.