

## **5 Insights for Women on Utilizing the Power of Employee Resource Groups for Leadership Development**

By: Jennifer Brown

Picture the most efficient, productive, and innovative organization you can imagine. What does it look like? Chances are that it resembles a highly-advanced form of an Employee Resource Group (ERG), also known as Affinity Groups or Business Resource Groups — a multi-disciplinary, globally dispersed, diverse yet inclusive organization — in which ideas flow up and down the hierarchy and across silos.

We believe ERGs should be considered the best resource and opportunity for the next generation of women leaders, and other diverse talent, and here's why. Today, ERGs enable women, or will enable in the near future, to:

- gain exposure and visibility within broader networks
- learn a broader set of skills by collaborating on ERG projects and initiatives
- seize leadership opportunities within ERGs that they may not otherwise realize in their day jobs, and
- contribute to their company's "cultural competency" through participation in sales, market, and product development.

ERGs provide a win-win opportunity for employers and female employees because they will realize the value and bottom line impact of women who are empowered and connected like never before. JBC has developed the following insights to help women think most strategically about where they can gain leverage. We encourage women to take advantage of and leverage the existence of these networks, to not only grow their careers but also demonstrate the value of female talent, and markets, to organizations everywhere.

**Insight #1: Companies are increasingly viewing ERGs as valuable talent pipeline development mechanisms, and JBC believes this is a unique and unmatched opportunity for women to supercharge their professional development.**

### **WHERE SUCCESS BEGINS: SHIFT IN ERG VALUE PROPOSITION**

Forward-thinking companies are beginning to see ERGs as enablers of business opportunities and are working to evolve existing organizational models to capitalize on these opportunities. As such, the ERG value proposition has been shifting slowly, but steadily, over the last few years. ERGs have begun to drive customer value, "convene" and build networks, offer a broader value proposition to functions and business lines, and target specific customers aligned with the affinity group. Companies that are ahead of this trend will have the privilege of driving a conversation that could lead to a groundbreaking business model.

**Insight #2: Companies that figure out how to leverage women will become global powerhouses. The easiest place to start is with existing structures within an organization – Women's Employee Resource Groups.**

### **PULL AND PUSH STRATEGY**

Business line, Diversity and Inclusion, HR, and ERG leaders have the opportunity to create cutting-edge ERGs, which represent a microcosm of the next-generation business model utilizing a two-pronged strategy. This

phenomenon is known as “pull and push”. While both pull and push play important roles in business models, ERGs have traditionally employed more push than pull when pursuing involvement in business conversations. However, some companies have been at the forefront of implementing both pull and push strategies to maximize the return on investment of these network groups. Women can take advantage of both dynamics.

### **PULL STRATEGY**

In ERG-speak, “pull” would refer to business lines or sales people proactively including ERGs and “pulling” them into their processes. In the ideal business scenario, ERGs are pulled into the conversations to offer customer insights and value. Therefore, the value proposition for ERG members shifts as they become more directly involved in product development and sales. This not only broadens their internal network, but also creates exposure to the external customer base. Leading companies are actually beginning to measure managers and leaders on their ability to integrate diversity into all aspects of their business, such as Marketing, Product Development, R&D, Sales, Operations, etc. This accountability will drive both push and pull activities, as line leaders are seeking to demonstrate impact towards their diversity and inclusion metrics.

Women know their internal and external constituencies well, and through ERGs, they bring invaluable “cultural competency” to organizations selling products and services in an increasingly diverse world. In order to successfully implement a pull strategy, business units need to see ERGs as potential contributors and strategic partners for revenue generation and not just as networking groups for races, genders, or affinities. In the last few years, JBC has been working with business lines to help them successfully engage their ERGs, thereby altering the ERG value proposition for the entire organization.

**Insight #3: Women need to articulate the value they bring to the table. They should conduct their own market research, collect and reference data points, identify and proactively initiate meetings to present new ideas and pursue opportunities for collaboration to create the appetite for the “pull”.**

### **PUSH STRATEGY**

With an ERG “push” strategy, ERG members are actively engaged in “pushing” goods or information towards consumers and internal stakeholders. JBC has worked with clients who have succeeded in showcasing and bringing together women in a new way within the workplace utilizing a push strategy. For example, members of a Women’s ERG at a global leading technology company, operating over 30 chapters in 20+ countries, “pushed” their way forward and established credibility with consumer and customer markets. Network members designed an event by women for women that provided a forum for participants to build deep relationships with external networks, business owners, and executives. The complex design of these client-focused events resulted in revenue generation, demonstrating the successful utilization of ERGs as a platform for a discrete and subtle push strategy.

The company wins because ERGs have the ability to create and support new business opportunities. Even further, ERG leaders, members, and event attendees feel more engaged and connected to the company. Meanwhile, network members benefit because these business initiatives require an intense level of project management, collaboration, and leadership which all present important executive development opportunities.

**Insight #4: Women should tap into ERGs and utilize these powerful networks to invent new go-to-market strategies, new products, and new talent pipelines that align with the business strategy.**

Similar cutting-edge ERG strategic thinking has great potential to result in a win-win situation for the company and for network participants. In other cases, ERG leaders have taken training and professional development to a new level. For example, ERGs have partnered with corporate learning teams to create learning opportunities or executive shadowing programs that didn't already exist. Members built programs and marketed them internally to different functional leaders. This is an innovative way for ERGs to fill critical development gaps within organizations.

**Insight #5: Through partnering with different functional areas to enhance the area's cultural competency, women can build critical networks, subject matter expertise, and leadership experience that extend beyond the learning derived from their everyday role.**

## **FUTURE INSIGHTS**

Companies are beginning to evolve their diversity and inclusion practices further by taking them out of the silos they have traditionally inhabited, and embedding them throughout the organization—in places like ERGs. JBC believes that companies have come a long way and continue to manage diversity, which has to do with appropriate representation of minorities. Step two of the process is inclusion, which refers to harnessing our diverse workforces for common business goals and creating a comfortable environment in which new ideas and opportunities can flourish. ERGs and their participants can actually provide the bridge to accomplishing this important transition, and female talent plays a central role.

**Jennifer Brown** is CEO and Founder of Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC). JBC works with Fortune 500 clients to transform their workplaces by harnessing leadership, fostering innovation, and leveraging diversity through Strategic Consulting, Training, Coaching, and Research & Events offerings. Jennifer is a speaker and subject matter expert in the fields of organizational diversity and leadership.

## **About Jennifer Brown Consulting**

**Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC)** is in the business of transforming human potential and aligning individual performance to drive organizational results. JBC specializes in four key Practice Areas: Strategic Consulting, Training, Coaching, and Research & Events. We transform businesses by harnessing leadership, fostering innovation, and leveraging diversity through our offerings. We are dedicated to meeting clients' needs and delivering a solid ROI through results-oriented solutions. JBC's expert **advisors, consultants, trainers, coaches, and facilitators** turn talent networks into business pipelines and innovation engines, as well as help individuals at all levels transform their environments to appeal to employees, clients, and customers. JBC's seasoned practitioners possess years of experience in Diversity & Inclusion, Leadership, and Innovation and are hand-picked for each client engagement.