



## A Woman's Path to the C-Suite

**C**arol Williams, now retired, started her career at Dow Chemical as a development engineer and moved through the requisite positions as she made her way to the role of executive vice president of manufacturing and engineering, supply chain and EH&S operations. Williams talks to *CEP* about her journey to the C-suite, obstacles along the way, and her thoughts on why women do not make it to the top-tier executive level as frequently as men.

***You've had an impressive career path, reaching an executive level that is not as common for women as for men. What enabled you to reach such a high level?***



**Carol Williams:** My career at Dow truly was fabulous in many ways. It allowed me to continuously learn. I had new job roles, new site locations, new businesses, new functions, and new cultures, and, in each of these opportunities, I

had the chance to learn new skills and capabilities that then became useful for the next role.

My first suggestion for people is to continuously be open to something new and to learn something new. Second, from the very beginning I sought out roles that would put me in contention for the next role. At every company and in every function, there are experiences that people see as critical to growing in that area of responsibility. If you are not seen with that critical skill, you may not be considered for that next larger role.

And third, you have to deliver results. This doesn't mean doing well at managing what you were asked to lead. That is the expectation. But what you're being paid to do, and what they want to see you do, is examine what is happening in the world and take your group, your team, your project to the next level. And then make sure that the contribution that you have delivered is seen and attributed to you.

***Are there certain skills that have helped you see what your next step is and to make yourself known as someone who can perform the next-level job?***

**Williams:** The required traits depend on the job needs. However, there are skills that are important regardless of the role. Number one, public speaking is critical in almost every role.

So is learning how to sell things. It's funny that you have

a chemical engineer telling you that you have to know how to sell things. When you're a young engineer all the way up to when you're in the C-suite — you're competing for resources and you have to be able to really sell what your project has to offer. Whether you're a researcher in the lab or a salesperson in the field, you have to be able to sell your ideas and concepts so that they get accepted.

Public speaking and the ability to position and sell your needs is something that our young engineers out in the workplace don't understand. Those are things that I learned early on and became a real foundation for moving forward.

***What is your perspective on why there is a lack of women in C-level positions?***

**Williams:** The reason women are not in the C-suite starts much below that level. It actually starts quite early in a woman's career. McKinsey published a 2016 report called "Women in the Workplace," and it showed that we're hiring at about relatively equal levels, 54% men and 46% women, at the entry level. However, by the time that first supervisory level is reached, men are chosen 63% of the time and women only 37% of the time. This is across all industries. That's really where we need to start.

When you get to that starting point, first-line supervisors often feel tremendous stress to manage their first supervisory role, their first employee relations, and to deliver on the day-to-day responsibilities. When they're confronted with significant project tasks, they often choose people like themselves or people who have delivered for them before. However, it's these high-visibility situations that give management at higher levels the chance to see these younger people and then they get the support for those next higher roles.

Often those selections that the first-line supervisors are making unconsciously exclude those who are different, women and under-represented minorities. Many companies have identified this and they're now doing unconscious-bias training to help first-line supervisors recognize that bias does exist and then to provide them with opportunities to recognize that bias. I think that's a start.

Secondly, though, women need to take some responsibility. We need to speak up and ask for these key roles. It doesn't mean that we get the first one we ask for. But it does set the expectation that you want to take the lead, you're willing, and you're capable to do it.

Another thing women need to stop doing is taking roles that won't continue their growth and that take them out of that line role, whatever that is in your function. Too often the

women are asked to take these sideline roles. But then they're not given that larger role because they haven't had the line experience. Let me give you an example of this from Dow.

In manufacturing at Dow, it is seen as critical to be a site leader to take on a manufacturing director role. However, many women who may see themselves as capable and desirous of one of those large manufacturing director roles do not set themselves up for taking a global site leader role. If they don't take on a production leader role, which is a very demanding role, they wonder then why they're not selected.

One thing companies can do is to ask leaders to interview a woman or an under-represented minority for every new supervisory role or large project lead role. It doesn't mean they have to choose that person. They may not be the right fit. However, by taking the time to interview these diverse people, it was amazing at Dow how these high-potential diversity candidates then found new roles within a year because the supervisors got to know them and then decided to test them.

***This question relates to something that women often have to deal with that may impact their ability to move up in an organization. How have you balanced work and family?***

**Williams:** I actually don't like the term work-life balance. It might be because I'm a technical person and if you have a balance or a scale and it's out of balance you can add more weight to the other end of the scale and bring it back into balance. However, in life, I haven't yet figured out how to add more hours to the day. I like to think of it as work-life choice. Every person is given this pizza pie to manage, that's our life. But we're also given the knife. No one else has the knife. Only you have the knife. And you decide how you cut your pie. What percent goes to work, what percent goes to children, your parents, your spirit, your personal workout time. And these percentages may change over time depending on what's happening in your life.

I once had a woman say that it was unfair that the man in her office was working 16 hours a day and was delivering significant new technology. When she asked me about this, I said, "Dow pays for results, and right now this man is delivering significant results. However, he is not spending any time with his family and we have no idea what this means for his personal life. It's his choice and it is your choice also. You're making the choice to devote more time to your family and he is not. Only time will tell us what will happen."

For me personally, I did not always get this choice correct, but I have two wonderful daughters, five grandchildren, and two stepdaughters. When my children were little, my spouse was very helpful in all aspects of work and family. I also had a support network to help me through the time when we were both away. However, I did prioritize to not miss the dance recital even though I may not have made all the practices. We

celebrated every birthday of my daughters with family and friends but it might not have been actually on their birth date. Again, you make conscious choices to make it work for you.

***Is there a disadvantage for companies that do not have women in top-level positions?***

**Williams:** There are several studies that show having women on boards or in the C-suite does deliver better results. In February 2016, *Harvard Business Review* published an article that focused on this and showed that having 30% of the C-suite as women translated to a 15% increase in profitability for a typical firm. In 2007, *Catalyst* published a report that focused on boards, and boards with the highest representation of women had outperformed others on return on equity, return on sales, and return on invested capital. The data is pretty compelling that having diversity in your board and in your executive leadership delivers results. So yes I do believe that companies that do not have a diverse board and a diverse C-suite are at a disadvantage.

***What challenges did you encounter on your path to an executive role? How did you persevere through these challenges?***

**Williams:** Right before I left Dow I was asked to give a fire-side chat with one of the high-potential leadership groups and they asked me a very similar question. At this, I talked about an early-career challenge, a mid-career challenge, and then a late-career challenge, and I also started the conversation by reminding the young high-potentials to expect challenging moments because they happen to everyone.

My early-career challenge happened at about 10 years when I was asked to leave the business and the site where I had built my reputation and was essentially asked to start over at a joint venture that was just in its infancy. This opportunity would move our family from Ohio to Louisiana, would be my first manager role, and would require me to find new childcare and family coverage. But taking that role is probably why we're having this interview today. I learned so much by taking the role — the value of corporate culture, the melding of two corporate giants that were partners, Dow and Exxon, participating on a cross-functional leadership team, meeting payroll for a new company, developing start-up technology for it, and learning to cope at home in a new state where we felt private schooling was necessary. I learned that although it is tough, it can be done, it can be fun, and it really was great learning.

My mid-career challenge was being asked to leave my R&D roots and take on a manufacturing site manager role. Switching functions in the middle of your career and gaining that peer recognition of your capabilities, even if you obtained those skills in a different manner, can be daunting. However, this was a move that opened up a business direc-



tor role opportunity and then a chance to lead Dow's global purchasing operation. Again, things that would not have happened if I had not stepped out to try something new.

Finally, late in my career, the challenge was taking my first role working for Andrew Liveris, our CEO. I was asked to lead a market-facing development effort. Essentially, it was changing how Dow went to market after selling products for 100 years. Changing how a company does business after 100 years is tough. However, when your customer supports the innovation and the change to the market focus, it did help to drive this kind of change.

***Will you talk about your leadership style — shared leadership? Do you see this as being a leadership style that requires more emotional intelligence?***

**Williams:** One of the roles that we as leaders have is identifying the leaders of tomorrow. And one of the ways to do this is to grow the leaders of tomorrow by sharing leadership today. In the organizations that I have had the privilege to lead, one of the ways we did this was by rotating who was leading meetings, who wrote the minutes, and who presented to upper management. This provides a chance for your direct reports to learn and to grow while they're in that role and to also realize that with decision-making comes accountability.

Another interesting thing that we started doing was inviting someone two steps below the leadership team to attend leadership meetings to take minutes. It provided them with the opportunity to see what topics were being discussed, how our team made decisions, and how negotiations progressed.

What shared leadership does not mean is that as the leader you're abdicating your responsibility. There are times when the leader has to make the call. But if your people have been engaged in the process and they understand the reasons why a decision was made — they may not like it, but they understand it and can support it.

Your next question was about leadership style and emotional intelligence. I think all leadership roles require emotional intelligence to be truly effective. If you're not self-aware and able to effectively engage your people, how can you deliver on the vision for your group, how can you develop new ideas for the future, or get your people passionate about what the enterprise needs? I think emotional intelligence is critical for all.

***Who are your role models and how have these role models helped you along your career path?***

**Williams:** My mom and dad were always role models for me, while I was growing up and even when I was working. From my dad, I learned a strong work ethic, that being on time meant you were actually late and if the job was worth

doing it was worth doing right. I can still hear those words when I take on a new task, even as a retiree. This philosophy helped me throughout my life.

From my mom, I learned that women should and could do anything. At a time when women did not work, my mother did. She worked throughout my formative years growing up and I did not feel robbed of anything because she worked. She also worked until she was in her 70s. From her, I learned that some women excel by working and are better for their families when they are home because they work.

***As a role model yourself, what advice would you offer women who want to reach the C-suite level? Are there any strategies you can share to help women overcome obstacles to advancement?***

**Williams:** First, I hope that some women that read this article do want to reach the C-suite. Do not be afraid to let people know that you want to build the skills and the capabilities to grow your career so you can be considered as a candidate for a C-suite role. Sometimes, women are a little afraid to actually state that they want it. For example, we were hosting Dow's board members at an informal event where they were meeting upcoming high-potentials. The board member that I was hosting asked everyone at the event one question: What role do you aspire to? Every single one of the men said that they aspired either to his role as a board member or to the role like I had in the C-suite. But when he asked the women this question, he got very long-winded responses about delivering on their current role, getting roles to help set them up for success. At the end of the night, he asked me why the women didn't aspire to big roles. I told him that they did aspire to them, but they were not bold enough to say that. Be bold. Tell them that you want it.

Secondly, people need to make sure that they're delivering profitable unique results that are helping the company to grow. Then make sure that their results are being attributed to them.

Finally, you asked about obstacles to advancement: If you find an obstacle, and you will, don't let it stand in your way for long. If you have a boss like I did that says something like, "I don't know why you work since your husband has a good job," don't stay working for them for long. Why would they give you a key project role when they think men should have them? And also, don't let obstacles become a stumbling block to your future. For example, did you know that Walt Disney was fired from the *Kansas City Star* newspaper because he wasn't creative enough? Or that Oprah Winfrey was fired from her nightly news job and was offered as a concession a daytime talk series? Well, we all know how those turned out. Everyone will be confronted with obstacles in life. It's how we deal with these obstacles that will lead to our success.

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