

# A Case Study of How Women Crack the C-Suite

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**Abstract** The purpose of this study is to secure a clearer understanding of how women crack the C-Suite within their professional careers. Alumnae from Gabelli School of Business at Fordham University were interviewed to understand how these graduates made it to the C-Suite and to see if there existed any trends or key insights from their journeys. The main findings of this preliminary study indicate the following regarding the alumnae: (1) each experienced an event, incident or program that increased their desire to pursue the C-Suite; (2) each had a mentor or mentors that had a major impact on their careers; (3) each had similar factors and acquired skills that enabled their elevation to the C-Suite; (4) each experienced gender issues on their rise to the C-Suite and within their current roles; and (5) each had not fully mastered the art of work life balance although they were fully supportive of this concept with individuals within their organizations. The initial results of this study can potentially be a resource for women seeking the C-Suite, for organizations looking to gain greater female representation within the C-Suite and for females thinking of pursuing graduate management education.

**Keywords** Women, C-Suite, Executive Development

## 1. Introduction

Cracking the C-Suite for any professional is a long and arduous process. Research has further indicated that this journey is even more difficult for women. The increasing demands and changing skill sets needed to not only reach

the C-Suite but also thrive in it, have also evolved over time. With this as a background, the purpose of this study is to secure a clearer understanding of how women, from diverse industries and sectors, crack the C-Suite.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

According to Frangos, there are four (4) core paths to the C-Suite. The first path is the *Tenured Executive*. This path consists of internal hires who understand the history and culture of one's organization. These hires have a strong sense of future industry trends, can lead transformational change and have multiple institutional sponsors. The second core path to the C-Suite is the *Free Agent*. These executives usually travel the traditional path and are hired externally to the C-Suite level. The third core path to the C-Suite is the *Leap Frog Leader*. These non-traditional candidates, either hired internally or externally, are usually forward thinking, take calculated risks and are unexpected hires who jump various levels to the C-Suite. The fourth core path to the C-Suite is the *Founder*. These professionals break away from one's current organization and create new ventures [1].

While there are four (4) core paths to the C-Suite, many of these hires fail. According to the Global Leadership Forecast Series, 47% of externally hired C-Suite leaders fail while 35% of internally hired C-Suite leaders fail. Some attribute these failures to poorly designed C-Suite positions [2]. It has also been noted that once hired, failure occurs because of a lack of understanding of "culture", "relationships", "teams" and "people" in addition to not enough time and resources devoted to the transition

development process [3]. Most companies have lofty expectations for C-Suite executives but do not necessarily support their "star hires" once they are secured [4]. It has also been noted that C-Suite executives often fail due to the extraordinary pressure to grow the organization regardless of the external environment [4]. In addition, failure occurs due to the lack of proper succession planning and limited planning within organizations [5]. Furthermore, 41% of C-Suite role expectations do not align with candidates' qualifications, and 36% of responsibilities do not align with candidates' professional experience. This has led to an average C-Suite tenure of only 5.3 years [6]. This has also further led to a "war on talent" which just exacerbates this phenomenon even further [7].

Failure within the C-Suite can also be attributed to the evolving foci of such positions. For example, it has been noted that C-Suite positions have moved from a more tactical to a more strategic focus. An example can be seen with how C-Suite executives now are required to communicate utilizing data, influence and persuasion rather than only speech writing and media placements used in the past [8]. Companies now want leaders who are adept communicators with strong social skills along with relationship builders and problem solvers [9]. C-Suite executives must move beyond their functional expertise and must deliver top business acumen and soft leadership skills that include strong communication, collaboration, strategic thinking and a global mindset [4]. In addition, strong finance skills are now also an expectation within the C-Suite [10]. C-Suite executives are now required to be equipped with change management skills along with subject matter expertise, strategic thinking, decision making and foresight [11]. The expectation is that C-Suite executives must create a culture of empowerment throughout their organizations [12]. C-Suite executives must now build an agile organization that includes "Conventional Agile Teams" that create "innovative solutions" [13]. Examples of the evolution of the C-Suite can be seen with the Chief Information Officer (CIO) and the Chief Operating Officer (COO) positions. More specifically, the CIO role has shifted, in many cases, to that of Chief Digital Officer (CDO). Trends indicate that the responsibilities of the COO are being moved, in some industries, to the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions [14].

While there has been failure within the C-Suite coupled with a changing foci within these roles, women have been making some gains in acquiring such positions. According to the analysis of the Russell 3000, growth of women in executive roles has averaged 6.9% from 2016 through 2021 with utilities (21%) and healthcare (16%) holding the highest share. This percentage is also up from 3.8% from the previous five-year cycle [15]. In addition, according to

this study, in 2019, women made up 5.2% of CEOs. In 2021 this has increased modestly to 5.6%.

The 2020 Survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports women occupy 29.3% of CEO roles in the United States which has grown 1.4% [10]. According to a recent Deloitte report, women in C-Suite positions in North America within the financial services industry are expected to grow from 21.1% in 2021 to 28.3% in 2030 [16]. In 2012, 27% of first-time directors were women and in 2022 this figure rose to 44% [17]. For the first time in history, Forbes recently reported that women now lead more than 10% of Fortune 500 companies [18]. Furthermore, according to a 2024 study by Grant Thornton, 6% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women and 35% of senior management roles are held by women [19]. Finally, an example of a *Free Agent* move within the C-Suite among women can be seen with Ms. Jessica Sibley, the former COO of Forbes, who replaced Mr. Edward Felsenthal as CEO of Time Magazine [20].

Overall, while there has been positive movement in women acquiring more C-Suite roles, according to 2020 Catalyst Research, this segment only holds 6.4% of these roles (32 positions) within the S&P 500 companies [10]. Women make up less than 25% of executive level positions overall [21]. A recent LinkedIn study illustrated that for every woman to make the C-Suite level during their first decade of their career, nearly 1.8 men secured this level [22]. In addition, according to the Russell 3000 Report, 41.5% of CEOs are at least sixty (60) years old up from 35.1% since 2017 which adds a further hurdle [23].

There is also initial data that indicates that having women in C-Suite roles can have a positive impact on an organization. According to a 2020 study by Nielsen, women by 2028 will not only own 75% of discretionary spending, making them the "world's greatest influencers", but also will outperform men in key leadership traits, innovation and development of unique organizational culture [24]. It has also been noted that more women in the C-Suite make organizations more profitable, more socially conscious, safer, and provide higher quality customer experiences in addition to making firms more open to change, less risk averse and more open to changing the status quo [25]. A recent study of Fortune 500 organizations has found that female leaders are very valuable to customer strategy and lead to greater shareholder value [26]. Having a female board chair or greater representation of females in the C-Suite can also lead to positive gains regarding an organization's diversity and representation [27]. Women who have made the C-Suite attribute organizational mentoring and sponsorship programs along with efforts to build specific organizational cultures in the workplace as important factors for their trajectories [28].

Yet even with these positive organizational outcomes women still face hurdles within their journey to the C-Suite. Women reported that they feel pressured that their time is limited to crack the C-Suite [22]. If women do not "sprint" to the C-Suite early in their careers their chances of making the C-Suite greatly diminish as many careers are put on hold or stalled due to childcare and other responsibilities [29]. Statistically, women leave their companies at a higher rate than men. Many have indicated that the reasons for their departure include a lack of an opportunity to advance, a lack of flexible scheduling and a commitment to their wellbeing along with being the recipient of a high level of microaggressions [21]. Women lack confidence to perform in male-dominated fields / functions and are less attracted to executive position postings that are vague in presentation [30]. Once women reach the C-Suite the disparity in pay still abounds. The reason behind this phenomenon is that women have always experienced pay disparities throughout their careers, and once they reach the C-Suite level companies believe making their pay equitable to their male counterparts is too much of a pay increase [31]. According to a 2021 YPO Global Gender Equality Survey, 47% of female CEOs of companies with revenues between \$10 million and \$1 billion indicated cultural expectations were an obstacle compared to only 2% of male counterparts [32].

As set forth in this paper, while it is very difficult to reach the C-Suite, it is even more difficult for women who encounter additional challenges and obstacles within this

journey.

### 3. Methodology

Our research question included how did the alumnae of the Fordham University, Gabelli School of Business, Executive MBA Program crack the C-Suite? Five (5) alumnae were identified and were invited to participate in this study. These alumnae, with unique roles within the C-Suite representing diverse industries and sectors, accepted the offer to participate. Please find the professional background of the five (5) alumnae who participated in this study in Table I.

1. Was cracking the C-Suite always a goal for you?
2. Did you experience a "moment of truth" in your career? If so what was it and how did it impact you?
3. Was there an individual who had the biggest impact on your career? If so who was it and how?
4. What are three (3) important factors that lead you to the C-Suite?
5. Did you experience any gender related issues either within your journey to the C-Suite or within your current role?
6. How have you managed the Work / Life Balance within your career?

Once the data was collected an analysis ensued to determine if trends existed within each journey to the C-Suite.

**Table I.** Background of Alumnae Interviewed

Alumnae	Age Range	EMBA Graduation Date Range	Title	Industry	Organizational type	Method of Cracking C-Suite
Alumna #1	36-40	2011-2015	CEO	Consumer Packaged Goods	Fortune 500	Leapfrog Leader
Alumna #2	51-55	2001-2005	President	Manufacturing	Family Business	Tenured Executive
Alumna #3	46-50	2011-2015	Executive Director	Association	Nonprofit	Free Agent
Alumna #4	51-55	2006-2010	COO	Nonprofit	Nonprofit	Tenured Executive
Alumna #5	41-45	2006-2010	CEO	Food and Beverage Manufacturer	Privately Held	Tenured Executive

**Source:** Selected Fordham Gabelli EMBA Alumnae in C-Suite Roles who participated in this study.

Once these alumnae accepted the offer to participate in this study, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with each alumna. The following six (6) questions were asked within these interviews which guided the discussions with each individual.

## 4. Results

The results of this study are offered in the order of the research questions that were presented in the Methodology. The findings are below.

### 1. *Question 1: Was cracking the C-Suite always a goal for you?*

For Alumna #1 the C-Suite was not a goal at least "certainly not from the beginning." Early in her career Alumna #1 was working for a premier consumer products company and was selected to participate in a marketing training program which also served as a general management program. Within this experience Alumna #1 realized that "marketers are trained to lead businesses". This was the first time that Alumna #1 was exposed to "holistic leadership" along with formulating and implementing strategy. From that experience Alumna #1 indicated that she really enjoyed "setting strategy" and seeing it "all come together." This experience allowed Alumna #1 to pursue a "general management path." She credits the consumer products company for having the foresight to invest in her as a young professional.

For Alumna #2 the C-Suite was not a goal "at least not in college". As a communication arts major in college, Alumna #2 wanted to work in television news so she interned at a major news network. Upon graduation and after backpacking in Europe, Alumna #2 had a change of heart even though that specific news network wanted to hire her. Alumna #2 began working as an executive assistant at a corporation that her father just started. Within this role her responsibilities grew including business development, technology and attending trade shows. With her father serving as her mentor and after completing her Executive MBA, Alumna #2 was promoted to Executive Vice President in which she was involved in international travel for business development and managed the organization. With the sudden and unexpected death of her father Alumna #2 took over the company and has led it ever since. The mentorship of her father and his belief in her abilities were instrumental in Alumna #2's rise to the top.

Deep down, Alumna #3 was always drawn to the C-Suite. As a young immigrant from Taiwan there was a familial drive to "be the best you could be and never give up". Upon receiving a Bachelor's degree in International Business, Alumna #3 worked as an assistant for a luxury retail brand. Within that position Alumna #3 observed senior leaders and believed "this is something I can do".

For Alumna #4, the C-Suite was always her intent. Her Executive MBA experience allowed her to develop a "blue print of what a chief role can do". Alumna #4 realized early on that a C-Suite role has the ability to "advance your organization's goal and in my case mission (nonprofits) to a high level". Alumna #4 realized that the C-Suite role is uniquely suited to directly impact an organization by connecting/assigning the resources to the critical needs and

goals. For Alumna #4 the C-Suite was always a goal and she always wanted a "personal stake" in advancing those ambitions. Her Executive MBA experience allowed her to formulate this position.

For Alumna #5, the C-Suite was not her original goal upon her hire straight from her undergraduate degree. Yet throughout her tenure and her various roles in business development, operations and strategy execution, she was targeted by leadership as a C-Suite candidate and the process subsequently developed.

### 2. *Question 2: Did you experience a "moment of truth" in your career? If so what was it and how did it impact you?*

For Alumna #1 she did not believe she had one specific "moment of truth" within her career. She indicated that her initial experience at a premier global household and consumer products company gave her a "great foundation". She further indicated that her current employer set her on a different path both professionally and physically, leading her to a different region in the United States. For this alumna her organization had quite an "entrepreneurial spirit" and she was very motivated to learn as much as possible and to see how all of the "pieces of the machine come together". Her experiences allowed Alumna #1 to work in various functions including leading sales prior to becoming CEO which makes her a *Leapfrog Leader*. Alumna #1 further indicated that she views her career at her current organization in two parts, including "Pre Acquisition" and "Post Acquisition" with the subsequent "learning curves" that are inherent to each state.

Alumna #2's moment of truth came when her father, the leader of her organization, passed away unexpectedly. Alumna #2 indicated that she was devastated and thought she would be "incapable of moving forward". At that moment she had to prove herself and stay focused and positive for her employees, customers and suppliers. Alumna #2 indicated that she carried on and that tragedy and moment of truth gave her the drive to move forward.

For Alumna #3, the moment of truth came after being laid off from a nonprofit role when the entire department was reorganized. As a middle level manager, Alumna #3 took the opportunity to reflect on "what to do next". This layoff, in essence, provided "the drive to lead" and catapulted a trajectory to the C-Suite. While it was difficult in the short term, there were many positive outcomes within Alumna #3's career in the long term.

Alumna #4 indicated she was "twice born" throughout her career. The first time was "internally driven" when the practice of mindfulness was introduced to her within graduate school. At that moment she learned how important "strength of mind is for unleashing potential and productivity within yourself." Alumna #4 subsequently started a mindfulness practice that opened up "designing and building an organizational roadmap" to want more for her career. The second moment was "externally driven" when a partner within her organization exposed her to the

power of a "growth and learning mindset". This partner and leader allowed Alumna #4 to "grow and innovate together" and really pushed her in all facets.

For Alumna #5, there was a supervisor, early in her career within her organization, who identified her as a potential candidate for the C-Suite. This supervisor ignited Alumna #5 that the C-Suite was not only a possibility but also gave her the confidence to pursue this path.

**3. Question 3: Was there an individual who had the biggest impact on your career? If so who was it and how?**

Alumna #1 indicated that a "collection of people" had an impact on her career and she "never had a single mentor". She further indicated that she observed and learned from "champions on the ground" throughout her career. While not one specific person had the biggest impact Alumna #1 learned from many.

For Alumna #2 she indicated her father had the biggest impact on her career. She indicated that her father provided so much learning in all aspects of the business including customer relationships, the management of staff and stakeholders along with technology. Alumna #2 further stated that while her father was traditional in many aspects he had an "entrepreneurial spirit" which was a key takeaway.

Alumna #3 indicated that a key manager at the luxury retail brand earlier had the biggest impact. Promoted to management, Alumna #3 was overseeing a team who were older and had worked longer within the company. This specific individual, who was not Alumna #3's manager at the time, provided guidance and became a mentor. This colleague also eventually became Alumna #3's manager and is "the main reason why I am as successful as I am now".

For Alumna #4 she indicated that the former Executive Director along with the Chief Financial Officer within her organization had the biggest impact on her career. These individuals assisted Alumna #4 in "building a roadmap" for the C-Suite and helped her "unlock that mindset". In addition, having a collaborative supervisor who was open to her contributions and ideas was very impactful for Alumna #4. Furthermore, Alumna #4 indicated that a former Professor became another "secret weapon" for her in terms of hearing her ideas and pushing her "intellectual boundaries to generate frameworks for complex problems and new paradigms."

Alumna #5 indicated it was that supervisor, early in her tenure, who had the biggest impact on her career. This supervisor saw something and nurtured this development within her.

**4. Question 4: What are the three (3) important factors that lead you to the C-Suite?**

For Alumna #1 she indicated that her leadership training throughout her career was a key factor that has led her to the C-Suite. This type of training was sponsored

professional development by her organization. In addition, Alumna #1 indicated that her experience in cross-functional teams was also critical within her journey. This type of exposure allowed Alumna #1 to understand the key interdependency that exists within organizations. Furthermore, confidence and having goals were also key elements that drove Alumna #1 to the C-Suite.

For Alumna #2 there were two key factors that led her to the C-Suite. The first was the "employee support" within her organization. At times Alumna #2 had to cut back on her employees' salaries when there were revenue shortfalls. Alumna #2 is "forever grateful" for the cooperation and allegiance of her employees throughout this journey. Secondly, Alumna #2 has indicated that her suppliers were also critical. In collaboration with them Alumna #2 was able to build a long-term win/win relationship. Through the "highs and lows" Alumna #2 and her suppliers were able to work together for the good of not only their organizations but also their industry space.

Alumna #3 has observed that relationships, soft skills, and navigating emotions, are the keys to success. For Alumna #3 there are lessons to be learned from colleagues in "what to do and what not to do" which planted the seed to become a leader who is – an Asian, a woman, and an immigrant – a rarity in the C-Suite. The realization of representation wasn't the original goal, however, adopting DEI into the C-Suite is just as important.

For Alumna #4 there are three important factors that assisted her in reaching the C-Suite. The EMBA Program was critical to producing this ability through multi-disciplinary learning. The EMBA helped shore up gaps, for example, in economics and finance. Similar to Alumna #1, the experience of working in cross-functional teams allowed Alumna #4 the ability to, once again, understand the important role interdependency plays in an organization. Secondly, this type of experience allowed Alumna #4 the ability to understand the "duality of roles" and to "speak languages of different stakeholder groups" which made her more efficient and effective. It also allowed Alumna #4 the ability to understand her role more effectively by "embodying other roles". In addition, Alumna #4 believed that "healthy boundaries" assisted her with her productivity and flexibility. Having healthy boundaries allowed Alumna #4 to recognize initiatives that could "lead one astray or escalate commitment on shaky ground". Interestingly, regarding boundaries, Alumna #4 indicated that "saying yes all too often hurts you and I have learned the hard way by saying yes too often." Lastly, Alumna #4 believes that the fact that she loves her organization, its mission and members and her work has been also critical in allowing her to reach the C-Suite.

Alumna #5 indicated that leadership development along with her multiple diverse roles within her organization and her ability to effectively work in cross-functional teams were key factors that led her to the C-Suite. In addition, her longevity with the organization allowed her to grow her reputational capital.

**5. Question 5: Did you experience any gender related issues either within your journey to the C-Suite or within your current role?**

Alumna #1 indicated that she experienced gender issues along with conscious and subconscious bias throughout her journey to the C-Suite. In addition, she has indicated it is "worse now as CEO". Alumna #1 has further stated that some professionals are surprised that a female is in the leading seat of her company and have also commented on her age stating "you're too young for this". Overall, gender issues were ever present throughout her career.

Alumna #2 has indicated that her industry is male-oriented and male-dominated. Men traditionally in her industry "managed the plant" while women were relegated to "office duties". Throughout her career Alumna #2 has been referred to as "hey little lady". In order to lead within her industry Alumna #2 indicated that you must be a "strong woman". Overall, capable and strong leaders within her industry, regardless of gender, according to Alumna #2, are sought out and appreciated.

For Alumna #3, her constituents are majority male. Often times, these constituents are "coddling" her because of their engrained belief that women are "fragile", "emotional" and cannot do the "same job as a male". She has further fielded comments regarding her age such as "are you experienced enough to lead this organization?" or "are you old enough?" to move us forward? Alumna #3 has further had her (white, older male) board members refer to her as "sweetie", "honey" and "love". While she can address these issues nowadays, she did not have the opportunity or leverage to do that earlier in her career.

For Alumna #4 she also believes she has experienced gender issues throughout her career. Yet in hindsight Alumna #4 recognizes her own "cognitive bias" in the workplace and has indicated she has played into those gender biases especially with the suppression of her emotions in the workplace in masking vulnerabilities. Realizing now the importance of "authenticity" within her leadership style Alumna #4 is now leading with her "full self" and encourages others to follow this path regardless of gender. Overall, the male gender leadership behavioral pathway that Alumna #4 followed is no longer part of her "leadership playbook".

Alumna #5 indicated she did experience minor gender related issues during her journey. She attributed that the culture of the privately held organization allowed her to experience minimal hiccups within this area.

**6. Question 6: How have you managed the Work / Life Balance within your career?**

Alumna #1 indicated that work life balance has always been an issue throughout her career. However now as a CEO she believes she has some control over her schedule. As CEO Alumna #1 indicated she can "prioritize" and work around for "important events". This can only occur however with the support system Alumna #1 has in place.

Her husband serves as a stay-at-home parent with their three (3) young children. In addition, Alumna #1's parents have moved to their small town and are available to assist and provide support.

For Alumna #2 she indicated that her close friends live "out of state" and her personal life is all about her son which includes activities such as travel and soccer. Her life in essence revolves around her family and her son. For Alumna #2 she tries not to bring her work home and she tries to be a good example at work regarding family life and focusing on home. In essence she tries not to take advantage of her loved ones in this regard.

Alumna #3 believes work life balance is extremely important and encourages team members to take their vacations/holidays/sick days, however, she indicated that she is on her mobile "seven days a week". "I try to have work life balance, but I am not good at it. I preach it. I encourage it. Sadly, I don't practice it." In addition, the subsequent mental health issues that were a direct result of the pandemic were very concerning to Alumna #3 who believes that flex hours and other benefits will make employees not only more content but also more productive.

For Alumna #4 she believes that work life balance has never taken priority as the main "breadwinner" within her home. Alumna #4 also wants her team to have work life balance except she "did not find it in her career". Overall, Alumna #4 believes the concept of work life balance is a "unicorn" and it is overall "what you put on yourself".

Alumna #5 indicated work life balance has always been a struggle especially since she does not have children. Alumna #5 also indicated that she strongly encourages her staff to have work life balance.

## 5. Discussion

There are various useful observations that emerged from this study.

### 5.1. Events and Moments of Truth

First, it should be noted that the C-Suite executives interviewed for this study all reached the C-Suite after an event, program or incident that they experienced. For Alumna #1 it was her participation early on in her career in a marketing training (general management) program that planted the seed of the C-Suite within her. For Alumna #2 it was her father's mentorship and belief in her that opened her eyes to the C-Suite option. For Alumna #3 it was a direct result of her upbringing to succeed as a result of growing up in an immigrant household. For Alumna #4 it was her graduate school experience and belief that the best way to move forward an organization's mission (nonprofit) is through a leadership (C-Suite) position. For Alumna #5 it was an early supervisor who identified her and set the trajectory including leadership development.

Overall, it is useful to note that something served as a catalyst to trigger our sample's desire to pursue the C-Suite. Those experiences motivated these Alumnae to pursue C-Suite positions.

Secondly, it should be noted that not all of the Alumnae had a "moment of truth" within their career however each one had, once again, some type of occurrence that changed them. For Alumna #1 it was the great foundation that was set at the premier household and consumer products company along with her current organization that allowed her to pursue multiple roles to achieve a full understanding of the ecosystem. For Alumna #2 it was the sudden passing of her father resulting in and/or forcing her to "step up" within the leadership role. For Alumna #3 it was the experience of being unexpectedly laid off as a middle manager within a nonprofit that allowed her to rethink her next career step. For Alumna #4 it was her discovery of mindfulness along with having a colleague to share ideas that motivated her to the C-Suite. For Alumna #5 it was, once again, this early supervisor who saw something within her and changed her mindset that the C-Suite was a possibility.

Once again it should be noted that while all Alumnae at one point were intrinsically motivated to pursue the C-Suite they all experienced some type of external factors (and moments) which impacted them.

## 5.2. Mentorship

In terms of mentors all Alumnae interviewed had someone who had the biggest impact on their careers. For Alumna #1 there was a collection of colleagues whom she observed and learned from that shaped her career trajectory. For Alumna #2 it was her father's business acumen, entrepreneurial spirit along with his people-oriented approach that molded her leadership style. For Alumna #3 it was a previous colleague early on in her career that took her "under her wing" and provided mentorship and guidance for her. For Alumna #4 it was former colleagues including an Executive Director and CFO who assisted her in building the road map for C-Suite roles and "unlocking that mindset". For Alumna #5 it was, once again, that initial supervisor. Overall, for all Alumnae interviewed there was one person or a collection of individuals who all impacted their careers to a positive trajectory.

## 5.3. Factors / Skills

All Alumnae interviewed indicated specific factors and skills that led them to the C-Suite. For Alumna #1 and Alumna #5 it was their cross-functional experience, leadership and high impact team training along with their confidence that catapulted them to the C-Suite. For Alumna #2 it was her employee and stakeholder (customers / suppliers) support throughout the good times and bad times that allowed her to grow into a successful leader within the C-Suite. For Alumna #3 it was her

communication style and key understanding of the receiver that greatly assisted her journey and success. For Alumna #4 it was her ability to work cross functionally, communicate effectively, and understand roles and her ability to establish healthy boundaries that set the foundation for her C-Suite destination. A cross-functional understanding of an organization and effective communication along with establishing alliances were all key threads among all interviewed.

## 5.4. Gender Issues

Not surprisingly all of the Alumnae interviewed experienced some form of gender (and age) resistance. Some alumnae indicated the resistance was as a result of conscious and subconscious bias while others felt unnecessarily "coddled". In addition, all have been spoken to in a condescending way. Alumnae were not highly emotional about this topic during the interviews but they all realized that this was an expected part of the journey and found a way to deal with it.

## 5.5. Work Life Balance

All Alumnae interviewed believe work life balance is critical and they all preach this importance to all employees. Our Alumnae do not fully practice what they preach to their staffs. Each individual however has found a way to approach it. Alumna #1 has found that prioritizing each day, controlling her schedule and having a strong support system which includes her stay-at-home husband and her nearby parents has greatly assisted her. For Alumna #2 her personal life revolves around her son and family and she has made that her priority in terms of balance. For Alumna #3 she has tried to focus on work life balance and positive mental health for all individuals within her organization. For Alumna #4 she has tried to incorporate more work life balance but as the main revenue generator within her family it has been consistently difficult for her. For Alumna #5 work life balance has always been difficult and she believes not having children only exacerbates this phenomenon. While all our interviewed Alumnae believe and preach work life balance they do not embody it in their daily work life.

## 5.6. Next Steps

The goal of this initial study was to secure a clearer understanding of how women crack the C-Suite within their professional careers. While there are some useful takeaways from this study more inquiry certainly needs to be done. Achieving a clearer understanding of how women crack the C-Suite will provide needed guidance to females aspiring to this level as well as organizations interested in increasing representation of women within the C-Suite.

With this as a background, it is recommended that there be three (3) types of studies within this area moving

forward. The first type of research recommended is the case study. The women who crack the C-Suite all have a unique story and journey. Uncovering this journey and learning from these individual stories is one way to move the research forward. The second method of research should be statistical in nature. Surveys should be distributed to a large sample of women who have cracked the C-Suite followed by a regression analysis to determine the significance among the attributes. The third method of suggested research should focus on the decision makers, inclusive of corporate boards, who select C-Suite candidates and the reasons why these individuals were selected.

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We are very grateful to have completed this initial study and we look forward to continued research within this essential area.

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