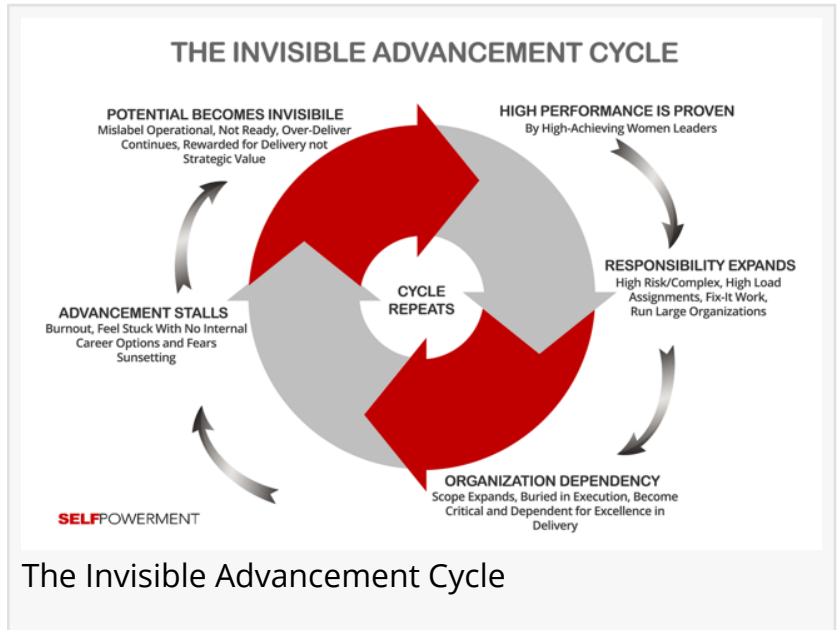


FORMER C-SUITE EXECUTIVE NAMES THE HIDDEN SYSTEM STALLING WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

New research white paper introduces the Invisible Advancement Cycle — a repeatable pattern confirmed across 62 interviews and 500 hours of research

BOSTON AREA, MA, UNITED STATES, June 10, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- McKinsey's 2024 Women in the Workplace report puts gender parity in senior leadership decades away and, the most recent report identifies a cause of the decline in women leadership is an emerging ambition gap. New research from former C-suite executive Deb Smallwood offers a complimentary lens with detailed qualitative research. The key finding is: "What appears as declining ambition is often a rational response to stalled advancement," she says. "Women are not opting out. They are opting for themselves."



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The Hidden System that
Quietly Determines Who
Becomes Indispensable
Without Becoming Visible”
Deb Smallwood

Smallwood has a name for what is stalling them — and she has been inside it herself.

In 1997, she was a top-performing Director when a new CIO hired a Vice President over her and told her four words she never forgot: "You are not strategic." She left, and went on to become a CEO, CIO, and Senior Partner at Fortune 500 companies.

Twenty-five years later, she sat across from a woman in her research — different company, different decade — who was running a large operation, led major transformation projects, and posted for her boss's role. She was told she was not strategic. Same words. Same system. Twenty-five years apart.

"At that moment, I knew this was not me or an isolated situation," said Smallwood. "It was a system. And it needed a name."

The Research

To find out whether her experience was an outlier or a pattern, Smallwood went looking for evidence.

Smallwood spent over 500 hours conducting narrative interviews with 62 senior leaders — 52 high-achieving women and 10 senior men — across industries and generations. Six findings surfaced consistently: representation improved but influence did not follow; responsibility expanded faster than authority; nonlinear careers collided with linear systems; execution was labeled "operational," limiting visibility; over-delivery became a trap, not a differentiator; and burnout redefined ambition rather than eliminating it.

The Invisible Advancement Cycle

Individually, each finding looks like a personal career setback. Read together, they form a system.

These findings describe a repeatable pattern in which high-performing women are entrusted with complexity, delivery, and risk while visibility, authority, and advancement fail to keep pace. "What is structural is experienced as situational. What is systemic appears personal — until it has a name," Smallwood explains. The cycle is distinct from invisible labor, glass ceilings, broken rungs, or impostor syndrome: it explains how leaders can be simultaneously indispensable and overlooked, successful and stalled.

The InnerShift

Naming the cycle explains why women stall. The next question was how some of them did not get 'stuck' in the cycle, since most high-achieving women initially enter the cycle with more responsibility.

Smallwood also studied the women who easily broke the pattern. What changed was internal before it was external — they chose themselves, led from clarity, and measured success by alignment rather than title. She calls this turn the InnerShift, and the framework around is [SelfPowerment](https://www.selfpowerment.com), built on four principles that each return a gift: Acknowledge (confidence), Awaken (clarity), Accept (choice), and Align (strategic boundaries). The shift moves a woman's central question from "Will they choose me?" to "Do I choose this?"

The White Paper

The full research is now public.

The free white paper, What No One Talks About — But Women Know, is available at [SelfPowerment.com/research](https://www.selfpowerment.com/research) as the research companion to Smallwood's book, SelfPowerment: The Inner Shift for High-Achieving Women Who Want More Than Just Success (Morgan James Publishing, April 2026). download a free copy of the white paper

www.selfpowerment.com/research

About the Author

The research grew directly out of the career that inspired it.

Deb Smallwood is the creator of SelfPowerment and a former CEO, CIO, and Senior Partner with four decades of leadership experience across insurance, technology, and professional services. Her book is available at Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and all major booksellers.

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