

## Creating Workplaces That Work For Women

An Interview with Jennifer McCollum, President and Chief Executive Officer, Catalyst

**EDITORS' NOTE** Jennifer McCollum is President and Chief Executive Officer of Catalyst. An expert on advancing women's leadership, McCollum has long been dedicated to challenging and changing the status quo for women in the workplace. A nationally recognized speaker, consultant, coach, and author, McCollum is a thought leader with expertise on closing the gender equity gap and inclusive leadership. She is the author of *In Her Own Voice: A Woman's Rise to CEO*, which offers advice based on McCollum's



Jennifer McCollum

own experiences on how to challenge gender biases in the workplace. McCollum most recently served for nearly six years as the CEO of Linkage, Inc., a top-20 global leadership development firm dedicated to advancing women and creating inclusive leaders and organizations. She led the transformation of the organization, culminating in the sale and integration into SHRM through 2023. Prior to Linkage, McCollum spent a decade growing businesses within Corporate Executive Board (CEB), now Gartner, and Korn Ferry. At CEB, she led product management within the leadership division, driving innovative solutions that helped organizations select, develop and place leaders at all levels. She also ran CEB's Leadership Academies business, which developed more than 30,000 professionals in 2,100 companies throughout 50 countries. McCollum also served as CEO of IntraVision, a leadership consultancy she founded and grew over the course of eight years. McCollum holds an MS in management and communications from the University of Stirling in Scotland and a BA in communications and psychology from Wake Forest University.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Catalyst ([catalyst.org](http://catalyst.org)) is a global nonprofit supported by many of the world's most powerful CEOs and leading companies to help build workplaces that work for women. Founded in 1962, Catalyst drives change with preeminent thought leadership, actionable solutions, and a galvanized community of multinational corporations to accelerate and advance women into leadership – because progress for women is progress for everyone.

### How do you define Catalyst's mission and purpose?

Catalyst's mission is to accelerate progress for women through workplace inclusion. Catalyst's research and tools have helped companies for 62 years drive equity at every level, and our impact is measured through equitable pay and representation.

### Will you provide an overview of Catalyst's work and programs?

Catalyst promotes gender equity through workplace inclusion, and our work is rooted in unique research and actionable solutions. Together with more than 400 leading companies around the world, we help create workplaces that work for women. Our programs focus on five key areas:

- **Advancing Women:** Increasing the representation of women, including women from racially and ethnically marginalized groups, in corporate leadership and promoting equal access to career opportunities.

- **Women and the Future of Work:** Developing solutions for women and underrepresented groups to have full participation and equal opportunity in the 21st-century workplace.

- **Lead for Equity and Inclusion:** Deepening understanding of workplace inclusion and equipping global companies to remedy inequities across intersections of identity, such as gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

- **MARC (Men Advocating Real Change):** Engaging men to leverage their influence to advocate for gender equity in the workplace.

- **Frontline Employees Initiative:** Creating respectful and rewarding workplaces, so all women thrive.

We offer actionable guidance and community through our workshops, courses, and webinars, as well as our signature Catalyst Awards Conference & Dinner and Catalyst Honours events. Our Catalyst CEO Champions For Change initiative shines a spotlight on CEOs and their organizations that exemplify what it takes to create and sustain inclusive workplaces.

### What excited you about the opportunity to lead Catalyst and made you feel it was the right fit?

When I wrote my book, *In Her Own Voice*, last year, I focused mostly on what women could do to overcome the real hurdles that hold them back. That's important work focused on supporting the women themselves, but it's even more effective when organizations and executives help break down the systemic barriers that exist, like representation, pay equity, male allyship, and inclusive cultures. Now, with this

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opportunity at Catalyst, I get to lean in on this other critical side of the issue, working alongside a committed staff and 400+ companies and their executives who are equally committed to our mission.

The other thing I’m excited about is that Catalyst is so research-driven. Everything hinges on leading-edge metrics around where we’ve been, where we are now, and where we need to go to achieve gender equity. Measurable data is crucial. And I love that Catalyst doesn’t only focus on the problems, but also on the best practices, tools, and training around the problems.

For example, Catalyst actively engages men in the process of systems change – because we can’t achieve gender parity without them. We invite them to see their role in the solution, not just to support or sponsor women, but to be true partners and advocates for real change. Most men want to help. When we provide the foundation of understanding and practical skills, they can do so effectively.

One more point: Catalyst brilliantly rewards and recognizes the people and organizations who do this work well through our prestigious Catalyst Awards. What we measure and reinforce, we get more of, and our award winners are living proof of that.

**Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women in C-suites and on corporate boards?**

There is a tremendous opportunity for women to lead in the C-suite and on corporate boards. We have 39 trailblazing women CEOs compared to 461 men running companies on the S&P 500. Men still fill more than 90 percent

of CEO roles and fill two-thirds of board seats. We’re approaching critical mass for women on boards, where their presence is finally considered a norm and not an exception. But that’s still just 33 percent.

The progress is too slow, and yet there are encouraging bright spots. Catalyst’s CEO Champions for Change is a unique community of more than 80 global CEOs committed to advancing women across racial and ethnic groups into leadership roles and onto boards of directors. They share organizational data on their efforts to advance women in the workplace with us each year, and our findings show that these companies are leading the advancement of women into senior leadership and outpacing their global peers. They are retaining women at all levels, including those who identify with marginalized racial and ethnic groups, at similar rates as men. And women are advancing to the highest levels at these companies.

**What advice do you offer to young women beginning their careers?**

There are now four generations in the workforce. At Catalyst, we’ve done a lot of work on generational differences, and we find that there is a lot of power in leveraging generational diversity. I would encourage young women to build their network early by accessing the wisdom of managers or seasoned employees who can help you with ongoing discovery and development. Find mentors with skill sets that will challenge your own evolution. Get curious and ask lots of direct questions. A good mentor can help you understand the unwritten rules about how work gets

done, about what does (and does not) lead to advancement.

Try to also create relationships where you can do some reverse mentoring and demonstrate your unique skills, too. It will help you build deeper connections with coworkers from different generations, which is good for you and for them. It will also make you more visible and give you the chance to hone your communication and leadership skills.

Advocate for yourself. Ask what the talent development program looks like. Let leaders know you’re interested instead of waiting to be asked. Also, don’t be afraid to speak up about your preferences on issues like flexible work options. Good companies know that this is important, not just for young people, but for everyone as they travel through different life and career stages. Now is the time to start getting used to asking for what you need.

Finally, be aware that unconscious bias is a real thing. People don’t always know how they come across to others. If someone offends you, don’t automatically assume it was intentional. I learned from Anne Chow, the first woman of color CEO in AT&T’s 140+ year history, that the best way to address it is to pull the person aside and gently let them know how what they did or said impacted you. Usually, they will be shocked and genuinely sorry.

This is not about giving bad behavior a pass, but about making it a habit to assume good intent. It’s better for building relationships, it’s better for your mental health, and it just creates a happier life. ●

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