We have seen increasing numbers of women in the early stages of careers in science without comparable increases in the proportion of women leaders. This situation is often described as a “leaky pipeline.”

If we assume that there is no gender bias in the search for leaders, how can this be? Here I suggest that significant numbers of women who should be tapped for leadership positions are invisible by current search criteria. Many women “don’t look right” when the paradigm for advancement to a leadership position is based on the career path of a scientist who is not also a primary caregiver.

Institutions can address this problem by offering early- or mid-career administrative training and by considering older women for leadership positions.

Where Leaders Come From

Typically, future leaders are identified for their first leadership positions when they are in their 40s. These early management roles mark them as candidates for the next, more visible step in leadership when they are in their 50s. So the typical candidate for a position as chair or dean is a person in his or her early 50s who has experience in management or administration as well as expertise and success in an academic specialty. Why would an otherwise highly effective and successful 50-year-old woman not yet have the administrative experience expected of such a candidate?

Invisible Women

The answer may be that women with significant familial obligations are already “max’d out” by science and teaching responsibilities and thus avoid management responsibilities outside their labs or clinical settings. A scientist (or academic physician) must expend maximal effort to be highly competitive. Distraction from this effort by administrative duties places a scientist at risk of failing in her or his chosen career. Thus many early- and mid-career scientists and physicians choose not to divide their attention further or decrease their research, teaching, or clinical efforts by taking on leadership responsibilities. Such distractions are an even greater threat to the career of someone who is also juggling work with family responsibilities. And women are more likely to find themselves in that situation. (The documented disparity between men and women’s hours devoted to childcare and chores is decreasing as men become more participatory partners, but this shift may not pertain to women now in their 50s. Notably, as fathers and husbands increase their responsibilities in the home, they’re also experiencing more difficulty in achieving work–life balance.)

I suggest that women are underrepresented in the presumptive leadership cohort because women in their 40s, as a result of their intense commitment to their careers and families, often avoid early management positions such as committee chair, division director, and assistant dean. Management and administrative experience therefore does not show up on their CVs and does not identify them as future leaders. In essence, by the standard methods used, they are invisible as potential leaders.

The lost opportunity is that, by their 50s and early 60s, many of our most talented women scientists have both fulfilled familial obligations and maintained intense career commitments. These individuals are now excellent candidates to be chairs, deans, and directors but are overlooked because they lack the standard
credentials sought by a search firm or search committee. This group of women has great administrative skills (as demonstrated by their success in juggling career and family), a mature perspective, and enormous energy now that they have completed the child-rearing phase of their lives. Yet few will show up on the “qualified” list.

What Institutions Can Do
I propose a two-pronged approach that institutions can take to elevate qualified women to leadership positions.

1. Offer leadership training courses that provide administrative and budget skills and a credential. There are excellent programs for women in early leadership positions, such as those offered by the Association of American Medical Colleges and Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine. Missing is training for early- and mid-career women scientists/physicians that emphasizes management skills and balancing career and family. Basic economic training would help these women in their personal and professional roles, and would give them essential tools for leadership positions. These management and budgetary tools could later be applied to institutional leadership positions when these positions seem appealing. In addition, inclusion of such courses on her CV would identify the faculty member as a well-prepared and interested candidate.

2. Reset the clock by 10–15 years for advancement to leadership by women who have not followed a traditional path but have chosen to devote their early years to childcare. Older women should be intentionally screened into the candidate pool for leadership positions. The absence of women in leadership positions reflects searches that emphasize the traditional 40- and 50-year-old candidates, an approach that is wasting a significant resource: mature, balanced, effective, and accomplished women scientists and physicians. To include this older population in searches is to align with current extended life spans and effective career durations. Note that this approach would not exclude younger women who are ready to take on leadership roles earlier.

Summary
- The current pattern of leadership advancement fits the career pattern of a scientist who is not a primary caregiver. This is not the career pattern of many of our most talented women scientists.
- Limitations imposed by inflexible schedules and unrealistic time frames have evolved in a previously male-dominated field.
- Women in their 50s and 60s often describe feeling liberated, with boundless energy to apply to their careers, once they no longer need to juggle family and career.
- Institutions choosing leaders from among mature women scientists and physicians will find outstanding, creative, analytic, well-balanced candidates.
- Having both management skills and a successful scientific career would put women in an excellent position to take on positions as deans or directors.
- As men become more participatory partners in home and childcare, they will benefit from these new approaches, as will their institutions.
- On average we live 35 years longer than our great-grandparents did—we have more time to make contributions. It’s time to fix the leaky pipeline creatively.

—Sandra K. Masur for the Women in Cell Biology Committee