The benefits to a company of having female representation on its board are significant. However, there is a gap — more like a massive chasm — between the presence of women in the workforce and the number of women on corporate boards. 19 percent of Fortune 500 board seats are currently held by women. In 2014, women comprised about 16 percent of board seats in the S&P 500. Nearly a third of the country’s female workforce are women of color, yet less than 3 percent hold seats on boards of directors for Fortune 500 corporations. And this is only because one-quarter of these women sit on multiple boards.

Even more startling, according to a report released earlier this year from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, even if equal proportions of women and men joined boards each year beginning in 2015, it could take more than four decades for women to reach parity.

Here are some immediate steps that we — both men and women — can take to create real change.

**Make the business case and reinforce it.** I love this quote from Janice Ellig, chair of the Corporate Board Initiative of the Women’s Forum of New York, in which she said...
executives must address gender disparity in the boardroom as a business imperative.” We know that boards with more women have higher return on sales, better risk management and attract more women in leadership. This is documented. Research by my colleagues at the Pepperdine Graziadio Business School also found that a 10 percent increase in gender diversity of a corporate board of directors will increase the company’s overall CSR performance by about 17 percent. We need to continue to promote the bottom line benefits of having women in leadership; we need everyone to know that it’s actually true not just rhetoric.

Be transparent. If you don’t know there is a problem, it’s hard to address it. That’s why efforts like those of Congresswomen Carolyn B. Maloney (D-NY-12) are so important. She recently introduced legislation that would require companies to report their strategies for recruiting more women into top corporate positions, both on boards and in senior management, and also urge corporations to develop strategies to achieve gender parity more quickly. We need corporate America to be transparent and we need to acknowledge companies that are working to change the paradigm.

Banish second generation gender bias. When people think of gender bias they tend to think of statements like “a woman’s place is in the home.” Fortunately, most people recognize how valuable women are in the workplace, but we have not come so far as to rid ourselves of gender bias altogether. Today, it is more subtle. For example if a woman speaks her mind or is outspoken people often react negatively. An article in the Harvard Business Review summed it up perfectly “these messages tell women who have managed to succeed that they are exceptions and women who have experienced setbacks that it is their own fault for failing to be sufficiently aggressive or committed to the job.” Millennial men tend to be more egalitarian in thinking so I’m hopeful that second-generation gender bias will soon be a thing of the past.

Create change from within. People often wonder about how to break into the higher ranks of corporate America. The answer is getting to know people in power. As many as 90 percent of board recommendations are made by other board members. Current board members need to make a concerted effort to mentor ambitious and talented women. Sometimes the entree into a board seat at a corporation starts by serving on the board of a non-profit. Business executives often parlay such experience into a board position in the corporate sector. Pepperdine University, which I work for, is not shirking away from leadership on boards. The Pepperdine Graziadio Business School is hosting an alumni event later this month encouraging women to network with non-profit leaders and learn about board opportunities. Events like these are absolutely critical. We need CEOs and top executives to create opportunities to bring more women in to boardroom networks.

In order to move more women into leadership positions we also need to change the corporate culture. Attitudes and behaviors trickle down from managers to workers and only when there is a commitment to ensuring gender equity from those at the top will we start to see real change. Let’s hope it doesn’t take four decades to get there!

Dr. Bernice Ledbetter is Practitioner Faculty of Organizational Theory and Management at Pepperdine University Graziadio School of Business and Management. Her research and teaching interests focus on leadership and values, especially gender differences, as well as on moral developmental and non-western approaches to leadership. Dr.
Ledbetter recently started the *Pepperdine Center for Women in Leadership* to empower and advance women in the workplace.