

# Propelling diverse leaders to the top: A developmental network approach

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Scholars and practitioners are making a strong business case for greater representation of women and other underrepresented groups on senior management teams and boards. A model is developed that highlights how to create optimal developmental networks—groups of developers who help advance people's careers and personal growth—that can assist in propelling diverse leaders into the upper echelons of their organizations and board positions. Several literature streams are integrated in order to identify developmental networks that will help diverse leaders overcome barriers to breaking the glass ceiling in greater numbers. Numerous strategies intended to shape diverse leaders' network structure and content are discussed, as are contextual challenges that may inhibit optimal networks' development. Lastly, theoretical and practical implications for individuals and organizations are highlighted.

## KEYWORDS

developmental networks, diversity, leadership development, mentoring, women

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

A new study of 366 public companies in the U.S., Canada, U.K., Brazil, Mexico and Chile by McKinsey & Co., a major management consultancy, found a statistically significant relationship between companies with women and minorities in their upper ranks and better financial performance as measured by earnings before interest and tax, or EBIT.

And “very few U.S. companies yet have a systematic approach to diversity that is able to consistently achieve a diverse global talent pool,” Ms. Hunt added. (Lublin, 2015)

This article introduces a conceptual model integrating evidence from several literatures and offers a framework for human resources practitioners to leverage in their quest to propel women and other underrepresented groups (whom we collectively refer to as *diverse leaders* throughout) into the top management ranks of their organizations and into board positions. The model centers on the role of optimal developmental networks needed by diverse leaders (i.e., high-potential women and non-White leaders who are in the individual contributor and lower- to middle-level management ranks who have

the capability to ascend to executive positions) as critical for career ascension. Prior to this article, no mentoring research has proposed optimal developmental network structure and content characteristics needed for diverse leaders' advancement and linked the provision of network support over time to positive diverse leader outcomes; this model intends to fill that theoretical gap in the literature. The model also asserts the critical role that human resources can play in creating strategies that help diverse leaders to nurture optimal networks, thus offering substantive practical implications for organizations.

Research on the performance of companies with more women in senior management and on their boards and with more minorities in upper echelon roles strongly supports the business case for diversity in upper management (Carter, Joy, Wagner, & Narayanan, 2007; Curtis, Schmid, & Struber, 2012; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Lublin, 2015; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2013; Noland, Moran, Kotschwar, 2016). For example, a 2012 study noted, “We find that, ceteris paribus, a given firm generates on average 1% (or over \$40 million) more economic value with at least one woman on its top management team than without any women on its top management team and also enjoys superior accounting performance” (Dezso & Ross, 2012, p. 1084). Studies also show that more diverse organizations are more innovative (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013; Ostergaard, Timmermans, & Kristinsson, 2011; Talke, Salomo, & Rost, 2010).

Prior to the recognition of a “diversity dividend” for companies’ performance, the argument for propelling diverse leaders to senior ranking positions and to corporate boards rested largely on social and ethical arguments (Curtis et al., 2014). As research proliferates that finds positive implications for more diverse representation at the top, it becomes clear that human resources professionals have a significant role to play in growing diverse talent and aiding their hierarchical advancement. Complicating the achievement of more diverse representation at the top, substantial research has identified unique challenges faced by diverse leaders in their efforts to reach the upper echelons in organizations (e.g., Catalyst, 2007; Devillard, Graven, Lawson, Paradise, & Sancier-Sultan, 2014; Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2010; Ibarra, 1992, 1993). Within corporations, this challenge shows up as increasingly difficult odds of advancement for women compared to men, with women being five times less likely to reach CEO from the executive committee level (Devillard et al., 2014). African American, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Hispanic/Latino representation at the CEO level is dismal, just over 4% (Zillman, 2014). Similarly, these minority groups collectively hold 13% of all corporate board seats (Alliance for Board Diversity, 2013). Two primary factors, one structural (e.g., lack of access to informal networks) and the other perceptual (e.g., evaluation against the White male leadership standard), are considered to be the primary culprits of diverse leader underrepresentation (Ibarra, 1997; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). These challenges result in particularistic developmental needs on the part of diverse leaders that must be met for advancement to occur.

Here, we propose that mentors and other developers that comprise a diverse leader’s developmental network—the group of people who take an active interest in and action to advance focal individuals’ careers and personal growth (Higgins & Kram, 2001)<sup>2</sup>—can provide an array of career support (e.g., sponsorship, visibility, coaching, challenging assignments, role modeling) and psychosocial support functions (e.g., affirmation and confirmation, friendship, counseling, inspiration and motivation) (Cotton, Shen, & Livne-Tarandach, 2011; Kram, 1985; Murphy & Kram, 2010), as well as holding behaviors (e.g., containment, empathetic acknowledgment, enabling perspective) (Ghosh, Haynes & Kram, 2013; Kahn, 2001; Ragins, Ehrhardt, Lyness, Murphy, & Capman, 2017) that can offset and mitigate the challenges that often prevent them from reaching the C-suite and boards.

Our framework, which draws upon and integrates theoretical and empirical contributions across several literatures, including but not limited to research on women’s leadership (Catalyst, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2013), diversity (e.g., Ibarra, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997), mini-learning career cycles (Hall, 2002), holding environments at work (Kahn, 2001), positive organizational scholarship (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2006), and mentoring and developmental networks (e.g., Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2012; Higgins & Kram, 2001), provides scientific support and practical guidance for a programmatic and organization-wide effort to propel diverse leaders to upper echelons in organizations.

The model proposed here (see Figure 1) shows that human resources strategies aimed at (a) creating a developmental culture

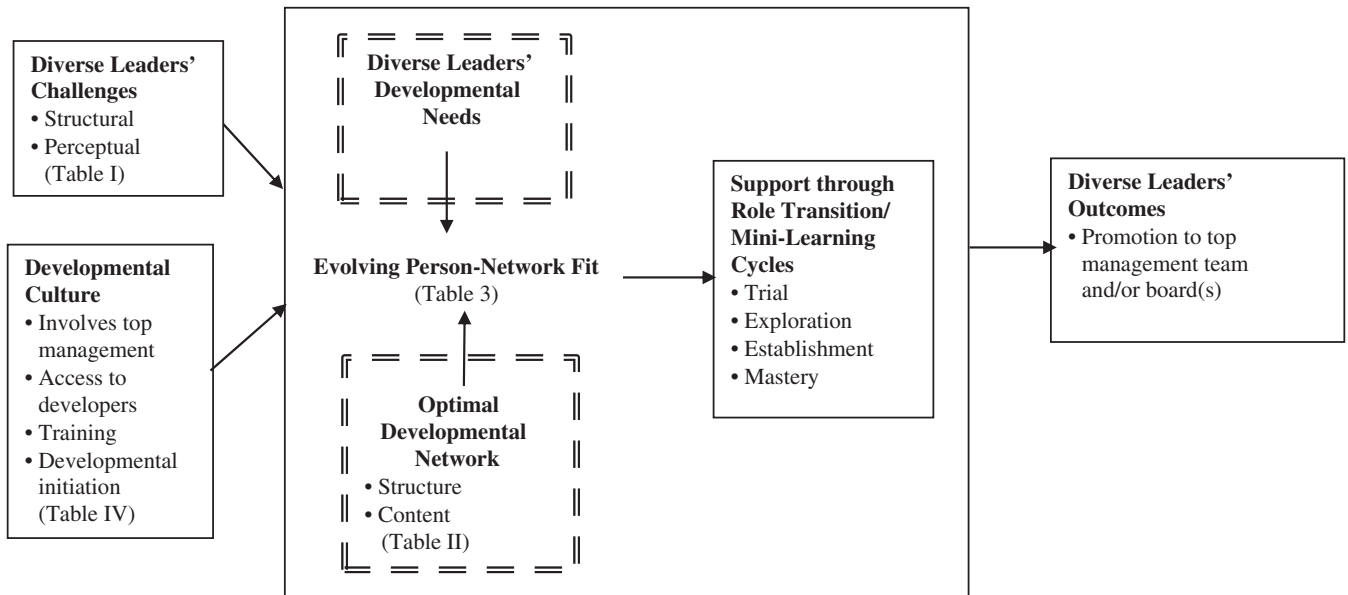
that helps cultivate high-quality developmental relationships (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Ragins, 2011), (b) providing access to needed developers, (c) training on developmental networks, and (d) heightening developmental initiation, can shape the structure and content of diverse leaders’ developmental networks as they learn and grow during the career transitions (mini-learning cycles) necessary to contribute at a top-management team level and on corporate boards. Strategies taken by HR can enable an evolving person–network fit between the unique needs diverse leaders have due to the structural and perceptual challenges they face vis-à-vis their White male counterparts and their network characteristics (structure and content). The psychosocial, career, and holding behavior support provided by developers enables them to meet diverse leaders’ particular needs over time as they ascend in organizations.

We proceed by introducing developmental networks as vehicles for career ascension. Next, we propose characteristics of optimal developmental networks for diverse leaders that center on the fit between diverse leaders’ needs and network characteristics (structure and content) in light of structural and perceptual barriers facing them over time. Importantly, we highlight the need for developers’ provision of holding behaviors that buffer diverse leaders from common anxiety-producing challenges. We then delineate specific actions that HR practitioners can take to propel diverse leaders to the upper echelons of management.

## 2 | DEVELOPMENTAL NETWORKS AS VEHICLES FOR CAREER ASCENSION

Over the past 30 years, a significant amount of support has amassed for mentoring as a vehicle for individual growth and career advancement (e.g., Chandler, Kram, & Yip, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Support from mentors and other developers that comprise individuals’ developmental networks has been associated with numerous positive outcomes for protégés, including heightened compensation and promotions (Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001), personal learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002), performance (Yip, 2015), and work satisfaction (Higgins, 2000). Conversely, research has found that a dearth of mentoring prevents women from securing seats on multiple corporate boards (McDonald & Westphal, 2013). Commonly identified developers include, but are not limited to, a person’s spouse and other family members, supervisors, senior-ranking professionals, peers at work, external executive coaches, friends outside of work, current and former school colleagues, industry or professional association colleagues, mentoring groups, and junior employees who can act in a reverse mentoring capacity (Murphy & Kram, 2010, 2014; Shen, Cotton, & Kram, 2015).

While certain network structures are associated with positive career outcomes—for example, promotions, extraordinary career achievement, performance, and optimism (Cotton et al., 2011; Higgins & Thomas, 2001; Yip, 2015)—the ideal network for any one person is contingent upon achieving a fit between his or her developmental needs and developmental network structure and content; researchers have referred to this notion as “person–network fit” (e.g., Higgins, 2007; Shen, 2010; Shen, et al., 2015). Given the



**FIGURE 1** Propelling diverse leaders: A developmental network approach

challenges and constraints faced by diverse leaders, the developmental network needed to propel them into the upper echelons will be one that is designed to mitigate or overcome both structural and perceptual barriers that their White male counterparts do not experience. Figure 1 shows the need for evolving person–network fit as central to aiding diverse leaders’ advancement. For the optimal fit between a diverse leaders’ network and their developmental needs, it is important to consider both the network structure–diversity, size, strength of tie, and multiplexity—and its content—the support provided—in light of the challenges that the focal individual faces.

### 3 | OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENTAL NETWORKS TO HELP ADVANCE DIVERSE LEADERS

Four primary dimensions have been used to describe developmental network *structure*, each with presumed implications for the focal person (see Table 2): diversity, size, strength of tie (Higgins & Kram, 2001), and multiplexity (Cotton et al., 2011; Higgins, 2000). Below,

**TABLE 1** Challenges faced by diverse leaders

Category of challenge	Specific challenges
Structural	Lack of access to key informal networks
	Lack of sponsorship
	Lack of role models
	Second generation bias (e.g., gendered career path needed for ascension)
Perceptual	Evaluation against the White male leadership standard
	Negative racial stereotyping
	Double-bind for women
	Lack of interpersonal comfort in diversified relationships

we discuss how diverse leaders’ networks should be optimized along each of the four dimensions and how the networks would be different from those historically beneficial to their White male counterparts. In particular, we propose that diverse leaders’ optimal networks will be more diverse, larger, have greater numbers of cross-race and cross-gender ties, and more single function and multiplex ties than those of their White male counterparts. These characteristics help offset key challenges that diverse leaders face, in particular, lack of access to informal networks and sponsors that are the vehicles for information, resources, perspectives, visibility, and advocacy needed for career ascension. Table 1 provides an overview of the structural and perceptual challenges that diverse leaders face that give rise to their unique developmental needs.

Following a discussion of optimal network structure will be one involving content (support provided) that uniquely addresses additional challenges that diverse leaders face. See Table 2 for definitions of developmental network structure and content characteristics and Table 3 for a summary of how developers can provide support that addresses diverse leaders’ unique needs, achieving evolving person–network fit.

#### 3.1 | Developmental Network Structure

##### 3.1.1 | Diversity

Network diversity can be viewed from a structural (e.g., role or position in network) or a demographic (e.g., race or gender) perspective.<sup>3</sup> Ascending leaders’ networks should have enough diversity to provide sufficient and far-reaching access to information, resources, perspectives, and sponsorship needed to perform at a high level in a series of lateral transitions, international assignments, and/or hierarchical promotions over time in an organization. From a network perspective, diversity is related to the degree of redundancy versus novelty of resources an individual will secure (Granovetter, 1973; Higgins & Kram, 2001). Developmental networks with little range (number of social spheres represented), that are dense (in which most or all of

**TABLE 2** Developmental network structure and content definitions\*

Structure	Characteristics
Diversity	Range and density, as well as important differences among developers, including experience, expertise, social context, and background
Size	Number of developers in a network
Tie strength	Closeness of the relationships (e.g., affect, trust, rapport, and frequency of communication)
Multiplexity	The extent to which a single tie provides more than one type of support or plays more than one role (as would be the case when a developer is a friend and ally)
Content	Functions
Career support	Instrumental aspects of developmental support, including sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, challenging assignments, protection, and preservation
Psychosocial support	Emotional aspects of support that develop competence, identity, and self-worth, including encouragement, counseling, friendship, personal feedback, role modeling, acceptance, and confirmation
Holding behaviors	Nurturing developmental support responsive to situations that are disturbing, upsetting, or anxiety provoking, including containment, empathetic acknowledgment, and enabling perspective

\*Adapted in part from Murphy and Kram (2014) and Chandler, Murphy, Kram, and Higgins (2015)

the developers know one another), or that are homogeneous in nature (i.e., developers are similar on demographic and attitudinal factors) will offer narrow support (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005).

Diverse leaders face particular structural and perceptual barriers (e.g., Hewlett et al., 2010; Higgins, Chandler, & Kram, 2007; Ibarra, 1993, 1995; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Thomas, 1990) that their White male counterparts do not, such that the former require more diverse networks than the latter in order to meet their needs. Two relational patterns help explain why. First, homophily, the sociological phenomenon where we are attracted to those most similar to us (McPherson et al., 2001), means that senior

White males tend to be attracted to junior Caucasian males as protégés. Second, the homogeneity in top management creates organizational structural disadvantages resulting in few senior diverse leaders for upcoming diverse leaders to partner with (Ibarra, 1995, 1997). Thus, diverse leaders need more diversified networks to offset lack of access to informal peer networks that can provide developmental support, to sponsors, and to same-race and same-gender relationships in their immediate groups and organizations that involve greater levels of psychosocial support and role modeling (Catalyst, 2001; Corporate Leadership Council, 2001; Ibarra et al., 2013; Murrell, Blake-Beard, Porter, & Perkins-Williamson, 2008; Thomas, 1990).

**TABLE 3** Evolving person-network fit for diverse leaders

Diverse leaders' unique needs (resulting from perceptual & structural challenges)	Optimal network structure and content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhanced access to information, resources, and sponsorship</li> </ul>	<p><u>Structure</u></p> <p>Diversity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diverse in spanning hierarchical, geographic, functional, and organizational boundaries</li> <li>Both intra- and inter-organizational developers</li> <li>Networks with more social arenas represented than White males to ensure necessary identification and psychosocial support needs are met</li> <li>More intra-organizational developer representation for top management team aspirations</li> <li>More extra-organizational developer representation for board director aspirations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships that involve strong interpersonal comfort and motivation to help</li> </ul>	<p>Size</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relatively large developmental network</li> <li>Minimum of two sponsors (specifically, one same-race or same-gender, and one white male if possible)</li> <li>A mentor</li> <li>Minimum one special peer at work</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support that directly mitigates or removes perceptual biases or helps diverse leader cope with them</li> </ul>	<p>Strength of Tie</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A number of strong- and weak-tie relationships</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Broader range of career and psychosocial support</li> </ul>	<p>Multiplexity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiplex relationships include a mentor and same-gender and same-race relationships</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support throughout career learning cycles that are particularistic to the unique barriers/challenges diverse leaders face</li> </ul>	<p><u>Content</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High amounts of career (e.g., sponsorship, coaching, challenging assignments) and psychosocial support (e.g., affirmation of identity, friendship) overall</li> <li>Offers significant holding behaviors (e.g., containment, empathetic acknowledgment, enabling perspective) to address anxiety-provoking scenarios</li> <li>Evolves based on the particular challenges the leader faces during a mini-career cycle</li> </ul>

Reflecting the above, some research has suggested that White males have less diversity in their developmental networks, as they receive strong instrumental support from more senior White male mentors and they need to cross fewer hierarchical, departmental, and organizational boundaries to receive it (e.g., Higgins et al., 2007). Conversely, per the challenges above, ideal diverse leaders' networks must cross boundaries in their organizations (e.g., support or affiliation-groups, seniors, peers, juniors, different functions, geographical locations) and in various spheres (e.g., external executive coaches, friends, family, graduate school, industry, occupation, community). In sum, diverse leaders' optimal developmental networks will need to be diverse in terms of representation of numerous social spheres—functional, hierarchical—than their White male counterparts, have greater extra-organizational representation, and have greater racial and gender diversity to enable the needed levels of interpersonal comfort.

In spite of the need for diverse leaders to have both extra- and intra-organizational developers, the network should have a larger proportion of the latter in order to ascend to a top management team; the reason for a stronger intra-organizational representation is that it enhances the likelihood of greater amounts of developmental assistance from within the organization, which leads to promotions, intentions to stay and organizational commitment, as well as work satisfaction (Higgins, 2000; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Higgins & Thomas, 2001; Payne & Huffman, 2005). In contrast, diverse leaders whose aspiration is board membership need networks with more extra-organizational representation to gain access to boards through contacts and to gain perspectives on different companies and industries (Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; Sheridan, 2001).

### 3.1.2 | Size

Diverse leaders' optimal networks will be larger than their White male counterparts and include more sponsors, both as means to alleviate the challenges they uniquely face. Importantly, because cross-gender and cross-race relationships lack strong interpersonal comfort needed for substantial support, diverse leaders will need to cultivate dual sources of support by having both same- and cross-gender and race relationships (e.g., Thomas, 1990). Their White male counterparts, on the other hand, will likely be able to advance in the organization with smaller networks as they do not require dual support systems and are more apt to have more needs met by their senior White male mentors.

A critical structural feature for diverse leaders is the need for sponsors, those developers who are of high status in the organization and in sufficiently senior-ranking roles to connect them to career opportunities, advocate for their promotion, and make them visible to other senior leaders (Hewlett, 2013). Promotions and opportunities for new roles are associated with high-status networks and contacts with senior-ranking individuals (Higgins & Thomas, 2001; McDonald & Westphal, 2013; Seibert et al., 2001). As noted, this poses as a significant challenge for women and underrepresented groups who have less access to mentors (Catalyst, 2007; Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Dreher & Cox, 1996; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and who are less likely to report having sponsors than their male counterparts (Hewlett, Peraino,

Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2010; Viator, 2001). Because findings show the greatest benefits result from having a White male mentor (Blake-Beard, 2003; Dreher & Chargois, 1998) and White men still occupy the majority of C-suite positions, diverse leaders will likely need to have at least one sponsor who is a White male. Given the barriers that exist in nurturing cross-race and cross-gender relationships and the likelihood that White male sponsors will also sponsor other White males with whom they will have strong rapport and trust, diverse leaders should seek to cultivate at least one other sponsorship relationship, ideally with someone of the same gender or race. Should there be a paucity of same gender or race prospective sponsors at senior-levels, then diverse leaders should nurture two sponsor relationships with White men. (The later discussion on HR strategies will assert ways to cultivate diversified sponsorship relationships.)

Consistent with research that extraordinary career achievement (Cotton et al., 2011), work satisfaction (Higgins, 2000), and intrinsic career success (Van Emmerik, 2004) are associated with larger developmental networks, diverse leaders' networks should be relatively large over time. Findings indicate that three to four intra-organizational developers are associated with promotion (Higgins & Thomas, 2001) and higher salary (Kirchmeyer, 2005; Murphy & Kram, 2010). Of those, at least two must be in senior roles relative to the protégé to provide sponsorship (Hewlett, 2013; Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Across their career, high achievers have an average of 22 developers, half within and half outside the organization (Cotton et al., 2011). Individuals in midcareer tend to list an average of 12 developers as actively helping them manage their career (Murphy & Kram, 2014). Importantly, external developers help protégés improve performance but do not affect advancement (Kirchmeyer, 2005). Taken together, this research supports the idea that diverse leaders' networks need to be larger than their White male counterparts, particularly due to the need for dual support systems to excel in their careers.

### 3.1.3 | Strength of tie

Along with larger, diversified networks, high-potential diverse leaders should strive to have networks that include a combination of strong and weak ties (strength of tie being a third key dimension of developmental networks). Strong ties, characterized by greater emotional closeness and repeated support interactions (Granovetter, 1973; Rice & Aydin, 1991), will lead not only to greater motivation on the part of the developers to assist leaders but also to the leaders' intent to act on the support and advice (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Because diverse leaders have needs that their White male counterparts do not—in light of the likelihood of the latter's strong ties with White male senior leaders who have the power to substantially aid their careers—they need additional support, which highly motivated, strong-tie developers can provide.

As a means to strengthen developer ties, diverse leaders should seek out relationships with individuals with whom they see compatibility of work style, viewpoints of the organization, and other attitudes, as perceived attitudinal similarity is a predictor of satisfaction with a relationship (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Murphy, 2011). Similarity in race and gender in developmental relationships also predicts

attachment and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Thomas, 1990; Turban, Dougherty, & Lee, 2002). As such, diverse leaders will benefit from having at least a few same-gender and/or same-race developers who are likely candidates for strong ties (Phillips, Northcraft, & Neale, 2006). An additional benefit of homogenous relationships is that they may offer the role modeling that diverse leaders often lack due to the relatively few senior diverse leaders on top management teams and corporate boards. Ideally, diverse leaders will also have at least one special peer at work who provides informational and friendship support (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Given the positive value of contacts in other functions/departments and at different levels in the hierarchy (Seibert et al., 2001) and that diverse leaders will need to pursue a balance of same- and cross-race and/or cross-gender relationships in order to advance (Ibarra, 1995)—the latter of which may not naturally result in intimacy and identification with one another (Thomas, 1989) and thus will provide less functional support—diverse leaders' networks should include a number of weak ties as well. Weak ties have been found to represent unique social benefits through their ability to bridge between groups and to provide access to information and resources (Granovetter, 1973; Seibert et al., 2001). Such relationships can help diverse leaders bridge the gap in support within the organization that may exist in cross-race and cross-gender relationships. In particular, weak ties help offset the lack of information that occurs when diverse leaders fail to have insider access to key informal social networks. These weak ties can be considered either personal or career guides, which involve infrequent interaction and limited provision of psychosocial and career support, respectively, within the outer circle of a diverse leader's network; although weaker in strength, they still serve as additional sources of support and thus provide value in the overall network (Shen et al., 2015).

In sum, diverse leaders will have greater numbers of cross-race and cross-gender strong and weak ties, and more weak ties generally, than their White male counterparts.

### 3.1.4 | Multiplexity

Multiplexity has been defined as "the extent to which two actors are connected by more than one type of tie." For example, a pair of actors who are friends and members of the same department have a multiplex tie of value (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, p. 135). Multiplexity with developers has been found to offer multiple types of career and/or psychosocial support and tends toward being stronger ties by virtue of more than one type of support (Cotton et al., 2011). By comparison, single-function ties offer a single type of support (e.g., friendship or coaching).

Diverse leaders should be mindful of opportunities to pursue multiplex relationships given that they involve multifaceted types of support (Cotton et al., 2011). Their cross-gender and cross-race relationships are more likely to be single function than multiplex due to the lesser degree of intimacy and comfort (multiplexity requires motivation to provide multiple types of support, which weaker tie relationships lack). In contrast, their same-race and same-gender relationships, due to likelihood of greater interpersonal comfort, have the capacity to be multiplex, particularly in the way of providing

psychosocial support. Diverse leaders will ideally have a mentor in their developmental network; mentors are multiplex in that they provide high amounts of career and psychosocial support (Kram, 1985). The mentor could be one of the diverse leaders' sponsors or a different individual. As will be discussed later, mentors are particularly well suited to provide holding behaviors critical to meeting diverse leaders' needs.

## 3.2 | Developmental network support

Optimal networks for diverse leaders will offer the support that meets their developmental needs, that is, evolving person-network fit achieved over time through career cycles (see Figure 1). We assert that three content characteristics facilitate optimal networks: high amounts of and varied career and psychosocial support and use of holding behaviors by developers. Evolving person-network fit enables a diverse leader to receive developmental support that is contingent on where they are in career cycles.

### 3.2.1 | High amounts of and varied career and psychosocial support

Studies on perceptual biases facing diverse leaders illustrate a number of hurdles to attaining senior executive roles (Catalyst, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2013). For one, non-White leaders face the challenge of being evaluated against the prototypical "White standard" of leadership, wherein White leaders are more favorably viewed, both in terms of success and in potential, highlighting a racial bias against minority leaders (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). In addition, negative stereotypes of particular racial groups, such as those of African Americans and Hispanic Americans as "incompetent or lazy," also provide substantial drawbacks for diverse leaders who aim for a senior role or board membership (e.g., Burns & Gimpel, 2000; Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004). Third, research on the "double-bind" for women leaders (Catalyst, 2007) suggests that women who are evaluated on the basis of a masculine standard face unappealing choices in determining how to act as leaders. The study identified three such choices, all of which can damage their ability to move toward the C-suite: being either too tough or soft; being perceived as either likeable or competent, but not both; and receiving fewer rewards and experiencing tougher standards vis-à-vis men.

As noted earlier, diverse leaders have more needs compared to their White male counterparts that can be met by high amounts of psychosocial and career support. In terms of career support, to ameliorate the prospect of negative stereotypes of certain groups in the workplace that would undermine their advancement, diverse leaders will arguably need greater amounts of sponsorship (when senior leaders consciously or unconsciously favor White high potentials in advancement considerations), visibility (to provide contact with other senior leaders needed to overcome group stereotypes) (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004), and challenging assignments to build strong, well-rounded skills and knowledge bases to offset, for example, gendered career paths that favor certain backgrounds like sales and finance. More recent research found that a leader's organizational position predicts coworker perceptions of the leader's dominance and a leader's feelings of power, which in turn heightens career support;

interestingly, the study found that this relationship was stronger for women executives than men, suggesting that developers with sufficient sponsorship capability who can help women to attain more senior roles can also help trigger a reinforcing cycle of status and developmental support (Yip, 2015).

Developers can also offer other types of career support, including coaching on executive presence (Hewlett, 2014), role modeling, and a sounding board for leaders as they experiment with provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999, 2015) in their quest to develop an authentic style of leadership, among other network content relevant to helping diverse leaders with particularistic needs. Recent research has proposed that to redress the competence/likability trade-off that women face—i.e., that women must choose between being respected and liked—women should focus on developing a sense of purpose that will guide their actions (Ibarra et al., 2013); developers can assist female leaders in this effort.

Diverse leaders need substantial psychosocial support to help them address how to mitigate perceptual barriers (e.g., being compared to the White male standard of leadership and second-generation bias) (Ibarra et al., 2013), to vent their challenges (e.g., the biases they face) within trusting relationships, and to offer friendship and support through role transitions and difficult assignments. Research has shown that having a close developer who offers high amounts of psychosocial support (e.g., a friend) at work increases work satisfaction (Higgins, 2000), and workplace friendships boost engagement and retention (Riordan, 2013). Thus, it is particularly important for diverse leaders to cultivate a developmental friendship with at least one workplace colleague. Finally, Yip (2015) found that attaining a higher organizational position (a more senior level) enhances a leader's sense of power leading to increased perceptions of both dominance and warmth, and subsequently increased career and psychosocial support, respectively. This suggests that the achievement of a more senior role may enable diverse leaders to feel an increased sense of power, which will lead to perceived warmth and consequently their receipt of more psychosocial support over time.

### 3.2.2 | Holding behaviors by developers

Recent research conceiving of developmental networks as holding environments for adult development (Ghosh et al., 2013) opens new avenues for how developers can help diverse leaders attain senior executive roles. Holding environments involve the creation of nurturing spaces that allow adults who experience strong emotions to situations that are “disturbing, upsetting, or anxiety provoking” to safely interpret and express them (Kahn, 2001, p. 264). More generally, these are environments where leaders can feel safe to interact in situations where they need a secure base of support (Ghosh et al., 2013). Recent empirical work by Ragins, Ehrhardt, Lyness, and Murphy (2017) confirmed that holding behaviors are distinct from the provision of career and psychosocial support, and that they serve to buffer diverse individuals from ambient discrimination (see Table 2). Importantly, holding behaviors by high-quality mentors—formal or informal—significantly buffered protégés from a discriminatory workplace; however, those by supervisors and coworkers did not, suggesting that it is *interaction* of holding behaviors with high

levels of career and psychosocial support from at least one trusted mentor that is most essential.

Holding behaviors are critical for diverse individuals as they are likely to face many more anxiety-provoking situations than their White male counterparts. Developers can offer three sets of holding behaviors that can help diverse leaders handle particularistic needs that arise from troubling circumstances: containment, empathetic acknowledgment, and enabling perspective (Kahn, 2001). Containment involves a set of behaviors, including inquiry (asking questions to help the leader share emotions), compassion (displays of warmth), and accessibility (giving time and attention to leader), that enable diverse leaders to express emotions and impulses in a safe environment. This would be relevant, for example, in the case of a Latino leader who needs to openly express frustration with the paucity of role models at senior levels and the loss of a challenging assignment due to a sponsor's decision to elevate a White male whom he dually sponsored instead. Empathetic acknowledgment, which involves behaviors like empathy and validation (e.g., communicating positive regard), enhances a leader's sense of self and aids ego functioning during stress. An example of the need for the foregoing would be a female leader who begins to question her authentic style when she, during a performance evaluation, is told that her assertive style, which would be readily embraced were she a man, is putting off her peers. Finally, an enabling perspective involves behaviors such as sense making (helps a leader make sense of situations) and negotiated interpretation, which aids actionable interpretation of situations (Kahn, 2001). Enabling perspective would be helpful during a stressful situation where a newly promoted high-potential diverse leader senses that he or she is unable to break into key informal networks and is creating strategies to do so. Holding behaviors exhibited by developers can be a critical link in helping to meet diverse leaders' particularistic needs as they center on leaders' ability to face perceptual and structural barriers and to “regain their momentum and continue on their way” (Kahn, 2001, p. 263).

### 3.3 | Evolving support through leaders' career cycles

Diverse leaders' ascension to senior positions and board membership can be conceived as a series of sequential mini-learning (career) cycles—the four stages are exploration, trial, establishment, mastery, in that order—that are three to five years in duration (Hall, 2002). At each stage of the cycle, certain needs dominate, consistent with the goals of and challenges associated with that stage (Hall & Chandler, 2007). By conceptualizing a diverse leader's ascension to a senior management team or board role as a series of mini-learning cycles that correspond with particular positions (e.g., a leader takes a lateral role that involves a learning cycle that ends in three years when she takes a promotion, at which point a new cycle begins), it is possible to map the types of developmental support that the leader needs at any given time. It also suggests that optimal developmental networks for diverse leaders will evolve over time based on where they are in career cycles. Prior research on the inner-outer core (Cummings & Higgins, 2006) supports that people's networks evolve over time. Figure 1 shows that evolving person-network fit involves the provision of needed support throughout career cycles.

During the “exploration” phase, for example, diverse leaders will need to locate and choose roles consistent with their strengths, sense of self, and interests. Key support during this stage includes aiding awareness of different internal opportunities and sponsorship for the chosen role (Hall & Chandler, 2007), which would naturally be more challenging for diverse leaders to secure given the homophily and structural disadvantages noted earlier. In the “trial” phase (which lasts up to a few weeks during immediate entrance into the new role), diverse leaders need counseling to assist them in coping with confusion and stress resulting from uncertainty (Louis, 1980) and any surprises or unforeseen challenges and barriers in the new role. It seems likely that diverse leaders will experience perceptual challenges during this phase, as their new subordinates evaluate them against the White (Rosette et al., 2008) and masculine standards of leadership (Catalyst, 2007); this challenge requires holding behaviors, psychosocial support such as friendship and counseling, and career support such as coaching as a way to meet their heightened developmental needs during that time.

During the “establishment” phase of a learning cycle, mastering tasks and developing requisite competencies and making a substantive impact over time dominate a leader’s needs. This phase typically lasts for at least a year to several years as someone grows within a role and begins to make contributions in it. Diverse leaders need multiple intra- and extra-organizational developers who can provide critical information about the group’s culture and political climate, help them gain access to informal networks, act as role models, be sources of friendship and counseling, and coach on how to perform at an optimal level while addressing the challenges and barriers that will inevitably come to the fore during this lengthier part of the cycle (among others forms of support). Finally, during the “mastery” stage, a diverse leader has several needs that dominate, including sustained excellence of performance, consideration of one’s strengths and weaknesses in contemplating future roles, strengthening of collaborative and trusting relationships, and continued honing of skills and knowledge. Because of the excellence required to ascend an organization, it is critical for diverse leaders to receive strong coaching and honest feedback from developers on task performance and the strength of their amassed political and social capital, as well as unrecognized barriers they face as diverse individuals.

Taken together, propelling diverse leaders to top management teams and board positions hinges on creating evolving person-network fit (provision of support provided by networks that meet their developmental needs) over time. Specifically, diverse leaders need high amounts and varied types of career and psychosocial support, as well as holding behaviors from developers that match their needs, with particular attention to the unique challenges and barriers they face and the career cycle stage they are in. The next section discusses the powerful role that human resources professionals can play in facilitating the necessary fit.

## 4 | HUMAN RESOURCES ROLE IN LEVERAGING DEVELOPMENTAL NETWORKS

Human resources professionals can play a critical role in creating an organizational context conducive to the creation of optimal networks

diverse leaders need to succeed. In absence of intervention, the developmental network structure and content needed are not likely to naturally evolve. In partnership with senior executives, HR has four levers to utilize: creating a developmental culture, providing access to developers, training on developmental networks, and fostering developmental initiation. These strategies are summarized in Table 4.

### 4.1 | Creating a developmental culture

Clearly, for diverse leaders to cultivate optimal developmental networks, their organizations must nurture cultures in which people value diversity and learning from and providing support to each other. A developmental culture, in which relational learning is valued and employees are inclined to openly share their struggles and weaknesses with others for the purposes of personal and organizational growth (Kegan, Lahey, Fleming, & Miller, 2014), requires conscientious and strategic action on the part of human resources in partnership with senior and middle management. Although senior management is a key enabler of a value on diversity and a developmental culture, it is likely that HR practitioners will need to help educate senior management of its influence and strategies to affect it. As a starting point, HR practitioners can provide support (e.g., scientific studies) for the business case for more balanced representation at more senior levels and educate senior management on the importance of developmental networks for diverse leaders to ascend in an organization. This initial action is critical as, due to the paucity of women and other underrepresented groups in senior roles, high-potential diverse leaders will need to cultivate sponsorship relationships with White males, who might otherwise not gravitate toward them. In addition, HR leaders and senior executives can partner to brainstorm strategies to embed organizations with a value on relational learning, the latter of which would encourage strong, responsive networks.

For a developmental network approach to succeed, HR must partner effectively with top management to ensure that support of relational learning and diversity initiatives is highly visible, including budgetary support and recognition of the importance of formal mentoring and coaching programs. Senior executives and middle management also need to be role models of relational learning through sharing their own stories about mentoring and the power of their own networks in affecting their career success, as well as actively mentoring others and encouraging their subordinates to do the same. In addition, senior executives who want to lead “deliberately developmental organizations” (Kegan et al., 2014) must be willing to “take the lead” in exposing their own developmental needs and shortcomings in order to champion the same behavior in others. HR will need to educate senior and middle management in these and other ways.

HR practitioners would also need to alter and develop structures and systems that support developmental cultures. For one, organizations’ performance management systems, which are designed to channel behavior in ways consistent with business goals, must be evaluated and changed when appropriate. Performance appraisals, which have traditionally been conducted on an annual or semiannual basis and served as the primary occasion when feedback occurs, should be placed under close scrutiny. Deloitte, for example, has



**TABLE 4** Human resources strategies to propel diverse leaders using a developmental network approach

Human resources strategies	
Creating a developmental culture	<p>Senior and middle management roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders' visible support for targeted initiatives</li> <li>• Role modeling by managers and senior executives</li> <li>• Embed diversity and relational learning as values in the organization</li> <li>• Structures and systems</li> <li>• Performance management systems (e.g., evaluate developers; include developmental initiation with diverse others as criteria in promotion)</li> <li>• Succession planning criteria includes a diversity of styles and perspectives, to create a diverse pool of candidates for opportunities</li> <li>• Formal and informal recognition of relational learning</li> <li>• Hire for relational savvy and comfort with diversified relationships</li> <li>• Develop processes that encourage frequent feedback-giving</li> <li>• Conduct cultural audits to evaluate degree to which relational learning is valued and networks thrive</li> <li>• HRIS systems that track leaders' developmental networks</li> </ul>
	<p>Financial and resource support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources for training and formal programs</li> <li>• Budget allocation for external coaches</li> </ul>
Providing access to developers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employ external coaches who are carefully matched with diverse leaders (e.g., in same-gender and same-race pairings)</li> <li>• Formally pair diverse leaders with senior sponsors</li> <li>• Develop formal peer coaching circles and reverse mentoring programs</li> <li>• Nurture employee resource groups for diverse leaders</li> <li>• Panel discussions with diverse leaders inside and outside the organization on their networks and how they have leveraged them</li> </ul>
Training on developmental networks	<p>Training for diverse leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide assessment tools for identifying current development networks</li> <li>• Train potential leaders on the value of cultivating a diverse network of intra- and extra-organizational developers who provide varying levels and types of support responsive to their needs</li> <li>• Encourage the use of mentoring episodes both within developmental relationships and outside of them as learning opportunities</li> <li>• Help leaders understand that they need to nurture relationships prior to the time when the support is provided</li> </ul> <p>Training for developers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train developers on coaching techniques (e.g., listening, empathy, asking open-ended, powerful questions)</li> <li>• Train developers to work as a unit to provide continuity and complementarity of support over time</li> <li>• Train developers about the value of developmental networks and the optimal networks for diverse leaders, and encourage them to share stories about theirs with their protégés</li> </ul> <p>Train supervisors re: White male standard</p>
	<p>Mutual training for leaders and developers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train leaders and their formal developers on how to cultivate and strengthen their relationships over time (e.g., expectations, goal-setting, self-disclosure, confidentiality, high quality connections)</li> <li>• Train leaders and developers about types of support that can be provided as well as holding behaviors and the need to vary support based on where diverse leaders are in their career cycles</li> <li>• Train leaders and developers about the unique challenges that diverse leaders face so that the partnerships can work to mitigate them and senior leaders' second-generation biases can be mitigated</li> </ul>
Fostering developmental initiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage informal developmental initiation through shared training opportunities amongst employees at all levels</li> <li>• Push senior executives/chairs to reach out to diverse newcomers during transitions when extra support is critical</li> <li>• Help diverse leaders identify potential senior developers to approach</li> <li>• Promote the idea that good questions start learning conversations</li> <li>• Inspire high quality connections by being attentive and present during interactions, increasing the potential for building a relationship</li> <li>• Reverse mentoring programs matching junior diverse leaders with senior executives to promote longer-term relationships that involve key functional support like holding behaviors and sponsorship</li> </ul>

reinvented its performance management system in a handful of key ways, including by requiring weekly check-ins between a leader and each teammate with the goals of coaching and offering timely feedback as part of a strategy to fuel employee performance (Buckingham & Goodall, 2015). Other organizations have considered creative ways to offer Millennials the feedback that they crave; one company, for example, offered quarterly reviews and an online, on-demand system that allowed employees to request and receive brief feedback (140 or fewer characters) from a broad group of people (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Implementing solutions like these build in more meaningful coaching and feedback opportunities for diverse leaders at all levels of an organization and help pique performance over time, as well as provide opportunities for informal developmental relationships to flourish.

Succession planning should align with the core values of increasing diversity and creating a developmental culture (Murphy & Kram, 2014) to ensure a diverse pool of candidates exists for promotion. Building employee mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship as competencies that are evaluated in the performance appraisal process will help encourage relational learning in the organization, fostering opportunities for diverse leaders to partner with potential developers. Organizations that formally pair diverse leaders with powerful sponsors can hold the latter accountable by setting clear goals for advancement within certain time frames. A formal sponsorship program that partners senior White male executives with diverse leaders is one strategy for ensuring that the sponsorship role is fulfilled. Diverse leaders should also be evaluated in part, based on their level of developmental initiation; similarly, senior executives could be

evaluated on whether they initiate developmental relationships with diverse leaders.

HR practitioners can adjust their hiring practices to include ways to identify job applicants with relational savvy—adeptness with leveraging developmental relationships in their careers (Chandler, Hall & Kram, 2010)—who are comfortable with and have shown an ability to nurture diversified relationships. Questions that elicit responses about the degree to which a person seeks out relational learning opportunities, gives and receives feedback, strives to benefit his or her developers, and more generally helps others can offer insight into a candidate's ability to leverage organizational support and a developmental culture to ascend in the organization. HR programs that involve formal and informal recognition of relational learning (e.g., awards given to diverse leaders who have strong networks and public acknowledgment of success stories involving mentoring) will reward and encourage the cultivation of strong networks as well. Human resource information systems (HRISs) can periodically track leaders' developmental networks for evaluation. Finally, just as organizations are conducting engagement surveys on an annual basis to gauge important employee attitudes, human resource practitioners could evaluate their organization's relative climate for relational learning through surveys and other methods (e.g., employee focus groups) in order to evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies.

Human resources practitioners, in educating senior managers about the need for optimal developmental networks for diverse leaders, can gain needed financial support for relevant initiatives, including for formal programs and hiring of external coaches. Notably, many of the strategies that human resources practitioners can pursue to nurture a developmental culture will not only benefit diverse leaders but also all leaders in an organization, leading to rich, far-reaching outcomes (see also, Kegan & Lahey, 2016).

## 4.2 | Providing access to developers

A second important set of human resources strategies arises from HR's ability to support the type of network structure diverse leaders uniquely need. HR can intervene to provide greater access to what would otherwise be missing developmental opportunities. First, HR should formally pair diverse leaders with sponsors who are charged with aiding their hierarchical advancement over time, mitigating the effects of homophily (Hewlett et al., 2010; McPherson et al., 2001; Whitely et al., 1991). Given the importance of sponsorship to ascension and the likelihood that many of the pairings will be cross-race and/or cross-gender, matching on complementarity (the idea that a mentor has the capability/knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the protégé) and similarity (e.g., attitudinal) will be a critical task. Additionally, human resources can organize special interest groups and learning opportunities such as women's conferences and leadership programs, demographically associated employee resource groups, including panel discussions with senior diverse executives regarding their networks and how they have built and shaped them over time (the latter being one way to overcome the paucity of diverse leaders available as role models) (Ibarra et al., 2013).

More generally, human resources can create more networking opportunities between senior-ranking employees and diverse leaders

in order to help cultivate relationships (Hewitt et al., 2010). Employing external coaches can offset the lack of access to needed support; leaders can be carefully matched on the complementarity between leaders' needs and coaches' abilities and awareness of diverse leaders' experiences in the workplace (see Murrell, 1999). Ideally, individuals will be able to offer input into the match in order to ensure that high-quality relationships ensue (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). To enable diverse leaders to cultivate a breadth of relationships across functions, geographies, and hierarchical boundaries, HR professionals can develop peer coaching circles and reverse mentoring programs using best practices such as volunteerism and input into the matching process (Murphy, 2012; Parise & Forreth, 2008; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000), and high-involvement training (Egan & Song, 2008), as well as complementarity between the parties' particular needs (Kram, 1985; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

## 4.3 | Training on developmental networks

Human resource efforts to nurture a developmental culture and offset lack of access to important sources of support will go far to help diverse leaders, yet they cannot ensure optimal networks are formed. Importantly, given that informally cultivated developmental relationships often have a natural chemistry that can be difficult to duplicate in formally arranged ones (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1999), the impact of relationship satisfaction in mentoring success (Ragins et al., 2000), and the positive effects associated with proactive behaviors in mentoring relationships (Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006), organizations should offer substantive training for protégés and their developers (see Table 4 for an overview).

Training should be carefully planned and include first and foremost a discussion on the effects of developmental networks and the need for diverse leaders to configure theirs optimally. Studies on developmental and workplace networks (Cross & Thomas, 2008; Dobrow et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2001) provide evidentiary support for their importance. An overview of types of developmental support and the variety of relationships and assistance developers can provide will help leaders recognize an array of options available to them. An assessment tool like the Developmental Network Questionnaire (Higgins, 2004) and guidance on analyzing one's developmental network (Murphy & Kram, 2014) are a starting point for leaders to understand their current network structure and what support they are receiving. Leaders should recognize that their networks will need to shift over time, in part according to their needs and to where they are in a career cycle, and that while any formally assigned sponsors or mentors are one or more important sources of support, the network resources overall are critical to determining outcomes (Higgins & Thomas, 2001; Singh, Ragins, & Tharenou, 2009a). Further, leaders should be educated regarding behaviors that aid relationship formation and receipt of mentoring such as self-disclosure (Wanberg, Welsh & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007), proactivity (Singh, Ragins & Tharenou, 2009b), elaboration (Long, Wang, Phillips, & Lount, 2013), interaction frequency (Murphy, 2011), and expression of appreciation for developer efforts (Chandler, Hall, & Kram, 2010). Diverse leaders should realize that reflection on their own strengths and areas for development will be critical over time since person-network fit relies

upon self-awareness on the part of the focal person (Higgins, 2007). Protégés should also be educated to seek out mentoring episodes, which are single interactions that confer developmental support, whether they occur in the context of an ongoing developmental relationship or are one-time incidents (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007).

Although diverse leaders will be aware of barriers they face, they may have minimized or ignored them so as to not be hampered by them; a frank conversation, not only with leaders but also their developers, can be the precursor to identifying relational strategies to overcome them. For one, supervisors and male sponsors who are made aware of second-generation bias and the White leadership standard may actively work against it, and women will feel empowered by recognition and acknowledgment of it (Ibarra et al., 2013). A discussion of how having a variety of leadership styles in the workplace that match flatter, more team-based organizations—styles that women in particular are likely to utilize (Chin, 2004; Eagly, 2007)—will help diverse leaders and developers to be motivated to bring greater representation to senior roles.

Both parties should learn about characteristics of high-quality relationships (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), including tensility (ability to withstand strain), emotional carrying capacity, and rapport, and the importance of building trust and interpersonal comfort through actions like allowing oneself to be vulnerable, actions that support mutuality (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), and discussing and creating shared experiences (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005). Developers should receive additional training on coaching behaviors like empathy, listening, and asking powerful questions (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007), and on the nature of holding behaviors to mitigate anxiety-provoking situations (Kahn, 2001).

#### 4.4 | Fostering developmental initiation

Optimal developmental networks are more likely to result from a context that fosters high developmental initiation by diverse leaders and by potential developers. Developmental initiation is a set of developmental-seeking behaviors aimed at skills, knowledge, and task performance. Research suggests that while developmental initiation may not be aimed directly at relationship formation, it increases the likelihood that the diverse leader will build one (Higgins, Chandler, & Kram, 2007; Singh, Ragins, & Tharenou, 2009b). Each exhibited behavior may result in a mentoring episode, a singular interaction that confers developmental support (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007), which can strengthen a relationship more generally and advance one's development. Individuals who are adept with developmental relationships tend to exhibit strong developmental initiation, resulting in diverse, large networks (Chandler et al., 2010). Because research shows that engaging in at least one formal mentoring relationship has been found to increase developmental initiation (Murphy, 2011), diverse leaders' early initiation will likely be strengthened over time as positive experiences with developers and mentoring mount over time, further heightening leaders' ability to build optimal networks throughout their careers.

Among the strategies that human resources practitioners can pursue in relation to developmental initiation is to educate diverse leaders to reach out to senior executives with whom they have

compatibility (e.g., compatible work styles, hobbies, strategic viewpoints, community involvement, or family) as a way to gain developmental support and also nurture interpersonal comfort. In addition, diverse leaders can be educated about behaviors that are effective in initiation with senior executives, including asking powerful questions, generating potential solutions to problems prior to a mentoring episode (to ensure that leaders appear proactive and solution oriented), attentiveness during the conversation, professional follow-up that involves thanking a senior developer for his or her time, and what actions were taken on the basis of the assistance.

In sum, HR practitioners have a significant role to play in the process of helping diverse leaders gain developmental networks that fit with their unique needs. Prior research affirms that HR practices aimed at strengthening top management teams' internal and external networks have positive effects on firm performance (Collins & Clark, 2003).

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The conceptual model developed here integrates research from a number of different literature streams—for example, mentoring, leadership, diversity, and positive work relationships—to propose optimal developmental network structures and content for diverse leaders (e.g., Ibarra et al., 2013; Kahn, 2001; Higgins & Kram, 2001). It provides an evidence-based framework for scholars and practitioners highlighting critical elements that foster the developmental support necessary for diverse leaders to thrive. The contribution is timely in coinciding with research that confirms the business case for having more diverse senior management teams and directorate boards (Curtis et al., 2014; Deszo & Ross, 2012; Noland et al., 2016). In addition, we provide HR professionals specific guidance for facilitating developmental networks that best support diverse leaders as they ascend their organizations.

### 5.1 | Theoretical contributions

This integrative framework contributes to the literatures on mentoring, leadership, diversity, and positive work relationships. Within the mentoring literature, developmental network research had not until now offered what types of relationships would compose an optimal developmental network. Higgins (2007) argued convincingly that a high-functioning developmental network will be contingent on the focal individual's needs; however, many of the challenges (needs) for diverse candidates are now known, enabling us to make the case for particular characteristics here. In addition, many fields have reached gender parity at entry levels and attract diverse high potentials (e.g., medicine and law), yet higher dropout rates among women persist (Cohen, 2012). We suggest that this is in part because diverse leaders need a combination of a developmental culture, career (e.g., sponsorship, coaching) and psychosocial (e.g., encouragement, friendship) support, and holding behaviors (e.g., containment, enabling perspective) from key developers to successfully navigate learning cycles required to ascend to the top of organizations and boards.

A major challenge in the leadership literature is to develop emerging leaders in terms of both human capital—individual knowledge, skills, and abilities—and social capital—those resources embedded in work relationships that enhance cooperation and resource exchange (Day, 2001). Although a handful of studies have asserted a linkage between mentoring and leadership development (e.g., McCauley & Douglas, 2004; McCauley & Guthrie, 2007; Gibson, 2008; Giscombe, 2007), they have done so by exploring the support women leaders need during career transitions (Gibson, 2008), asserting how to help women leaders break the glass ceiling through singular formal mentoring relationships (Giscombe, 2007), or considering how different kinds of singular informal developmental relationships can be leveraged in leadership development programs for all participants, both male and female (McCauley & Guthrie, 2007). We extend this stream of inquiry to establish how a *network* of developers can uniquely aid women and other diverse leaders—who face predictable challenges (see Table 1) in reaching the executive suite and boards vis-à-vis their White male counterparts—in breaking the glass ceiling. In addition, we outline how human resources strategies can help shape diverse leaders' networks to achieve more inclusive leadership on top management teams and corporate boards.

Empirical work has demonstrated that developmental networks are essential for high achievement (Cotton et al., 2011), yet no research has made specific recommendations about who those developers should be to facilitate such success or what those developers need to do that is distinct for diverse leaders. We contribute to the diversity literature with this model by proposing optimal structure and content characteristics that enable diverse individuals to respond to challenges as they ascend to leadership roles (see Table 3). Diverse leaders have particular difficulty securing sponsors, those senior executives who actively nominate and advocate for an individual's advancement (Hewlett, 2013; Kram, 1985). We suggest that organizations support diverse individuals in connecting with at least two sponsors, ideally one senior White male and one same-gender/same-race sponsor, through cultivating a developmental culture, training efforts at encouraging developmental initiation, and creating formal sponsorships that hold senior executives accountable for helping diverse leaders ascend. Because of the unique challenges facing diverse leaders, it is essential that high-potential candidates cultivate relationships with at least one high-quality mentor who can provide holding behaviors, creating a safe environment to help them navigate anxiety-provoking situations. Diverse leaders need diverse networks to offset the informational, resource, and sponsorship deficiencies that result from lack of access to informal networks and lack of same-gender and same-race relationships that offer strong-tie and multiplexity benefits.

The positive organizational scholarship literature includes developmental relationships as one type of high-quality connection facilitating positive outcomes (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). We argue that aspiring diverse leaders will benefit from having high-quality developmental relationships with high amounts of psychosocial support (e.g., friends) at work. Positive workplace relationships are particularly valued by ascending Millennials (Hewlett, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2009; Murphy, Chandler, & Tosti-Kharas, 2016) and essential for supporting diverse candidates who are likely to need more psychosocial

resources to cope with ongoing challenges. A key feature of the model is the need for a fit between a person's developmental needs and the support provided through the network structure and content. While prior research has signaled the need for fit (e.g., Higgins, 2007; Shen, 2010; Shen et al., 2015), we provide guidance on particular developers and suggest that they be attentive to supporting diverse candidates' challenges during role transitions and learning cycles at a time when the pipeline of diverse leaders needs to be strengthened to break the glass ceiling in larger numbers (Egan, 2015).

Finally, this article is the first to incorporate the concepts of holding environments (Kahn, 2001) and learning cycles (Hall & Chandler, 2007) together in one framework. Unlike their White male counterparts, high-potential diverse leaders face challenges that require a safe holding environment in which they feel certain that their vulnerability and disclosures will not be breached. Holding behaviors are most likely to be enacted by high-quality mentors, who also provide high levels of career and psychosocial support (Ragins et al., 2017). In order to advance, diverse leaders need to succeed in navigating the inherent challenges of career cycles that all leaders face as well as the unique barriers they will likely face during each transition. We suggest that developers be attuned to providing extra high levels of support during transitions and learning cycles when frustrations and anxiety-provoking scenarios are most likely to occur.

Overall, we assert that diverse leaders' optimal developmental networks need to be larger and more diverse, among other characteristics, than their White male counterparts. Although building these networks involves time and resources invested on the part of diverse leaders, their developers, and HR practitioners, we believe the benefits for the individual getting the strategic support necessary and for the organization (retention, performance, innovation) far outweigh the costs.

## 5.2 | The impact of the organizational context

While the framework proposed here offers substantive guidance on how to aid diverse leaders' ascension in organizations and to boards, it is noteworthy that this approach will be constrained in certain contexts. Research highlights that an organization's existing culture and associated practices can provide baseline opportunities or hindrances to leverage this framework. Specifically, the ideal setting for this framework is one that values relational learning, disclosure of weaknesses and being vulnerable, collaboration, and consistent feedback and development of employees (Chandler, Murphy, Kram, & Higgins, 2016; Kegan & Lahey, 2016; Shen et al., 2015). Conversely, in extremely competitive and hierarchical contexts, organizations whose professional norms strongly value independence or autonomy and lack an emphasis on professional development provide significantly fewer opportunities for diverse leaders to seek out assistance and mutually nurture relationships that will support their development and may stall if not entirely prevent HR practitioners from leveraging the strategies proposed here.

We must acknowledge that the biggest challenge for this framework is that it requires an evolving mindset from our current leaders and organizations.<sup>3</sup> There first needs to be a conceptual understanding of the challenges and barriers facing diverse high potentials and a

commitment to change of the status quo. Senior executives and human resource professionals must recognize the power of relational dynamics within their organizations and actively promote a developmental culture, as well as personal action to nurture developmental relationships with diverse leaders. Most importantly, there must be strategic resources allocated and a long-term investment in recruiting, developing, and promoting diverse leaders in order to implement the strategies suggested here.

### 5.3 | Practical contributions

Based on this conceptual framework, we developed a detailed prescriptive strategy (see Table 4) to provide specific guidance for nurturing developmental networks that enable ascending diverse leaders to thrive. Current leaders and human resource professionals are well advised to facilitate a developmental culture, which provides indirect opportunities for informal developmental relationships, through (a) the active involvement of senior leaders, (b) providing access to developers, (c) training on developmental networks, and (d) fostering developmental initiation by all employees. We suggest that HR can also intervene directly by connecting diverse high potentials to certain developers—e.g., internal sponsors and external coaches—and creating formal mentoring programs where diverse protégés are partnered with senior leaders who have the capacity to provide holding behaviors.

Research has demonstrated that women and minorities who are first-time directors receive less mentoring and consequently fewer appointments to other boards (McDonald & Westphal, 2013). Using our framework, diverse candidates for boards would be advised to actively seek external developers for their network, and board members would actively seek to connect them to mentors on the board who could assist them in understanding norms and navigating complex interactions both during and after board meetings. HR professionals can focus training and coaching at the most senior levels on developmental initiation to provide ascending leaders and potential developers with the skills to stimulate high-quality connections and contribute to one another's growth and development.

### 5.4 | Limitations and future research

While this integrated framework has both scholarly and practical application for leadership, mentoring, and human resources, it draws on several studies across different organizations and industries and will need empirical testing. Longitudinal research that examines the developmental networks of diverse leaders as they advance to the uppermost echelons and boards will test this framework. Qualitative studies will provide insight on processes, while quantitative studies can test these suggested relationships. Scales are available for many of the variables in this model, including developmental culture (Murphy & Kram, 2014), career and psychosocial support (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Scandura, 1992; Scandura & Williams, 2001), holding behaviors (Ragins et al., 2017), and developmental initiation (Murphy, 2011), though there is an opportunity to refine these metrics and create measures that assess person–network fit and learning cycles. We suggest a measure of person–network fit

modeled on O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell's (1991) scale assessing person–organization fit, which would use a set of statements to capture both individual needs and network support relative to those needs. Longitudinal research will enable individuals and organizations to assess progress as well.

### 5.5 | Conclusion

A growing body of research affirms positive associations between more balanced top management teams and organizations' performance, signaling the need for women and other underrepresented groups to ascend to the upper echelons in organizations. Building upon the extensive mentoring literature—which highlights the value of mentoring and developmental relationships as vehicles for career advancement and personal growth—and integrating other relevant literatures, a model was proposed highlighting the role that human resources can play in nurturing a fit between diverse leaders' developmental needs and the structure and content of their developmental networks as a key method for advancing diverse leaders in organizations. Numerous practical implications exist for how human resources professionals can aid this critical business imperative, as well as for organizations and diverse leaders who strive to break the glass ceiling en masse.

### NOTES

- 1 We have chosen to use Higgins & Kram's (2001) original definition of developmental networks in this article, as we believe that diverse leaders' ascension requires active support on the part of developers.
- 2 Network diversity should not be confused with diverse leaders, the former referring to diversity of developer representation across social spheres like work and home and demographic diversity of developers, among other network characteristics. We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for the suggestion that we clarify the two.
- 3 Thank you to our anonymous reviewers for suggesting this.

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