

Break the glass ceiling

A challenge for business leaders to do a better job

Question:

I'm a hard-working, successful manager. I've had to overcome quite a few obstacles to get where I am. I wasn't able to get my college degree right away because I didn't have enough money. Without a degree, I was passed over for some jobs I think I could have done well. Eventually, I did get my degree. Better opportunities did come my way. The challenge I now face is not so easily solved. I'm a woman in a male-dominated company and industry. I know I make less than some of my male colleagues. I know I work more hours than some of them. My performance reviews are generally very strong. On occasion, I've been criticized for being too cool or hard to get to know. But, I don't want to spend time with some of these guys and give them the wrong idea. I'm polite and pleasant. I leave it at that. I feel like I've reached a plateau and can't get beyond it. I feel boxed in, like the "token female," and I'm very frustrated. I

don't share my feelings at work for fear they would be used against me. This leaves me feeling like I'm just "taking it." What advice can you share with me to help me ease the discouragement?

Answer:

Although there have been some steady gains over the past few decades, inequity still remains the brutal reality for many women in the workplace.

Your experience is shared by other women who are challenging gender-role stereotypes by pursuing careers in fields that have been traditionally dominated by males. In this article, I'll spend some time talking about contextual elements regarding this issue. I'll offer some suggestions for what might be done to address the bias with which you are confronted.

At the outset, let me observe the legal environment in which we operate today precludes organizations from treating women differently than men. A variety of employment legislation exists that protects women from the kind of inequitable treatment you allude to in your question (e.g., inequitable pay). Having said that, it is disturbing to note the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics routinely reports that women still only earn 75 to 80 cents for every dollar than men are paid for comparable work.

As I see it, the principal issue you are confronting is the *glass ceiling*. Glass ceilings exist when organizations erect and maintain invisible, but very real, bar-

riers that limit, restrict or prevent the career development and mobility of women and members of minority groups.

How pervasive is the glass ceiling? All one has to do is inspect the ranks of the top executives to see the disparity that exists. Examining the leaders of the *Fortune* 500 yields a total of six women. Extending the search to the *Fortune* 1,000 yields another five women. If my math is correct, that's a grand total of 11 women. That means men lead the other 989 companies in the *Fortune* 1,000.

I don't know about you, but I find this statistic to be absolutely amazing. I have a hard time believing that the only 1 percent of female business executives have what it takes to succeed in a top assignment. That's what the math above tells us. Men occupy 99 percent of the CEO roles in the *Fortune* 1,000. This reminds me of the old movie title, "Where the Boys Are," except in this case they're not on spring break in Florida, they're in the board room leading America's largest companies.

It also says something about where the women are not. Why is it that women still are not better represented in upper managerial assignments?

Researchers who study this discrepancy postulate a number of explanations. Some feel that the discrepancy is rooted in deeply engrained ideas that we have concerning what men and women are supposed to do in our society. This view holds that we learn to believe and adopt gender-role stereotypes.

Over time, we vigorously defend these stereotypes in order to maintain a certain sense of order (i.e., "the way things are"). For example, we might come to believe all

women are innately nurturing and sympathetic. Over time, then, we do what we can to make sure that women occupy roles that consistent with that stereotype.

There is also the issue of sexism. This is the concept of gender-based privilege. In our society, men tend to have greater access and opportunity, sometimes merely because of the fact that they are men. Decades ago, it was uncommon for women to seek visible, responsible roles in businesses. That has changed over time, but the belief that the business arena is truly the domain of men still has some enthusiastic adherents. Women need not apply.

Then there is the issue of acceptance of individual differences. I am talking about basic prejudicial feelings here. Some male executives might not be all that interested in creating a truly welcoming, inviting atmosphere for women. Some male executives might not be comfortable working side-by-side with women. They might feel there are business risks associated with letting women access managerial positions. Further, when it comes to selecting high potential employees, these male leaders might have on “blindness” where women are concerned. Their mental model for the desirable candidates might have “male” written all over it, whether this is a conscious or unconscious judgment.

So, what can be done to break through the glass ceiling? Eyring and Stead, researchers who focus on work-

place diversity, offer these suggestions for organizations that really are serious about creating gender equity in the workforce:

- Create a task force for women’s concerns.
- Establish goals for women’s upward mobility.
- Make sure that women are represented on any committee or task forces that are concerned with women’s issues.
- Emphasize inclusion of women of color in women’s issues programming.
- Conduct a regular survey on employee concerns, including women’s issues.
- Offer networks and support groups for women of color.
- Hold management accountable for women’s development.
- Establish systems for identifying high-potential women.
- Encourage women’s movement into line management.
- Provide awareness-oriented diversity training for managers.

Let me conclude by observing that ultimately this is an issue that the leadership of the organization must address. Long time readers know I hold leaders accountable as the “architects” of the organization. Leaders, through their words and actions, play a very significant role in shaping the “other bottom line” of the organiza-

tion—its corporate culture.

If the organization is going to truly create a level playing field for all employees and eliminate the disparities that exist between men and women, then leaders will have to lead on this initiative. After all, the tone is set at the top.

By the way, I know exactly what I’m saying in this last comment. Yes, I am challenging the leaders of the organization, who are typically men, to do a better job in creating opportunities for women and other individuals from minority groups. My hope is that with focused attention, over time, more and more women and minorities will get access to top management assignments.

It will be interesting to see what the gender breakdown of the *Fortune* 1,000 will be 10 or 20 years from now. My hope is that it will be much different than what we see today.

As with many things, though, only time will tell.



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