

SMASHING GLASS CEILINGS: WHY WOMEN STILL FIND IT TOUGH TO ADVANCE TO THE EXECUTIVE SUITE

Persistent and prickly cultural, organizational, and leadership issues still limit women's representation at the top levels of U.S. corporations, and the resulting brain drain does not bode well for companies competing for a shrinking pool of talented potential leaders. A number of companies are aggressively tackling the problem, and the author offers ways that other companies can follow their lead. © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Barbara Reinhold

Despite all the hype in recent years about women surging into the middle management ranks of global corporations (a statistic most companies like to trumpet at every opportunity), today fewer than 10 Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs. And while women are making some strides into upper management by landing jobs as CFOs in companies like Yahoo, Citigroup, and Home Depot, their overall numbers in the executive suite remain sparse. Even in so-called “bellwether” companies for women, such as Xerox and Avon, women hold only a small number of the top executive jobs. And in some of the hottest industries women remain woefully underrepresented; in the nation’s media, telecom, and e-commerce industries, for example, women

hold only 13 percent of the top jobs and 9 percent of the board of director positions.¹

What’s going on here? Why aren’t women advancing more rapidly into the upper echelons of corporate America? What cultural, organizational, and/or leadership obstacles do they still face? And what can be done to fill the executive suites with more female leaders in the years ahead?

This article looks at the hard-fought wins women have secured to this point and examines some of the insidious issues of exclusion holding women back from achieving their full leadership potential. It showcases several companies that have made an internal commitment to women’s advancement—with impressive results. Finally, it discusses what I believe are the critical organiza-

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tional conversations that a company's leaders must have among themselves, as well as some concrete steps their organizations can take, if they are to effectively identify, develop, advance, and ultimately retain high-quality female executive talent now and in the years ahead.

RESEARCH PROVES WOMEN'S COMPETENCE AS LEADERS

In many ways, it is ironic that a large portion of corporate America remains uncommitted to grooming and advancing women for positions of power and influence in the organization. In aggregate, women today make up only 12 percent of top earners and leaders in America's executive suites, and yet studies in industries ranging from manufacturing to high tech to consumer goods show that women often outpace their male colleagues on many measures of leadership and management ability.

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For example, *BusinessWeek* highlighted a study in 2000 by the California-based Hagsberg Consulting Group that determined women executives outpace their male counterparts on 42 of 52 essential management skills. Among the findings: female executives, when rated by their peers, bosses, and subordinates, score higher than their male colleagues on such measures as producing high-quality work, setting goals, and mentoring. Women also win kudos for being more collaborative, better motivators, and more willing to share information with others than many men are.²

Meanwhile, a 2004 study by Catalyst found that companies with a higher representation of women in top management jobs financially outperform companies with fewer women at the top. The study used return on equity (ROE) and total return to shareholders (TRS) to analyze the financial performance of 350 companies that had remained on the Fortune 500 list for four out of five years. The companies with the highest representation of women in their top man-

agement averaged a 35 percent higher ROE and a 34 percent higher TRS than those of companies with the lowest women's representation.³

WHAT IS HOLDING WOMEN BACK?

So why haven't research findings on women's performance translated into more top-level executive opportunities for women? In my view, there are at least six reasons why women are not advancing as quickly in corporations as they should.

Reason #1: The culture of most companies today is still overwhelmingly "white and male."

Despite the much talked-about flattening of the organizational pyramid in recent decades, many companies today still resemble quasi-military organizations, with hierarchical structures, "command-and-control-oriented" management practices, a chain of command philosophy, and largely top-down and "transactional" communications. Furthermore, even as globalization has helped many companies increase their awareness of the value of diversity as they identify and target nontraditional (i.e., non-American, non-English-speaking) markets for their goods and services, companies have been much slower to recognize the need for broad ethnic, cultural, and gender diversity in their leadership ranks. Consequently, the vast majority of top-level executive positions in business continue to be filled by men.

In these environments, it has been my experience that women are often called upon to be "bicultural." To get ahead they must learn the male language of leadership, power, communication, and influence without any expectation that their male colleagues will return the favor. For example, a prominent woman executive I know, a senior HR executive at a very prestigious U.S. company, takes it as a given that she must read the sports pages before major business meetings so that she can "bond" with her male colleagues through the small talk and camaraderie that is the inevitable preamble to such gatherings.

Does anyone expect corporate males to read the newspaper's columns on healthcare, women's issues, parenting, education, or childcare in order to better relate to their female colleagues? I don't think so. Does anyone really put the heat on men

to become more empathetic and sensitive to the needs of others at work? Rarely in my experience. Companies pay millions to teach emotional intelligence to their male executives, but so far there is not a great deal to show for this in terms of transforming the predominantly “white male” culture that pervades corporate hallways and boardrooms.

But the culture and gender divide in the workplace is deeper than what I have just noted. An individual might also see her ethnic heritage, or her sexual orientation, as an essential element of who she is and how she makes her way in the world. These “cultural distinctions” among employees are not simply politically correct demographic descriptions but are in fact how growing numbers of young people (future business leaders of both sexes) define themselves. And it is time that companies listened. In essence, companies must become much more attuned to the nuances of diversity within their leadership ranks. Doing so increasingly will be key to retaining high-quality leadership talent in general and high-quality female talent in particular. Women (and other minorities, for that matter) simply will not stay in organizations where their individuality is not acknowledged or where they feel marginalized by those in the majority.

Reason #2: Gender bias still exists. The corporate culture in many companies does not yet champion the development of female managers and executives or see it as key to the company’s future business success. The roots of this lie in lingering gender bias about the competence of women to hold high-powered line jobs and their willingness to embrace demanding careers that take them away from kids, homes, husbands, and significant others. Some authors, notably Joan Williams of American University’s Washington College of Law, have described this as the “maternal wall.” According to Williams, maternal stereotyping no doubt plays a significant role in some management decisions about whom to promote in organizations. She notes that when a woman without a child is out of the office, she is presumed by colleagues to be out on business, while an absent mother is thought to be out dealing with a childcare issue.⁴

Gender bias also colors the unconscious or at least nonverbalized feelings that some man-

agers have about women employees. *BusinessWeek* noted in its November 2000 issue that some businesses view women more as “workhorses” well suited to jobs in middle management than as executives of top-notch caliber, capable of leading global business enterprises or making tough management decisions that impact people.⁵

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Even in cases where maternal status is not in question, some companies give the appearance of a gender bias in their decisions about whom to send to top-flight leadership development courses. According to the International Consortium for University Executive Education (UNICON), U.S. executive education programs each year have only one seat out of four filled by a female. For example, women composed only a small fraction of the more than 125 participants in a recent Advanced Executive Development Program at a leading business school. One woman, a banker from outside the United States, acknowledged to a colleague of mine that she had personally borne the nearly \$55,000 cost to attend this program, while her fellow classmates attended at their company’s expense.

Workplace gender bias also emerges as a key finding of three Catalyst surveys of women executives in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada over a four-year period (1996–2000). Aggregated findings from these studies found that in all three countries, “senior women identify male stereotyping and preconceptions of women’s roles and abilities as a top barrier to women’s advancement,” according to Catalyst.⁶

“Most companies have not dispelled myths about women’s commitment, about their risk quotient, willingness to relocate, and ability to manage men or run a manufacturing operation,” says Betty Spence, president of the National Association for Female Executives. Consequently, women are not offered the kinds of opportunities that lead to the executive suite. “Where the best companies for women stand out is [in] their

focus on moving women into the historically male province of profit-and-loss (P&L) responsibility,” says Spence. “Companies that ‘get it’ hold managers accountable for moving women into P&L jobs. They should make any woman’s short list of places to work.”⁷

Reason #3: Many companies have not created a culture of accountability for the development of female managers and executives. Surveys of CEOs and senior women executives in Fortune 1000 companies find that the failure of senior leaders to assume accountability for women’s advancement is a key barrier to women getting ahead in corporate America.⁸ It is also a prime reason why more women are not getting the specific kinds of experiences in line management and P&L so often seen as essential to executive advancement.

Today’s working mothers are frequently high-functioning multitaskers in their families, intimately intertwined in their children’s lives in ways few men are.

We all know that in business “you get what you measure.” If companies do not follow up on a decision to develop women managers and executives by measuring the results of their efforts in this area, the job will not get done. The National Association of Female Executives notes that companies rarely track gender statistics for P&L positions. To do so would reveal the huge gender gap in America’s executive suites; it would also likely motivate some companies to do more to give women critical line experience and P&L responsibility.⁹

Unfortunately, most companies do not pay that much attention to the specific opportunities and developmental assignments they give to female executives. Some of this dates from outmoded employment policies and management practices or is the result of manager inexperience in mentoring new female hires or management fast-trackers. In other cases, companies implicitly steer women away from line jobs and toward career paths in areas such as public relations, corporate communications, and HR—sometimes thinking they are doing these women a favor.

Reason #4: Companies do not always view people skills as executive skills. The skills

women are known for—the abilities to listen, collaborate, empathize, be inclusive, and build consensus—are viewed by many companies as “people skills,” not as executive skills. By this logic, women may be talented specialists or even “gifted” middle managers and team leaders, but they do not possess the hard, quantitative executive skills necessary to close business deals, do analytical analysis, penetrate new markets, generate profits, and make a business run efficiently and productively.

This “psychological marginalization” of women is very unfortunate because the skills commonly associated with women are the building blocks of EQ, made famous by Daniel Goleman’s pioneering work on emotional intelligence.¹⁰ EQ is increasingly seen today as vital to the smooth operation and internal health of all kinds of organizations; even top leaders in the military subscribe to its importance. The ability of business leaders to demonstrate EQ as part of their leadership styles is clearly critical when it comes to managing and motivating today’s highly educated knowledge workers, and for building and sustaining employee productivity, motivation, and morale in business environments of continuous change. EQ is also important when it comes to understanding and serving customers, resolving workplace conflicts, executing business strategies, and aligning diverse individuals within a company behind common business goals.

Reason #5: Many companies fail to help women juggle the competing demands of work, life, and family. As any woman can readily attest, women are almost always more affected by family-unfriendly work policies and organizational cultures than men are—regardless of the industry and a woman’s professional dedication to her job. Today’s working mothers are frequently high-functioning multitaskers in their families, intimately intertwined in their children’s lives in ways few men are. Thus their schedules are more likely to be impacted by soccer games and sick children than men’s schedules are.

Women are also much less likely to complain about workplace challenges or scheduling inconveniences than men are. They typically do not feel free to speak up on their own behalf, or they feel they must accommodate others to get

ahead. A study conducted by Carnegie-Mellon's School of Public Policy and Management, for example, found that women often do not get what they want and deserve at work because they do not ask for it. Three separate studies showed that men are more likely than women are to negotiate for what they want, a fact that can often lead to lower compensation and promotion gaps for women.¹¹

In my experience, women inconvenienced by a company's rigidity or insensitivity to family-life issues are more likely to quit a job than to speak up and ask for what they need to make that job manageable. This is a big reason for the female brain drain in many organizations today. But contrary to what the media often like to emphasize, working women are not leaving large corporations simply to have more time with their families, i.e., they are not just opting for the Mommy track. Rather, they are exiting these organizations mostly because they are tired of male posturing in business meetings and the double standards that often value men's careers over those of women. They are leaving to start new businesses where relationships with colleagues and customers are based more on collaboration and cooperation than on corporate turf battles and competition. And they are departing to seek more opportunity, more visibility, more autonomy, and a better quality of work life than that afforded them in traditional hierarchical, male-dominated organizations. Indeed, one might seriously ask whether these exits of women from corporate workplaces indicate a level of workplace dysfunction, organizational toxicity, and/or job inflexibility that need not exist but which women—unlike their male counterparts—are not willing to tolerate in order to get ahead. Such departures are not just unnecessary, they are also tragic. This disrupts the upwardly mobile corporate careers of many gifted professional women, women who would very likely stay with their companies longer if their employers showed more flexibility and sensitivity to the multiple roles they play. It also denies to large corporations the very skills and competencies they need to succeed in today's—and tomorrow's—business environment. Women often prove to be powerful consensus builders who create communities of collaboration at work in ways men do not. Women also can

be highly effective motivators, able to leverage their influence to build inclusive workplaces and strong team focus around critical business goals and priorities. They do this almost instinctively, because their experiences of “differentness” from their male coworkers have sensitized them to the need to be inclusive of others and to build, as author Sally Helgesen puts it, “webs of inclusion” in the workplace, instead of pyramidal hierarchies of power, control, and manipulation.¹²

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Shelly Lazurus, chairman and CEO of Ogilvy & Mather and former chair of the Smith College board of trustees, is one of the most respected and powerful female executives in the world today. Lazurus makes the point that women should do both themselves and their companies a favor by speaking up more for what they need to succeed at work, rather than quitting good jobs to go elsewhere. She believes that in some cases, this can help precipitate needed culture change in companies. Lazurus recalls that years ago, when she was a young mother and swiftly rising corporate executive, there were times when she brought her kids to work so that they experienced her as both a mother and a working woman. However, she says, as her stature and position increased, there were also times when she would not attend corporate off-site meetings with her management team over weekends if it meant leaving her kids alone on a Sunday.¹³

Lazurus's point is well taken. Women do need to do more self-advocacy in the workplace. By doing so I believe they can transform our workplaces in ways that will benefit both men and women. How? By helping to usher in greater job flexibility and more family-friendly work policies (such as paternity leave); by creating more diverse workforces; and by fostering healthier, more harmonious, and inclusive organizations.

Reason #6: Because women often lack the mentors and collegial networks of their male colleagues, they are frequently shut out of informal networks of communication to which their male colleagues are privy. In the afore-

mentioned survey of Fortune 1000 CEOs and women executives at the vice-president level and above, a clear majority of respondents saw “exclusion from informal networks” and lack of mentoring as among the biggest barriers to advancement of women in their companies.¹⁴

“The career paths of aspiring young male executives moving up in general management, marketing, and product development today often get charted out for them by sponsors who see to it that these individuals get the key jobs and developmental experiences they need to become general managers,” says Jill Ker Conway, a former president of Smith College who today sits on the corporate boards of Nike, Merrill Lynch, and Colgate-Palmolive. While this is beginning to happen for women in business today as well, Ker Conway says, “it doesn’t happen spontaneously and usually requires careful thought and investment in mentoring programs for women.”¹⁵

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SUCCESS STORIES: WHERE WOMEN ARE GETTING AHEAD

While it is true that women face many challenges to attaining high-level positions, there are a growing number of companies that have undertaken systematic efforts to recruit, recognize, identify, develop, and advance women managers and executives. The initiatives at two companies, Johnson & Johnson and PricewaterhouseCoopers, serve as noteworthy models of such efforts.

Johnson & Johnson’s Women’s Leadership Initiative. In 1995, global healthcare giant Johnson & Johnson (J&J) created a Women’s Leadership Initiative (WLI) under the auspices of J&J’s CIO and executive committee member, JoAnn Heisen. Its goal was not only to increase the number of women in leadership positions but also to remove barriers and develop leadership competencies so that women will be represented at all levels of the corporation in proportion to their representation in the labor pool.

Progress toward that goal has been spectacular. For example, the number of WLI conference attendees who are women at the director level and above tripled from 300 in 1995 to 900 in 2000, and now stands at 1,700.

Today the company remains strongly committed to providing emerging women leaders with substantive executive development opportunities. As one example, J&J works closely with Smith College to provide customized executive education services to the company’s emerging cadre of global female managers and executives. A good portion of J&J’s efforts focus on helping women managers and executives better understand and leverage their strengths as women when it comes to leading global project teams, heading business units, and assuming senior-level management positions within the company. The success J&J has had in identifying and promoting female executives is due in large part to the efforts of Heisen, who has acted as the major champion of the project within the company for the last ten years and has personally mentored many emerging J&J female managers and executives across all of J&J’s business units worldwide.

PricewaterhouseCoopers’ Commitment to Promoting Women. When the Boston office of PricewaterhouseCoopers discovered ten years ago that it was losing up to 50 percent of its female auditors before they had a chance to become partner, the firm decided to take radical steps to retain highly prized female auditor talent. It introduced a policy that allowed women to work part time and still stay on the career track to partner, a position at PricewaterhouseCoopers that pays upwards of \$500,000 a year. It also initiated a mentoring program that enables women to connect with and service important clients, demonstrate their skills, and gain visibility in front of more senior male partners. The firm also actively encourages senior women in the firm to promote the careers of more junior women.

The firm did not undertake this initiative because it was a “feel good” thing to do, notes PricewaterhouseCoopers Chairman Dennis Nally. Instead, Nally says it became an imperative for the firm if it wanted to attract top female talent and retain it over time. Like J&J’s Heisen, Nally is a big champion of advancing

women in his firm. Recently he committed the firm to increasing its portion of female partners to 35 percent by 2006.

Other Companies with Best Practices. Other firms have also implemented powerful initiatives to more actively recruit, develop, mentor, and promote women in their companies. And they are putting robust accountability measures in place to give these leadership development efforts real meaning and organizational impact. I cite three excellent examples here—General Electric, Harley-Davidson, and Shell Oil Company U.S., companies whose best practices merited them the 2004 Catalyst Award in recognition of their efforts to advance women managers and executives. In making the announcement, Catalyst President Ilene H. Lang noted that each company has been highly systematic in its approach to advancing women in its organization and provides “a mix of strong lessons and examples for the business community.”

General Electric’s “Developing Women Leaders: Synergistic Forces Driving Change.” This successful initiative aligns the goals of Session C, General Electric’s performance management and succession planning system, with those of the General Electric Women’s Network (GEWN). Session C has been used to identify and develop top talent at GE since the 1950s. GEWN has been nurturing the growth and development of women leaders since 1998, and is now active in 60 of the countries where GE operates. High-potential female executives identified as part of GE’s Session C process are often tapped to manage GEWN hubs and regions worldwide, giving these women valuable, enterprisewide executive experiences and developmental opportunities. GE Chairman and CEO Jeff Immelt is a big supporter of the program. What’s more, strong performance metrics are in place to ensure that GE is in fact developing women executives and individuals from various minority backgrounds.

Catalyst reports that because of GE’s systematic organizational efforts to develop women executives, between 1998 and 2002 women’s representation grew from 5 percent to 13 percent of GE corporate officers, from 9 percent to 14 percent of senior executives, and from 18 percent to 21 percent of executives.

Harley-Davidson’s “Optimizing Talent: A Culture of Empowerment.” Harley-Davidson is another company putting greater organizational emphasis on the identification, development, and promotion of female and minority executives. Its program, “Optimizing Talent: A Culture of Empowerment,” encourages the nurturing and promotion of diverse leadership talent across all functional boundaries in the company.

Harley-Davidson has a proven track record of promoting women to top jobs. One of its most prominent senior executives, Donna Zarcone, the president and COO of Harley-Davidson Financial Services and former chairperson of the Board of the American Financial Services Association, is living proof that a woman can run a corporate business unit even in a company with a primarily male customer base.

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Shell’s “Valuing and Leveraging Diversity to Become a Model of Inclusiveness.” Shell Oil Company U.S. has launched a progressive leadership development initiative to develop and advance women, as well as people of color, through its leadership ranks across the company. The initiative, known as “Valuing and Leveraging Diversity to Become a Model of Inclusiveness,” includes, among other features, a global diversity and inclusiveness (D&I) standard developed by parent Royal Dutch/Shell Group to serve as a goal for these efforts. Shell U.S.’s Diversity Progress Enhancement Project (DPEP) provides guidelines for strengthening employee networks and uses a scorecard to measure progress relative to the D&I standard—features all intended to ensure the initiative’s effectiveness.

Shell’s efforts to promote women and minorities have met with great success. Women currently comprise 25 percent of the employee population and 57 percent of corporate officers. Between 1997 and 2003, women’s representation increased from 8 percent to 32 percent at the senior executive level; from 7 percent to 14 percent at the senior management level; and from 9 percent to 22 percent at the middle management level.

WHERE DOES YOUR COMPANY BEGIN?

As the research has aptly demonstrated, companies that have not already committed to developing more women leaders face a competitive disadvantage relative to companies that have. Furthermore, those that remain unconvinced are likely to face shortages of managerial and executive talent just a few years from now. As the baby boomer generation begins to retire, the smaller “baby buster” generation will supply too few new workers—of either sex—to replace them, and companies will find themselves with a smaller talent pool from which to draw future generations of business leaders. As a result, women will become even more critical to the leadership ranks of companies than they are now. The careful cultivation and grooming of female leaders today is essential for assuring a company’s profitability and viability tomorrow.

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So how can your company follow the lead of J&J, PricewaterhouseCoopers, General Electric, Harley-Davidson, and Shell in advancing the careers of women managers and executives? I suggest a few critical first steps to develop awareness and commitment at the highest levels of the organization, followed by some additional actions you might consider as part of a comprehensive plan for moving forward.

Get top management buy-in. In my mind, the CEO and top leadership of the company must take ownership of this effort; their buy-in is absolutely essential if an organization is to put a high priority on female leadership development and follow through with the necessary actions. Top management buy-in entails the following:

- Understand and fully accept the importance of women leaders to the future success of the business.
- Embrace women’s executive development as a core business value, and cascade its importance to other levels of leadership within the organization.

- Have an open and honest discussion about the current priorities and practices that facilitate or hinder the advancement of women in the company.
- Make a meaningful commitment to action.

I believe that achieving such buy-in requires that top management engage in some serious soul-searching and dialogue. Such a dialogue will go a long way towards raising organizational consciousness of issues related to the development and advancement of women. It is also the necessary precursor to transforming the company’s culture into one that is more inclusive and embraces the advancement of women as a core business value.

As with any major business decision, company leaders will need to be convinced of the rational business-related reasons to undertake this effort. Thus I suggest you begin by building the business case for why focusing organizational time, energy, and resources on women’s professional development is a smart business strategy. The business case should stress that developing women leaders is not only the right thing to do but also the smart thing to do. Today, diversity in the leadership ranks is good for business. It bespeaks a corporate culture that embraces risk taking, creativity, new thinking, and entrepreneurship. And as the operations of most companies become more global, you can tell your top leadership that having a workforce—and leadership bench—that resembles your company’s global marketplace is increasingly critical to business success. To further drive home this point, you might want to research your competitors to see how they approach the issue of women’s leadership development. Such benchmarking can be quite convincing in demonstrating to top management the competitive advantages of leadership diversity.

To build initial support for this effort, try to find a few senior-level executives inside your organization who “get it” when it comes to the issue of women’s development. Then enlist them as allies to move this issue forward on the company’s business agenda. They could, for example, plant the seed with top management that it is time for the organization make an explicit public commitment to promoting and advanc-

Questions for Top Management Dialogue

Use the following questions as suggestions for guiding a dialogue among top management that will raise organizational consciousness about women's development in your company and help lay the groundwork for developing a systematic approach to women's executive development.

1. *How strongly is our company committed to the necessity of identifying and developing female leadership talent?*
2. *To what extent has our company made this an explicit organizational goal and business value, key to the future success of our business?*
3. *To what extent do we (the CEO and top leadership team) champion greater recruitment, development, and nurturing of female managers and executives?*
4. *To what extent do we cascade responsibility for development of women to other levels of leadership inside the organization? Do leaders at every level of the business display consistent leadership behavior and actions around this issue?*
5. *In what ways (if at all) does our organization's culture explicitly, covertly, or tacitly discourage the development and promotion of female managers and executives? For example, do we tend to reward men for potential and women for performance? Does gender bias (even unconscious) affect management decisions to promote individuals? Or are men and women always treated the same?*
6. *In what ways (if at all) does our culture explicitly champion the development and promotion of female managers and executives? Are there explicit policies, procedures, and practices that we have put in place within our organization to recruit, develop, and promote female talent? Do we have metrics in place with which to gauge/measure our progress in advancing women managers and executives, and if so, are they factored into the annual performance reviews of our senior leaders and managers throughout the organization? To what extent are leadership development programs and succession planning activities aligned to support the systematic identification, development, and promotion of women in this company?*
7. *Are men and women tapped in equal proportions for development perks like attendance at executive education programs?*
8. *How good a job is our organization actually doing when it comes to attracting, recruiting, developing, and promoting female managers and executives?*
9. *What percentage of our company's middle management is female today? What percentage of line managers is female? What percentage of our female executives has direct P&L responsibility?*
10. *Do we track recruitment and retention statistics in order to determine whether we experience a female "brain drain" over time?*
11. *To what extent does our company make a deliberate effort to provide career development and coaching experiences to high-potential female employees, managers, and executives? Are women encouraged to pursue careers in line management and to gain significant enterprisewide business experience, including P&L responsibility, or are they generally directed towards careers in public relations, HR, and other staff and administrative functions?*
12. *Do we offer—or should we offer—specific kinds of leadership development training for women, such as internal and external leadership development programs, corporate university programs, action learning, coaching and mentoring, and developmental job assignments?*
13. *Have we developed a strategy for developing women managers and executives that is aligned with our business strategy and the emerging needs of the marketplace?*
14. *Do we use enterprisewide communications to promote the development of women managers and executives as a core business focus and value?*

ing women. They can further propose that top management engage in an open, in-depth dialogue on this issue in a session facilitated by you or another appropriate individual.

Open this top management session with a persuasive presentation of the business case you have developed. With discussion, this can provide the necessary motivation for leaders to overcome their objections, do an honest assessment of the current situation in the company, and make a meaningful commitment to action.

Think about hiring an anthropologically savvy consulting group to work with your leadership team to address critical culture issues. . .

The sidebar “Questions for Top Management Dialogue” contains a series of suggested questions you can then use to facilitate a dialogue that will help raise consciousness about the issues women face in advancing their careers in your company and also help lay the groundwork for developing a systematic approach to women’s executive development. Obviously, this list could contain still more questions, but these should suffice to jump-start a vigorous organizational dialogue that opens the way for effective actions, such as those that follow.

Launch a comprehensive initiative. Once top management is on board and committed, one meaningful action that your company can take is to launch a Women’s Leadership Initiative, such as J&J undertook, that will serve as a platform for organizing, implementing, and communicating developmental efforts and programs to advance women in the organization. Build a coalition of organizational champions to support the initiative, and include in this group both female and male senior executives who can serve as key program sponsors. Again, you will want to get your CEO to sign off on this initiative and to bless its importance as critical to the future success of the business.

Remove cultural barriers. Think about hiring an anthropologically savvy consulting group to work with your leadership team to address critical culture issues—e.g., insidious biases, lack of appropriate training, outdated performance appraisal systems, poor mentoring of subordinates,

sexism, stereotyping—that have historically kept women and members of other minority groups from excelling in your organization in the past. A knowledgeable outside expert can help surface the nonverbal assumptions, beliefs, behaviors, and work patterns that pose barriers to the full inclusion and valuing of women and minorities in the workplace. One consulting firm I’ve had occasion to work with is DramaWorks Interactive in Northampton, Massachusetts, which uses improvisational skits and role playing, based on in-depth organizational interviews, to help executives understand how their words, attitudes, and on-the-job behaviors can be obstacles to creating an empowering and inclusive corporate culture. “Our motto is to help companies make the invisible visible,” says founder Dr. Erik Muten. “This is very important as companies strive to change behaviors and eliminate barriers that stand in the way of any kind of organizational change.”¹⁶

Commit to using state-of-the-art training and development approaches and methodologies. Working closely with top management, your company’s HR, Training, or Organizational Development department should take responsibility for creating a leadership development (LD) curriculum that addresses the needs of both female and male managers and executives and that offers a multitude of learning opportunities, such as:

- Classroom and corporate university-based training
- Distance and web-based learning
- Developmental work assignments crafted as part of strategic career development plans for female high-potentials (FHPs)
- Off-site LD programs affiliated with leading universities
- Performance appraisal/skills assessment and feedback
- Continuing education
- Pairing of senior mentors with young FHPs
- One-on-one performance coaching
- Career counseling

GE’s worldwide leadership development (LD) programs are a standout example of leadership training excellence. They bring together both male and female executives from around the world for

A Reality Check: Women's Perceptions of the Situation in Your Company

Ask the following questions of women in your company about their experiences working there. This will help guide the design and implementation of leadership development programs geared towards developing women managers and leaders, and will also provide top management with employee perceptions of how well the company is doing in grooming women for leadership roles.

- *How comfortable do you feel working here and why?*
- *To what degree do you feel this organization uses your talents well?*
- *Do you feel your current job (and career path) provide you with the fullest opportunity to develop yourself and apply your skills?*
- *What does this organization need to do to get the best return on investment in you?*
- *Are you satisfied with the coaching/mentoring you are receiving? What kind of coaching would be most valuable to you? From whom do you want to receive it?*
- *Do you feel this company has demonstrated its willingness to invest in your development as a leader?*
- *How many and what kinds of professional development opportunities has the organization offered you? Have you ever been discouraged from pursuing a training or development opportunity that was of interest to you?*
- *What can this company do to better coach, mentor, and train future generations of female managers and executives?*
- *If you could have half an hour with the CEO and executive committee to help them maximize the potential of their female employees, with no need to worry about recrimination, what would you tell them?*

cross-functional, enterprisewide training and LD experiences. GE's LD programs include mentoring, informal networking, action learning, and relationship-building opportunities.

Get input from the women in the company.

As part of developing or overhauling your company's LD programs to make them more embracing of FHPs, you must dare to ask women—at all levels in your organization—tough questions about their experiences in the company. The sidebar "A Reality Check" lists some questions to consider asking. In addition to providing valuable feedback, obtaining input from women managers and executives through questions like these will build good will and demonstrate that your company is truly committed to developing its female leadership talent. You might also consider obtaining this input early in the process so that it can be presented at the top management dialogue session, discussed earlier, as a reality check on executives' percep-

tions of the current situation regarding development of women within the company.

Customize coaching and career development discussions to meet the needs of FHPs. Just as men in organizations today typically find older managers or executives as mentors, women must have these same opportunities. Such coaching relationships, whether formal or informal, can do a great deal to help young female managers and executives grow professionally, learn to navigate their company's organizational terrain, develop key organizational insights and political skills, and become fully self-aware individuals. I strongly recommend that any coaching/training/mentoring program offered to FHPs should pair young female managers and executives with other more senior (and gender-savvy) women executives with whom they can talk and share concerns in confidence. This also provides a wonderful venue in which a senior woman executive can impart her wisdom and insights to a younger colleague on a range of is-

sues from leadership style, personal effectiveness, goal setting, and career planning to self-confidence, stress management, and health and wellness.

But do the pairing carefully. Not all senior females make good role models for younger high potentials; some have adopted styles so closely resembling men that they may have sacrificed their awareness of what it is like for the majority of women to work in a male-dominated organizational environment.

Offer FHPs an all-female executive education experience. Consider making available to female managers and executives an all-female executive education experience at some point in their career with your company. A few universities, including Smith College, offer a broad array of executive education programs specifically designed for women

executives. Women who have gone through these programs at Smith tell us that being in an all-female-executive setting affords unique opportunities for candor and self-disclosure, unlike those possible in mixed-gender programs. And while our programs focus on providing course graduates with world-class leadership, management, financial, and technical competencies—just as traditional business school LD programs do—what truly sets them apart is their focus on helping women learn, grow, and develop across their entire lifespan. This holistic approach to executive learning stresses the growth of authenticity, self-confidence, personal empowerment, and emotional intelligence to help women bring their unique and personal qualities to their leadership roles in their companies, teams, business initiatives, and projects. The sidebar

All-Female Executive Education Programs Offered by Smith College

Smith College's Executive Education Offerings for women include four different types of programs, each targeted at women with different leadership development needs and priorities or designed with the unique business, organizational, or strategic needs of a sponsoring corporation in mind. The programs are developed and continuously redesigned in conjunction with sponsoring corporations and course participants.

- *The Smith College Consortium brings together each year between 50 and 60 high-potential, fast-track women (typically director-level) from leading companies for two weeks of "strategic" learning around issues of leadership, business strategy, corporate finance, relationship management, global marketing and branding, and intercultural competence.*
- *The Smith Tuck Global Leaders Program, a collaborative venture of Smith College and the Amos Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, is tailored to the needs of senior women executives (typically corporate VPs) poised to take on leadership and executive responsibilities at the highest levels in their organizations. The weeklong program is designed to be of particular value to women who hold or are preparing to assume job assignments in global business environments.*
- *Customized leadership development programs, typically targeted at a company's mid-level managers and emerging leaders, are created in cooperation with company personnel and with input to program design from faculty from leading business schools and consultancies.*
- *From Specialist to Strategist: Business Excellence for Women in Science, Technology, and Engineering, a collaborative venture with the Society of Women Engineers, provides women who have four to ten years of work experience with the tools to become successful managers, team leaders, and executives.*

For more information, visit the Smith College Web site at www.smith.edu/execed

“Smith College Programs for Women Executives” provides more information on the four types of programs currently offered.

CONCLUSION

In a sense, the fate of women managers and executives in companies today rests on the degree to which a male CEO and male top leadership team are enlightened about this issue. Fortunately, a growing number of male CEOs in business do “get it” when it comes to issues of female talent development, including top executives at the companies highlighted in this article. They are building on earlier track records of enlightened male executives like David Kearns, former CEO of Xerox, who as far back as the 1980s put strong emphasis on the development and promotion of women.

Fortunately, too, women themselves are proving tenacious in reaching for the top. “I see real generational change in women entering corporate life today,” says Jill Ker Conway. “The ones rising up in companies enter business through recruiting programs at great undergraduate institutions and often get good training in corporate

finance and accounting, and have some understanding of organization development as well, which their predecessors who graduated from college 20 or 25 years ago did not. Young women coming up today also have a great deal of experience in competitive athletics and team sports, which women in the ‘pre-Title 9’ world did not have,” she notes. “These kinds of experiences are all key to success in business today.”

While women still have significant hurdles to overcome before they populate the executive suite in the same numbers that men do, I am confident, based on my own work as a coach and consultant, that the day is coming when women will be as intimately a part of a company’s leadership bench as men are today. To move things along, however, we must continue to push the business case for why promoting and advancing women managers and leaders is good for business. And we must continue to showcase the ways that women have the potential to be truly transformational leaders in business, using their developmental and life experiences of “differentness” from men to drive healthy and necessary changes in organizational life, culture, and performance. ■

NOTES

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3. BMO Group, *The bottom line: Connecting corporate performance and gender diversity*, as cited in *New Catalyst study reveals financial performance is higher for companies with more women at the top*, press release, Catalyst, January 26, 2004. Catalyst is a nonprofit research and advisory organization working to advance women in business.
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