Gender gap in the executive suite: CEOs and female executives report on breaking the glass ceiling

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Executive Overview

While business organizations are struggling to hold on to their best and brightest women, the persistence of the glass ceiling makes this difficult. Dismantling the glass ceiling requires an accurate understanding of the overt and subtle barriers to advancement faced by women, and the strategies used to overcome these barriers. A large-scale, national survey of Fortune 1000 CEOs and the highest-ranking, most successful women in their companies identified key career strategies used by the women in their rise to the top, and the barriers to advancement they faced in their firms. A startling finding of the study was the disparity in the perceptions of chief executive officers and the high-ranking women in their firms. The Fortune 1000 CEOs had vastly different perceptions of the organizational and environmental barriers faced by their female employees, and in their companies' progress towards equality in the workplace.

Women currently constitute nearly half of the U.S. labor force, and occupy a significant and growing proportion of entry and mid-level managerial positions. In 1972 women held 17 percent of managerial positions, and this proportion swelled to 42.7 percent in 1995. Although women are flooding the managerial pipeline, they have been stymied in their entrance to top-level positions; currently, less than five percent of executive positions are held by women. Of greater concern is the lack of progress on this front. The proportion of top level positions in Fortune 1000 companies held by women increased from 5 percent in 1979 to only 2.9 percent in 1989, and only four of the Fortune 1000 CEO positions are held by women. A 1995 census revealed that while women accounted for 10 percent of corporate officers, they represented just 2.4 percent of the highest ranks of corporate leadership, and held 1.9 percent of the most highly compensated officer positions in Fortune 500 companies.

This lack of progress has been attributed to the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier to advancement based on attitudinal or organizational bias. The glass ceiling appears to be pervasive in corporate America; over 92 percent of executive women report its existence. The glass ceiling is costly, not only in terms of lost productivity among workers who feel blocked in their careers, but also in terms of turnover costs, which are estimated to average 150 percent of managers' annual salaries. Eighty percent of female middle-level managers in one study reported leaving their last organization because of the glass ceiling, and other studies indicate that many leave to start their own competing business.

Increasingly, individuals in many organizations are recognizing the importance of shattering the glass ceiling and removing barriers that prevent women from utilizing their full potential. However, the fact that the glass ceiling has remained virtually intact over the last ten years indicates that these efforts have been largely ineffectual. Dismantling the glass ceiling requires three key pieces of information. First, it is critical to understand the barriers women face in their advancement. Second, it is instructive to understand the career strategies used by women who successfully
overcame the barriers to advancement. Finally, it is vital that corporate leaders have an accurate and complete understanding of the barriers and organizational climate faced by their female employees. Commitment to breaking the glass ceiling, while important, is not sufficient; for change to occur, CEOs must also have a clear understanding of the subtle and overt barriers women face in their advancement.

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To obtain information about these issues, Catalyst undertook the first large-scale, national study of women executives and CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies. We surveyed 1,251 executive women who hold titles of vice president or above in Fortune 1000 companies and all of the Fortune 1000 CEOs. Surveys were returned by 461 female executives and 325 CEOs. We also conducted in-depth, follow-up telephone interviews with 20 female executives and 20 CEOs.

Our study addressed women's advancement from the perspective of women who have actually advanced to senior levels of leadership in the nation's largest companies. These trailblazers are in the best position to provide inside information on the types of obstacles encountered on the road to senior management. By sharing the personal and career strategies used for effectively navigating through those obstacles, this breakthrough generation of female executives can provide critical information for future generations of female managers coming up through the ranks. Of equal significance, by juxtaposing CEOs' perspectives on barriers to advancement with the perspective of female executives, we can assess for the first time whether CEOs understand the subtle and complex organizational barriers faced by their female employees.

Strategies For Breaking The Glass Ceiling: How Women Do It

The female executives in this large national study were presented with a list of 13 possible career strategies that may contribute to the advancement of women to senior management and were asked to rate the importance of each strategy to their own career advancement. As shown in Table 1, nine career strategies emerged as central to the advancement of these successful female executives. In particular, four of these strategies stand out as key to their career success. These are consistently exceeding performance expectations (rated critical by 77 percent); developing a style with which male managers are comfortable (61 percent); seeking out difficult or challenging assignments (50 percent), and having influential mentors (37 percent). We interviewed female executives from this national sample to learn more about career strategies used by these female pioneers.

Performance is the Bottom Line

Superior performance is expected of all executives, but it may be particularly important for women. Consistently exceeding performance expectations was the top-ranking strategy used by these successful female executives, and an overwhelming 99 percent of the respondents reported that this strategy was critical or fairly important. These women reported that they had to prove their ability repeatedly, and needed to over-perform in order to counter negative assumptions in a predominantly male business environment. These successful female executives reported that they were often not

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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Critical</th>
<th>Fairly Important</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
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<tr>
<td>Consistently exceed performance expectations</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop style that men are comfortable with</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seek difficult or high visibility assignments</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<td>Have an influential mentor</td>
<td>37%</td>
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<td>Network with influential colleagues</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<td>Gain line management experience</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td>Move from one functional area to another</td>
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<td>Initiate discussion regarding career aspirations</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<td>Be able to relocate</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<td>Upgrade educational credentials</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td>Change companies</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td>23%</td>
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<td>Develop leadership out-side office</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<td>Gain international experience</td>
<td>5%</td>
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viewed as credible, and that they had to prove themselves and reestablish their credibility in each new work situation. One survey respondent advised:

Do the best you possibly can at every assignment no matter how trivial. Always go the extra mile. It is not enough to be willing, you have to do it, even if no one is looking.

How do successful corporate women demonstrate superior performance? Follow-up interviews revealed two particular strategies: work harder than your peers; and develop unique skills and expertise.

In describing their high-performance track records, successful female executives emphasized the importance of sheer hard work and stamina. In interviews, executive women described workdays that begin at 4:00 a.m. with several hours of pre-dawn reading before the children awake, late-night business calls and faxes to homes fully teleconnected to the office, and travel schedules and after-hours business obligations that keep them away from home several evenings a week.

But the interviews indicated that while hard work was important, the performance bar may be placed higher for women than for men. One survey respondent advised: “Be willing to work much harder than male peers.”

Besides sheer hard work, developing specialized expertise is another effective means for women to become known as high performers. Some successful women executives made a point of developing unique skills so as to become indispensable; others built their expertise by gaining external recognition:

I think you have to have a specialty... and you have to do it better than anybody else can conceivably know how to do it.

—Corporate controller, consumer products company.

**Beyond Performance: Walking the Fine Line**

For women, being a star performer, even outperforming their male peers, is not enough to break through the glass ceiling. Fully 96 percent of the executive women in our study identify a second factor, unrelated to performance, as critical or fairly important to their career success. That key factor involves developing a professional style with which male managers are comfortable. These successful executives had to adapt to a predominantly male culture and environment, and deal with the phenomenon often referred to as the male managerial model, in which models for successful managers incorporate masculine styles and characteristics. This male managerial model places women in a double bind: if their managerial styles are feminine, they run the risk of not being viewed as effective managers, but if they adopt masculine styles viewed as appropriate for managerial roles, they may be criticized for not being feminine.

One successful woman executive points out the double-behavioral standard:

... the guys can yell at each other all the time, shake hands and walk out the door, and it’s perfectly comfortable for them—but on the rare occasion that I raise my voice, it’s not accepted in the same way.

—Personnel director, retail organization.

Another interviewee reported that she had to learn:

how to interact with men who had never dealt with women before, and how to be heard, and how to get past what you looked like, and what sex you were, and into what kind of brain you had... I had to learn how to offer opinions in a way that they could be heard because I wasn’t necessarily given the right to have an opinion.

—Vice president, consumer products company

These restrictions on behaviors were listed by two other survey respondents in an ironic litany of don’ts for female executives:

Don’t be attractive. Don’t be too smart. Don’t be assertive. Pretend you’re not a woman. Don’t be single. Don’t be a mom. Don’t be a divorcee.

Do not make waves. Do not disagree and be correct (kiss of death!). (Working) longer, harder, smarter means nothing if you have a mind of your own and express your own ideas and opinions.

Women in managerial positions are forced to develop managerial styles that are not masculine or feminine, but are acceptable to male colleagues, supervisors and subordinates. This is a daunting challenge that is not faced by their male counterparts.
Not only must women walk a fine line, they must also be concerned with making their male colleagues comfortable with their very presence:

With 13 men on the management committee, and I'm the only woman... it was very awkward at first. But it's been over two years now, and what I have found is that they are never truly comfortable because it's not a hundred percent men. And that's not because they don't like me, or they don't like the fact that a woman's there. It's that there's always that certain guard that what they might say in a roomful of men will be taken wrong when a woman is there.

—Senior Vice President, health care organization.

In short, not only must women exceed performance expectations, they must also find the appropriate way to perform that will not threaten their male peers or make them uncomfortable.

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Some CEOs acknowledge the challenges women face in fitting into the corporate culture and creating a comfort level with male managers. As one CEO notes:

I don't think it has anything to do with competency. I think it's just that our society has certain norms that have been built in—wives being uncomfortable with women working in the same office as their husbands, things of that nature.... The men might not articulate it that way. But I believe that sociologically, we are where we are through no deliberate intent.

Although the intention may not be deliberate, the spillover of cultural expectations of women's roles into the corporate boardroom creates a unique set of challenges for women seeking leadership positions.

**The Importance of Stretch Assignments**

Seeking out difficult or highly visible assignments was the third critical success factor identified by the women executives in our study. Half of those surveyed deemed it critical, and fully 94 percent regarded it as important to their career progression. Key assignments have been found to be related to differential career tracking for men and women and are pivotal for three reasons. First, stretch assignments provide professional growth and learning challenges. Second, they serve as grooming exercises for career tracks leading to executive positions. Finally, highly visible assignments provide critical access to key decision-makers and influential mentors in the company. As one interviewee points out:

When I first came to the company, I was assigned certain very specific, very important high-profile projects, which gave me the opportunity to work on matters that were very important to the company.... They involved contact with the handful of senior people and gave me the opportunity, as a relative newcomer with good credentials but not a lot of prior exposure, to develop their trust and their confidence and their sense that when given an assignment I could get it done.

—General counsel, media company.

While undertaking these assignments is an important prerequisite for gaining access to high-power career tracks, women encounter gender-related barriers to gaining this career milestone. Many of the women in our study reported that they often had to explicitly signal their willingness to take on unusual or challenging assignments, since otherwise managers may assume they are not interested. Several CEOs underscored the importance of this point:

There's been an assumption on the part of men that opportunities everywhere are open to them, whereas there might be a perception that a woman might not want to move, because of personal interests of one kind or another.... Managers are reluctant to talk about these things today, for whatever reason.... I think it's more incumbent on a woman to come forward and say how free she is to do things.

This suggests that the burden of obtaining these key assignments falls largely on the woman. Unlike their male counterparts, who may be approached by senior management and offered key assignments, women must first independently recognize the importance of these assignments and then convince others that they are both motivated
and able to fill these assignments. The women who successfully reached the executive suite in our study did not wait for potentially career-enhancing opportunities to come to them; they actively took charge of their own careers by overcoming gender-related expectations and seeking visible assignments that promoted their mobility.

**Mentoring is Mandatory**

A full 91 percent of the female executives surveyed reported having a mentor sometime in the course of their careers, and 81 percent saw their mentor as being either critical or fairly important in their career advancement. Additionally, nearly all of the 20 female executives who were personally interviewed identified at least one senior man who was instrumental in their development and advancement.

I think it's the single most critical piece to women advancing career-wise. In my experience you need somebody to help guide you and ... go to bat for you. And I'm not saying someone to take care of you because you're a woman. I'm saying, because you are a woman, you need somebody to fight some of your battles in the male environment.

—Vice president/corporate secretary, utility company

The importance of mentoring has been documented in other studies. Individuals with mentors receive more promotions, have more career mobility, and advance at a faster rate than those lacking mentors. Additionally, both male and female executives in other studies overwhelmingly report the presence of a mentor sometime during the course of their careers.

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While a few women executives had female mentors, the scarcity of women in senior management limited their supply. Yet those who were fortunate enough to have both male and female mentors point out the differential strengths associated with each of these key relationships. While male mentors are more influential in organizations and can provide greater access to inner power circles, female mentors were better able to identify and empathize with the barriers faced by women in organizations.

Many of the interviewees recounted that exclusionary corporate environments and performance pressures led to erosion of self-esteem and self-confidence during the early career years. Mentors were viewed as instrumental for countering chilly corporate climates and building self-esteem. In particular, female mentors were identified as better able than male mentors to identify and address self-esteem issues and concerns.

One interviewee pointed out that some male mentors don't understand what you're up against. Or what you may be confronting, or the attitudes that some people, some men, may have, particularly a young woman coming into a meeting with a responsible job.... But I think that's overcome if they really are a good mentor, helping you understand the male perspective and the male world.

—Executive vice president, insurance company

I think mentoring is very important for career advancement because you have somebody who is there for you, will defend you, will reinforce the decisions that you make with others. ... (Mentors) help you understand the organization, to understand the players, to understand the personalities. And they did that for me, but more importantly, whenever I had a problem, they'd stand up for me because they believed in me, and that's invaluable. It's something I could not have done for myself, and if I hadn't had that, I don't think that I could have made it because I do think women have different issues in that regard, at least women who were starting their careers 20 years ago.

—Executive vice president, insurance company

While mentors are important for everyone, they are particularly critical for women seeking to break through the glass ceiling. Influential male mentors, with preestablished networks and credibility, can sponsor their female proteges into senior management circles, and provide inside information usually obtained in the old boy networks. Mentors also can buffer women from adverse forces in the organization, and help them navigate through the challenging and changing political terrain. These buffering functions were pointed out by one interviewee:
A key function of mentors is that they build their protege’s self-confidence and professional identity. These functions are critical for women; many of the women in our study reported that lack of support and isolation depleted their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Because of the important role mentoring played in their own careers, many of the senior women interviewed felt an obligation to mentor others, especially women. Over half of the women interviewed reported being mentors, and nearly all of them reported mentoring other women in their organizations. These female mentors recognize the need for mentoring as a benefit both to promising young managers and to the company. They also feel a need to give back to younger generations of women.

The most important lesson for women is to learn that they’re not in competition for each other for a short list of jobs—it changed in my head back in the early 1980’s, when I realized that was just a sexist attitude in the environment to begin with, and so I began mentoring in the sense of networking with other women and building a team environment with other women.

—Vice president, chemical company

This comment mirrors the finding of other empirical research, which has found no support for the idea that women become inaccessible “queen bees” once they obtain high-ranking positions in organizations.

In sum, these pioneering women relied on career strategies that were adaptive, proactive, and characterized by hard work. They attributed their success to consistently exceeding performance expectations, developing a style with which male managers feel comfortable, seeking out challenging and visible assignments, and obtaining the support of an influential mentor.

These career strategies are not independent, and may in fact build upon one another. For example, exceptional and visible job performance increases the likelihood of being selected by a mentor. Mentors, in turn, provide their proteges with coaching and visible assignments, which improves their job performance and places their proteges on the fast track to advancement. By developing a managerial style with which male managers feel comfortable, these women may also have improved their chances of getting selected by a male mentor. Existing research indicates that while women are as likely as men to obtain a mentor, women need to overcome greater barriers to getting a mentor than men, and that key barriers involve the mentor’s reluctance to assume a mentoring role for fear that the relationship would be misconstrued as romantic in nature. These women may have developed the political savvy to not only recognize this barrier, but also overcome it by managing their image and the perception of others. Finally, mentors provide feedback that shapes their proteges’ management style. This is particularly critical for women, who need to develop a managerial style that is not only effective, but effective for their gender. While male mentors may help female proteges develop acceptable styles, female mentors may be better suited for this task. Although most of the female executives interviewed lacked access to a female mentor, they recognized that women may be better able to share tried and true strategies for walking the fine line, and reported making it a point to share their hard-earned strategies with their female proteges.

White Noise In The Executive Suite: Divergent Perspectives On Barriers To Advancement

The executive women in these Fortune 1000 companies overcame gender-related barriers in order to break through the glass ceiling. An important question is whether their CEOs understood the barriers these women faced in their advancement. CEOs need accurate perceptions to develop effective solutions. We presented the female executives and CEOs in our survey with ten possible barriers to advancement, and asked them to select the three factors they considered to be the most significant in preventing women from advancing to the highest level of corporate leadership. What we found was both startling and revealing. Survey responses, as well as the follow-up interviews, revealed a marked gender gap in perspectives. Although the women and men in our study were all successful executives and were describing essentially the same corporate environment, they viewed this environment in different ways.

What’s Holding Women Back? CEOs Blame Lack of Experience

An interesting finding in this study is the degree of consensus among male CEOs as to the key factors preventing women from advancing to corporate
leadership. As shown in Figure 1, a decisive 82 percent point to lack of general management or line experience as the most crucial barrier holding women back. A second critical barrier, according to almost two-thirds of CEOs (64 percent), is that women have not been in the pipeline long enough—that is, the executive talent pool has included few women until recently.

In an interview, one CEO explained:

My class from business school had seven women in it, out of 650. So, there is a pipeline issue. And it'll take another five to eight years before the number of 45-year-old women ready for senior management jobs is balanced with the number of men.

However, some CEO's contend that time alone will not solve the problem. As one CEO points out:

It's not that women haven't been in the pipeline long enough; it's what they have done while they are in the pipeline.

Some CEOs attributed women's lack of experience in line management functions to women's self-selection or lack of understanding of the importance of these experiences; others see company practices as in part responsible:

I think that, without question, some women have chosen not to pursue certain tracks that, for one reason or another, might be more attractive to men. I think that the larger reason is probably that we, the men of the organization, have built in credentials that we measure people against and, for one reason or another, that probably are biased against women.

I think many women have been held back because they haven't been prepared to make the same sacrifices as perhaps men are... they're not apt to move or relocate. Their families are all there.

One CEO recognized the more subtle dynamics that prevent women from obtaining key job assignments:

In the case of women, we use the lack of specific training for a job as a reason not to open the jobs to them, when we are more ready to bring men into jobs for which they are not specifically trained. That kind of discrimination or stereotyping is much subtler and more difficult to get at.

Our study also revealed a profound disparity between the kinds of experience CEOs identify as critical to advancement and the experience of most corporate women today. The majority (82 percent) of CEOs pointed to women's lack of general management/line experience with profit and loss responsibility as a key deterrent to their advancement. Only 47 percent of the female executives saw...
this as a critical barrier to women's advancement. Moreover, the executive women were far less likely than the male CEOs to believe that women have not been in the pipeline long enough; only 29 percent of the women reported this as a key barrier, compared to 64 percent of the CEOs. Clearly, most of the women in our study would disagree with the argument that it is simply a matter of time until female executives catch up with their male counterparts.

**Women Point to Corporate Culture**

The women executives surveyed had a profoundly different view of the barriers women face in breaking the glass ceiling. The women were more than twice as likely as the CEOs to consider inhospitable work environments as a barrier to women's advancement: 52 percent of the women executives cited "male stereotyping and preconceptions of women" as a top factor holding women back, compared with 23 percent of CEOs; 49 percent of women identified "exclusion from informal networks," compared with 15 percent of CEOs; and inhospitable corporate culture was identified by 35 percent of women, but only 18 percent of CEOs.

*The majority (82 percent) of CEOs pointed to women's lack of general management/line experience with profit and loss responsibility as a key deterrent to their advancement.*

One interviewee pointed to the tenacious nature of stereotypes by describing a situation where, despite her impressive credentials and achievements, she was still assumed to be a secretary in a business meeting:

I was 43 years old and I was the highest ranking woman on the ... staff, and this guy thinks I'm somebody's secretary. I mean I was at Harvard. I was a fellow at Harvard ....
—Executive vice president, transportation company

Another emphasized the exclusionary climate by her comment:

You'd want for once in your life to walk into a room where people are talking that they continue to talk and you don't feel that you're listening in on something you're not supposed to be listening in on.
—Vice president, high technology company

These successful female executives describe corporate cultures that are inhospitable and exclusionary, environments with white noise—constant background static that is distracting, debilitating, and a constant reality for many of these female executives, but that is often not heard by their male bosses.

In order to probe these environmental issues in more depth, our survey also included items assessing male managers' attitudes and behaviors. Again, the CEOs and executive women in our study sharply differed in their perceptions. As shown in Figure 2, executive women were significantly more likely than CEOs to agree or strongly agree that men have difficulty either supervising or being supervised by women.

Twice as many women executives as CEOs (40 percent versus 20 percent) believe that white men in their companies are concerned with reverse discrimination, presumably because of workforce diversity initiatives. To the extent that these concerns are significant, they fuel fears of a quota system and can undermine corporate efforts to achieve greater diversity in leadership.

Another striking difference in the opinions of male CEOs and female executives is the importance ascribed to politics and style. Women were more apt than men to identify women's lack of awareness of organizational politics and ineffective leadership style as factors holding women back. While these factors ranked fairly low in both executive women's and CEO's ratings, the fact that substantially more women singled them out as obstacles suggests that female executives regard the issue of cultural fit and acceptance as a greater challenge for women than do top male executives. As one female executive noted:

To understand what was going on politically—for lack of a better word—was irreplace-
able in making career progress and every bit as important as the actual assignments that I had.

—Vice president, consumer products company.

One reason that male CEOs may not perceive style as being an important impediment to women's advancement is that it was not an issue for them in their own advancement. As discussed earlier, a key career strategy used by these successful female executives was the development of a managerial style that made male coworkers comfortable. This is unlikely that the CEOs in this study had to develop an adaptive style in order to make their female coworkers comfortable. This is illustrated by one CEO's comment: "I'm 56 years old and it's never happened in my career that I have reported to a woman."

Implications Of Dual Perspectives

Why would such a dramatic difference be found between the men's and women's perception of the environment they share? One interpretation of the data is that there are dual environments—one for men that is designed to foster their advancement, one for women that presents subtle, but significant obstacles to their advancement.

The CEOs in this study were logical in their approach, and viewed the problem of women's advancement in terms of what they can see and what they can count: the number of women in the pipeline and their years of experience. They have no way of understanding the corporate environment faced by their female employees because it is an environment that they do not currently experience, nor did they face in their rise to the top. As members of the majority, they were in environments designed by and for men, and presumably geared to being responsive to their needs and advancement. The problem is that CEOs are the critical change agent in most organizations, and if they do not understand the nature of the problem, it is nearly impossible for them to develop effective solutions.

The Problem Defines the Solution

The divergence in perceptions of the cause of the problem conceivably may lead to a marked divergence in proposed solutions. The CEOs viewed the major impediment to women's advancement as lack of experience and time in the pipeline. The logical solution to this barrier may be to fill the pipeline with women and then passively wait for their advancement. This pipeline approach assumes that time will take care of the problem, and that if women do not advance it is because they are unwilling or unable to do so. The burden for change therefore lies with the individual woman. The underlying assumption in the pipeline approach is that the playing field is level all the way up to the corporate suite, and it is therefore up to the individual women to perform effectively and make the right choices to obtain corporate leadership positions. The organization's role in addressing this problem is passive once there are enough women in the pipeline. Proponents of this approach are perplexed that while women are flooding into the managerial pipeline, and advancing as quickly as their male counterparts, few break through to the top leadership positions in organizations.

The female executives in our study present a very different assessment of the problem. These women sharply disagreed with the CEOs, and pointed to an exclusionary corporate culture as the primary barrier for women's advancement. In contrast to the CEOs, these women identified a playing field that was not level, but represented more of an obstacle course for women. Under this culture perspective, the problem does not lie with the individual women, but with attitudes and subtle barriers in the organization which foster an inhospitable corporate culture.

This culture perception may call for one of two solutions. The first solution is to change the corporate culture. This requires an active, planned intervention, which is clearly at odds with the pipeline approach of passively letting time handle the problem. The second solution is for the individual woman to adapt to the culture. Indeed, this is the approach that was consistently reported by these female executives. As discussed earlier, these women used career strategies that involved outperforming their male peers and developing adaptive management styles that made their male peers comfortable. While this solution may work for a select group of women who are both willing and able to adapt to an inhospitable corporate climate, it may not be an effective solution for the next generation of talented female employees aspiring to corporate leadership positions.

While this group of successful female executives adapted to inhospitable corporate cultures, this approach is definitely at odds with current perspectives on diversity in organizations and does not represent an effective, long-term solution to the problem. Diversity experts observe that organizations are most effective when active measures are taken to adapt corporate cultures to the needs of an
increasingly diverse workforce, rather than placing the entire burden of change on the minority employee. Increasingly, it is recognized that by expecting minorities to adapt to the dominant culture, organizations fail to capitalize on the innovative and creative outcomes of a diverse workforce.

The view as to who is responsible for change, the individual woman or the organization, yielded contradictory results in our study. While both the CEOs (80 percent) and female executives (76 percent) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that it is the company’s responsibility to change to meet the needs of management women, 73 percent of the female executives and 61 percent of the CEOs in our study also strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that it is up to women to change to fit the corporate culture. These conflicting responses may reflect recent and incomplete shifts in attitudes regarding diversity and responsibility for organizational change.

**Is the Solution Working? It Depends On Whom You Ask**

It is reasonable to ask whether any of the solutions described above are working. Are these Fortune 1000 organizations making headway in removing promotional roadblocks and providing more opportunities for women? The answer depends on who is asked. As displayed in Figure 3, the CEOs were more than twice as likely to say that opportunities for women in their companies improved greatly over the past five years. The female executives were more pessimistic about the change; fifteen percent of the women reported no change in opportunities, compared with only two percent of the CEOs. Once again, we found a sharp divergence in the perception of the same organizational environment.

Are these female executives accurate in their perceptions, or are they being overly-pessimistic in their appraisal of women’s opportunities in their organizations? While it can be argued that women who break through the glass ceiling are probably best equipped to assess its density, no definitive answer to this question can be found. Existing studies reveal limited progress in women achieving corporate leadership positions. Whatever the reality, the perception that there are limited opportunities for advancement is sufficient for turnover decisions and reduced career aspirations among talented female employees. The barriers do not have to be real to be effective.

**Whatever the reality, the perception that there are limited opportunities for advancement is sufficient for turnover decisions and reduced career aspirations among talented female employees.**

A salient finding of our study is that the majority of CEOs surveyed apparently are unaware of the corporate environment faced by their female employees. As pointed out earlier, women were nearly twice as likely as CEOs to point to inhospitable corporate cultures as a barrier to women’s advancement. CEOs, on the other hand, are more than twice as likely as women to report great improvement in the opportunities for women to advance in their corporations. How can these CEOs be so out of touch with the workplace experiences of nearly half of their workforce?

**Voices From The Top: Some CEOs Get It. Others Need Work**

We explored these issues further in our interviews with 20 male CEOs and found four themes underlying their perceptions of the corporate climate faced by the women in their organizations. Each theme represents a continuum on which CEOs varied, and the themes illuminated underlying assumptions that may have contributed to the differing perceptions of the CEO’s and the female executives who worked for them.

**Gender-Blind Treatment Results in Gender-Blind Outcomes.** The first theme is the view that organizations need to treat men and women exactly the same. This perspective assumes a level playing field in the organization. Gender-blind treatment
is therefore expected to result in gender-blind outcomes. One CEO explains:

I think companies have to be gender-blind. Period. Whatever they do for men, they do for women. We're gender blind and that's the only thing that's going to work.

The assumption that the same career strategy is equally effective for men and women is not supported by the findings of our study; the female executives in our study attributed their success to developing a managerial style appropriate for their gender, which is clearly a gender-typed career strategy. CEOs who hold a gender-blind perspective may be reluctant to develop special career development programs aimed at helping women and other minorities navigate through the potentially non-level playing field in their organizations.

Some CEOs did not share the gender-blind perspective. These CEOs recognized that organizational climates are not always supportive to women and minorities, and that gender-blind policies do not necessarily result in gender-blind outcomes. Some of these CEOs acknowledged the potential resistance and stereotyping women may encounter from male managers. Some recognized the subtle, exclusionary nature of many organizational cultures, and applied this perspective to their view of diversity and corporate culture. In contrast, other CEOs maintained that since organizations treat everyone the same, individuals should therefore adapt to the organization.

Gender Generalizations: All women are alike and they are all very different from men. The second theme that emerged from the CEO interviews was that CEOs varied on the extent to which they used group stereotypes to view individual women. Some saw men and women as being very different, whereas others saw them as nearly the same.

Some generalizations about gender differences had negative connotations:

Everyone has (career) slumps. I think that a greater percentage of women, when they have a slump, will look at the option of dropping out of the work force. Most men wouldn't see it as an option.

If a woman wants to be as assertive as men, she can get just as much air time. In many cases she can do better than a man. But sometimes mentally their knees buckle in an area where they are toe to toe . . . . If they want to be forceful, they are just as good.

I'd say there is a gender bias that there's less tough, aggressive women than men.

Some CEOs rejected the notion of group generalizations, and focused instead on individual differences within groups:

I find that the women in our company have the same range of ambition as the men, ranging from people who are fiercely ambitious and want to rise high and go far, to people who want to lead balanced lives and are pretty happy with what they're doing.

You can make a lot of generalizations about men and women, but when you get down to it, you've got to deal with specific people. Whether they're male or female, they don't necessarily fit the stereotype . . . . Some women we have around here aren't collaborative at all. They're extremely competitive people.

Other CEOs not only recognize individual differences, but also recognize that any gender differences in behaviors are often overshadowed by gender-neutral behaviors that emerge in response to position and responsibility:

Whether you're male or female, by the time you get to a senior management position, you've learned a different style of leadership anyway.

How do group generalizations relate to CEO perceptions of corporate climate? Existing research indicates a reciprocal relationship between group stereotyping and exclusionary corporate climates for women. Group stereotyping leads to the dual perception that all women are alike, and they are all very different from men. This perception is amplified when women are in the numerical minority. This results in a situation where men are treated on the basis of their individual characteristics, whereas women are automatically shunted into group categories, and are treated on the basis of those categories. This creates dual environments in organizations: one for women, and one for men, a distinction that is further fueled by group stereotypes. So male CEOs may assume that women do not want stretch assignments because of lack of aggressiveness or family demands, or they may place women in team leadership positions because of gender stereotypes that women are less competitive and more nurturing than men, and are therefore more likely to put their own
needs aside for the good of the group. In either case, the challenge that is faced by women, but not their male counterparts, is to prove to their male colleagues that they are individuals and that they should be evaluated on the basis of their individual characteristics, rather than their group membership. In order to meet this challenge, women may expend considerable energy developing impression management strategies to project an image that runs counter to gender-role expectations.

Consciousness Raising in the Executive Suite: The Impact of Personal Experience. The third theme that emerged from the CEO interviews was the degree to which the CEOs were conscious of the exclusionary climate faced by their female employees. Many of the CEOs recognized that their own personal experiences influenced their awareness of gender issues, as well as issues faced by other minorities in their organizations. While most of the CEOs were white males, one CEO reflected on his own experience of being targeted for stereotyping and discrimination:

I'm Jewish. There weren't any Jewish people going into banking and there were no Jewish officers of banks. I was asked a lot, "Why are you doing this? There aren't any examples of Jews having succeeded in banking." I answered that it was because nobody had tried.

This CEO went on to relate how his background influenced his views of diversity in organizations:

People would ask, what is it like to go to school with blacks? I would think about how I would sit in class and not know the answers to questions and a black person would. So I would look at people as individuals. If you give them the same chances to perform and development experiences, you see race and religion and gender don't have much to do with success. This leads me to the conclusion that you can succeed by doing things differently.

Some CEOs observed that their early experiences interacting with competent women resulted in their casting aside gender-role stereotypes and generalizations:

Let me just say that I have been around very capable women all my working life. I certainly have never doubted the competency and capabilities of women in decision-making roles ... So I have seen women all my life be very effective in very difficult situations.

I have women friends who got MBAs and have gone on to run major companies.

Other CEOs reported that they become cognizant of gender issues through direct experiences with family members, most notably, their daughters. These direct, personal experiences were instrumental in raising the CEOs' consciousness and awareness of gender issues in organizations:

I have five girls, no sons .... One interesting issue is my two youngest daughters, one of whom is in grad school, the other's going to start this year—they're both into women's issues. That's what they want to do as a career, work on women's issues .... You talk about politics. I catch it if I don't think the way they do on those issues. Those things have certainly had an impact.

I have a couple of career-minded daughters. I would like them to have the opportunity to go as far as their abilities will take them.

... I would stand my three daughters against most males I know and they would compete very well.

Some of the CEOs interviewed recognized that they do not automatically become sensitive to these environmental issues because it is not part of their daily experience in their organizations. These CEOs sought to increase their awareness of gender issues through experiential training. It is important for CEOs to recognize that while feedback from female employees may increase their sensitivity to gender issues, it is often quite difficult for women to give this feedback without invitation. Personal experiences allow CEOs to understand the corporate climate faced by their female and minority employees. Whether the experience is directly aimed at the CEO or vicariously observed through others, it generally shatters the assumption that discrimination does not exist in their organization.

The Mantle for Change. The final theme revealed from the CEO interviews was the CEOs' responsibility for making change occur in their organizations. The CEOs' role in the change process may involve a range of actions from actively mentoring and grooming women for high-ranking positions to providing a more flexible workplace and a corporate culture that relishes diversity. Whatever the nature of the change, for change to be effective, it must come from the top.

While many of the CEOs interviewed recognized
their responsibility for taking the mantle of change, some also recognized the potential risks involved with making change happen. One CEO elaborated:

I really had to...take some chances in promoting women into roles that exposed them to high risk—and me as well. I had to run those risks to demonstrate that women could, in fact, handle these particular high-sensitivity, high-visibility jobs. So having done that, that’s continued to open opportunities for women because there's no longer an artificial barrier to such promotions.

Other CEOs were reluctant to take the mantle of change, partly because of fears that the intervention would be viewed as an affirmative action gesture:

...holding managers accountable for developing women. I really dislike that. I think that could really backfire on you. I feel about that like I feel about affirmative action. People who weren’t qualified were force-fed into it to match some sort of artificial goal.

Some CEOs did not take on the mantle of change because they believed that change did not need to occur. However, while these CEOs maintained that their organizations were gender-blind, they still expected women to help other women, thereby inferring that their corporate culture may not be as blind as they would like it to be.

Still other CEOs take the more benign approach that change needs to occur from a grass-roots level. Instead of active intervention, these CEOs hope that change will be initiated by women and other minorities in their organizations. Their role in the change process would therefore be to support the change, but not initiate it. However, one problem with giving the mantle for change to women and minorities is that these employees are vulnerable to backlash, and typically lack the power to sustain the change over time.

The themes that emerged from these interviews were connected. CEOs who were sensitized to the dual environments in their organizations did not assume a level playing field between the genders; they understood the exclusionary climate women face and they therefore did not advocate gender-blind policies and programs. CEOs who were sensitized to women’s experiences were also more likely to emphasize individual differences between women, rather than using broad-based group generalizations to categorize their female employees. These CEOs also recognized their role in changing the inhospitable corporate climates faced by their female employees. In short, they attempted to hear the white noise in their organizations.

Bridging The Gender Gap

How do we bridge the gender gap and sensitize CEOs to the corporate climate faced by their female employees? Most CEOs do not understand the experience of being a minority in their organization since they themselves are in the majority. However, some recognize this disparity, and that the playing field is not perceived as being level by their female employees. This understanding is often obtained by direct, personal experiences with female colleagues and family members, most notably daughters. In the business world, it may be obtained by working with women as fellow members of corporate boards. Other interventions that may raise CEO awareness include diversity training, focus groups featuring women, cross-gender mentoring, discussions with other CEOs, inclusion of gender and diversity issues in executive education, and other educational approaches using a variety of media.

Many organizational interventions aimed at breaking the glass ceiling that have been identified elsewhere are also supported by our study. For example, organizations need to track women into direct line experience positions with profit and loss responsibility, minimize gender bias by using objective performance appraisal systems, facilitate effective mentoring relationships, promote work/life balance by implementing flexible workplace policies, and make managers responsible for the career development and tracking of their female employees. As pointed out by the Gordon and Whelan article in this issue, organizations also need to address the specific career needs of midlife women by offering flexible job designs and specialized career path programs.

Our study adds one more intervention to this list: raising the consciousness of chief executive officers and other senior officers slated for those top positions. In fact, this intervention may be the key underlying factor behind effective implementation of all of the other interventions listed above; effective implementation requires top management commitment. Organizations need the support and guidance of top management if women are to break through the glass ceiling. For this to occur, the gender gap must be bridged.
Endnotes
10 An alternative reason for the persistence of the glass ceiling is that stated intentions to break the ceiling may not reflect real intentions; some individuals may benefit from maintaining the status quo.
11 The response rates for the female executive and CEO samples were 36.8 percent and 33 percent. On average, the female executives were 45 years old, earned an annual salary of $248,000, and were highly educated: almost two-thirds have postgraduate degrees. Seventy-two percent of the women were married, and almost two-thirds (64 percent) have children. Only nine percent identify themselves as other than Caucasian, and these women of color earned an average annual salary of $229,000. Eight-one percent of the women were within two reporting levels of the CEO, and 44 percent report directly to the CEO or are only one level from the CEO. More than 60 percent held staff positions. The largest number held the title of vice president (54 percent) or senior vice president (19 percent); survey respondents also included a significant number of even more senior executives, such as president, executive vice president, chief financial officer and general counsel.
12 A sample of 40 women was randomly drawn from the survey mailing list, and 20 of these women participated in a telephone interview. Among the CEOs completing the survey, 50 respondents noted in a separate postcard their interest in participating in a follow-up interview, and 22 of these were randomly selected to participate. Complete interview data were collected from 20 CEOs. The semi-structured interviews were taped, transcribed, and analyzed using a variant of thematic and componential analyses.
13 We used earlier studies, based on interviews with small groups of hand-picked female executives, as a launching point for the development of this list of strategies. We refer the reader to ground-breaking studies by Morrison, White and Van Velsor 1988 and Mainiero, L. 1994. Getting anointed for advancement. The case of executive women. Academy of Management Executive, 8: 53-67. Our study extends these studies by asking a large sample of female executives to prioritize the specific strategies used in their advancement.
14 We also asked the female executives to prioritize among the list of 13 strategies by selecting the top three strategies that were most important. The same four strategies were picked as the most important strategies for advancement: consistently exceeding performance expectations (ranked in the top three by 74 percent of the sample); seeking out difficult or challenging assignments (51 percent); developing a style with which male managers are comfortable (48 percent); and having influential mentors (39 percent).


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