

YOUR CAREER

The Real Glass Ceiling

It's not what you think.

By Adrian Savage

Photo by Eyewire

The concept of a glass ceiling isn't new. An invisible barrier that prevents capable employees from being promoted to top positions, the glass ceiling is often thought to affect only women or be caused by prejudice. A far more powerful and common glass ceiling affects men just as much as women.

Most corporations can be described as *meritocracies*: places where promotions are earned based on merit. Achievement and performance are emphasized;

advancement is gained through hard work. However, between upper middle-management and the executive level, corporate culture nearly always shifts to a culture based on power.

The change is invisible and rarely, if ever, acknowledged openly. To advance further, a worker must play by the new rules even though they've never been explained. In fact, the new rules are so important to the way top teams function that even highly talented people

How Women (and Men) Can Have “It” All

U.S. women fill only 5 percent of executive positions, although they take half of the management slots available, according to *BusinessWeek*. That's not because they lack competence. Rather, it may be because they don't know how to demonstrate “it”—what *BusinessWeek* calls “executive presence.”

Here are some do's and don'ts, which can help women (and men) show they've got “it.”

Do make a polished entrance into a room by shaking hands and connecting with people immediately.

Do speak decisively. Don't equivocate with words such as “perhaps” or use “we” instead of “I.”

Don't end sentences with a raised tone like a question.

Don't leave a meeting without contributing your thoughts; you'll look passive and unengaged.

Do plan what you'll say in meetings, rehearsing beforehand.

Do open up to senior executives in hallways or elevators, sharing in-fu about your personal life to create bonds.

Do learn to self-promote. One method: Weave accomplishments into anecdotes.

The “nice girl, seen and not heard” attitude that women learn hurts them more the further they go in their careers, says *BusinessWeek*. Women who want to make it to the top should be sure to speak up. Learning how to build social capital is crucial, as leaders promote people they like and feel comfortable with.

who can't conform will be blocked or eliminated. Though few people talk about it, this is the real glass ceiling.

What causes this shift in culture? In an organization in which people rise by merit, the differences between them shrink. Merit no longer separates one employee from another, but people must still be selected for top-level jobs. If one set of values no longer serves to evaluate workers, leaders must turn to another. Nearly always, power (sometimes described as “politics”) is what replaces merit.

Top executives exercise power and influence in order to make strategy decisions and allocate resources. Influence and patronage play a large part in getting things done and become the major source of success; executives spend more time with people who are outside of the organization. At the executive level, you must become part of the power culture. People who resist become marginalized in the race for influence. So, how can you determine whether you really want to join this new culture? Consider these job elements vital to work satisfaction:

- aligns with your core values
- offers the right level of challenge with a sufficient amount of stretch
- has a corporate culture and environment that you're comfortable with.

That last element is crucial when moving to an executive position. If the first two requirements are met but you aren't comfortable with the culture or environment at the top, it's likely you'll be unhappy in the position.

Some people never adapt well to the executive power culture. They have to accept that the top jobs aren't for them. Others, perhaps even most people, could perform well if they were prepared for the inevitable changes. Consider which category you belong to.

Deciding whether membership on the top team is right for you isn't easy. Taking a step up the corporate ladder may set you back a few rungs. For example, once you go from director to vice president, it can be difficult to find a director-level job again. People may think you're overqualified or that you were a failure in the higher job.

Recognize that breaking through the real glass ceiling is a life-changing experience; give it the thought it deserves. Be honest with yourself about whether you truly want to do it. If you have a satisfying career, it may be better to stay where you are, especially if you suspect you won't enjoy it at the top, or you may prefer to look for a similar role in another company.

These tips can help you make a wise

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decision about breaking through the glass ceiling and succeeding there.

Seek a mentor in the top team. A mentor can help you determine whether you'll thrive in the culture above the glass ceiling. Your mentor shouldn't be your boss and should be someone you can trust and confide in. That's especially important for women because most mentors available at the executive level are men.

Your mentor will know what it's like at the top and can tell you what you must do to succeed. Pay close attention. If what you hear is distasteful, you're getting fair warning. If you do decide to move up, your mentor can guide you and help you avoid mistakes in your new position.

 Your Career (May T+D) for more on selecting and working with a mentor.

Take time to explore yourself in depth. Don't assume that you know all about yourself. Over time, we all develop habits and attitudes that we might not be aware of. Just because they've worked—or been tolerated—at lower levels doesn't mean you should take them to the top. Use an assessment tool to determine what attitudes or behaviors you need to replace or abandon.

Gather data to understand the position behind the scenes. The list of job responsibilities may not give you the whole story. Your success or failure may depend more on how you handle the role. Clarify expectations to ensure that your understanding of the position is the same as everyone else's. Make sure to listen for the emotional context of the words describing the job, not just the responsibilities.

A good mentor, honest reflection, and complete information can help you understand what's expected in a top position and decide whether your future lies above or below the real glass ceiling.

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