

Photo by Veer

THE INVISIBLE WALL

WORKPLACE BARRIERS AND
SELF-IMAGE HINDER WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP ADVANCEMENT.



By Michael Laff

IF YOU WANT TO FIND OUT WHY THE RANKS OF WOMEN REACHING THE EXECUTIVE LEVEL ARE TAILING OFF, VISIT A COLLEGE CAMPUS.

While teaching classes at Washington University, Linda Henman, a St. Louis-based executive consultant, notes that there is one female among students in her graduate engineering class, yet when she walks into an HR class, every student is female.

Myriad reasons are cited for the flat and, in some cases, declining number of women serving as senior executives or on corporate boards. In Henman's view, educational choices are as much responsible for the slow pace of change as cultural or political factors. Although more women are enrolled in business schools than men, the gender ranks are still skewed in tactical fields, such as math and engineering, in which men predominate. Henman emphasizes that more women need to acquire financial literacy because such skills are essential to serve on a corporate board.

"The future CEOs are coming from operations such as accounting or engineering," she says. "I don't know any CEOs who came from HR."

Given the sweeping changes in the political arena, most observers are discouraged about the lack of progress of women reaching the executive level. The scarcity of women in senior leadership positions is all too evident in the numbers: 1.4 percent of Fortune 500 companies have a female CEO. Just 13 percent of corporate board members are women

Numerous organizations have launched leadership initiatives designed to identify and recruit women for executive-level positions.



and 16 percent of Fortune 500 corporate officers are women, according to Catalyst, a New York-based organization that researches women's roles in the workplace. Even as women attain and seek the highest levels in government, symbolic gains tend to overshadow the uneven progress.

"Overall it's disappointing," says Vikki Pachera, a headhunter with Allen Austin Executive Search in San Jose. "You want to see more role models at the board and CEO level, not just in positions such as HR that are traditionally held by women."

Awareness of the discrepancy is no longer an issue. Corporations are wrestling with past preconceptions of what a leader looks like and how to make their executive ranks more reflective of their customers and staff. Numerous organizations have launched leadership initiatives designed exclusively to identify and recruit women for executive-level positions. In addition to creating a wide range of networking and mentoring, organizations are focused on closing the gender gap in leadership circles.

Restraining hand

Women lack access to the informal mentoring that accompanies working in client service sectors. Internally, competitive fields such as law do not provide the kind of mentoring to promising female employees that can enable them to reach the executive level. Beyond tangible skills, the often hypercritical eye cast upon women of authority from both their peers and themselves serves as much to undermine their potential to advance as any blemish on their résumé.

The legal profession is a microcosm of the difficult choices women must make before they become a

corporate partner. Lauren Rikleem, who interviewed 100 attorneys for her book *Ending the Gauntlet*, found that the attrition rate among female attorneys rises sharply once they have worked with a firm for four to six years. This is just at the point where they become valuable in terms of attracting new business. Only 17 percent of partners and 13 percent of senior partners—those with equity in the firm—are women, according to her research.

In law firms, it is essential to learn who the important partners are, who the difficult attorneys are, and who among the roster will hold onto client work only to pass it off on a junior associate at the last minute. Navigating the terrain of office politics is a frequent pitfall for women, according to Rikleem.

"Women attorneys say that they can't succeed because they don't see people like them, they don't receive enough encouragement, and they can't sustain a high number of billable hours," Rikleem says.

While small businesses offer more opportunities, the ratio of women participating in the workforce in relation to men has remained steady since the 1990s. Research does indicate that women who seek a balance between work and other responsibilities will take a position with fewer duties that is below their qualifications over any other route.

The current generation may have different aspirations from their predecessors who believed the path to success led only through brand name corporations. A more recent phenomenon is the number of women who start their own businesses. In 1977, just 5 percent of private companies were owned by women. Today that figure has reached 35 percent, according to the Women Presidents' Organization. So while savvy market watchers could name all of the top

KEY FINDINGS

female CEOs in a few seconds, a sea change is occurring almost unnoticed in small businesses.

“It’s a very big change,” says Marsha Firestone, founder and president of the Women Presidents’ Organization.

“They get their experience in a corporate environment and then start their own business. They get more power, more influence, and more money. The spotlight is on large corporations [lacking female CEOs], but it shouldn’t be.”

While a number of research studies do not support the common misperceptions about women leaders, the findings have yet to break open barriers, even among women themselves.

“Oftentimes what holds women back is gender-based stereotyping and workplace barriers, not ambition,” says Julie Nugent, a research analyst with Catalyst. “When we asked people in corporations about their goals, an equal number of men and women strive to be in top positions.”

Typical barriers are a lack of access to informal networks and a lack of mentors with similar backgrounds. In a study that attempted to confront the oft-cited gender perceptions, Catalyst asked senior executives about differences between men and women in leadership positions. The report, “Women Take Care, Men Take Charge,” turned most of the accepted gender-rooted flaws inside out, calling into question their value as predictors of success.

“Men and women are not only perceived to have different leadership styles,” Nugent says. “Men consider women to be less skilled at problem solving. Both men and women believe women are better at nurturing while men are believed to be better at influencing upward and delegating. These stereotypes permeate the workplace.”

Different breed

There are indications that a successful female leader is a different breed, providing a sharp contrast with male leaders and females at the staff level. A recent study conducted by the Caliper Group, a Princeton, New Jersey-based consultancy, indicates that women leaders possess a more accelerated sense of ambition than their male colleagues and do not abide by gender stereotypes. Through testing and interviews with dozens of male and female executives, the study revealed that women leaders were more likely to take risks, use abstract reasoning, and communicate a sense of urgency than male leaders.

The findings conflicted with the prevailing notions about women being indecisive, risk averse, or too conservative in their thinking. About the only area where women leaders scored “lower” in terms of strength was ego and resiliency, but even this area is transformed into a character asset. While women at the entry- and mid-staff levels often interpret rejection as the final verdict on their ability, women in leadership positions shift their ambition into overdrive.

“Women leaders are more thin-skinned and less resilient than men,” says Herb Greenberg, president of Caliper. “They are more hurt by rejection, but they use it as an incentive. They take the injury as a challenge and say, ‘I’ll show you that you made a mistake.’”

Greenberg emphasizes that a comparative study with previous eras would have been difficult to conduct because

Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners

- In 2005, women held 16.4 percent of corporate officer positions, up just 0.7 percentage points from 2002.
- Women held 6.4 percent of top earner positions, up 1.2 percentage points from 2002.
- At the estimated growth trend for the past 10 years (0.82 percentage points per year), it will take 40 years for women to reach parity with men in corporate officer ranks.

Women of Color

- Women of color held only 1.7 percent of corporate officer positions.
- Women of color were 1.0 percent of all Fortune 500 top earners.

Women in Line, Staff, and Clout Positions

- Women were almost two and one-half times as likely to hold staff positions (71 percent) as they were to hold line positions (29 percent).
- Women held 9.4 percent of clout titles, up from 7.9 percent in 2002.
- In 2005, eight Fortune 500 companies were led by a woman CEO, up from six in 2002.

Women Corporate Officers, by Company Rank and Industry

- The percentage of women in any category measured did not vary systematically with Fortune 500 rank.
- Women had greater percentages of corporate officer positions in industries where women were 49 percent or more of the total workforce (finance, insurance, real estate, retail trade, and services).

Source: 2005 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners of the Fortune 500

of the scarcity of female executives in the 1970s. He adds that the distinctive nature of women leaders is what enabled them to reach the top.

Confidence mission

Regardless of the source, several executive coaches note the timidity that women in managerial roles have when sizing up their ability and the need to seek out advice. Striving to make the right decision, even to be perfect, hamstring many women who need to acquire expertise, often from colleagues who work down the hall. There is wide currency in the notion that women need more strategic experiences to reach the executive level.

Carol Frohlinger, a New York attorney and managing director of New York-based Negotiating Women, calls women’s deference the “tiara syndrome” whereby capable women

employees deliver results, often without adequate resources, only to hold their heads down and wait for praise.

Billie Blair, a Los Angeles-based organizational psychologist, believes that too many women with potential for promotion are either unaware or are afraid to ask for more opportunities. For a woman to rise to the executive level, she must “get all her tickets punched”—in other words, gain exposure to all aspects of the business, especially segments dealing with profit and loss, and those outside her area of expertise. Even among the current generation of highly educated women who obtained MBAs, Blair notes that the coming generation has not learned that gaining diverse experiences is essential to securing a promotion.

If there is a consensus among workplace analysts, it is that women with the greatest potential for advancement need to shed their fear of asking for help from colleagues. Oftentimes, women credit a male colleague for being their greatest source of inspiration.

“Women have close relationships at work, but they don’t normally ask for help from one another,” says Brigid Moynahan, president of The Next Level, a New Jersey-based training company.

Moynahan recalls coaching an executive with an information technology company who was regularly passed over for promotions because she was slow to navigate the corridors of power. While Moynahan continually reminded her client about the importance of seeking out male executives to chat informally and offer her expertise, it wasn’t until the client began mentoring another female that she learned the value of advice long ignored. The lesson more women in authority need to learn is to be better self-promoters in a way that exudes confidence and demonstrates leadership potential.

Executive presence

Many organizations hire consultants to provide training for how to act as a leader. Bill Morin, a New York-based executive

coach with WJM Associates, says the buzzword is “executive presence” whereby up-and-coming leaders, many of them women, are taught the essential subtleties of leadership style, such as staying calm, not overstating the difficulty of a particular challenge, and learning to spread credit. The idea of spreading credit is new to some women leaders who tend to take too much credit for themselves, thereby creating resentment among colleagues, Morin says.

Coaches who consult female executives often speak of the discomfort women have in leadership roles. If a woman executive attempted to be a command-and-control boss or use a strident tone, she would likely be branded with the worst kind of label. Likewise, the jocular, slap-on-the-back mannerisms practiced by many male CEOs would not work for women either. Female executives often have more difficulty engaging in the small talk that is essential for breaking barriers between executives and staff, according to Pachera. Absent many role models, the concept of how a female executive should carry herself as a leader is still unknown.

“About 20 years ago there was wider acceptance of women and other minorities in leadership positions,” Blair says. “But I don’t think that an acceptance of different leadership styles accompanied that.”

While working with female executives, Morin, who has coached several female Fortune 500 CEOs, says he is most often asked how to teach them to be able to influence the boss. Morin believes that acquiring a range of experience is important but is not the reason a woman will get promoted to the executive level. Typically, most companies will be satisfied with a six-month stint in other departments.

“She gets the job because of her energy, vision, and commitment,” he says. “If she’s hesitant or doesn’t speak the [company] language, that will destroy her much faster than anything else.”

Bringing in a higher percentage of women leaders does not mean sending the most promising candidates to some

PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN CORPORATE OFFICER POSITIONS, BY FORTUNE 500 RANK, 2005

	Average Number Corporate Officers	Average Number Women Corporate Officers	Average Percentage Women Corporate Officers
F1-100	28.0	4.9	17.5%
F101-200	20.8	3.3	15.7%
F201-300	19.1	2.9	15.3%
F301-400	21.8	3.7	17.1%
F401-500	19.0	3.0	15.9%
F500 Average	21.8	3.6	16.4%

Source: 2005 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners of the Fortune 500

sort of executive finishing school. If a company seeks to change the demographics of its executive level, it needs to start with changes to the entire culture, not just recruitment.

“We’re still dealing with the mentality that we need to ‘fix the women,’” says Kathy Bowman Atkins, a North Carolina-based business coach and former executive at General Dynamics. “I don’t see organizations doing a lot to help male leaders adjust their attitudes about developing women leaders.”

Atkins was one of two women among a 10-member executive team at General Dynamics. She was the only member who had responsibility for five functions, including engineering management, communications, and IT. Although she gained the trust of her peers, it came in tandem with a sense of awe that often attaches to women who are successful.

“I can’t tell you how many times people said, ‘You’re different; you think like a man,’” Atkins said. “Women are perceived as not being able to get things done in the workplace, but when they accomplish something, it’s considered incredible.”

Women’s movement

Formal and informal networks for women are emerging in large corporations such as Novartis Pharmaceuticals, Goldman Sachs, and Deloitte & Touche. Mentoring programs are likely the only remedy to bridge the gap between the knowledge many male executives possess and the knowledge some women seek to reach the next level. However, meeting for lunch or behind closed doors leads to complications. Rising fears of misperceptions and the rigid professional codes of conduct in the workplace often overshadow development needs.

“There is a reluctance of men in power to mentor women,” Henman says. “We’ve become so sensitive to signs of flirtation or personal relationships that we have stopped taking care of each other. Men are reluctant to provide any kind of mentoring to women if it could be perceived as romantic.”

Creating a formal mentoring network can achieve some goals but that too has its limits. Henman worked with Merrill Lynch on its mentoring program several years ago and believes that while the intentions are solid, the expected matching of women with women took precedence over matching people with the best talent for individual needs.

“I don’t want a female mentor,” Henman says. “I want the best mentor in my field.”

The mentoring barrier is an obvious reflection of the stigma that attaches to associating too closely with colleagues of the opposite sex in any manner. Andrea Zintz, vice president at Chicago-based Hudson Talent Management, recalls speaking with an executive at a major health-care company who shies away from playing golf with a female executive who also enjoys the game. The male executive will play golf with his peer’s subordinate. As a former executive at Johnson & Johnson, Zintz experienced the same isolation. She would regularly play golf with peers but not with the company’s president because the situation was too awkward.



Formal and informal networks for women are emerging in large corporations.

One company that integrates mentoring into its culture is Johnson & Johnson. Christian Koffman, the company’s former worldwide chairman of consumer products, was dismayed with the tenacity of debate whenever a woman’s name was brought up for discussion in the company’s succession plan. Discussions about male successors lasted five to 10 minutes; similar conversations about female candidates lasted one hour and turned visceral, or at times even hostile.

Zintz worked with Koffman to select 20 high performing women to serve as informal advisors on a range of issues. Enormously pleased with the feedback, Koffman expanded the ad hoc committee to the United States. Soon the exchanges resembled focus groups where a number of business topics were addressed in the sessions. Senior executives pledged to simply ask questions. The dialogue created a forum for the company’s male leaders to interact with women in an atmosphere that addressed actual business needs.

“It shifted the whole environment,” Nintz says of the internal discussions. “It started with the natural curiosity of the leader. It took courage for him to do that.”

Koffman's hope was to leave his legacy to a female successor, which he accomplished when Colleen Goggin was selected. Goggin, who was one of the 20 women selected for participation in the business exchange, remains the company's worldwide chair of consumer products.

Canada-based Scotiabank exemplifies how women can be promoted if the organization makes a concerted effort to change its demographics. An online tool allows all employees to review the bank's requirements for attaining senior-level positions. Webcasts featuring top female executives are available to the entire staff.

By tying the initiative to performance reviews of the bank's senior executives, the bank is achieving greater gender parity. As a result, the ranks of women at the senior management level increased from 19 to 31 percent from 2003 to 2006. Women serving one level higher, at the corporate executive level, increased from 27 to 37 percent in the past three years. The program was recognized by Catalyst as a model for advancing women.

Procter & Gamble is considered another pioneer for its reverse mentoring program whereby male senior executives are paired with a female colleague of lower stature. The program was born of necessity as the consumer products giant dealt with declining sales in the 1990s. The reverse mentoring was created as a way to find out what products may appeal to women consumers.

The sheer volume of organizations devoted to advancing women's interests shows that a change is coming. Most workplace analysts believe it will likely take another generation before parity is achieved between men and women in the executive ranks. Yet many of the women's networks and corporate leadership initiatives are too fresh to be evaluated.

Sylvia Lafair, president of Pennsylvania-based Creative Energy Options, which coaches executives, says that in order for women's networks to be effective, participants need to focus on how to improve the overall work climate instead of directing criticism against male colleagues. If the participants swap stories about injustices in the office, the corporate climate won't change.

Several of her clients at the executive level express frustration with the "boys club" but when Lafair challenges their assertions, they discover it is based almost entirely on perception. She believes that some of the gender-based criticism is rooted in the ideology of the women's movement where men were viewed as competitors.

"A lot of the barriers are self-imposed rather than being based upon an evaluation of what is and isn't possible," Lafair says. "We create some of these stereotypes rather than actually live with them. How much of the glass ceiling is a self-fulfilling prophecy?" **T+D**

Michael Laff is an associate editor for T+D; mlaff@astd.org.

THE QUALITIES THAT DISTINGUISH WOMEN LEADERS

The Womens Leader study, which included a personality assessment, the Caliper Profile, as well as a demographic analysis and in-depth interviews with 59 women leaders in 19 different business sectors from some of the top companies in the United Kingdom and the United States, reveals four major findings:

Finding 1: Women leaders are more persuasive than their male counterparts.

Finding 2: Women leaders feel the sting of rejection, learn from adversity, and carry on with an "I'll show you" attitude.

Finding 3: Women leaders have an inclusive, team building leadership style of problem solving and decision making.

Finding 4: Women leaders are more likely to ignore rules and take risks.

Source: Women Leaders Study, Caliper

