

Social

What It Takes to Break the 'Glass Ceiling'

Welcome Ms. Rose Iannelli ▾

11/28/2011

By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR

Women in senior positions acknowledge that certain obstacles exist for women seeking advancement to top roles, but some observe that it is women themselves, rather than companies or male colleagues, that impede career growth.

The "Executive Women Leadership Research Project," an interview-based study of 108 female executives in U.S. companies, suggests that the "glass ceiling," a concept that refers to an invisible barrier that prevents women from attaining top corporate positions, is not the barrier it was in the 1980s. Two-thirds of the women interviewed by CareerCurve Workforce Solutions, a talent and coaching firm based in Cleveland, held positions at the senior vice president level or above when the research was conducted in mid-2011.

According to the authors of the report released Nov. 7, 2011, "Securing a leadership role in a world-class company is an entirely attainable achievement no longer reserved only for the privileged few."

Yet the female executives interviewed noted that women's managerial aspirations often lag behind men's at key stages of their careers and that women have less clearly-defined career goals. Moreover, respondents suggested that too much focus on the concept of a glass ceiling "can be a self-imposed limiting factor."

Even if the glass ceiling does exist, however, it has moved higher, the report noted, "as women have now attained close to a third of middle management positions in many countries."

There are key actions women must take in order to achieve career success at a level comparable to male peers, CareerCurve respondents said:

- **Women must be intentional about building and communicating their value.** The women executives surveyed were clear about their career ambitions and took steps to communicate their value to their employers. "One of the biggest roadblocks is women's own self-doubt," the report noted, caused, in part, by "the internalization of stereotypes."
- **Women should identify and enlist sponsors and mentors.** As [SHRM Online has reported](#), when such relationships are at their best, they provide positive benefits for women and their sponsors and mentors. But women cannot wait for such relationships to be created for them. "You need to be proactive in developing cross-functional relationships while gaining a solid understanding of the business," Suzanne V. Forsythe, vice president of human resources for STERIS Corp., said, in the report.
- **Women should seek assignments and promotion to positions with profit-and-loss responsibilities.** "Too few women gain the experience of running a business as they progress up the career ladder, and this lack of experience minimizes their chances of landing top executive roles," the report noted.
- **Women should invest in personal and career growth initiatives.** Regardless of their life plans, the women interviewed by CareerCurve remained fully engaged and took advantage of learning opportunities such as courses and certifications. "They kept their minds challenged and their relationships fresh and intentional," according to the report.

"Women who have risen to the highest ranks of their profession view work/life balance as a myth," the report noted. Respondents said they have learned to set priorities, delegate responsibilities and apply team values to managing their personal and family lives. "Planning, excellent multi-tasking skills, a good support system and a sense of humor are essential to managing a challenging career and a healthy family life," said Virginia Albanese, president and CEO of FedEx Custom Critical, in the report.

Obstacles Remain

Sources consulted for this article agreed with many of the findings of CareerCurve's research, particularly those that laid some of the blame on women themselves.

"People assume that if they just do a great job, someone will notice it, and it's not necessarily true," said Susan Meisinger, SPHR, J.D., a member of the Global Advisory Board at Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC). "You have to raise your hand and volunteer to do more and seek out opportunities to demonstrate what you're capable of."

She noted, however, that this is an obstacle faced by men as well as women.

Yet Meisinger, a former president and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and a fellow at the National Academy of Human Resources and Human Resource Policy Institute, said she thinks that women sometimes equate being ambitious with being arrogant or believe that one must step on other people to get ahead.

She doesn't see it that way. Meisinger said individuals must simply convey to others that they are confident they can make a greater contribution to the organization.

But a lack of self-confidence is what holds many women back, according to Mary Cheddie, SPHR, senior vice president, human resources for Interval International and a former member of the SHRM Board of Directors. She said women are more likely to doubt themselves and question, often to others, whether they are capable of handling a new project or assignment, while men are more likely to express confidence immediately. Women are not afraid to talk to others about their fears and concerns about a new assignment, she said. "It is almost like we need to hear ourselves talk about it so that we can get our head around it, and then we [can] do it."

This can lead some to question a particular woman's abilities.

That's why Cheddie suggested that women "keep quiet" rather than expressing such doubts out loud and talk through their concerns in private, ideally with a mentor. "We should know that we are not being asked to do something unless we really can do it and, after all, if we don't take on new things, how will we ever grow?" she added.

When women need to verbalize concerns, however, they should seek the counsel of a trusted female peer, when possible.

"Women need to better mentor each other, 'watch out' for each other, and openly (and privately) support each other," said Laura Viehmyer, vice president, human resources at DAI, a development organization, in an e-mail sent while traveling on business in Afghanistan.

Stepping outside of one's comfort zone is crucial, sources said. Women, especially, must be willing "to be aggressive in going after what they want," said China Gorman, CEO of CMG Group, a talent management consultancy in Las Vegas.

But such aggression must be backed up with competence.

Gorman, who has held a series of senior-level positions, including that of COO for SHRM, said it takes equal parts performance, confidence and authenticity for women to achieve their goals. This means they should always exceed goals, be willing to disagree, be approachable and “be your best you, not someone else’s version of you as a leader.”

What Organizations Can Do

Cheddie said organizations can offer developmental opportunities, mentors and 360-degree feedback to women to help build confidence and ensure that they exude confidence in their dealings with others. “I grew up primarily with men and have been the only female in mostly male-led organizations, so I saw their behaviors modeled day in and day out,” she said. “I think this helped me quite a bit.”

In addition, organizations should be sure that individual leaders are not imposing limits on female colleagues by their words and actions.

Cheddie, who played basketball most of her life, said her high school coach told her she was “a horrible outside shooter” and that she should shoot only within five feet of the basket. So that’s what she did. However, her college coach, who had a different opinion, said she was “a dead-eye” for making longer, three-point shots. “I never even tried [three-pointers] in high school because I was told that I was ‘terrible,’ ” she told *SHRM Online*. “Yet I was NOT terrible. I not only could do it, I did it VERY well.”

Viehmyer recommended talent management efforts such as executive leadership and coaching programs for women, particularly those that balance risk-taking and decisiveness.

Other sources agreed.

“The next generation of leaders—male and female—is inside our organizations right now,” Gorman told *SHRM Online*. Thus, employers should pay “serious attention to succession planning,” provide “stretch opportunities for all employees” and encourage and support continued degree education financially, she said.

But an organization’s failure to take such actions should not prevent women from trying to reach for the top.

“I got to senior levels by taking assignments no one else wanted and succeeding with them, by being flexible about location ... and by letting the senior executives in my organizations know what I wanted,” Gorman said.

“I think the best thing organizations can do to help women attain top positions is to have women in top positions,” Meisinger said in an e-mail. “First, it signals to women in the organization that there is a future for them since other women have been able to rise to the top. Second, women who have been successful in rising to the top have an appreciation of the challenges that women face and will be able to mentor those who hope to do the same.”

Moreover, women leaders are more likely to encourage flexibility in the workplace, Meisinger added, because they understand the logistics of working and raising a family, the balance of which is more likely to burden women than men, she noted.

That is certainly the case for many women in India, according to Nirmala Menon, founder and CEO of Interweave Consulting Pvt. Ltd. in Bangalore. She said that multiple role expectations placed on women by society and by themselves, combined with long hours at work and “the lack of equal partnership from spouses on home-life management issues,” take a toll on women over time.

“Having to constantly struggle in organizational cultures which are generally political power games—for which most women have neither the time nor inclination—and then not being recognized for their efforts tires [women] out,” Menon told *SHRM Online*. “These constant inner struggles then seem too high a price to pay for career advancement.”

The result, Menon said, is that many women, in India and elsewhere, “recalibrate their lives” in favor of self-employment, community work or other interests.

That’s why Menon asserted that career success for women must come from collaboration between organizations and individuals. She said organizations can encourage women to step out of their comfort zones early in their careers so they build confidence in their abilities. Next, they can prepare women for more challenging roles in line and profit-and-loss functions. “This, combined with a sensitive work environment, supportive family-friendly policies and internal sponsorship, are bound to retain [women] and help [them] succeed,” she said.

Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, is an online editor/manager for SHRM.

Like 1

Society for Human Resource Management

1800 Duke Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314 USA

Phone US Only: (800) 283-SHRM
Phone International: +1 (703) 548-3440

TTY/TDD (703) 548-6999
Fax (703) 535-6490

Questions? [Contact SHRM](#)
Careers [Careers@SHRM](#)

©2011 SHRM. All rights reserved.