

# Crack the Glass Ceiling With the Help of a Mentor

by Rebekah Sheely and Lynn Stallworth

In recent years, a number of women have made it to the top of large American companies: Carly Fiorina at Hewlett-Packard, Anne Mulcahy at Xerox, Meg Whitman at E-bay and Andrea Jung at Avon. Does the rise of these women to the top of some of the country's most prestigious corporations send the signal that gender doesn't matter anymore? Or, is the business world holding its breath, waiting for these women to stumble and wondering if they can successfully manage companies during an economic downturn? In an interview with *Fast Company*, C.C. Lynch, a venture capitalist from California, says "yes" to the latter question:

Being a CEO is the worst job that you can imagine. I've done it several times, and as a woman, you just aren't listened to - or trusted - as much as a man would be. Carly Fiorina just happens to be the current dartboard target.<sup>1</sup>

While increasing numbers of women like Fiorina have worked their way to upper management positions, women are still underrepresented in positions of power and responsibility. Female managers often fail to advance past mid-level positions. A glass ceiling stands between them and top management levels. The term glass ceiling is used as a metaphor for "a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women and minorities from moving up the management hierarchy."<sup>2</sup> Worse yet when a woman manager does manage to advance, her efforts are not always understood nor appreciated by the business community nor compensated as well as those of her male counterparts.

## The Glass Ceiling - Cracked, But Still Holding

While women have made progress, evidence of the glass ceiling can still be found. The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants' 2000 Survey of Public Accounting Firms

and Professionals found that 17 percent of all partners, and only 10 percent in the largest firms, are women. A study of Fortune 500 firms conducted by Catalyst, a nonprofit research and advisory organization, in 2000 reported that about 12.5 percent of corporate officers, and only about 4 percent of those at the executive vice-president level or higher, are women. The Catalyst study also reported that only about 4 percent of top earners are women. The General Accounting Office (GAO), crunching numbers from the 2001 Department of Labor's quarterly Population Survey, found that "full-time female managers earned on average less than their male counterparts in the ten industries that employ 71% of all female workers, and in seven of the ten fields, the pay difference widened over the past five years". The wage gap persists despite nearly 40 years of laws prohibiting discrimination based on gender. While some interpret the study results as evidence that "women still can't get ahead on the job", others respond with "wake me when you find real data".<sup>3</sup> The GAO's pay-gap study did not control for differences in experience or level of managerial responsibility among workers - weaknesses that may make the results circumspect.

On average, lower salaries and lower status may be due to work interruptions and not to discrimination in the work force. Women are more likely to drop out of the work force for a number of years in order to raise families; thus, on average, women have less experience and occupy lower positions within their respective firms. Accordingly, they receive lower compensation than male managers their same age. On the other hand, evidence remains that, too often, the assumption that "after the baby, she is gone" results in many women being denied equal opportunities for advancement and pay. Whether lower wages and under-representation in upper management exist as a result of discrimination or self-selection, the fact that women's career paths are different needs to be addressed within the business community.

## **Why Does the Glass Ceiling Exist?**

Social psychologists attribute the existence of the glass ceiling to the manner in which humans process information. In order to make sense of a complex social environment, individuals tend to group people into categories and to associate specific attributes with those categories. The traits that are often associated with a group tend to reflect the groups= work roles and a stereotype is the result. Stereotyping, in and of itself, is not necessarily an inappropriate means of processing information. It allows an individual to quickly interpret stimuli and make a response. It is the response that may be inappropriate. Stereotyping that reflects unrecognized biases about such attributes as women's abilities, commitment, availability and flexibility within the work place can have serious consequences with respect to employee performance evaluations, assignments and promotions.

Stereotypes can arise solely in response to the current sexual division of labor. And in turn, these stereotypes serve to rationalize this division of labor by attributing the personality characteristics of the employee to the gender of the employee and not to the job. For example, secretaries are typically female. While a male manager may assume that the nurturing and submissive behavior of his secretary results from the woman=s personality characteristics, her behavior is better explained by the role requirements imposed by her work situations.<sup>4</sup> An office runs more smoothly when the secretary (whether male or female) quietly and efficiently helps those in more central positions with both work and non-work related tasks.

Because women are absent from high-level management positions in large numbers, female managers are not commonly characterized in terms of power, status, and leadership ability - traits that are thought to lead to successful management of subordinates. Women managers are often accused of behaving too much like women (i.e., too sensitive, emotional, and family

oriented). Yet, when a woman succeeds by acting competitively or assertively, she may be criticized for failing to live up to the feminine image.

An in-house study conducted by Deloitte & Touche in 1993 found that “managers rated men’s lack of experience in any area as untested potential, while they often saw women with identical skills and career tracks as unprepared for promotion.”<sup>5</sup> Other research has shown that when a male manager succeeds, his success is attributed to ability (a stable internal attribute). However, if the manager is female, her success is attributed to effort (an unstable internal attribute) or luck (an external attribute). On the other hand, a male manager’s failure is attributed to bad luck and a female manager’s failure to low ability. Do you sense the double-edged sword? Men are credited with success and excused for failure, while women are seen as personally accountable only for failure.<sup>6</sup> Is it any wonder that women fail to advance to upper management positions when they are not thought to possess those characteristics necessary to succeed on the job? Is it any wonder that women fail to advance to upper management positions when their successes earned by hard work and ability are attributed to fate’s whim?

### **What to Expect on the First Job**

Women entering the work force should not expect overt discrimination, but do need to be aware of how stereotypes can manifest themselves on the job. Almost immediately, a woman’s level of commitment to the company may be questioned. Typically, women in the workforce are classified into two groups: career-primary women and career-and-family women. While professional success is the priority of career-primary women, career-and-family women want the flexibility to balance their family and work. Those women on the Mommy track<sup>®</sup> are seen as lacking career commitment. What escapes mention in the business world is that the many male workers are not career-primary either. Yet they are not branded as having opted for the Daddy

track; men's motives for electing not to compete on the fast track are not automatically linked to their desire to balance work and family.

For this reason, it's best for a female not to mention her desire to raise a family during the interviewing process. Feel free to discuss the family-friendly policies of a company when meeting with the Human Resources representative, but refrain from divulging personal plans in great detail. Also, once a woman starts a job, it is best to get a sense of office norms before discussing her personal life or children at great length. A mentor can help the new employee learn these unwritten rules.

In addition to having their commitment questioned, female managers are more likely to experience feelings of isolation. Many women feel like outsiders and report being excluded from informal networks. The higher a woman climbs on the organizational ladder, the more isolated she may feel because there are fewer women to provide support. A mentor is not only a great way to gain advice, but also companionship and the beginnings of a network at a new job.

### **Using a Mentor to Further Your Career**

Traditionally, the mentoring relationship has been thought of as an informal pairing of junior and senior colleagues. The more experienced and knowledgeable colleague sponsors the junior by providing support, visibility, and protection as the protégé's career progressed.

In today's business environment, however, the concept of mentoring is evolving, as described by Cheryl Dahle : <sup>7</sup>

Fast forward to the present. Women have poured into the new world of work, and they've found they aren't welcome in the old boys' club of mentoring. They can't rely on men to pick female protégés. They can't depend on being able to socialize in the old style - on the golf course or over a cigar - to form personal bonds. So women have changed the rules. They've invented formal practices where none existed before, making mentoring more organized and focused.

Mentoring no longer necessarily implies sponsorship, but rather focuses on career development. A mentor may or may not be a protégé's supervisor. A mentor may or may not work in the same organization as the protégé, and the mentoring relationship may be formal or informal. In addition, a mentor may be a peer, a supervisor, an outside consultant, or an external group that offers assistance in a variety of areas.

In recent years, many corporations and accounting firms have developed formal mentoring programs. These programs are becoming commonplace in larger organizations as the benefits to firms are recognized. These benefits include the development of leadership abilities, increased retention rates, stronger connections among employees, and the cultivation of corporate culture. To new and potential employees, a formal mentoring program can signal that the firm cares about an individual's career development and success.

As a new staff person, you may be assigned a peer mentor by your firm's mentoring program. Peer mentors or "buddies" are typically slightly more experienced staff persons. You may wonder what you can learn from a coworker with only two years experience. This type of relationship is oriented towards socializing the new employee to the company's policies, practices and culture. This organizational socialization - mastery of day-to-day tasks, an understanding of how work groups function, knowledge and acceptance of the organization's culture, and an understanding of the expectations of the new employee's role as well as the scope and responsibilities of the job - is of great importance to both the new employee and the firm. Your peer mentor can provide you with technical information about how to perform specific tasks and normative information about expected behavior and the "unwritten rules" - such as the appropriateness of discussing your child's soccer match at work. Your peer mentor may explain to you the real meaning of "business casual," provide advice about work assignments, and

demonstrate the proper form for filling out your time sheet. Your peer mentor may also be an important source of social support. In addition to providing lunchtime companionship, your peer mentor can be someone with whom to share personal problems and exchange confidences.

Many of today's mentoring relationships are seen as transitional, with different mentors needed at different times and for different purposes. For example, Intel's innovative and unique mentoring program matches employees with mentors not by job title or by years of service but by specific skills that are in demand. Intel's program uses an intranet and email to perform the matchmaking, creating relationships that stretch across state lines and national boundaries. The system works by having potential mentors list their top skills at the company's internal employee web site. Employees click on topics that they want to master, such as leadership, Intel culture, or networking. Then an algorithm computes all the variables, and the database generates a list of possible matches. To ensure that its mentoring program achieves the intended results, the mentor and the protégé (Apartner® in Intel lingo) are required to put the details of the relationship in a mentoring contract.

In addition to helping a protégé identify and develop valued technical skills and expertise, a mentor can help in any number of ways, depending on an individual's needs at the time. To climb the corporate ladder, you need listening, communication, or negotiation skills. A mentor can help. A mentor can work to ensure that the protégé gets challenging and diverse work assignments, as well as the right kind of work assignments – including the ever important line jobs. A mentor can help the protégé develop a style - of leadership, communication, and physical appearance - that works. And, a mentor can provide emotional benefits such as support, encouragement, friendship and enhanced self-esteem.

Maybe your future employer will have a formal mentoring program in place. Perhaps it

will be as innovative as Intel's. If not, it is a good idea to identify your own informal mentor based on skills you want to acquire.

### **Maneuvering the Mentoring Road**

Before selecting a mentor, Subhana Ansari, a training-projects manager for Adecco Employment Services offers the following suggestions:<sup>8</sup>

- *Adjust the mirror.* Before searching for a mentor, do a self-assessment. What skills do you need to get where you want to go?
- *Scout out the route.* Do some prep work before you approach a prospective mentor. Call the prospective mentor's administrative assistant and ask what he or she is like to work with.
- *Get in first gear.* The two of you should agree on how the mentoring relationship will work. Outline your expectations about frequency and type of contract.
- *Set the cruise control.* Even if your meetings later become informal, you should try to have some structure in the beginning.
- *Bring an agenda that is tied to your goals.* If you settle for incidental advice and don't relate it to your overall objectives, you won't get much out of your meetings.

Harriet Rubin would add one more rule for the road, *Know When to Fold Your Tent and Leave*. She states that there always comes a time when you should end a mentoring relationship. What looks like help can turn into a case of psychological abuse when the mentor, demanding more mirroring or praise, stops giving.<sup>9</sup> At that point or when the protégé has learned all the mentor has to offer is the ideal time to end the relationship.

What if you don't feel like a mentoring relationship is right for you or you can't seem to



find the right mentor? Don't despair. Harriet Rubin has the following words of advice:

Two of my heroes, Jackie Kennedy Onassis and Eleanor Roosevelt, never had mentors. They would never have limited themselves in that way. They engaged the best teacher in the world: namely, the world itself.

These days, there are a number of excellent books on career development for women – including Catalyst's new publication, *Be Your Own Mentor*. Regardless of how you structure the mentoring relationship, the glass ceiling is easier to break with the help of a mentor.

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*Rebekah Sheely is an Assistant Professor at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas, and Lynn Stallworth is an Assistant Professor at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana.*