ABSTRACT. This article describes “Project Breakthrough: A Survey of Corporate Practices for Shattering the Glass Ceiling.” Evidence is presented that the “glass ceiling” remains intact in many areas. A list of barriers (social stereotypes) that support the glass ceiling are presented. Some corporate strategies found in the literature are also presented. Sixty-nine companies in the Houston area were surveyed. A summary score based on responses to thirty-four practices listed in the survey were computed. The top twelve organizations were identified as “distinguished,” and site visits were conducted. The practices of these companies are listed.

The Glass Ceiling Commission, a Labor Department-led panel, has been holding hearings to hear success stories of advancement for women and minorities. Joyce Miller, the executive director noted “We know the sob stories. Now we want constructive suggestions.” (Salwen, 1994) The purpose of this article is to describe “Project Breakthrough: A Survey of Corporate Practices for Shattering the Glass Ceiling.”

Justification

There are two significant reasons to “shatter the glass ceiling” for women and minorities. The first has to do with justice. When women and minorities follow the same paths of education and work experience to prepare themselves as qualified candidates for upward career mobility, it is simply unjust to stand in their way. The second reason has to do with a pragmatic approach to business success. “A company that mirrors the general population is better prepared to understand the needs of its customers and develop products and services that meet their demands.” (Martin, 1992)

Literature review

There is a lengthy literature available to support the notion that “the glass ceiling” exists for women and minorities. Although this problem has been appearing in the literature for a number of years, for the purposes of this study references were limited to 1990–1994.
The evidence remains

There continues to be evidence that “the glass ceiling” remains in tact in many area. The following are some examples:

* Only about 5 percent of the nation’s big six accounting firms’ partners are women.
* Of the 1000 biggest U.S. companies, women represent only 16.9 percent of more than 31,000 managers (Berton, 1993).
* Men outnumber women as executive vice presidents by three to one (Korn/Ferry International, 1993).
* Five hundred women hold 721 (6.2%) of the 11,715 board seats (Dobrznski, 1993).
* Men average 50 percent more compensation for similar positions (Littlejohn, 1993).
* Women occupy less than 3 percent of the top-level jobs in the largest U.S. corporations (McGonigle, 1991).
* At the current rate of increase in executive women, it will take until the year 2466 – or over 450 years – to reach equality with executive men (The Houston Post, 1991).

Cultural barriers

A number of cultural barriers have been identified that support “the glass ceiling.” Social stereotypes have been in place for centuries (Bass, 1990–91). The social stereotypes translate into the list of barriers in Table I.

Company strategies

There are some interesting examples of corporate strategies that have been successfully used. These examples represent a sensitivity to the problem.

Corning. The CEO and top executives attended a gender training program. A three-year followup program directs managers to incorporate what they learned into daily working life. One executive organizes special lunches with female managers and puts gender-bias “episodes” on every meeting’s agenda (Bergman, 1991). In addition, there are career planning and mentoring programs (Castro, 1993). Corning also sponsors quality improvement teams that focus specifically on issues related to Blacks and women, hold mandatory workshops to reinforce its policies against racial bias and gender discrimination, and encourage better working relationships among its diverse employee sectors (Loughran, 1991).

Tenneco Inc. has tied a part of an executive’s bonus to his or her progress in promoting women and minorities, which has resulted in a 25% rise in the numbers hired (Garland, 1991). Tenneco also created eight advisory councils composed entirely of women. Networking seminars were encouraged (Taylor, 1991).

American Airlines issued a directive that requires all officers to submit detailed, cross-functional development plans for all high-potential women in middle-management and above.

DuPont Co. has a rotation process that moves men and women through at least two or three functions before they reach top positions (Lopez, 1992).

Other suggested strategies found in the literature include the following:

* Place more women on boards of directors to (a) provide role models for senior management as a constant reminder of women’s capabilities and judgment (b) hold senior management accountable for promoting qualified women into line and general management posts.
* Help women with flex time and child care (support system).
* Ensure that company policies and programs educate everyone about sexual harassment.
* Understand that women and men approach managing differently and that both approaches may be valid (Korn/Ferry, 1993).
* Provide visibility (networking with successful men and women).
* Take control of women’s forward direction are actions that assist advancement (Eads, 1991).
* Combine (1) commitment and champions
**TABLE I**

Barriers to shattering the glass ceiling

1. There is a lack of informal advice and sponsorship that men get from one another (Fisher, 1992).
2. Paternalism limits work assignments and the necessary experience for advancement.
3. Women who are forceful and aggressive, traits which help men advance, are often regarded by male counterparts and supervisors as too pushy (Fletcher, 1992).
4. Lack of lateral movement (glass walls) deprives women of experience in line supervision needed for vertical advancement.
5. Putting women in line jobs is perceived as risky.
6. Many men feel uncomfortable dealing with women and doubt that women can balance a career and family (Lopez, 1992).
7. Male executives tend to support people like themselves.
8. Reluctance to admit women into informal office networks exists.
10. An executive wants to work with a man as he is not sure how a woman will react (take it on the chin or pout) to his demands. He looks at her and sees his mother, sister, wife, or daughter (Nichols, 1992).
11. Recruitment practices involve reliance on word-of-mouth and employee referral networking.
12. Executive search and referral firms are used in which affirmative action/EEO requirements were not made known.
13. Developmental practices and credential building experiences including advanced education and assignments to corporate committees, task forces, and special projects are often not as available to minorities and women.
15. Monitoring for equal access and opportunity was almost never considered a corporate responsibility or part of the planning for developmental programs and policies.
17. Women's participative management leadership style is seen by men as a lack of authoritarianism and confidence.
18. Women who adopt a male leadership paradigm are penalized by many organizations as they are perceived as unfeminine (Segal, 1991).
19. Standards of performance are higher for women and minority men than for traditional managers in the same job and responsibility level (Solomon, 1990).
20. Men attach less prestige to professions that attract a large number of women (Stern, 1991).
21. Human resource officers believe that women are less committed to careers, have less initiative, and are less willing to take risks.
22. Companies have not connected cost containment with retention and advancement of valued women employees as they have not yet experienced projected shortages of qualified males (Catalyst, 1990).
23. An AICPA survey noted that many employers deny that obstacles exist (Eads, 1991).
24. Many board rooms remain cozy clubs, where CEOs interact collegially with peers.
25. Some CEOs fear that women won't know or observe the unspoken rules - such as saving sticky questions for private conversations.
26. CEOs worry that women will want to devote more time to women's issues, such as family leave (Dobrznski, 1993).
27. Many employers deny that obstacles exist (Eads, 1991).
28. Giving women line responsibilities is perceived as a risk at companies (Ettorre, 1992).
from CEO down including financial and corporate backing, recognition and boosters (2) clearly communicated goals to both managers and eligible female employees (3) motivation and rationale by tying the program to the company’s business strategy (4) a monitored plan measured in quantitative terms reflected in pay raises and bonuses (5) mentoring for guidance, development of skills and advancement thereby allowing women to become privy to high-level company information passed informally among senior males. (6) evaluating the entire program once a year. (Ettore, 1993).

* Put more women in line positions responsible for profits and losses (Garland, 1991).
* Select women to participate in projects and serve on task forces (Little, 1991).
* Insure deliberate development and tracking of women (Catalyst, 1990).

**Methodology**

A survey instrument was developed based on the literature review and practices of companies recognized for their progressive practices. The survey was mailed to 1000 companies in the Houston area with 200 or more employees. A followup letter was also mailed. Sixty-nine companies returned usable surveys. The low return may be attributed to the Houston-area “oil patch culture,” which has been slow to implement equal employment opportunities for women and minorities. Fifty-eight percent were Human Resource managers; fifteen percent were line managers; twenty-seven percent were undesignated. Forty-nine percent were women; thirty-six percent were men; fifteen percent were undesignated.

Companies indicated how much they agreed or disagreed that their company was using a variety of practices to shatter the glass ceiling for women. Thirty-four practices that fell into four major categories (corporate culture, human resource practices, training and development, flexible work practices) were listed. Companies were asked to describe (1) three most and three least successful programs/initiatives (2) greatest barriers they face in shattering the glass ceiling (3) their plans for the future.

A summary score was computed for each company based on their responses to the thirty-four practices listed in the survey. Companies were ranked according to their summary score. The top ranking companies were identified as “distinguished.” These included nine private-sector businesses and three public-sector organizations.

Site visits were conducted with each of the “distinguished” companies to nominate the Excellence Award winners. A structured interview with set criteria were used to evaluate each company. Two-three member teams conducted each site visit. All the team members reviewed the site information and the survey responses to select Excellence Award winners.

**Findings**

Participating companies saw themselves as more progressive than others in addressing this issue.

* 80% felt they were better off than their competitors
* 68% felt they were better off than other companies in general
* 15% felt that they had been very successful in shattering the glass ceiling for women

The practices of the distinguished companies, measured by the thirty-four items on the survey, were compared with the fifty-seven other companies. The “distinguished” companies were more likely to do the following:

1. Have a task force in place to address issues important to women.
2. Clearly communicate goals for the movement of women to the managers in the organization.
3. Have women represented on special task forces that address issues important to women.
4. Explicitly include women of color in programs targeted toward women.
5. Include issues important to women on their regular employee survey.
6. Have minority networks to provide support for women of color.
7. Hold managers accountable for the development of women through the performance appraisal process.
8. Have systems in place for identifying high potential women.
9. Facilitate the movement of women into line positions.
10. Provide diversity awareness training to managers.

The thirty-four practices of all sixty-nine companies were rank ordered by the percentage that agreed or strongly agreed that this practice was used in their company. The five most and five least common practices were correlated with the other practices to better understand which other practices they were associated with.

The top five most common practices among the 69 companies are noted. These practices provide a tool for companies to use as a benchmark with their own programs.

Most common
* In 87% of the companies, respondents indicated that their upper management had demonstrated support for the advancement of women in their organization.
* In companies where management support was greater, the company was more likely to (1) have women represented on standing committees which address strategic business issues important to the corporation (2) target women to participate in executive education programs (3) facilitate the movement of women into line positions (which tied for the second most common practice). This in turn was correlated with offering good alternative assignments to women who turned down relocation offers.

Second most common
* 81% of the companies provided sexual harassment workshops to their managers, which did not seem to be correlated with other glass ceiling practices.

Third most common
* In 75% of the companies, the CEO had issued a statement of commitment to equal opportunities for women, which did not seem correlated to other glass ceiling practices.

Fourth most common
* 72% of the companies had systems in place for identifying high potential women. Companies that had these systems in place were significantly more likely to (1) track the professional development of women (2) provide diversity awareness training to managers (3) specifically communicate goals for the movement of women to the managers in the organizations (4) explicitly include women of color in programs targeted toward women (5) provide good alternative assignments to women who turn down relocation offers.

Fifth most common
* Two practices aimed at helping employees balance work and family needs tied for the fourth most common practice. These were the use of family leave (69%) and part-time work (69%), which did not seem correlated to other glass ceiling practices.

Five least common practices among the 69 companies
* 9% provide on-site child care.
* 14% tie management compensation directly to the development of women.
* 17% provide formal mentoring programs for women.
* 21% provide back-up emergency day care.
* 25% have minority networks which provide support for women of color.

None of these practices seemed to be correlated to other glass ceiling practices.

Companies were asked to write in answers to four questions about their activities for fostering the development and movement of women into positions of leadership. (1) What are the three most successful programs/initiatives? (2) What are the three least successful programs/initiatives? (3) What are the greatest barriers you have faced? (4) What are your future plans? Written comments were categorized. The largest categories are presented in Table II, III, and IV. Only four written comments were provided so no further
analyses were conducted with these data as the sample was so small.

Recommendations

1. Develop a systematic, on-going process for identifying and addressing issues important to women.
   * Identify and select influential senior-level managers to champion these efforts.
   * Establish a task force with men and women of different races/ethnicities to develop a long-term plan for developing and implementing this process.

2. Ensure “women’s” programs explicitly include women of color – and ensure women of color are explicitly included in “minority” programs/support groups.

3. Build succession planning processes to identify high-potential women early in their career and track their development.
   * Address the “glass walls” by placing women in high-risk line assignments.
   * Provide good alternative assignments during stages of their career when they are unable to relocate.

4. Clearly communicate goals for the movement of women to the managers of the organization.
   * Build in management accountability for the development and progression of women.

5. Do not assume women are aware of “glass ceiling” activities - communicate these activities.
   * Tell your high-potential women about what the company is doing to foster their own success – and to break the glass ceiling within the company.

6. Ensure individuals within the organization who are responsible for glass ceiling activities really understand the issues and assume a leadership role in promoting these programs/initiatives.

Conclusions

“Benchmarking” has become an accepted method for organizations to evaluate their progress. This project was an attempt to provide positive evidence of organizations’ strategies that have proved successful in making progress toward...
shattering the glass ceiling. It is hoped that this article will provide a record of the project that other organizations can use to benchmark their own progress in this area. Where they find strategies have been either lacking or unsuccessful, this article will provide both a checklist and some expected outcomes toward which organizations can work.

References

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