

Ambitious Women and the Glass Ceiling

By Hardeep Arora

The term “glass ceiling” refers to a barrier so subtle that it’s virtually invisible, yet so strong that it prevents competent women managers from moving up the corporate ladder or managerial hierarchy. These artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that females encounter to progressions within organizations, are typically not faced by male managers. The glass ceiling principle thus suggests that prejudice proceeds by social-psychological processes that include stereotyping and evaluative biases. Perhaps the most important component that reinforces the glass ceiling theory is the informal effort by dominant group (males) to retain an all-male atmosphere at top of the corporate hierarchy.

In an employment survey, most women managers opined that glass ceiling is the most poignant issue facing ambitious women in today’s corporate world, and even if their management resumes showcased accomplishments, accomplishments, and more accomplishments, senior management jobs still eluded them. Existing jobs entailed a measure of frustration as talented, proficient women regularly bumped against the glass ceiling. Nearly all female managers who were surveyed believed women were under-represented at the helm in their firms and their management resumes passed over, as top management harbored stereotypes about women, particularly concerning their ability to gain acceptance in a senior position, their commitment level, and their decision-making ability.

Specific problems identified as unique to women managers involve: burden of being labeled a token employee, being presented a test case for future female managers, lack of paradigms, stress of coping with bigotry, and eventually gender stereotyping. Research indicates that ambitious women who managed to smash through the glass ceiling and reached senior management positions in erstwhile male-dominated bastions did so at the cost of isolation and loneliness. In addition, as evidenced by their management resumes, these women are, in most cases, more qualified, more ambitious, and more mobile than their male counterparts. Moreover as their management resumes indicate they are extremely persistent and excel at multi-tasking.

Consequently women walk the tightrope that writers Susan Golan and Pat Heim express in their book *Hardball for Women* as, “If we become the aggressive, no-nonsense, win-at-all-cost players that our male counterparts pride themselves in being, then we are labeled bossy, obnoxious, ambitious, or strident bitches who are just mouthing off. If, on the other hand, we adhere to our childhood training and continue to be passive, nurturing, and cooperative in the business setting, then we’re labeled weak, overly sensitive, unambitious females, and again, what we perceive of as important contributions and success are dismissed. What a double bind!”

Either way, women stand to lose. If they are too aggressive, they are seen as mannish, and if they are too feminine, they are passed over for being too passive. Attaining the necessary skills to chart an effective career course and successfully steer across presents a venerable challenge.

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