

DIVERSITY

As Women Rise to the Occasion, Corporate Should Follow

Once upon a time not long ago, women had to choose between career and family. Starting in the 1970s, however, women became increasingly unwilling to choose one or the other. They decided they wanted both and could quite possibly "have it all." Now, all these years later, have they accomplished their goal?

It might seem so. In 1969, only 1 percent of all businesses were owned by females. By 2000, that percentage had grown to 46 percent with a growth rate of 7 percent over the previous three years.

Yet, even though women have made great strides in the business environment over the years, the same old roadblocks have certainly cropped up – lack of recruitment, difficulty gaining access to capital, cracking the old boys network and struggling to achieve a work-life balance.

Women entrepreneurs are currently only winning 4 percent of the sales to large corporations and 3 percent of federal contracts. Today, though this number is on a slow but steady rise, there are only 10 Fortune 500 companies with women CEOs and 20 Fortune 1000 companies with women at the helm. Many, therefore, will argue that the glass ceiling is still firmly in place.

And, according to a recent Annenberg report, there may be a second glass ceiling in place.

The report analyzed Fortune 1000 companies in a variety of industries and found that none of the companies



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had a majority of women on their boards of directors or in executive offices.

The report stated that the highest percent of representation that women may be able to achieve is 50 percent, while it may still be acceptable for companies to have a majority of men in top positions.

If you speak to successful women directly, however, they might sing to a different tune. Most agree that while the statistics can appear daunting, women have proven that they are absolutely unwilling to throw in the towel. So, what drives today's women to ignore the proverbial glass ceiling and achieve greatness in their professional lives?

A recent study shows the top two motivations for women's success in business are a desire for personal

achievement and need for a challenge. According to a study conducted by the Center for Women's Leadership at Babson College, the percentage of women executives who cite these motivations as driving forces for founding or leading their firms is significantly higher than those who cite the glass ceiling as a leadership driver.

Aileen Gorman, executive director of the Commonwealth Institute, says, "For many of our entrepreneurs, the glass ceiling was not an issue since they started their own companies without ever having worked in a corporation. For others, they simply used the corporate world as a stepping stone to acquiring skills they would eventually use in building their companies."

She added, "It is a different story, however, for the senior executive women in The Commonwealth Institute's membership. Many find themselves excluded from the top positions or from the most senior strategy meetings. In far too many cases, the glass ceiling is still alive and strong."

Despite the fact that prejudices and barriers are omnipresent in many corporate atmospheres, women continue to emerge as key players in their professions.

Women-owned businesses are becoming increasingly diverse – in terms of race, industry and size – and the number and economic influence of women-owned firms are increasing at rates that exceed the national average.

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According to the National Women's Business Council, between 1997 and 2004, the number of minority women-owned firms increased by an estimated 55 percent.

Simultaneously during this period, the number of majority-owned, privately held women-owned businesses grew by 23 percent, compared to 9 percent of all U.S. businesses.

In Massachusetts, women executives are making their marks as powerhouses in the corporate landscape. The study conducted by the Center for Women's Leadership highlighted that women-led firms here have boasted great success, with average firm longevity of 21 years. Fifty-nine percent of these companies expected robust growth of 5 percent or more annually.

Such women-led businesses have built their foundation for success on employee satisfaction and company culture. Creating a dynamic, diverse environment where employees of all backgrounds and areas of expertise can thrive has been the core mission of women-owned businesses.

Why is diversity such an essential element in the workplace? Donna Mullen Good, CEO of the Center for Women & Enterprise, says, "When people ask me why I care so much

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about diversity in business, I always respond the same way. I feel that it is critical to maximize all possible resources to get the best possible result. Diversity helps to bring a variety of perspectives and fresh ideas to the table."

Women have proven in the last 30 years that they can brilliantly multitask and have successful careers, raise families, take care of their extended families, give back to their communities and maintain a healthy lifestyle, all at the same time.

Studies show that 78 percent of women CEOs in Massachusetts consider work-life balance to be a critical personal priority, and 59 percent place high importance on making a commu-

nity contribution.

More and more companies today are recognizing the implications of diversity and are exploring ways to incorporate it into their culture.

It is crucial for today's CEO to set recruitment goals for the company in addition to establishing networking and mentoring opportunities for women already employed.

By adopting policies that are conducive to balancing work and family responsibilities, too, companies can create a more attractive environment for women.

Is it worth the cost of hiring women? One study of Standard and Poor's 500 companies showed that firms that focus on shattering their own glass ceilings racked up stock market records that were nearly two and a half times greater than other comparable companies.

As Oprah Winfrey says, "Every time you state what you want or believe, you're the first to hear it. It's a message to both you and others about what you think is possible. Don't put a ceiling on yourself."

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