A Look at the Cracks in the Glass Ceiling

Meghan Saulin

Introduction

Therese Pritchard, a litigator for Bryan Cave LLP, recently became the firm’s first female chair. She plans to use this role to focus on diversity in the firm. Ms. Pritchard was recently featured in an article in The Wall Street Journal recently entitled “Two Women Join the Growing Club of Female Law Firm Leaders” where she was quoted speaking of a time not too long ago when things weren’t so diverse in her neighborhood.

Ms. Pritchard said “I think the playing field is leveling out, and I think firms can select leaders from a more diverse talent pool than ever before.” She continued, “I do remember the days when I was for the most part the only woman in the room” (Smith, 2014).

In this paper I will take a look at the existing barriers to women’s advancement in corporate leadership, possible causes of and contributors to those barriers, and examine ways to keep cracking away at what has been called the glass ceiling in order to continue to level the playing field in the executive work force.

Where Do We See The Glass Ceiling and its Effects?

The term “Glass Ceiling” was first introduced in a March 1986 article in The Wall Street Journal by Hymowitz and Schellhardt entitled “The Glass Ceiling: Why Women Can’t Seem to Break the Invisible Barrier That Blocks Them from the Top Job.” The term was embraced by women around the world and is now a very common term to hear when discussing women striving for success in the top tier positions of the executive work force (Quast, 2010).
The glass ceiling is most often thought of as a collection of the barriers that qualified women are faced with when attempting to advance themselves up the corporate ladder. It is usually seen as a job inequality that exists that cannot be explained by a person’s past qualifications or achievements, and reflects a labor market discrimination not just labor market inequality (Cotter et al, 2001).

Some will ask if the glass ceiling truly exists or is it an excuse created by women- for women when advancement opportunities do not present themselves. If a glass ceiling were to exist, it would affect how women and minorities are handled in the working environment and would indicate one measure of discrimination, assuming all else being relative and the only difference being race or gender.

Related to the glass ceiling, or potentially stemming from the same sources, society is also struggling with a gender pay gap problem. “You know, today, women make up about half our workforce, but they still make 77 cents for every dollar a man earns,” President Obama stated. “That is wrong, and in 2014, it’s an embarrassment” (Jacobson, 2014).

This pay gap is a problem in 2014; however, this is just one in a list of problems. The argument has been made by many that, like preventing women from achieving the highest levels of corporate management, continuing to pay women less than men is just another way to hold women back - men in the work place and in society.

**Other Areas of Discrimination**

The job search is another area to examine when exploring whether the glass ceiling exists. Studies seem to indicate that while job postings and descriptions do not exclude women from consideration, sometimes the requirements are written in a way that excludes females. One example is required experience with tools, or materials less customarily available to girls. Another is inflexible work hours or work schedules. These behaviors may or may not be intentionally discriminatory, but it has been observed that there are companies in which female leaders have difficulty balancing female qualities with leadership qualities (Quast, 2011).

There are also the traditional gender roles that society defines as female, such as raising kids and taking care of the home and family.
Women are still most often the ones who are looked at to interrupt their careers to handle family responsibilities. The number of stay at home dads is increasing but is still a very small proportion of the overall number of stay at home parents. These type of demands make the social aspect of career advancement difficult (Quast, 2011).

A barrier to employment for any individual in a caregiver role can be the work schedule and work location. So even though companies may be willing to extend flexible schedules it is feasible to think that women who are not in the office during normal operating hours are missing out on crucial networking and advancement opportunities.

There are a number of barriers that women have to navigate to get respect and equality in the workforce. Men are promoted more quickly than woman with equivalent qualifications, even in jobs such as nursing and teaching which are traditionally dominated by females (Quast, 2011). Successful female managers are viewed as more deceitful, pushy, selfish and abrasive than their male counterparts and consequently have to navigate leadership far more cautiously than their male counterparts. The same characteristics that might gain a male employee consideration for promotion can be interpreted as disqualifying characteristics for a woman (Quast, 2011).

In recognizing the problems created by the glass ceiling, women have to realize that in order to crack it, they need to lead the charge and support each other in advancement efforts. Women are often the biggest critics and obstacles to other women. Beverly Jones, a Forbes contributor, spoke of how when talking to young women about career advancement, she was disturbed to find out that they feel threatened by women more so than supported by them (Jones, 2014).

There is also the confidence problem faced by many women. After fighting this uphill battle for so long, there are battle scars. Women tend to self-deprecate, instead of presenting confidence and appearing assertive (Jones, 2014). This is consistent with the point raised earlier, that women can be perceived as aggressive when attempting to assert themselves, but lacking in confidence if self-deprecating; a middle ground is very difficult to find. Women may not be willing to take as
many risks as their male counterparts. Expectations are set high, and instead of trying and failing they may avoid the risk (Jones, 2014).

Women have also been known to apologize in situations where they should confidently present themselves and must come to understand that they belong on the same promotional ladders as do their fellow, male employees (Jones, 2014). Jones speaks also of how the older generations wanted to open the doors of the working world for younger generations and make the world an easier place for females in the work place. She talks about how some fear that instead these older females may have burdened younger with their own insecurities (Jones, 2014). Women need the support and strength of other women to break through the glass ceiling.

Women can help other women, as well as themselves. Minimally, the problem of barriers to women needs to be a constant conversation. More research needs to be done so that the problems can be better understood and acknowledged. For women themselves, successful women need to mentor the next generation rather than looking at them as competition.

**Gender Differences in Education**

According to the Council of Graduate Schools, a group composed of member educational institutions highly involved in graduate education, in the fall semester of 2015 various degree programs showed males outnumbering females in terms of enrollment; in Business (55.4 percent to 44.6 percent), Engineering (76.2 percent to 23.8 percent) and Math and Computer Science (70.1 percent to 29.9 percent) male enrollment far outweighed female enrollment (Council of Graduate Schools, 2015). These are the programs that have the best executive advancement potential and offer the highest salary possibilities and women are not present.

Women are completely underrepresented in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics majors (STEM). In 2007, women earned only 17 percent of bachelor’s degrees in engineering but they earned 79 percent of the Education degrees (Rose, 2010). There was
a time when experts believed that woman avoided the STEM majors because of a lack of mathematic ability as compared to men.

Historically it is shown that men do outperform women in math after seventh grade, but that trend is changing. High school girls today are changing the tide, they now take more math and science credits. They are earning better grades than their male counterparts as well (Rose, 2010). Hopefully with these changes and advancements occurring, the result of this trend will be more women in the STEM fields.

Societal Challenges
Even in this day and age women are often thought of as homemakers, even if they are also working at full time jobs. In the 2012 Presidential Election, candidate Mitt Romney was asked about how he would go about working towards gender equality in the workplace. His response ignited a large debate about the roles of women in the workplace.

He spoke about how he himself had difficulty staffing his campaign with women, because there were very few qualified candidates who had applied. He also spoke about the flexibility that women seek because they would like to manage their work careers and their home life. He was quoted as saying “I recognize that if you’re going to have woman in the workforce that sometimes they need to be more flexible.” He also brought up a female chief of staff who had allegedly spoken of her desire to be home by five o’clock to make dinner for her family and be there for her kids when they arrived home from school (Intentional workplace, 2012).

His comments were considered outdated and insensitive to women, because they made it seem that the balance between work and family is something only a woman should be worried about. These are not necessarily issues that men have to worry about; society does not require men to be the bread winners as well as the bread makers.

There is a double standard and it is extremely unfair. There are stay-at-home dads but the statistics on incidence are a little cloudy at best. According to a Pew Research Center study, there are almost two million fathers who are at home; nearly half of these live in poverty.
For many of these men this is not a choice, there just is not another option; an experience shared by their female counterparts. According to this study only 21 percent of those men are home because they have chosen to be home with their kids to help raise them (Ludden, 2014). This suggests that the issues raised by candidate Romney are not female issues- they are parent issues.

While two million stay-at-home men may seem high, it is nothing in contrast to the 10.4 million stay-at-home mothers in the United States (Cohn et al., 2014). While the economy has played some role in the amount of mothers who are home, about six percent of the moms say they are home because they cannot find work outside of the home. Often moms are at home because of the societal pressures placed on them- pressures that men often do not experience or feel the need to succumb to (Cohn et al., 2014). A man is not perceived to be a “bad” father if not at home with the kids.

Creating Cracks

Given all of the barriers still in existence, the question beginning to be asked is- has the glass ceiling begun to crack? Are leadership and management opportunities at the executive level beginning to increase for today’s women? There have been some positive signs and some progress- towards pay equity and more equal opportunity- has been made.

Increased efforts are being made to quantify and define the differences for the genders in the workplace. The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission was a 21 member, bi-partisan body, appointed by President Bush and Congressional Leaders This commission was tasked with identifying the glass ceiling barriers that have blocked the advancement of minorities and women. It was also asked to identify policies and practices which have been successful in aiding in the advancement of these same minorities (Redwood, 1995).

Although, the changes are taking time and clearly the glass ceiling has not been completely eliminated, the commission did identify some successful initiatives started by some companies. Of primary importance are the support of the CEO of the organization and a specific identification of the problems within the organization (Redwood, 1995).
At the same time, however, a study done in 1995 examined the existence of “token” promotions. The research indicated that some companies created positions just to keep women quiet and give them the appearance of power and prestige. The companies did this so that women felt as though they were progressing and not being left behind (Chaffins et al., 1995). While this version of the commission and these studies occurred some time ago, there is still a wage gap and there remain few women at the highest levels of corporate America.

How do we make sure that women are being promoted for the right reasons today? A first step is to encourage females to engage in career planning early on. Young women need to be mentored into choosing successful and nontraditional college degree plans. The glass ceiling cannot be held solely responsible if women are choosing paths that are not pathways to success- though its existence may discourage women from pursuing certain paths. If, however, women pursue business degrees and excel in their programs, it becomes more difficult for discrimination to be tolerated- there are fewer excuses for insufficient advancement.

In various studies, McKinsey demonstrated that including women in leadership was highly consistent with excellent, and even outstanding, performance. When women and men share the top spots, there is more intelligence – and diversity of talent – to help solve problems and foster innovation (Sweazy, 2014).

This successful leadership can become generational as successful gender equality programs need to have strong and unwavering support from their leadership. Initiatives need to be specific to each individual organization; successful programs identify the internal problems and find ways to address and correct them. These programs are inclusive- to be successful they need to include all those involved including minority males, women and white males. They must address preconceptions and stereotypes; diversity training is a key component of such programs. The training needs to address stereotypes and preconceptions, sexual and racial harassment, and cultural differences. In order to be successful these programs must address the needs of everyone.
Emphasis needs to be placed on accountability. Organizational leadership needs to communicate its message and must support that message with clearly defined expectations. Holding employees accountable to this message reinforces the seriousness of the message. Progress must be tracked; successful programs need to be monitored constantly. Attention and oversight ensure that the progress is accurate. Programs that are successful are comprehensive. Outreach and recruitment get people in. Leadership training, career development, mentoring, promotional networks, and program assessment enable upward mobility (Redwood, 1995).

**Conclusion**

Women who have been successful in senior leadership make a great case for breaking down barriers. Studies have shown that when there is an inclusion of women in the top tier of the company leadership, it has a direct and positive impact on the company's bottom line (Johns, 2014).

It looks as though change is happening and more and more cracks are beginning to penetrate the glass ceiling. Catalyst.org released a list of women who held CEO positions in 2014 at Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies. The list is impressive—very high profile companies have women leading them. All told, five percent of Fortune 500 companies had women CEOs in 2014 and five point three percent of Fortune 1000 companies saw women at the helm.

While this number is not ideal, it is higher than it was (Catalyst, 2014). In 2012, twenty Fortune 500 companies had female CEOs for a total of four percent (Howard, 2012). While it does not represent equality, it is progress. The suggestions made in 1995 are still true—change comes when entire organizations become committed to that change. While it is happening slowly, it has happened that cracks are appearing in the glass ceiling.
References


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