



Barriers to Women's Leadership

The women's movement has challenged the notion of predetermined gender roles as "natural." Gender roles are instead socially constructed classifications that are inspired and furthered by the overarching influence of patriarchy within society, communities, and families. It is thus imperative that these fundamental, patriarchal classification schemes are challenged and deconstructed. The fundamental structure of Western patriarchal society depends upon an understanding that males are superior, more powerful, and that they represent the "norm," whereas women are understood as inferior, lacking in power and autonomy, and secondary. The power of socialization that underlies this system cannot be ignored. In fact, sexist, patriarchal values are so deeply engrained in society's consciousness that they are largely invisible. The very fabric of social organization has been woven by males, for males, to support males. In many bureaucracies, whether they are governmental or corporate, most of the upper positions are held by men. Women are generally concentrated in the lower, supportive positions necessary to keep this male leadership in power. Thus, the power, prestige, and privileges of those in positions of power, generally males, depend on the subordinate position of women. This ordering of power thus has serious consequences for women's leadership.

Numerous strategies have been attempted to overcome these barriers to women's leadership, particularly within the workplace. The goal is fair representation of women within corporations, politics, the professions, religious organizations, and unions. But there are limits to promoting equality within the structures that are maintained by patriarchal values. Through existing male-dominated organizations, men have come to view their perspectives and norms as being representative of wider, gender-neutral human organizations. With this perspective comes an assumption that the structure is asexual. This results in an undervaluing of women's knowledge and experiences. Even when women move into leadership positions, they are conditioned by the perspectives and power structures to maintain the status quo; while gender composition may be changed, the underlying structure of power, knowledge, status, and wealth is not challenged. Simply put, male dominance is the main obstacle to women rising to top positions in corporations and politics. Furthermore, traditional gender roles, still widespread in society, are barriers to women climbing corporate ladders. Current value systems largely support the notion that it is better for the family if the father is employed and the mother takes care of the majority of parental responsibilities. Unsupportive attitudes from family, friends, and co-workers may have negative effects on women's work and their roles in society.

THE GLASS CEILING

To understand the limited movement of women into prominent positions of leadership, concepts such as the "glass ceiling" have come into wide use. The term is commonly used to describe the invisible barrier that blocks women's chances of further promotion or advancement up the corporate ladder. The glass ceiling is not simply a barrier for individual women, but it also applies to women as a group, who are kept from advancing simply because they are women. Subtle, indirect obstacles as a result of labeling or stereotyping place stumbling blocks in the career paths of many women.

There are numerous causes of the glass ceiling for women. One important cause is occupational segregation. The labor market, and especially executive positions, remain segregated by gender. Women executives are largely concentrated in specific areas, such as personnel, public relations, and even finance specialties, which

seldom lead to the most powerful topmanagement posts. The route to power generally taken by presidents and chief executive officers is that of the business mainstream, an arena within which the numbers of women remain largely insignificant. While there are indeed women who have reached high management positions, they are often viewed, given their scarcity, as simply “tokens” so that corporate management cannot be accused of discrimination.

Many women in positions of leadership insist that the most important career strategy for advancing to senior levels is to consistently exceed performance expectations. In other words, for women to move up the corporate ladder, they must work harder and longer than their male counterparts. A standard excuse given by the male power structure is that, as a group, women have not moved into the most powerful positions because there are too few women with the right combination of training, education, and seasoning. In other words, doors have not been open long enough for women as a whole within the top leadership milieus. Bureaucracies that consistently reveal a dearth of women in choice executive positions insist that it is merely a matter of time before women close the equality gap with men in terms of leadership. But many women who are on the climb up the corporate ladder disagree. They believe that the lack of gender equity in leadership positions exists because of the patriarchal values that undergird the structure of leadership. In essence, women fail to get to the top because of systemic discrimination against them.

THE OLD-BOY NETWORK

Another barrier, and perhaps the most significant to women, is that the “old-boy network” shuts women out of top management. This old-boy network consists of males who have been educated at the same institutions or who have climbed the corporate ladder together. The “old boys” tend to promote individuals who are like themselves. Men who are in these top decision-making roles often look to former colleagues and friends to fill these positions. Women frequently are not even considered when it comes to promotions because they are outside these networks. Although corporations claim to be meritocracies—institutions in which advancement up the corporate ladder is based on performance and skill—the reality is that, despite men and women's similar educational attainments, ambitions, status, starting salaries, and commitments to their careers, men generally progress faster, attain higher-status positions, and receive significantly higher compensation than women. Men's associations with their male peers play a significant role in their rise to power and prestige. Given that women traditionally have not been an integral force within corporations, they simply have not developed similar networking systems.

EXCLUSION FROM INFORMAL SOCIAL GATHERINGS

Related, but different in its ramifications, is the issue of women executives being excluded from informal social activities where the groundwork is subtly laid for corporate advancement. This is a barrier to women in terms of developing rapport with their colleagues, potential clients, and male bosses. Corporations may further handicap women by sponsoring explicitly male-only gatherings. These social activities become ritualized and take on meaning as spaces where positive relationships are created. A significant consequence of women being excluded from these informal networks of communication is that women remain “the other,” the “outsider.” Golfing, for instance, has long been viewed and used as an important tool in developing business relationships. Deals are advanced on the golf course and sealed in the boardroom. If women are not a part of these invaluable networking scenarios, they are denied the possibility of climbing the corporate ladder. Moreover, stumbling blocks remain even if women do join their male counterparts on the green. Some golf courses are not female friendly; others restrict times when women can play, based on the assumption that they will slow down the field. Other clubs are overtly discriminatory in that they bar women from membership. Given the importance of networking through these and other informal social gatherings, women are at a distinct disadvantage. This seriously undermines women's strivings for equality within the workforce and in their progression into positions of leadership in particular.

SEX DISCRIMINATION

Sex discrimination is a serious obstacle facing women in leadership. Unique barriers that affect women's ability to shatter the glass ceiling involve career assumptions by management about women as a group and contradictory expectations for women. Discriminatory attitudes are often veiled in inaccurate "facts" about women's capacity for leadership. Women are presented as not aggressive enough, lacking the self-confidence required for the job, and not being serious enough about their careers to climb the corporate ladder. But prejudices and gender stereotypes persist because they allow males to protect their privileged status and keep women in their place. Despite overwhelming evidence that these stereotypes are wrong, they persist. Many female executives are convinced that they are not taken seriously by their male colleagues; many have reported being mistaken for secretaries at business meetings. While few women in executive positions report serious anti-women attitudes at work, the forces of discrimination are far more subtle: Women are simply ignored more than men. Furthermore, female executives are generally paid less than their male counterparts with similar responsibilities. Women's status in the leading professions of health, education, law, accounting, and engineering is similar to those in corporate settings. Female health professionals are concentrated in low-status and less prestigious positions. In higher education, an insignificant number of women fill the positions of president, chancellor, or provost.

Initiatives that must be put in place to rectify prevailing attitudes toward women include training in gender awareness, diversity, and combating sexual harassment.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is another serious problem for women in bureaucracies. Harassment is used as a form of power by an employer; sexual harassment intimidates and demoralizes women and creates an atmosphere of silence, because many women fear that reporting sexual harassment will jeopardize their careers. Indeed, patriarchal value structures allow men to believe that they have a right to control women. Feminists insist that preconceived notions of gender roles are central to this understanding; these lead to a wide range of rules pertaining to genderdetermined behaviors and expectations. Society's acceptance of these rules sets up the rationale for male supremacy and the potential for male harassment or violence against women.

LACK OF MENTORS

Another barrier to women in leadership is the lack of a critical mass of senior or visibly successful female role models and mentors. Mentoring is an arrangement whereby an individual who has experience and knowledge in a particular field can actively guide and offer support to facilitate the learning or development of another person. The arrangement generally involves a person in a leadership position providing guidance and assistance to an individual in a more junior position. While corporations or institutions of higher learning have recognized the importance and value of mentoring for their employees and have put formal structures in place to support this process, mentoring generally occurs on an informal basis. Given the old-boy network that has been central to men's mentoring and advancement, women traditionally have had fewer mentoring opportunities open to them than their male colleagues. Women in executive positions stress that the lack of mentoring among women has been detrimental to their climb up the corporate ladder. Because men generally occupy the highest positions of leadership, men are more likely to be in powerful positions to open doors for those with inferior status. This is a serious barrier to women's advancement. Since the basis of patriarchy has been organized through men's relationships with other men, a similar unity among women is an effective means by which to combat institutional forms and norms that largely exclude women.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP

For many women who are within reach of executive positions, the costs of consistently outperforming men and the lack of rewards in the race to the top are simply too high. Women-owned businesses are growing

dramatically both in number and in economic viability. Women are leaving the corporate world and are drawn instead to business ownership because it allows for greater control over their time, productivity, and advancement. As a result, corporations are under pressure to find ways to retain their most talented women.

Given the barriers to women's advancement, theorists are questioning the very structures of leadership dominant in society. Alternative organizational structures and, by extension, alternative modes of leadership call for questioning the patriarchal values that underlie leadership and long-accepted leadership ideals. The type of leadership that is exercised by many in executive positions is not the style of leadership that attracts and sustains women, nor is it necessarily just and effective. The classic leadership role involves power over another, and women in particular traditionally have been secondary, subordinate, and disempowered. Alternative modes of leadership—in essence, a contra-bureaucratic model—reject classical, patriarchal, hierarchical systems that are composed of vertical positions of authority, be those legally or traditionally defined. This approach attempts to counter competitive, patriarchal, and individualistic values that are intrinsic to the hierarchical process with alternative modes that focus instead on communication and participation at all levels as the basis of leadership. Leadership is thus understood as a process of reaching consensus and following through on group decisions. The goal of such leadership, in which relationships are primary, is understanding rather than persuasion. In this scheme, individuals can be both followers and leaders at different times or even simultaneously. The goal is a horizontal and consensus-based process that focuses on a more democratic, egalitarian method of participation and communication.

Communicative leadership is truer to women's styles of leadership; historically, women have been in positions and played roles in which dialogue, nurturing, and problem solving are central. Since patriarchal, hierarchically based positions of leadership have traditionally been closed to women, women may be more open to alternative approaches that are more communicative and participation-based. Horizontally based leadership, in aiming to involve the broadest range of individuals in the process of decision making, cannot be restricted to women. This more interactive approach must reorient both women's and men's approaches to leadership.

—Doris R. Jakobsh

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