Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling: An Industrial Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Many companies have recognized that the workforce of the future will be significantly more diverse than in the past. A substantial number of these new employees will be women. Industry must create an environment that attracts the best, brightest, and most talented women and provide an environment that empowers them to reach their full potential. Barriers to advancement, such as the real or perceived "glass ceiling," inhibit the individual and ultimately negatively affect the company. Successful companies will recognize that gender diversity is a critical business strategy and implement aggressive programs to assist women in breaking through the glass ceiling. Gender diversity initiatives should include examination of quality of life issues, training and development, organizational policies and practices, and management accountability. Mentoring programs clearly play an important role in gender diversity programs. Personal mentoring experiences in academic and corporate environments, as well as a pilot mentoring program at Land O'Lakes, will be discussed.

Key Words: Mentor, Workforce, Women, Science

Introduction

The term "glass ceiling" was popularized in an article titled "The corporate woman," which appeared in the March 24, 1986, edition of the Wall Street Journal. The "glass ceiling" has been defined as artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified minorities and women from advancing into mid- and senior-level management positions. The glass ceiling is not a physical barrier but rather an attitudinal hurdle consisting of largely unconscious stereotypes and misconceptions. Companies and universities that hope to attract and retain the most talented employees need to explore ways to assist women in breaking through the "glass ceiling," or, preferably, eliminating it completely.

The Glass Ceiling in Academia

The glass ceiling is a reality for many women in academia. One of the striking differences between women and men at universities is that women students and faculty are less likely to advance as far or as fast as their male peers. Women students often suffer a decline in academic and career ambitions during their college years and are less likely to apply to graduate school and less confident about their chances for success in graduate school than male students of equal ability and achievement. Women faculty remain clustered at lower ranks in non-tenure-track positions and/or in less prestigious institutions (Menges and Exum, 1983).

Psychologists Caroline Luksza at the University of Michigan and Ronald Friend at the State University of New York at Stony Brook looked at 106 faculty members at a large university and reported that stress declined radically for men who were promoted in rank but not for female faculty who were promoted. Even when women faculty achieved tenure, they felt greater work demands, less job control, lack of support and recognition from colleagues and chairs, and lack of respect for their research in comparison to male tenured faculty (Winegar, 1994).

As a former faculty member at the University of Minnesota, I saw the impact of attitudinal barriers and gender bias that existed for women faculty, particularly junior faculty. More committee assignments, pay discrepancies, lack of female role models, feelings of not being taken seriously, the difficulties in deciding whether or not to start a family before achieving tenure, and lack of support by colleagues and department heads were common concerns of women faculty. Few formal or informal mentoring programs were available and many women felt that their schedules were too full to participate in...
meaningful networking with colleagues and friends within their own institution, let alone with women at other institutions or through professional societies or social organizations.

The Glass Ceiling in Industry

The situation is not very different in industry. A recent survey conducted by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor (1994), which included questionnaires from 250,000 women and telephone interviews with a nationally representative random sample of 1,200 women, concluded that concerns about the glass ceiling, equal pay, access to adequate child care, lack of training, and discrimination are issues that affect women at all levels of employment, from blue collar to professional. In 1993, women earned 71 cents for every dollar earned by a man, up from 61 cents in 1978. Stress was identified as a serious problem by almost 60% of the women, but it was particularly acute for single mothers and women in their 40s who held professional or managerial jobs. More than half of the women with children 5 yr old and under said that affordable child care was a serious problem. Fourteen percent of white women and 26% of minority women reported losing a job or promotion because of sex or race. Three out of five women said they had little or no likelihood of advancement (Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, 1994).

Women who have advanced to senior executive positions in the industrial sector have achieved more visibility in the recent past than their academic counterparts, in part due to the increasing recognition of the reality of workforce demographics and the focus on diversity spearheaded by a few very progressive companies. Companies that have instituted total quality management systems, incorporating and rewarding teamwork, have recognized that women are often more sensitive to employee needs, more focused on consensus building, and seem innately more communicative than traditional male managers. However, few companies have instituted aggressive programs to eliminate gender bias and provide supportive environments that nurture and promote the development of women. For most women in industry, the glass ceiling is alive and well (Schwartz, 1992).

Discussing the Undiscussables

Many companies have recognized that the workforce of the future will be significantly more diverse than in the past and that a substantial number of these new employees will be women. Creating an environment that attracts, retains, and promotes the most talented employees is a critical business strategy, but many companies are not able to aggressively pursue these goals because they are unable to acknowledge and openly discuss gender issues. Felice Schwartz, president and founder of Catalyst, a national not-for-profit research and advisory organization that works with business to effect change for women, believes that a “conspiracy of silence” prevents discussing the issue of gender bias (Schwartz, 1992). Chief executive officers and university administrators do not voice their concerns for fear of litigation and women do not speak up because they don't want to be seen as different from men. It is time to discuss the undiscussables!

First, it is important to acknowledge the fundamental biological difference between women and men. Pregnancy and birth are uniquely female experiences, and 85% of women have babies at some time in their lives (Schwartz, 1992). Acknowledging this natural process and implementing clear and comprehensive maternity leave policies will enable companies to retain their best women. The fact that women have babies does not alter their commitment to a job or the quality of their work, as long as maternity is acknowledged, planned for, and managed.

Second, employers need to accept parenthood as a part of doing business and provide flexibility so that men and women can be productive at work as well as active, involved, and responsible parents at home. Even though more and more men are assuming more active parenting roles, women are still viewed as primary caretakers. Flexible policies relating to maternity, paternity and parental leave, work hours, at-home work, and re-entry assist in legitimizing parenting by acknowledging it as a business imperative.

Third, companies must recognize that the traditional work environment is not very encouraging to women. In the predominantly white male cultures of academia and industry, subtle discriminatory policies, practices, and behaviors create stress and barriers to advancement for women. Unconscious stereotypes and preconceptions about women in the workforce creates an attitudinal barrier and an inhospitable atmosphere. Companies must first accept the premise that women belong in the workplace and then work to change the environment. Managers need to be made aware of the new demographic realities and the practical business imperative for proper conduct between the sexes at work. Men must be sensitized to their unconscious negative behavior and sexual harassment cannot be tolerated.

Fourth, recognize that women face a tougher challenge than men do after they join male-dominated companies. Women are relative newcomers to the male world of business and their traditional socialization does not adequately prepare them for this new world. Women are frequently isolated and therefore may be slower to learn the "unwritten rules" that lead to corporate success. Management must recognize their responsibility to provide special additional training and tools that are vital to excellent performance.
Women need to be mentored and coached in the same way as men. Behavior that usually characterizes successful men must be encouraged in women.

Finally, senior management needs to take ownership and provide leadership for ensuring equal opportunities for women within their corporations. They need to monitor appraisal and compensation systems and actively eliminate gender bias. They need to institute tracking systems and create advancement opportunities for women. They need to lead by example and hold managers accountable for ensuring that their vision is implemented throughout the company.

The Glass Ceiling Initiative

The Glass Ceiling Initiative was established by the Department of Labor in 1989 following the publication of Workforce 2000 (1987), a report highlighting changing demographics and the role of women in the future workforce. In establishing the Glass Ceiling Initiative, Secretary of Labor Lynn Martin said, "If our end goal is to compete successfully in today's global market, then we have to unleash the full potential of the American workforce. The time has come to tear down, to dismantle, to remove and to shatter—the 'Glass Ceiling.'"

The goals of the Glass Ceiling Initiative were to promote a quality, inclusive, and diverse workforce; promote good corporate conduct; and promote equal opportunity, not mandated results. To gain a better understanding of the current cultural climate for women within corporations, Secretary Martin initiated corporate management reviews of nine randomly selected Fortune 500 companies who had contracts with the federal government. A summary of the reviews was published in a report titled "Pipelines of progress: A status report on the glass ceiling" (1992). The results indicated that there seemed to be a plateau in the management ladder for women and minorities. Minorities reached a plateau at lower career levels than women, who reached a plateau at lower career levels than men. There was a lack of corporate ownership of equal opportunity principles by senior management, as well as a lack of monitoring of appraisal and compensation systems by management. Record keeping was inadequate and there were limited advancement opportunities for women and minorities.

Several glass ceiling barriers were identified: 1) lack of management commitment to establish systems, policies, and practices for achieving workplace diversity and upward mobility; 2) pay inequities for work of equal or comparable value; 3) sex, race, and ethnicity-based stereotyping and harassment; 4) unfair recruitment practices; 5) lack of family-friendly workplace policies; 6) "parent-track" policies (differential treatment of parents vs non-parents in the workforce); and 7) limited opportunities for advancement to decision making positions. Such barriers prevent women and minorities from reaching their full potential within corporations. The status report also provided some insight into initiatives that were working to promote an inclusive and diverse workforce at some of the companies evaluated. These included 1) tracking women and minorities with advancement potential; 2) ensuring access and visibility; 3) ensuring a bias-free workplace; 4) ensuring that talented women and minorities entered the pipeline; and 5) mentoring programs.

The Role of Mentoring

In a University of Miami study of barriers to women's upward mobility, 72% of the 176 successful women executives from small- to medium-sized businesses surveyed had a mentor who played an important role in their career (Ragins and Scandura, 1994). The term "mentor" has been traced to Homer's Odyssey. Mentor was a trusted friend of King Ulysses who nurtured, protected, and educated Ulysses' son during his 10-yr absence. Mentor's instruction went far beyond the teaching of specific skills. It encompassed personal, professional, and civic development. Focus was on the development of the whole person to full capacity, and integration of that person into the existing hierarchy through socialization to its norms and expectations (Hall and Sandler, 1983). The modern-day mentor fulfills much the same purpose as Ulysses' trusted friend: coach, motivator, teacher, role model, counselor, and provider of moral support; a mentor is an influential individual who has advanced experience and knowledge and who is committed to providing support to your career.

I have been very fortunate to have had several mentors throughout my career. These mentoring relationships have greatly enriched my personal and professional life and have influenced my career choices, direction, and success. My mentors have come from academic as well as industrial backgrounds. They are unique individuals who have been willing to provide honest opinions on career goals, objectives, and decisions. They volunteer objective points of view and alternative strategies for dealing with crises on the job or in my personal life. They coach me through difficult and highly charged political situations. They serve as role models and I have learned by observing how they interact with people and deal with situations. They provide constructive criticism in a compassionate yet straightforward manner. They motivate and inspire. They bolster my self-esteem at times when it needs bolstering. Through their extensive networks of colleagues and friends, I have developed a network of diverse colleagues and friends. Some of my
mentors are also my dearest and most trusted friends. I treasure the time and wisdom my mentors share with me.

Land O’Lakes’ Mentoring Program

My personal mentoring experiences have strongly influenced my conviction that both formal and informal mentoring programs should be encouraged in industry, as well as academia. Because white males will make up only 15% of the net growth in the workforce over the next decade (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991), bottom line success will depend on recruiting, training, and retaining the best possible employees. Women entering the workforce will seek out those employment opportunities that provide a “gender-friendly” environment. An effective mentoring program may become a business imperative, a critical tool for attracting, developing, and retaining the most talented women within the organization.

A pilot mentoring program was established at Land O’Lakes, Inc., within the Division of Research, Technology and Engineering/Corporate Purchasing (RTE/CP) in April 1993. The voluntary program, initiated and coordinated by employees, was launched through a series of informational “brown bag” lunches, phone mail messages, and posted signs. Anyone interested in participating in the program as either a mentor, protégé, or both completed a questionnaire describing, in part, what they were looking for in a mentoring relationship. A committee made up of coordinators from all departments within RTE/CP matched mentors with protégés. The program is of flexible duration and provides a no-fault conclusion if the relationship is not working for whatever reason for either the mentor or the protégé.

The responsibilities of mentors and protégés were defined at the outset of the program. Mentors are responsible for serving as resources for information on the company, coaches for skill development and effective behavior, and confidants in personal crises. Mentors are expected to share their knowledge and experience, assist in mapping a career path, provide constructive feedback, and have the overall responsibility of defining their expectations of the relationship.

A primary premise of the program is that protégés have the ultimate responsibility for their own personal growth and development. They are expected to define their expectations, goals, and objectives for the mentoring relationship. Protégés are responsible for preparing an action plan for accomplishing their goals. They are expected to take the initiative in arranging meetings with their mentor and to be receptive to feedback and coaching. Both protégés and mentors agree to a no-fault conclusion option if for any reason the relationship does not work out.

There are currently 24 mentor-protégé pairs in the program, made up of approximately equal numbers of men and women. The entire group meets approximately once each quarter to discuss topics of general interest. Outside speakers address topics of interest and direct application to personal and professional development. These have included personal inventory assessment, establishing mentoring goals and self-mentoring plans, giving and receiving constructive feedback, personality assessment and impact of personality style on relationships, and communication style differences between men and women.

The benefits for the protégé are numerous and include individual recognition and encouragement, personal development and self-improvement, knowledge of the company and informal rules for advancement (as well as political pitfalls to be avoided), information on how to behave in a variety of professional settings, a perspective on long-term career planning, and increased performance, productivity, and career satisfaction. In addition, the protégé often benefits by the mentor’s direct intervention or through the mentor’s own contacts and networks. Indirectly the protégé enjoys the mentor’s “reflected power” (Kanter, 1977), which confers special status and acceptance by others. There are also benefits for the mentor, such as the satisfaction of helping in the development of another person. In addition, the mentoring relationship provides a vehicle for the mentor to receive feedback on his or her own projects from a junior person in the organization who is eager to learn and can offer an objective viewpoint.

In the long term, the ultimate beneficiary of a successful mentoring program will be Land O’Lakes. Mentoring helps create a receptive and supportive environment that is more attractive to new employees. Talented employees who feel valued and have a better understanding of the corporation will contribute more to the success of the company in the long run.

Many companies have elected not to establish formal mentoring programs such as the one initiated by Land O’Lakes. This does not necessarily mean that mentoring opportunities are unavailable, but it does require that individuals desiring this experience take the initiative to identify someone to informally serve as a mentor. Fellow employees or supervisors could assist new employees in identifying appropriate mentors either within the company or in other companies. One of the best ways to identify potential mentors is to network through professional societies, volunteer organizations, and local business meetings or workshops.

Other Mentoring Opportunities

In addition to internal formal or informal mentoring programs, companies have the option of participating in privately sponsored mentoring programs such as Minnesota 100. The Minnesota 100 program was initiated in 1991 by Gayle Holmes and Mary Mahoney, both veterans of the corporate training and
education field. In this not-for-profit operation, 100 mid-level women managers are linked with local senior level managers at another company in each of two 12-mo programs launched each year. Senior executives serving as mentors volunteer their time; companies pay $1,340 for each protege they enroll in the program. The meetings between mentor and protege average 2 to 3 h a month. The participants are brought together for half-day sessions once a month to hear speakers and participate in small group discussions of business issues. Some of the Minnesota 100 meeting and discussion topics include power and empowerment; balancing work and homelife; goals, values, and ethics; creating a professional persona; corporate politics, culture, and ethics; career derailment; personal motivation; managing in dynamic environments; futurism; and negotiation skills. The discussion groups (peer groups) provide mutual support and the opportunity to compare professional and personal experiences.

The Minnesota 100 concept is being franchised nationwide through a program called MENTTOR (Maximizing Experience, Networks and Talent Through One-on-one Relationships). This program helps companies establish structured in-house mentoring programs using on-site trained administrators, marketing videos, and computer-based training products.

Mentoring Women in Animal and Dairy Science

Acknowledging that gender bias exists and beginning an open dialogue on the issues are the first steps for women in animal and dairy science to begin breaking through the glass ceilings in academia and industry. This ADSA/ASAS symposium on “Trails for Success for Women in Animal and Dairy Sciences: Mentoring as a Stimulus for Success,” initiated and sponsored by women faculty and graduate students, began the dialogue on gender bias in academia and industry. Mentoring is clearly one proven approach for providing support and stimulating change within institutions.

Institutions themselves, including professional and scientific societies such as ADSA and ASAS, have an important role to play in ensuring the future success for women in animal and dairy science. Inclusion of similar forums for discussion of gender issues in future programs is an important approach that should continue. Keeping the issue at the forefront will encourage the establishment of active programs to begin addressing the issues. Women should be encouraged to participate in the governance of professional societies as members of key committees, including the executive committee or governing council, and to participate as speakers and session organizers at regional or annual meetings. Other organizations, such as the American Society for Microbiology, have established committees on the status of women within their profession to address needs and concerns. Formal and informal mentoring programs could be established under the auspices of ADSA and ASAS to model and foster the development of women who will ultimately take leadership roles in the organizations.

Departments of Animal Science and Dairy Science could also play a critical part in supporting women faculty and students. The value of mentoring cannot be overstated. Departmental heads and deans should consider establishing informal or formal mentoring programs for women faculty, staff, and students. Mentors could be drawn from within the university, but not necessarily only from within the same departments. Local industry executives and scientists could participate in the program as mentors.

Individual women in animal and dairy science must take a more active and personal role in mentoring, both as mentors and proteges. Each of us must be responsible for getting involved, actively seeking out mentors, and establishing networks. Mentoring is not just for senior executives or university professors. At every level in our professions, each of us can look over our shoulder to see a woman just behind us in need of mentoring.

Implications

Empowering women to reach their full potential must become an imperative in industry and academic institutions. Those companies and universities that establish aggressive programs to sensitize the workforce to demographic realities and assist women in breaking through the real or perceived glass ceiling will be the ultimate beneficiaries. Establishing informal and formal mentoring programs is just one mechanism for attracting and retaining talented women in animal and dairy science-based professions; however, it could be one of the most critical first steps for ensuring trails for success for women in these professions.

Additional Mentoring Projects

As women have increased in number and in professional status in the sciences, it has become clear that formal and informal mentoring programs are necessary to train and attract the best and brightest women. The Minnesota 100 concept is being franchised nationwide through a program called MENTTOR (Maximizing Experience, Networks and Talent Through One-on-one Relationships). This program helps companies establish structured in-house mentoring programs using on-site trained administrators, marketing videos, and computer-based training products.

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Literature Cited


