

## **Glass Ceilings – Treating the Problem, Not the Symptom**

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Glass ceilings are barriers that prevent women from achieving executive positions. Those glass ceilings remain as powerful now as they were twenty years ago when the term “glass ceiling” was first coined by the Wall Street Journal. Glass ceilings have sparked discussion and debate as to their causes, effects, and possible solutions. However, I have found that the flaw with the debate and efforts to break through glass ceilings is, twenty years later, the focus remains on the effects of glass ceilings and not the problem. It is akin to treating a headache with an aspirin. The symptom is being treated rather than what is causing the headache itself.

In my research I have found there are two primary assumptions people have about glass ceilings: 1) all glass ceilings are the same and; 2) by addressing issues such as disparities in the number of women in executive positions and inequities in pay between men and women we can start to elevate women to a level playing field with men. Both assumptions are false. Next I will address how the shape of glass ceilings is not the same, how the unequal playing field is much more complex than the issue of gender alone, and ways for women to truly achieve those executive positions to which they are currently being denied.

**The shape of glass ceilings.** Over the course of the past twenty years, illustrations of glass ceilings in books and magazine articles have traditionally shown glass ceilings as being flat. Saying glass ceilings are flat is the modern equivalent of saying the world is flat. If we take the ceiling metaphor to its logical conclusion, then we must accept that just as ceilings in houses can be flat, vaulted, or cathedral in shape so too can glass ceilings in business have different shapes. This would explain why glass ceilings vary from organization to organization and industry to industry. Some women think glass ceilings aren't as much of a problem because, in their industry, the ceiling is higher. Other women in other industries may hit their ceiling right away. The continuing challenge is that glass ceilings are invisible so it is difficult to be able to immediately recognize the shape of particular glass ceilings in business and where the inevitable stopping point for women is from industry to industry. If we understand all the factors involved with glass ceilings and use those factors as a guidepost to diagnose industries and individual organizations, then we can better “see” the shape and height of those glass ceilings.

**Gender.** Gender is a factor in creating glass ceilings but it is not the *only* factor. Too much of our focus on glass ceilings is on male versus female as their causation. Research has shown that there are six factors (or panes) in constructing, reinforcing, and deconstructing glass ceilings. Each of the factors interacts with each of the corresponding factors. Power positions and Gender construct glass ceilings. Organizational Culture and Societal Roles reinforce glass ceilings. Feminism and Mentoring deconstruct glass ceilings.

**Constructing glass ceilings.** Power positions are those executive positions in the upper levels of businesses such as vice-president, president, CEO, and the board of directors. If men who occupy those power positions do not believe women have the necessary aptitude for executive positions, women will not get promoted when a vacancy occurs.

Gender in the business world reflects that the gender in power (men) has control over the destiny of the gender seeking power (women) and exercises it accordingly to keep the out-group (women) from becoming part of the in-group.

**Reinforcing glass ceilings:** Organizational Culture reinforces the attitudes (whether spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten) of those in power positions and can be passed down from generation to generation like an organizational heirloom. An organization's culture can mirror general society and its assumptions and attitudes. For example, societal roles say that women can cook, and men grill. Organizational Culture makes similar assignments: men in the boardroom, women are in middle management. As Organizational Culture reinforces power positions, and Societal roles reinforce gender assignments, glass ceilings are strengthened. However, there are two forces that counteract and deconstruct the constructing and reinforcing factors.

**Deconstructing glass ceilings.** Feminism has been characterized as looking through the lens of gender and seeing how it matters. Feminists are challenging people in our society to look through the lens of gender and seeing how women in business matter, particularly in executive positions. Mentoring has been a recommended strategy to assist women past the invisible barriers that hold them back. However, research shows that female-centered mentoring (women mentoring women) is more effective than male-centered mentoring. This is not to say that men cannot mentor women. They can. However, the advantage of female-centered mentoring can be summed up in one word: balance. Women are better at helping other women in providing perspective on balancing life issues at home and at work. Male mentors may be able to sympathize with the challenges women face on a daily basis but female mentors can empathize with their protégés. Been there, done that.

**Mentoring and advocacy.** Where mentoring falls short is that when the mentoring relationship ends, the protégé has new knowledge and skills but she is in no better position to break through glass ceilings. The protégés lack the means and connections among key organizational decision makers to rise to the positions to which the protégés aspire. Therefore, mentors must be *advocates* for their protégés. It is imperative for women currently in executive positions to become champions for their protégés and actively participate in the deconstruction of glass ceilings. The deconstruction of glass ceilings is a grassroots effort. We cannot depend on legislation or mandates to level the playing field for women.

**The future.** Glass ceilings will remain as powerful as they are as long as men and women alike focus on their effects rather than their cause. Glass ceilings are not uniform in shape and gender is not the only factor in creating glass ceilings. Once when we recognize the systemic nature of glass ceilings and how they are constructed, reinforced, and deconstructed can begin to make true progress in achieving parity for women in the business world.