

# Despite Increasing Numbers, Women Execs Say It's Lonely at the Top

by *Denise T. Cormier*

Women currently hold over 50% of management and professional positions in the US, over 85% of Fortune 500 companies have at least one female corporate officer, and those numbers are growing. Today, most of us do not think it unusual for a woman to be promoted into a leadership position, and the number of women entrepreneurs is increasing. So this should be a time of celebration!

But while the numbers show that women have risen in the business world, my own recent research on women leaders reveals that corporations need to look beyond numbers before they begin to toot their horns. That's because women who have reached top positions report feeling under constant pressure to prove themselves and be accepted. They do feel fully "integrated," experiencing frustration at a point in their careers when they should instead be feeling elated.

Most women leaders do not even realize that they're not alone in feeling like outsiders. Yet their feelings clearly represent a widespread, organizational problem. Fortunately, it's also a problem that can be conquered if both professional women and organizations join forces to observe and practice a few fundamental but critical steps. My knowledge on this issue derives from recent interview I did with 40 successful women who have broken the "glass ceiling." I wanted to learn all I could about their experiences at the top. Representing such industries as pharmaceuticals, healthcare, manufacturing, high tech, and higher education in the US and Europe, these leaders were VPs, directors, and senior managers with

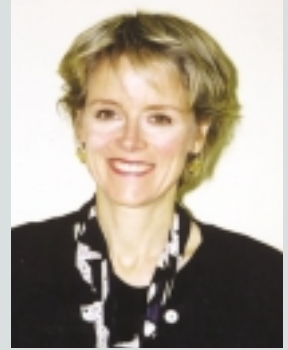
salaries and peer recognition reflecting their titles and positions. They candidly shared their dreams and aspirations, and stories of the challenges they face in their leadership roles.

These hard-working women are proud of their achievements and their status, and dedicated to making a difference and helping others succeed. As pioneers and leaders, they exude energy, enthusiasm, vision and a high level of self-awareness and self-confidence. But they also have their struggles. Like their male counterparts, these women share a desire to create more balance between their work and personal lives. They expressed frustration at having little time to reflect and to grow their people. They discussed how challenging it can be for women to be viewed as strong and powerful, yet not aggressive.

Though important, these findings may not seem too surprising. What *was* surprising was these leaders' shared longing to be fully integrated at the top because these are women who *are* at the top, who sit around the conference table with their male counterparts. These successful women revealed their struggles to excessively prepare and defend themselves and their positions; the lack of networking and friendships with colleagues; and the all-too-familiar experience of watching someone else get recognition for their ideas.

What does being "fully integrated" mean? It requires that women feel influential and accepted as equals with their male colleagues. It also means women being accepted for who they are, and valued for their individuality, leadership talents, and vision. Finally,

*Dr. Denise T. Cormier coaches and consults to leaders and their teams to help them become more effective and successful in their work and personal lives.*



*Her clients include business leaders, physicians and other professionals. She can be reached at [denise@cormierassociates.com](mailto:denise@cormierassociates.com) or 413-296-0001 or by visiting her website [www.cormierassociates.com](http://www.cormierassociates.com).*

integration means no longer feeling isolated, different, and alone.

It is critical that both organizations and their leaders take the next step – looking beyond the numbers – to fully realize the value women can and do bring to their organizations. Companies must begin to dialogue about these issues at the leadership level, continue the process of promoting talented women to the top, coach and mentor leaders and emerging leaders, and create networks and forums to bring women leaders together.

Women leaders must acknowledge the value and necessity of networks to their own professional success, prioritize coming together to interrupt their current isolation, explore coaching and mentoring for the support they need as pioneers, and shift their current leadership practices to incorporate more delegation as a means of growing their people and freeing their time.

Ascribing to and supporting this new form of professionalism – where relationship-building is key – will enable women leaders to be the true insiders that they and their companies hope they will be. When that happens, it really will be time to celebrate.