

Why Top Professional Women Still Feel Like Outsiders

by Denise Cormier

In today's business world, the notion of a female at the top is no longer an anomaly. In the United States, women currently hold over 50 percent of management and professional positions. Over 85 percent of the Fortune 500 companies have at least one female corporate officer. Worldwide, women with graduate-school degrees outnumber men with the same in 21 of the 27 richest countries. Over the next decade, the number of women with graduate and professional degrees is expected to grow by 16 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education; the projection for men is 1.3 percent. By 2025, women will outnumber men in U.S. workplaces. Taken together, all these figures suggest that many of the twenty-first century's high-potential leaders will be women.

At the same time that the number of talented women in business is increasing, a wave of research also shows that women are leaving corporate life, creating what Lisa Belkin of *The New York Times* termed the "opt out" revolution. *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and *Fast Company* have all recently published articles discussing the exodus of highly qualified women from mainstream careers. In the past, the belief was that women were leaving corporate life because of the pull of family demands; the corporate response was to create flexible work programs and family initiatives. These programs were designed to assist women in realizing both their family and career aspirations while ensuring the organization continued access to this talent pool over time. However, research recently published in the *Harvard Business Review* (March 2005) and *FT Magazine* (October 2005) shows that women are also leaving corporate life because of high levels of dissatisfaction.

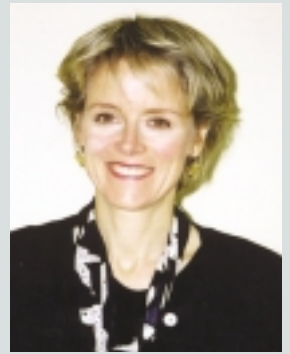
Not only is this revolving door costly, but it may also prove devastating for

organizations. Attracting and retaining senior women is critical for financial reasons as well as for diversity. A recent Catalyst study of 350 of the Fortune 500 companies showed that return on equity was 35 percent higher in those companies with women at the top. In addition, companies with women at the top got higher valuations and higher-than-average stock increases. Above and beyond being a source for competitive advantage, these women leaders are also role models for their aspiring successors. As HR executives know all too well, high-caliber talent is costly to recruit and costly to train. The importance of women in leadership positions is of such concern that the focus of the Women's Forum on the Economy, held in Paris in October 2005, was on attracting and retaining senior women.

What are the sources of this dissatisfaction that is causing women to leave their positions as successful organization leaders? According to a recent study that I conducted with women who have broken through the glass ceiling, one of the main drivers of this dissatisfaction is that women feel like outsiders even when they have made it to the top. As one of the women I interviewed remarked: "There were hurdles in getting here; that I expected. But now, there are these hurdles that I didn't think would be here... It's still a boys' game. There's this line of demarcation that the girls still can't cross easily."

This article will explore the issues and challenges facing today's women leaders, discuss how women and organizations can conquer the often unrecognized and isolating "outsider syndrome," and explain why it is imperative that organizations take the initiative to remedy this situation.

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IT'S LONELIER AT THE TOP IF YOU'RE A WOMAN

Perhaps you recognize this woman. She has high-caliber talent, she's quick and sharp and she moves fast and is focused. Her door is open; she's calm, cool, and at ease with her team. They look to her for support and guidance, which she readily gives. She's bright, experienced and respected. She exudes confidence and juggles her workload well. She seems to have it all under control.

The scene shifts to a meeting with her colleagues. The same woman is one of two women at the table of six. Notice how her demeanor has changed. She appears cautious, ill at ease. Her conversation is serious and businesslike—even the chitchat. Something is different. She no longer appears to be the confident woman whom we met earlier.

As an executive and team coach, I am uniquely privy to the dreams, concerns, ambitions, and challenges my clients experience in their professional lives, and to the behaviors they exhibit in meetings. The insights afforded by this professional experience enticed me to explore the issues that seemed to be plaguing personally many of the women I coach and affecting their organizations. I wanted to go beyond the stories of the famous, charismatic women leaders whose faces grace the covers of glossy newsweeklies and to dig beneath the existing survey data on women leaders to understand better how ordinary women who

have "made it" in the corporate world see themselves and make sense of their status and their positions. I hoped that this information might help to stop the revolving door of successful women who are exiting their organizations and help women find greater satisfaction in the leadership roles they have achieved.

To learn about their experiences at the top, I recently interviewed 40 successful women who have broken through the "glass ceiling." These women came from a variety of industries, including pharmaceuticals, health care, manufacturing, high technology, and higher education in both the United States and Europe. They included COOs, VPs, directors, and senior managers, with salaries and status reflecting their titles and positions. These leaders ranged in age from 35 to 60. They were single, married, partnered, and divorced. Some had children; others did not. During the interviews, these women candidly shared their dreams and professional aspirations and the stories of the challenges they face as leaders.

As a group, these women are ambitious and hard-working. They are proud of their achievements, their experience, and their status. As pioneers and leaders, they exude energy, confidence, self-awareness, and vision. These successful women are dedicated to making a difference—as contributors in their organizations and in the lives of those they lead. As one woman executive said, "My job now is not just to contribute as before, but to be the role model and mentor to others who are moving up."

In spite of their successes, these women also have their struggles. Like their male counterparts, these leaders share a desire to create a better balance between their work and their personal lives. They expressed frustration at being caught up in day-to-day activities, leaving little time to reflect, think strategically, and grow their people. These women leaders discussed the still-too-familiar challenge of walking the line between being assertive and powerful, yet not aggressive, and managing other aspects of gender relations as part of their responsibilities as global leaders.

SURPRISE CHALLENGE: ISOLATION

Though important, these issues did not strike me as surprising. What was surprising

was the feeling of isolation that these women shared, and the longing they expressed to be fully integrated at the top—even though these high-caliber women are at the top, sitting at the table with their male counterparts, and even though their positions afford ample opportunities to interact and network with colleagues.

As I explored further, I found that this feeling of isolation stems from two sources:

1. Feelings of "not fitting in" with the male culture that currently dominates today's organizations; and
2. A lack of the social networks and relationships that are critical to thriving in a leadership capacity today.

Not Part of the Club

What is isolation like for these women? For some, isolation comes in the form of feeling left out. Jill, one of the women in the study, expressed it this way: "I was recently in a management team meeting. I am the sole woman in the group of five. That's OK; it's not unusual. We were discussing a new structure for a new and highly innovative function-positions, not people. In the presentations, every fictitious person in each block on the [organizational] chart was referred to as *he*, for example, '*he* will do this, *he* will do that.' Now, I understand that '*he*' is the generic pronoun for '*he* or *she*,' but after a while, I really started feeling alone, unrepresented. Was I being crazy? Overly sensitive? When I commented—and did it with forethought and lightness—my colleagues chuckled and agreed, but nothing in the discussion changed."

Gail describes isolation this way: "I walk into the meeting room and the tenor changes. Sometimes, I just feel like I crashed the party." Or, as Julie commented: "I just wish I would be seen as a leader, not a woman leader. Then I would feel like I had made it and I was successful."

Another study participant described another symptom of not feeling fully integrated: "My male colleagues never express doubts or shortcomings. I have to be careful how I express myself. Even though I know I'm good, I feel like an imposter, so I prepare and prepare again. That takes time – time that could be spent on better things."

Differences in male and female communication styles also contribute to the isolation, as

expressed in this comment: "My male colleagues—their style is very dominating. They speak in a loud and confrontational way. I have to work diligently to make sure that I don't come across as 'overdominating'—the bitch. I speak up with my own style and try to be heard, and push back and challenge in a way so that *they* (the men) don't feel threatened. Sometimes, when I am lucky, I succeed. Other times, I have been told that I'm too pushy."

Lack of Social Capital

Top women also seem to lack networks and friendships with colleagues. When asked, these women leaders expressed both the desire and the intention to schedule networking and social time with colleagues, yet their aspiration did not equate with successful follow-through. Lack of time and the pressures of work demands were often cited as reasons for not creating these networks. As one woman commented: "My just-say-no policy kicks in. I've got to get things done."

On probing further, I also discovered that many of these women viewed their networks as a luxury, not a necessity, and isolation as something that just comes with the territory of leading. "I wish I had more [time with colleagues], both men and women," said one study participant. "Networking is an opportunity; [it's] not routine. I know it needs to be routine, like going to the gym, but it's not." Another summed it up this way: "We even have a women's network here on site. I put it on my calendar, but most times other priorities take precedence."

As these examples demonstrate, although women leaders are aware that networks and influencing are important, especially in this age of the ever-growing matrix organization, these women struggle with putting a priority on relationships that are vital to their success. Leadership is dependent on competencies, but it is equally or perhaps even more dependent upon relationships. A successful leader must be visionary and strategic, but she must also know who and how to influence across the organization. As she moves up in the ranks, a lack of social networks can hinder or derail a career.

INTEGRATION: A CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTOR

What does integration mean? How important is integration to these women leaders? As these women told me, their professional dream is to be fully integrated at the top, which they defined as feeling influential and being accepted as equals with their colleagues. To them, integration means being recognized for their ideas and accomplishments, as well as sharing a sense of belonging, and no longer feeling isolated and alone. And as these women so eloquently said, being integrated means being able to lead with integrity – to have the freedom to be themselves at work. In essence, being integrated is critical to these women's success as leaders.

WHAT WE CAN DO: THREE SOLUTIONS

As this study shows, the challenges that women leaders face today have real potential for either derailing this top-notch talent or, at the very least, diminishing their passion as leaders. Neither option bodes well for organizations that understand the importance of women to their competitive edge, financial performance, and succession planning. In the past, when we were not facing a tightening labor market, we had the option to use an excess labor pool as a bailout. That is no longer an option today. Instead, the HR executive's strategic imperative is to ensure and sustain the quality and supply of leaders in the pipeline. Some of that work can be done by helping women leaders individually. Organizations must take other crucial steps.

The new organizational mandate is three-fold: professional development, culture change, and creation of networks. Let's look at solutions in the professional development category first.

Professional Development

The methods leaders use to get to the top are not the same skills and competencies they need to sustain their passion and ensure their success at that level. It is critical that organizations define and adopt a new leadership profile that reflects the needs of the organization of the future, one that will include many more women leaders than today. That leadership profile includes the ability to do the following:

- Set priorities
- Delegate
- Grow talent
- Collaborate and develop social capital
- Cut through layers of complexity
- Have a global mind-set

Identifying and promoting women and training them in the new leader skill sets can set the foundation for learning to lead in a new way, as well as for finding satisfaction in leading. Organizations can ensure the incubation and the day-to-day execution of the skills listed above through mandated professional coaching and quality mentoring programs for current and emerging women leaders. Coaching can help strengthen skills and competencies. In the form of one-on-one instruction, it can also identify and analyze the gaps in one's social network, as well as allow the development of those strategic areas necessary for success. Mentoring programs provide the specifics for understanding key players in the organization and the politics necessary to succeed. The investment in these necessary support structures is a low price to pay for the leadership advantage of tomorrow.

Culture Change

A shift in corporate culture is also needed to integrate women fully at the top. Today, many companies have a diversity overlay to their succession process and business plans. In most cases, these programs have been very successful in helping women and minorities move up in the organization; in designing and ensuring equal access to opportunities; and in helping organization members understand differences and be more aware of issues of diversity based on gender, race, and ethnicity. In addition to promoting women to the top, organizations should begin now to encourage dialogue and to engage in the crucial conversations aimed at developing organizational cultures that embrace women leaders and create new ways of managing and leading together. By doing so, we will shift from the overlay of diversity to a real form of inclusivity.

Creating Networks

In today's highly networked and matrixed organizations, relationships are the name of the game. Success is a social phenomenon. Relationships play a key role in getting a job

or a promotion, selling a new idea, or obtaining financing and venture capital. A social network is also key to feeling—and being—integrated as a leader. Organizations must develop company-sponsored internal and external networking opportunities for their leaders, as well as networks of women leaders, to support and nurture this talent pool. Formalizing such a program can build confidence, stop isolation, tap resources, and provide a systematic vehicle for developing a leader's social network and social capital.

THE INDIVIDUAL'S MANDATE: TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

As organizations change, so too must the women who find themselves leading them. My study has identified not only some of the barriers women face in leading organizations, but also their dreams and aspirations. Women must acknowledge the value and necessity of networks to their own professional success and must recognize the importance of coming together to interrupt their current isolation. Women must also utilize coaching and mentoring for the support they need as pioneers and, in turn, mentor women leaders who are following in their footsteps. Finally, women must identify and develop the social networks critical to their success and shift their current leadership practices to incorporate more delegation as a means of growing their people and freeing their time. Subscribing to this new form of professionalism—in which relationship building is key—will enable women leaders to be the true insiders that they aspire to be and that their companies need.

CONCLUSION

As this research demonstrates, women leaders are not "men in skirts." Rather, they have their own sets of needs, dreams, ambitions, and talents that they bring to their role as organizational leaders. It is critical that organizations and their leaders take the next step to realize fully the value that women can and do bring to their organizations by developing corporate cultures where women can be who they really are and lead alongside and as equals to their male colleagues. In so doing, organizations will stop the current "brain drain" and be assured of a constantly replenished talent pool for tomorrow that benefits more than the bottom line.