Sisterhood in short supply in the workplace

It's often the women who hold back their female colleagues

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While several organizations are striving to eradicate the glass ceiling in work environments, it still blocks the progress of many women. And while it is certainly upheld by male executives, it is perhaps upheld even more ardently by female colleagues and by supervisors of women workers.

Pai and Vaidya (2006, p. 421) point out that the term ''glass ceiling'' was coined 20 years ago by *The Wall Street Journal* to describe the apparent barriers that prevent women and minorities from reaching the top of the corporate hierarchy:

> The glass ceiling is a metaphor for prejudice and discrimination (Carli and Eagly, 2001, p. 631).

According to Carli and Eagly (2001), the glass ceiling constitutes an invisible organizational or perceptual barrier for women and minority groups, preventing them from moving up the corporate ladder. Particularly emphasizing the subordinate position of women, Demirdjian (2007) maintains:

> Throughout the long history of mankind, women have been employed as a second fiddle to men (p. 1).

Carli and Eagly (2001) observe that, although women's status has improved remarkably in the twentieth century in many societies, women continue to lack access to power and leadership compared with men (p. 629). Demirdjian further explains that, even in today's industrialized nations, only a handful of women have succeeded in bursting through the glass ceiling:

> Out of thousands of large US corporations, fewer than half a dozen women hold chief executive positions in this highly industrialized nation (p. 1).

Alkadri and Tower (2006) confirm:

> Pay disparities between men and women persist in the US workforce despite comparable pay legislation, advocacy, and social change (p. 888).

Continuing the review of women's position in contemporary work environments, Weyer (2006) avers:

> A study surveying more than 1,200 women in *Fortune* 1,000 companies concluded that ''obstacles to women's advancement are not intentional'' (p. 442).

Weyer (2006) continues:

> Yet, […] gender appears to be affecting the advancement of women in a detrimental fashion (p. 442).

With regard to treatment of minority workers, Pendakur and Pendakur (2007) assert:

> South Asian-origin workers face greater disparity at the bottom than at the top, and Black workers face great disparity across the distribution (p. 41).

Frank (2006) reports:

> We do find evidence that gay/bisexual men suffer from glass ceilings comparable to those faced by heterosexual women (p. 485).

Experiences and insights

In many US (and other) workplaces, there is a feverish tendency from white males to remain in control of the upper echelons of the organizations they are affiliated to. This can be explained by the fact that these white males have traditionally fulfilled superior roles, thus having a hard time sacrificing their privileges to others. It is mostly women and minorities, the relative ''newcomers'' in the workforce, who therefore confront all kinds of invisible barriers toward advancement in their workplace, regardless of how great are their achievements. However, male executives' attempts to remain in power would be less enduring if women, among each other, displayed a less aggressive mentality and were not so keen to prevent one another from advancing. Some refer to this trend as ''the crab-bucket mentality'', because it manifests itself as if the workplace were a bucket full of crabs, in which those at the bottom will pull down the ones who try to climb up, so that, in the end, no one advances. The following real-life examples may illustrate the point.

Case 1: demise rather than sharing

A few years ago, a female friend, here referred to as Trudy, was working at a non-profit organization in Los Angeles, where the office manager was a woman. As a newcomer, Trudy soon learned that there were two ways of surviving in this workplace: either you obeyed the office manager's rules and clearly submitted to this woman, or you had to hold some expertise that the company considered important enough, so that you could get away with non-association, and isolated performance within the organization.

Trudy found herself in the latter position, and was happy to be there. After all, the organization had a wise chief executive, an older male, who refrained from micro-managing and provided employees he trusted with the luxury of flexible working hours or telecommuting, as long as they delivered their work in a timely and professional fashion.

The chief executive suffered a heart attack, which rendered him unable to lead the organization for a while. When he requested that a multi-disciplinary team run the organization during his absence, the female office manager opposed the idea so strongly that it was not taken up.

The office manager saw a golden opportunity for becoming the sole leader of the organization. However, she possessed neither the insight nor the tact required. Moreover, a number of non-conforming specialists in the organization were working against her. Within two months the organization started losing important financial donors, and within four

months all the specialized employees resigned. Within six months the non-profit entity had to close.

Case 2: jealousy and insecurity as project slayers

Another example reviews a female executive who headed a career department at an educational institution, and learned that there were plans for a new unit in her operating area. This new unit was intended to be managed by one of its initiators, a mature international student named Jane. Realizing the importance of involvement and the complexity of change, Jane made sure she included the existing career-department executive in the planning process from the start.

Initially this executive was highly enthusiastic about the project, stating that there was, indeed, a great need to have such a unit. However, she also asserted that establishing such a unit would require a lot of funds, which were not available, and would never become available, in her opinion.

When the finances did become available – much to Jane's surprise – this woman's attitude changed. She started demanding a voice in the hiring process of the person who should run this new unit. Jane, who had been assigned to develop the unit from scratch, was forced to go through an unnecessary and time-consuming recruitment process.

Although Jane got the job offered, the circumstances in her life had changed dramatically and she turned the job offer down.

Case 3: seeing a threat where there is none

A final example pertains to unnecessary protectionism. The victim in this case will be referred to as Annie. She was a hard worker, who always received compliments for her positive approach, insight and determination to go an extra mile. Finding a female supervisor on her path, Annie decided that she would make the relationship be a fruitful one, in which she would make sure not to engage in anything that would offend this supervisor. Indeed, Annie would go out of her way to perform over and beyond the expectations so that her supervisor would see her as an asset to the department.

In retrospect, though, Annie learned that some people do not appreciate star performers, because it may make them look bad in the eyes of top management. If top management finds out how much more can be done in a shorter time, the entire image these people carefully created through the years goes down the drain, and they experience loss of face.

During the first evaluation session this female supervisor bluntly told Annie that she did not see their relationship as a good fit, and that she wondered what Annie's suggested solution was. In a state of near-despair, Annie requested a few days to recover from this unexpected shock and to mull over the problem, and then decided to choose the most dignified option: she requested a six-month continuation of her job, after which she would resign.

The supervisor was happy, because a perceived threat would step out of the way. Annie stated in hindsight that the relief was mutual, although for entirely different reasons. She was particularly relieved when the self-suggested six months were over and she could finally cease having to face the female supervisor.

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Conclusion

While women are claiming a greater presence in the corporate world, the issues described reveal an even bigger and more enduring trend: women performing as their own enemies in the workplace. While this often-reciprocal aggression may partially be understood by the fact that women have to work harder for every step up the career ladder, it remains inexcusable that women hinder other women in their advancement.

As long as this is not addressed through thorough self-reflection from each working woman, the glass ceiling will never be successfully shattered.

Note

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