

MEMBER'S SPOTLIGHT



"It is not enough to...recruit a female human resources director and tell her to hire more female managers."

A Practical Approach To Breaking the Glass Ceiling

BY KERRY CLEMMONS

Having a representative number of women in the executive ranks not only is ethically correct, but also makes good business sense. At John Alden Financial Corp., about 27 percent of our top managers are women, and we are trying to increase that percentage.

Women executives bring a much-needed variety of opinions, ideals and management styles to a company. With today's fast-changing markets, senior management needs the broadest possible range of abilities and viewpoints. An executive group whose members share the same characteristics and background is handicapped in the decision-making process by its lack of diversity.

What steps could a company take to provide greater opportunities for its women managers?

First, set clear goals and make a long-term commitment to all employees. Rather than trying to fill a quota, top management should be concerned with preparing employees for higher-level positions. Advancement of women should be more than just "another human resources program." It must have real substance and support from senior management.

Second, develop formal and informal support systems. Coaching, mentoring and other types of consulting assistance can help all managers improve current job performance and prepare for the next step up. At John Alden, we have found the mentoring approach to be extremely effective. By staying in touch with mid-level managers, we can identify weak areas and provide support on work-related issues.

Third, allow mid-level managers to learn more about the inner workings of senior management. Success as a supervi-

sor often means taking direction from your manager and delegating tasks to your subordinates, a relatively straightforward process. But once you set foot in the executive offices, the rules change. Top managers must be self-directed, and a newly promoted executive must be able to determine what is expected in her role. She also must have excellent interpersonal skills. A manager who does not demonstrate these skills may make critical mistakes that thwart her success.

Fourth, allow talented managers of both sexes the opportunity to participate in high-level meetings, such as strategic planning sessions. Let them see firsthand how senior executives actually interact with each other. Set up brainstorming sessions, problem-solving task forces, weekend retreats or other activities that bring together different levels of managers.

Fifth, have feedback programs that give managers a clear sense of their strengths and weaknesses. A formal annual review is not usually enough to provide effective feedback.

Finally, convince *all* rising stars that the advantages of moving up to the executive suite outweigh the personal sacrifices. Although higher pay and prestige are strong motivators, not everyone wants longer hours, stress and job uncertainty.

For companies concerned about the glass ceiling, the most common mistake is to look for a quick fix. It is not enough to promote a woman to the executive committee or to recruit a female human resources director and tell her to hire more female managers. The real issues—recruiting, training and career advancement—run deeper within an organization. It may take five years or longer for positive results to occur.

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