

A New Look at the Glass Ceiling

The Perspective From the Top

By Helen Peters and Rob Kabacoff



Sunoco has a woman CEO; the current presidential administration includes a number of women at the highest levels; women are routinely captaining the Space Shuttle. Reports vary, but the consensus seems to be that women comprise 40-50% of the management ranks of U.S. corporations. Is the “glass ceiling” a dead issue in America?

We don’t think so. In spite of significant gains at lower-and middle management levels, women still hold only a small percentage of senior executive positions. In addition, women in executive and managerial positions earn only 69 cents for every dollar earned by men in a similar position. And, in today’s global economy a new barrier has arisen – the “glass border.” In U.S. companies, only 15% of expatriate assignments are given to women.

What is preventing women who have reached middle management from overcoming the final obstacles to equity in the executive suite? Our research suggests that both women’s approach to the leadership role, and the use of different

**THE LEADERSHIP
EFFECTIVENESS
ANALYSIS™ MODEL**

The model is comprised of twenty-two specific dimensions of leadership behavior that are measured against six essential functions of the leadership role:

CREATING A VISION

- Conservative
- Innovative
- Technical
- Self
- Strategic

DEVELOPING FOLLOWERSHIP

- Persuasive
- Outgoing
- Excitement
- Restraint

IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

- Structuring
- Tactical
- Communication
- Delegation

FOLLOWING THROUGH

- Control
- Feedback

ACHIEVING RESULTS

- Management Focus
- Dominant
- Production

TEAM PLAYING

- Co-operation
- Consensual
- Authority
- Empathy

evaluation criteria on the part of their bosses and peers, may be the answer.

Our Research

Management Research Group® is a firm specializing in the creation of behavioral assessment instruments used for individual and organizational development. We have information about the characteristics, leadership styles, and levels of effectiveness of over 400,000 managers worldwide. Our extensive database can be used to address a wide range of questions regarding leadership. Previously we have looked at how leadership behavior differs between men and women at all management levels (see our article, “The Way Women and Men Lead – Different, But Equally Effective,” on the MRG website: www.mrg.com). In the research reported here, we looked at only men and women in senior executive roles.

From our databases, we identified 172 executives: 13 male and 13 female CEOs, and 73 male and 73 female Senior Vice Presidents. The male and female executives were matched on type of industry, years of management experience, and organizational level. The executives came from 88 North American companies. Their average age was 45 years old, 94% were Caucasian, and 94% had attended four or more years of college. All were seasoned managers: 33% of the executives had 5-10 years of management experience, 27% had 11-15 years of experience, and 40% had over 16 years of experience.

As part of in-company leadership development programs, each of the executives had been assessed against MRG®’s leadership model using the Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ Questionnaire. The questionnaire measures twenty-two specific leadership dimensions. Together, these dimensions define the leader’s ability to develop a vision or direction for the organization, to engender the support of others for the vision, to implement the vision in organizational terms, and to ensure things happen according to plan. The leader’s orientation toward achieving results and their ability to work with and through others are also measured.

Each executive had completed a questionnaire rating his or her own leadership behavior. They were also evaluated on a 360-degree basis, with bosses, peers and direct reports assessing their leadership behavior and their effectiveness in the leadership role. On average, one boss, four peers and four direct reports rated each of the executives. 81% of bosses were males, 67% of peers were males, and 46% of direct reports were male. Observers had known the executives on average between four and six years.

Here is what our research found.

Women and Men Have Fewer Differences in Leadership Style at the Top

In our previous research, we found a number of differences between the leadership style of men and women. In this study, where we looked only at leaders at the very top, gender differences were fewer and smaller. We assume this is due to two key factors. One, the role requirements of senior positions are more consistent than for positions lower in the organization, and therefore require a more limited range of behavior to be successful. And two, the selection process for senior positions identifies individuals who are more like each other, whether men or women.

Women who make it to executive positions are more likely to be big picture thinkers and risk takers than women leaders in general.

In spite of this winnowing process, certain behavioral differences between men and women do persist into the executive suite.

- Men are still consistently seen as more restrained, steady, and able to work well under pressure. Bosses and direct reports also see men as taking a more traditional and thoughtful approach to problem solving, minimizing risk by learning from past experience.
- Women are still perceived to make less effort to keep their emotions in check, to operate with a great deal of energy and enthusiasm, and to let others know what they are thinking and feeling. They also continue to put more emphasis on setting goals, meeting deadlines, and monitoring work.

Unlike at lower levels, executive women were seen to be as strategic and as willing to take risks as men. Since big-picture thinking is one of the most critical attributes to being viewed as an effective leader, and one of the tickets to admission into executive ranks, this is an important finding. It may be that learning to take a more analytical and long-range, broad approach to problem solving is a key attribute of women leaders who break through the glass ceiling.

The Effectiveness of Men and Women Executives Is Evaluated Based on Different Standards

In addition to rating leadership behavior, bosses, peers and direct reports also rated each executive in the study on effectiveness. This allowed us to look at the interactions between leadership behavior, perceptions of leadership effectiveness, the gender of the executive being rated, and the observer group (boss, peers or direct reports). What we found was that:

- Direct reports use the same behavioral criteria for men and women when determining if an executive is effective or not.
- Bosses and peers, whose opinions count most when opportunities for advancement and promotions are made, do not. They use somewhat different criteria for judging the effectiveness of men and women leaders.

Leadership Behavior and Peer Ratings of Effectiveness:

There appears to be only one major difference between how peers rate the effectiveness of men and women. Peers see women who seek out and value the opinions of others to be more effective than women who don't. However, men who exhibit this behavior were not seen by peers as being more effective than men who do not use this approach.

Leadership Behavior and Bosses' Ratings of Effectiveness:

Bosses value men who actively seek out positions of authority and influence. In addition, for bosses, men who employ short-range, hands-on, practical strategies and a forceful, assertive, and competitive approach to achieving results are seen as the most effective.

Our research found that the bosses of senior executives value hard driving men and nice women.

The opposite is true for women. Bosses do not see women with these same characteristics as more effective. Instead, women who are accommodating to the needs of others and demonstrate an active concern for other people are seen as the more effective by bosses.

Conclusions

Our study results indicate that:

- There are fewer differences between the leadership behavior of men and women in top spots than for individuals in lower management levels.
- There appear to be two big differences between the average female manager and those women who have broken through the glass ceiling. Women in executive roles tend to be: 1) as oriented to strategic thinking, and 2) as willing to take risks, as men.
- The effectiveness of male and female executives may be measured using very different standards.

We hope that our research findings on leadership behavior are useful to women who are interested in developing the skills that will help them to break through the glass ceiling. We also realize that many readers may find some of our findings on measures of effectiveness discouraging. The bosses in this study (81% of whom are men) appear to continue to evaluate men and women along more traditional sex role-based stereotypes. They seem to be paying more attention to women's ability to create and maintain positive interpersonal relationships than their ability to develop effective business strategies and achieve results. Men who pay attention to how interpersonal factors may affect teams and team building, coaching and mentoring, and sensitivity to diversity, are not being given credit for their skills either when it comes to judgments about effectiveness. They too are judged along more traditional lines that value assertiveness and action-orientation in male leaders.

Outdated stereotypes about how men and women ought to behave still appear to play a part in today's corporate reality. The message for all of us is to be sensitive to long-standing

cultural biases, and to understand that as leaders, we may not be measured on solely objective terms of effectiveness.

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Results of other Management Research Group® studies on leadership can be found on our website at www.mrg.com.



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