

## We've Certainly Come a Long Way Baby! But Can We Stay There?

by Cheryl Green

The number of women and minority executives in corporate America is increasing. Just consider these statistics: In 1995, a mere 8.7 percent of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies were held by women. Today, that number has swelled to 15.7 percent, up from 12.5 percent in 2000. And, according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's 2001 private employment survey, 35.9 percent of corporate senior officials and managers are women. Women of color represent 1.6 percent of corporate officers, up from 1.3 percent in 2000, according to the Catalyst census.

The placement of more women and minorities at the senior levels in organizations has been earned. Better education, training, experience have positioned them well to compete and serve. What may have started as affirmative action and EEO initiatives in corporations has evolved to a true appreciation that diversity improves the bottom line. Researchers have found that workforce diversity leads to improved problem solving and decision making, enhanced creativity and innovation, and greater corporate flexibility, and more effective use of the non-traditional white male talent in the organization. (*Creating the Multicultural Organization* - by Taylor Cox)

But once these talented and educated women or minorities climb to the top, are companies doing what it takes to retain them? To answer that question, I have to pose another one: With the increased focus on executive coaching as a key strategy in executive and leadership development, are senior executives equipped to further develop their key women and minority executives?

The difficulty in answering these questions became apparent to me after receiving a series of coaching engagements for senior executive women and minorities. They were bright, talented, and valued by their organizations --- but were perceived as having a leadership skill deficit. I was being asked to coach them on a variety of behaviors to enhance their effectiveness in managing their people, time or business. An unfortunate pattern seemed to be emerging. Yes, there may have been developmental needs, but more importantly, the issues seemed to be solvable with effective performance management by their CEO bosses.

One of the more severe cases was of a talented black woman, "Sue," who was the head of multi-function department in a client organization. She has been a great spokesperson for the company, and was well-known in the local African-American community. But there were issues.... From the CEO on down, there were frequent complaints about Sue. She lacked focus and knowledge about the details of her department. She was unprepared for meetings, and failed to respond to voicemails and emails. She lacked industry knowledge even though they had suggested she take a couple of classes sponsored by industry associations to gain the fundamentals.

After a few meetings and interviews I could put the pieces of the puzzle together.

The CEO was angry and frustrated after having been supportive of her development and not seeing any or minimal improvement. When I arrived on the scene, he was emphatic that she had 60 days to fix this. I suggested a few scenarios that would require his involvement. He refused saying "She has to fix this!"

I later discovered that Sue's behavior had been an issue for two years. Why had they allowed it to go on this long? A few reasons surfaced. One was Sue's visibility in the external community. The second was that the company's reputation with the African American employees was problematic. Since Sue was the highest ranking black female, the CEO wouldn't want to shake things up.

A third, and rather disturbing, supposition on my part was that the CEO, generally a demanding and direct manager, was uncomfortable in managing a black female. Perhaps he was not providing the direct feedback needed to effect a change in behavior. Or, when confronted with Sue's defensiveness or lack of self awareness, was uncomfortable asking for help. Or, the risk of dealing with a "protected class" (i.e. a woman or minority) executive as he would a white male was too great. It could be a public relations nightmare. This is why, I deduced, he had finally given up and concluded that this was essentially "her problem". Thus absolving himself of any responsibility for what had happened. It was best left unresolved - or left to work itself out during a layoff or restructuring.

Despite stories like this, there are potential solutions to address what I see as chronic conditions in corporate America: the glass ceiling phenomenon and the desire to retain women and minorities. Here are a few tips based on my work with clients: women, minorities, and white male executives. Although there is quite a bit of work that needs to be done, they provide hope for resolving organizational issues like the cases presented here.

## **Tips for corporate leaders to address the glass ceiling and retention issues**

### **Get out and see the issues from the other side.**

A colleague recently commented that the biggest surprise he had in being assigned to lead his firm's diversity recruiting effort was that there was a problem --- a problem in the perceptions of the firm by women and minorities and antagonism expressed by majority members in the firm and in the surrounding community. The fact that he had no idea of many of the concerns expressed was scary.

Ask your women and minority executives about their experiences in the company. If you want to retain them, check in frequently to forestall any issues. If they are reporting directly to you, ask questions during informal meetings or during scheduled performance conversations. Checking in at least semi-annually provides you an opportunity to learn of issues before they become major obstacles to retention.

If there are key executive women and minorities further down in the organization, you may have to schedule a meeting expressly to elicit information or take advantage of random encounters to ask how things are going or if you can be of assistance to them. In an organization where there are unwritten norms about chain of command communication, you will have to make it clear to your direct reports and the broader organization that this is an area where you want first-hand information.

You may also host focus groups or informal roundtables with groups of women or minorities to understand their perceptions of issues related to their advancement in the company.

### **Have answers ready for the tough questions.**

In the recruiting process, women and minorities want to work for companies where they feel they have a chance to be successful. One of the key indicators of that potential success is that there are already women or minorities at the senior levels in the company. Once you've given the sales pitch of your company, candidates want answers. How many women or minorities are on the executive team in the company or at partner level in a firm? How long have they been with the company or firm? How many women or minorities have you promoted in the last two years and can I talk to them? How many women are in the partner group or at the VP level and have a family? If you can't answer those questions unequivocally, you have little chance of recruiting top talent --- except those who see value in being a "pioneer."

### **Get honest with yourself.**

Be honest in acknowledging any discomfort you have in managing or raising performance issues with women or minorities. Are you avoiding conversations that you would otherwise have with your other direct reports? Do you spend equal amounts of time with your women or minority direct reports as other reports in business and social situations? Do you find yourself speaking with your HR VP about the women or minority reports' issues more than other direct reports? Are you more at ease with some employees than others? Are there any patterns you can identify? An external coach or your internal HR person may be able to help you identify the double standards you may be creating.

### **Get honest with others.**

Lack of candid feedback is a key derailer for women and minorities. It's a vicious cycle: Without feedback, they don't grow.... If they don't grow, their perceived value to the organization fades .... If their value is diminished, they may not perform up to their potential. If they aren't performing up to their potential they aren't selected for larger opportunities. They flounder, they stagnate or leave. Or their underperformance serves as a justification for not hiring "another one."

Get help in providing the necessary feedback any leader in your organization requires to perform up to expectations. Are you afraid of their reaction? Afraid of hurting their feelings? Are you afraid that your intentions will be misunderstood? Face the fear and write down what you'd like to communicate. A coach or internal HR professional may help you in deciphering issues. In *Difficult Conversations*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, the authors describe the benefit of deciphering the three parts of a difficult conversation. The "what happened" conversation (what's the story), the "feelings" conversation (what should we do with our emotions) and the "identity" conversation (what does this say about me).

If you focus on the goal of developing the other person or improving the business result for the department or company, it may ease the discomfort associated with the race or gender difference.

### **Face the fear.**

While the risk of 'protected class liability' is real, (women, minorities, over 50

employees etc.) the benefits of learning to manage a diverse workforce and discuss issues openly are immeasurable. Many coaching colleagues and HR executives have reported that their senior executive clients are reluctant to address performance issues of women or minorities as aggressively as they might others due to fears about accusations of discrimination. Compounding the problem, the issue is one that is rarely discussed.

Most corporations today have diversity or inclusion as a corporate objective. Yet few training programs exist where corporate executives can learn to manage or communicate with men or women who are significantly different. Senior executives can model the way by seeking support of an external coach or consultant along with their internal HR executives to manage the relationships and communicate a corporate standard of leadership effectiveness as it relates to diversity management. Perhaps, just as organizations have leadership programs for women and minorities, we will soon develop leadership programs for executives to work effectively with diverse executives.

### **Champion the cause.**

While we may like to think everyone has the same opportunities --- it's time to face a reality of corporate life. Women and minority executives need to be supported. Many companies sponsor a variety of programs targeting their women or minority leaders. One utility piloted a special on-boarding process for key hires. They provide briefings on the organization structure and culture, schedule appointments with other key executives, provide questions to be asked to help new executives uncover the unwritten rules of the game, provide mentors, and schedule periodic performance reviews with the individual and their boss. Additionally, bonuses are tied to diversity retention.

Executives can champion the recruitment and retention of women and minorities by offering development opportunities. Even if promotion opportunities aren't immediately available, offer challenging projects or other short term assignments instead. Invest in executive development programs or consider offering coaching support for key women and minority leaders.

Finally, stay involved in the process; don't delegate the ongoing monitoring of progress. A key retention tactic is to throw more money or stock options at an executive when they announce their intentions to leave. While this may achieve short term success in some cases, some departing executives find it insulting and it may be counterproductive to the longer term goals of making your company or firm one where women and minorities feel they can succeed.

**Excellence in Action:** Don't be afraid of having honest conversation about what's really going on with race and gender issues among senior executives.

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