



## Synopsis

# A Modern Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling

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### Small Wins

Incremental changes aimed at biases so entrenched that they are not noticed until they are gone. The advantage of a small wins strategy is to make progress and change while invoking little or no resistance.

*"...gender discrimination is so deeply imbedded in organizational life as to be virtually indiscernible. Even the women who feel its impact are often hard-pressed to know what hit them."*

### *Glass Ceiling*

Women at the highest levels of business are still rare. They comprise only 10% of senior managers in Fortune 500 companies; less than 4% of the uppermost ranks of CEO, president, executive vice president, and COO; and less than 3% of top corporate earners. Statistics suggest that as women approach the top of the corporate ladder, many jump off, disillusioned and frustrated.

### APPROACHES TO PROMOTING INCLUSION

#### *Assimilation*

Encourage or insist that the under-represented group adopt the practices of the majority and assimilate into the existing culture. Companies who adopt this approach encourage women to adopt more masculine attributes. HR departments train women in assertive leadership, negotiation, golf.

#### *Accommodation*

Accommodate the unique needs of the under-represented group. For women this can mean instituting formal mentoring programs to replace the informal networks from which they are often excluded, creating alternate career tracks or an extra year on the tenure clock to help women in their child-bearing years, or making flexible work arrangements to accommodate child and/or elder care.

#### *Value Differences*

Emphasize the value of the differences under-represented groups bring to the workplace. Companies institute sensitivity training to help managers appreciate traditionally "feminine" activities or styles, such as listening or collaboration.

*“[A] source of power in the small-win approach is that it routs discrimination by fixing the organization, not the women who work for it...”*

*[I]t frees women from feelings of self-blame and anger that can come with invisible inequity. And it removes the label of troublemaker from women who complain that something is not right.”*

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#### REFERENCE

Meyerson, Debra and Joyce Fletcher. 2000. *A Modest Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling*. Harvard Business Review Jan–Feb 2000:127–136.

Reprint R00107 can be purchased from [www.hbrreprints.org](http://www.hbrreprints.org).

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### *Implementing a Small Wins Strategy*

Once an organization determines that it has a gender inclusion problem—female employees won’t join the company, or leave in alarming numbers—a search for the cause starts. Diagnosing the problem is difficult because the culture is so familiar, which makes it invisible—like the water we swim in. Employee interviews and focus groups are conducted to determine some of the following:

- ⊗ How do people accomplish their work? What, if anything, gets in the way?
- ⊗ Who succeeds in the organization? Who doesn’t?
- ⊗ How and when do we interact with one another? Who participates? Who doesn’t?
- ⊗ What kinds of work and work styles are valued? What kinds are invisible?
- ⊗ What is expected of leaders?
- ⊗ What are the norms about time?
- ⊗ What aspects of individual performance are discussed in most evaluations?
- ⊗ How is competence identified during hiring, promotion, and performance evaluations?

These questions are used to unearth cultural patterns and their consequences. Which practices affect men differently than women, and why? Which have unintended consequences for the organization? After some insight is gained, small wins can be designed. Each small win is a trial intervention and a probe for learning, intended not to overturn the system, but to slowly and surely make it better.

### *“Unbounded Time”*

An example given from the authors’ practice is the case of a European retail company who had high turnover among female employees. The cultural analysis uncovered a lack of clarity and discipline around time, which resulted in meetings running late, last-minute schedule changes, and tardiness. The issue became known as “unbounded time,” and once articulated, was immediately apparent how it affected women more harshly than men. People realized that the lack of clarity and discipline in the company had negative consequences not just for people but also for the quality of work.

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