

A Modest Manifesto For Shattering the Glass Ceiling

by Debra E. Meyerson and Joyce K. Fletcher



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It took a revolution to get women where they are in business today. But now, to push hard-won gains wider and deeper, a different approach is necessary. It is a strategy based on small wins—incremental changes that have the power to transform organizations positively for both men and women.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM PROVIDES an occasion to celebrate the remarkable progress made by women. That women now hold seats on corporate boards, run major companies, and are regularly featured on the covers of business magazines as prominent leaders and power brokers would have been unimaginable even a half century ago.

But the truth is, 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.¹ Statistics also suggest that as women approach the top of the corporate ladder, many jump off, frustrated or disillusioned with the business world. Clearly, there have been gains, but as we enter the year 2000, the glass ceiling remains. What will it take to finally shatter it?

Not a revolution. Not this time. In 1962, 1977, and even 1985, the women's movement used radical rhetoric and legal action to drive out overt discrimination, but most of the barriers that persist today are insidious—a revolution couldn't find them to blast away. Rather, gender discrimination now is so deeply embedded in organizational life as to be virtually indiscernible. Even the women who feel its impact are often hard-pressed to know what hit them.

That is why we believe that the glass ceiling will be shattered in the new millennium only through a strategy that uses *small wins*²—incremental changes aimed at biases so entrenched in the system that they're not even noticed until they're gone. Our research shows that the small-wins strategy is a powerful way of chipping away the barriers that hold women back without sparking the kind of sound and fury that scares people into resistance. And because the small-wins strategy creates change through diagnosis, dialogue, and experimentation, it usually improves overall efficiency and performance. The strategy benefits not just women but also men and the organization as a whole.

The Problem with No Name

Time was, it was easy to spot gender discrimination in the corporate world. A respected female executive would lose a promotion to a male colleague with less experience, for instance, or a talented female manager would find herself demoted after her maternity leave. Today such blatant cases are rare; they've been wiped out by laws and by organizations' increased awareness that they have nothing to gain, and much to lose, by keeping women out of positions of authority.

That doesn't mean, however, that gender inequity has vanished. It has just gone underground. Today discrimination against women lingers in a plethora of work practices and cultural norms that only appear unbiased. They are common and mundane—and woven into the fabric of an organization's status quo—which is why most people don't notice them, let alone question them. But they create a subtle pattern of *systemic* disadvantage, which blocks all but a few women from career advancement.

For an example of this modern-day gender inequity, take the case of a global retail company

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The Research: A Joint Effort

The research for this article began in 1992 and is ongoing. Our work—including interviews, surveys, archival data, focus groups, and observations—has taken place at 11 organizations. They included three *Fortune* 500 companies, two international research organizations, two public agencies, a global retail organization, an investment firm, a school, and a private foundation. The goal of each project was to create the kind of small wins and learning reported in this article.

The ideas presented in this article were developed in collaboration with three colleagues: Robin Ely, an associate professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs in New York City and an affiliated faculty member at the Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons Graduate School of Management, in Boston; Deborah Kolb, a codirector of the Center for Gender in Organizations, a professor of management at Simmons Graduate School of Management, and a senior fellow at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School; and anthropologist Deborah Merrill-Sands, a codirector of the Center for Gender in Organizations and an expert in conducting research on gender in organizations.

The research in this article builds directly on the foundational work of Lotte Bailyn, the T. Wilson Professor of Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Rhona Rapoport, director of the Institute of Family and Environmental Research in London. They also collaborated on many of the projects mentioned in this article.

based in Europe that couldn't figure out why it had so few women in senior positions and such high turnover among women in its middle-manager ranks. The problem was particularly vexing because the company's executives publicly touted their respect for women and insisted they wanted the company to be "a great place for women to work."

Despite its size, the company had a strong entrepreneurial culture. Rules and authority were informal; people were as casual about their schedules as they were about the dress code. Meetings were routinely canceled and regularly ran late. Deadlines were ignored because they constantly shifted, and new initiatives arose so frequently that people thought nothing of interrupting one another or declaring crises that demanded immediate attention.

The company's cultural norms grew from its manner of conducting business. For instance, managers were expected to be available at all times to attend delayed or emergency meetings. And these meetings themselves followed certain norms. Because roles and authority at the company were ambiguous, people felt free to make suggestions—even decisions—about any area of the company that interested them. A manager in charge of window displays, for example, might very well recommend a change in merchandising, or vice versa. To prevent changes in their own area from being made without their input, managers scrambled to attend as many meetings as possible. They had to in order to protect their turf.

The company's norms made it extraordinarily difficult for everyone—women and men—to work effectively. But they were particularly pernicious for women for two reasons. First, women typically bear a disproportionate amount of responsibility for home and family and thus have more demands on their time outside the office. Women who worked set hours—even if they spanned ten hours a day—ended up missing essential conversations and important plans for new products. Their circumscribed schedules also made them appear less committed than their male counterparts. In most instances, that was not the case, but the way the company operated day to day—its very system—made it impossible to prove otherwise.

The meetings themselves were run in a way that put women in a double bind. People often had to speak up to defend their turf, but when women did so, they were vilified. They were labeled “control freaks”; men acting the same way were called “passionate.” As one female executive told us, “If you stick your neck out, you're dead.”

A major investment firm provides another example of how invisible—even unintentional—gender discrimination thrives in today's companies. The firm sincerely wanted to increase the number of women it was hiring from business schools. It reasoned it would be able to hire more women if it screened more women, so it increased the number of women interviewed during recruiting visits to business school campuses. The change, however, had no impact. Why? Because, the 30 minutes allotted for each interview—the standard practice at most business schools—was not long enough for middle-aged male managers, who were conducting the vast majority of the interviews, to connect with young female candidates sufficiently to see beyond their directly relevant technical abilities. Therefore, most women were disqualified from the running. They hadn't had enough time to impress their interviewer.

The Roots of Inequity

The barriers to women's advancement in organizations today have a relatively straightforward cause. Most organizations have been created by and for men and are based on male experiences. Even though women have entered the workforce in droves in the past generation, and it is generally agreed that they add enormous value, organizational definitions of competence and leadership are still predicated on traits stereotypically associated with men: tough, aggressive, decisive. And even though many households today have working fathers and mothers, most organizations act as if the historical division of household labor still holds—with women primarily responsible for matters of the hearth. Outdated or not, those realities drive organizational life. Therefore, the global retail company was able to develop a practice of late and last-minute meetings because most men can be available 15 hours a day. The investment firm developed a practice of screening out women candidates because men, who were doing most of the interviewing, *naturally* bond with other men. In other words, organizational practices mirror societal norms.

That the “problem with no name” arises from a male-based culture does not mean that men are to blame. In fact, our perspective on gender discrimination does not presume intent, and it certainly does not assume that all men benefit from the way work is currently organized. Lots of companies run by men are working hard to create a fair environment for both sexes. And many men do not embrace the traditional division of labor; some men surely wish the conventions of a *Father Knows Best* world would vanish.

Men, then, are not to blame for the pervasive gender inequity in organizations today—but neither are women. And yet our research shows that ever since gender inequity came onto the scene as one of business's big problems, women have blamed themselves. That feeling has been reinforced by managers who have tried to solve the problem by fixing women. Indeed, over the past 30-odd years, organizations have used three approaches to rout gender discrimination, each one implying that women are somehow to blame because they “just don't fit in.”

Tall People in a Short World

To describe the three approaches, we like to use a metaphor that replaces gender with height. Imagine, therefore, a world made by and for short people. In this world, everyone in power is under five-foot-five, and the most powerful are rarely taller than

five-foot-three. Now imagine that after years of discrimination, tall people finally call for change—and short people agree that the current world is unfair and amends should be made.

Short people first try to right things by teaching tall people to act like short people—to minimize their differences by stooping to fit in the doorways,

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for example, or by hunching over to fit in the small chairs in the conference room. Once tall people learn these behaviors, short people insist, they will fit right in.

Some short people take another approach to routing discrimination: they make their world more accommodating to tall people by fixing some of the structural barriers that get in their way. They build six-foot-high doors in the back of the building and purchase desks that don’t knock tall people’s knees. They even go so far as to create some less demanding career paths—tall-people tracks—for those who are unwilling or unable to put up with the many realities of the short world that just can’t be changed.

Other short people take a third approach: they celebrate the differences of their tall associates. Tall people stand out in a crowd, short people say, and they can reach things on high shelves. Let’s recognize the worth of those skills and put them to good use! And so the short people “create equity” by putting tall people in jobs where their height is an advantage, like working in a warehouse or designing brand extensions targeted to tall people.

Those three approaches should sound familiar to anyone who has been involved in the many gender initiatives proliferating in the corporate world. Companies that take the first approach encourage women to assimilate—to adopt more masculine attributes and learn the “games their mothers never taught them.” Thus, HR departments train women in assertive leadership, decision making, and even golf. Male colleagues take women to their lunch clubs, coach them on speaking up more in meetings, and suggest they take “tough guy” assignments in factories or abroad.

Companies that take the second approach accommodate the unique needs and situations of women. Many offer formal mentoring programs to compensate for women’s exclusion from informal networks. Others add alternative career tracks or an

extra year on the tenure clock to help women in their childbearing years. Still others offer extended maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, even rooms for nursing infants.

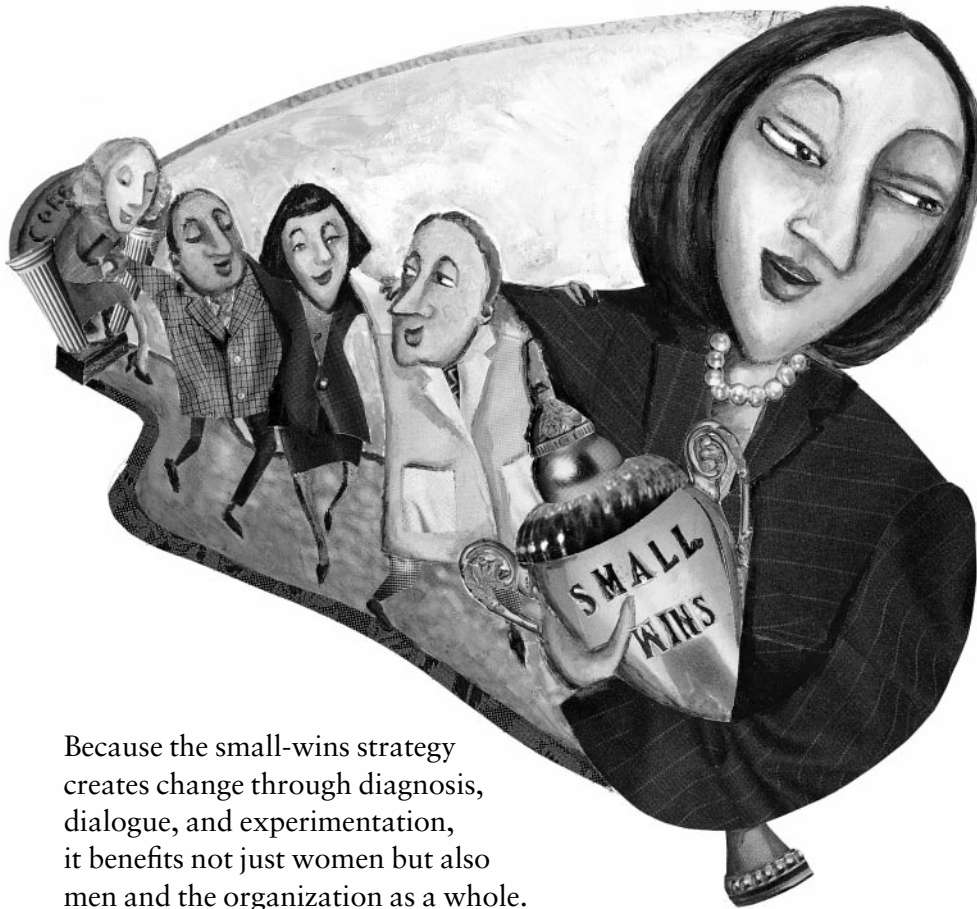
In the third approach, companies forgo assimilation and accommodation and instead emphasize the differences that women bring to the workplace. They institute sensitivity training to help male managers appreciate traditionally “feminine” activities or styles, such as listening and collaborating. And they eagerly put women’s assumed differences to work by channeling them into jobs

where they market products to women or head up HR initiatives.

All of these approaches have helped advance women’s equity in the corporate world. But by now they have gone about as far as they can. Why? Because they proffer solutions that deal with the *symptoms* of gender inequity rather than the sources of inequity itself. Take the first approach. While many female executives can now play golf and have used relationships formed on the fairways to move into positions of greater power, these new skills will never eradicate the deeply entrenched, systemic factors within corporations that hold many women back.

The same is true of the second approach of accommodation through special policies and benefits. It gives women stilts to play on an uneven playing field, but it doesn’t flatten out the field itself. So, for example, mentoring programs may help women meet key people in a company’s hierarchy, but they don’t change the fact that informal networks, to which few women are privy, determine who really gets resources, information, and opportunities. Launching family-friendly programs doesn’t challenge the belief that balancing home and work is fundamentally a woman’s problem. And adding time to a tenure clock or providing alternative career tracks does little to change the expectation that truly committed employees put work first—they need no accommodation.

The limits of the third approach are also clear. Telling people to “value differences” doesn’t mean they will. That is why so many women who are encouraged to use “feminine” skills and styles find their efforts valued only in the most marginal sense. For example, women are applauded for holding teams together and are even told, “we couldn’t have succeeded without you,” but when promotions and rewards are distributed, they are awarded to the “rugged individuals” who assertively promoted their own ideas or came up with a onetime



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technical fix. Ultimately, the celebration approach may actually channel women into dead-end jobs and reinforce unhelpful stereotypes.

A Fourth Approach: Linking Equity and Effectiveness

Since 1992, we have helped organizations implement a fourth approach to eradicating gender inequity. This approach starts with the premise – to continue the metaphor – that the world of short people cannot be repaired with piecemeal fixes aimed at how tall people act and what work they do. Because the short world has been in the making for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, its assumptions and practices – such as job descriptions that conflate the physical characteristics of short people with the requirements of the job – will not be undone by assimilation or accommodation or even celebration. It will be undone by a persistent campaign of incremental changes that discover and destroy the deeply embedded roots of discrimination. These changes will be driven by short and tall

people together – because both will ultimately benefit from a world where height is irrelevant to the way work is designed and distributed.

Returning to the real world of men and women, the fourth approach starts with the belief that gender inequity is rooted in our cultural patterns and therefore in our organizational systems. Although its goals are revolutionary, it doesn't advocate revolution. Instead, it emphasizes that existing systems can be reinvented by altering the raw materials of organizing – concrete, everyday practices in which biases are expressed.

The fourth approach begins when someone, somewhere in the organization realizes that the business is grappling with a gender inequity problem. Usually, the problem makes itself known through several traditional indicators. For ex-

ample, recruiting efforts fail to get women to join the company in meaningful numbers; many women are stalled just before they reach leadership positions or are not rising at the same rate as their male colleagues; women tend to hold low-visibility jobs or jobs in classic “women's” departments, such as HR; senior women are waiting longer or opting to have fewer (or no) children; women have fewer resources to accomplish comparable tasks; women's pay and pay raises are not on par with men's; and women are leaving the organization at above average rates.

After recognizing that there is a problem, the next step is diagnosis. (For a description of the diagnosis stage of the small-wins strategy, see the sidebar “How to Begin Small Wins.”) Then people must get together to talk about the work culture and determine which everyday practices are undermining effectiveness. Next, experimentation begins. Managers can launch a small initiative – or several at one time – to try to eradicate the practices that produce inequity and replace them with practices that work better for everyone. Often the experiment works – and more quickly than people would

How to Begin Small Wins

Once an organization determines that it has a problem—female employees won't join the company, say, or women are leaving in alarming numbers—it is time to start searching for causes. Such diagnosis involves senior managers probing an organization's practices and beliefs to uncover its deeply embedded sources of inequity. But how?

An effective first step is often one-on-one interviews with employees to uncover practices and beliefs in the company's culture—how work gets done, for instance, what activities are valued, and what the assumptions are about competence. After that, focus groups can more closely examine questionable practices. Some companies have found it useful to have women and men meet separately for these initial discussions, as long as the outcomes of these meetings are shared.

Diagnosis isn't always straightforward. After all, the group is looking for the source of a relatively invisible problem. Yet we have found a collection of questions that help keep the process on track:

- How do people in this organization accomplish their work? What, if anything, gets in the way?
- Who succeeds in this 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 in this organization? What kinds are invisible?
- What is expected of leaders in this company?
- What are the norms about time in this organization?
- What aspects of individual performance are discussed the most in evaluations?
- How is competence identified during hiring and performance evaluations?

After the initial diagnosis, managers should identify cultural patterns and their consequences. For example, Which practices affect men differently than women, and why? Which ones have unintended consequences for the business? Following this analysis, change agents can discuss these patterns with different people. We call this stage "holding up the mirror," and it represents the first part of developing a new shared narrative in the organization.

The next step, of course, is designing the small wins. We have found that by this point in the process, groups usually have little trouble identifying ways to make concrete changes. It is critical, however, that the managers guiding the process keep the number and scope of initiatives relatively limited and strategically targeted. Managers and other change agents should remind the organization that a single experiment should not be seen as an end in itself. 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.

suspect. Sometimes it fixes only the symptom and loses its link to the underlying cause. When that happens, other incremental changes must be tried before a real win occurs.

Small wins are not formulaic. Each organization is unique, and its expressions of gender inequity are, too. Consider, then, how the following companies used incremental change to bring about systemic change.

Let's begin with the European retail company that was having trouble keeping its women employees. When the problem finally became impossible to ignore, the president invited us to help the organization understand what was going on. The answer wasn't immediately obvious, of course, but as we began talking to people, it became clear that it had something to do with the lack of clarity and discipline around time. Then the question was raised, Did that lack of clarity affect men and women differently? The answer was a resounding yes.

After discussing and testing the idea further, executives started using the phrase "unbounded time" to refer to meeting overruns, last-minute schedule changes, and tardiness. The term struck a chord; it quickly circulated throughout the company and sparked widespread conversation about how meeting overload and lax scheduling damaged everyone's productivity and creativity.

At that point, the president could have asked the company's female managers to become more available (assimilation). He could have mandated that all meetings take place between nine and five (accommodation). Or he could have suggested that female employees work together in projects and at times that played to their unique strengths (celebration). Instead, he and a few other senior managers quietly began to model a more disciplined use of time, and even discouraged people who suggested last-minute or late-night meetings.

Soon people began to catch on, and a new narrative started to spread through the company. The phrase "unbounded time" was used more and more often when people wanted to signal that they thought others were contributing to ineffectiveness and inequity by being late or allowing meetings to run overtime. 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. Over a nine-month period, norms began to shift, and as new people were hired, senior managers made sure that they understood the company was "informal *and* disciplined." To this day, the concept of "unboundedness" pops up whenever people feel the organization is slipping back into norms that silently support gender inequity.

The small-wins strategy also worked at the investment firm that tried—unsuccessfully—to hire more women by increasing the number of interviews. After executives realized that their 30-minute interviewing approach was backfiring, they began to investigate their entire recruiting practice. They examined how the questions they asked candidates, their interview procedures, and even the places in which they were recruiting might be giving traditional people—that is, male MBAs—an advantage.

And so a series of small initiatives was launched. First, the firm lengthened its interviews to 45 minutes. Partners acknowledged that shorter interviews might have been forcing them to rely on first impressions, which are so often a function of perceived similarity. Although comfort level may make an interview go smoothly, it doesn't tell you if a candidate has valuable skills, ideas, and experience. Second, and perhaps more important, the firm revised its interviewing protocol. In the past, partners questioned candidates primarily about their previous "deal experience," which allowed only those who had worked on Wall Street to shine. Again, that practice favored men, as most investment bank associates are men. In their new approach, managers followed a set protocol and began asking candidates to talk about how they would contribute to the firm's mission. The interviews shifted radically in tone and substance. Instead of boasting from former Wall Street stars, they heard many nontraditional candidates—both women and men—describe a panoply of managerial skills, creative experiences, and diverse work styles. And indeed, these people are bringing new energy and talent into the firm. (As an added bonus, the following year the firm arrived at one prominent business school to find it was earning a reputation as a great place to work, making its recruiting efforts even more fruitful.)

Both the retail company and investment firm saw their equity and performance improve after implementing changes in their systems that could hardly be called radical. The same kind of success story can be told about an international scientific research institute. The institute, which produces new agricultural technologies for farmers, had a strong cultural norm of rewarding individual achievement. When a breakthrough was reached, a new product was developed, or a grant was won, individual scientists usually got the credit and rewards. The norm meant that support work by secretaries and technicians, as well as by scientists and professionals in departments like biotechnology and economics, was often ignored.

Paradoxically, top-level managers at the institute spoke enthusiastically about the value of teamwork and asserted that success was a group, not an individual, product. In fact, the organization planned to move to a team-based structure because senior managers considered it an imperative for addressing complex cross-functional challenges. But in the everyday workings of the organization, no one paid much heed to supporting contributors. The stars were individual "heroes."

The undervaluation of support work was an issue that affected many women because they were more likely to be in staff positions or scientific roles that were perceived as support disciplines. In addition, women more often took on support work because they were expected to do so or because they felt it was critical to a project's success. They connected people with one another, for instance, smoothed disagreements, facilitated teamwork, and taught employees new skills.

Many women expressed frustration with this type of work because it simply wasn't recognized or rewarded. Yet they were reluctant to stop because the costs of not doing it were clear to them. Without it, information would flow less easily, people would miss deadlines, more crises would erupt, and teams would break down. As we talked with them, women began to recognize the value of their efforts, and they gave them a name: "invisible work."

As in the European retail company, naming the problem had a striking effect. It turned out that invisible work wasn't just a problem for women. Men and women started talking about how the lack of value placed on invisible work was related to much larger systemic patterns. For example, people noted that the company tended to give sole credit for projects to the lead scientists, even when others had contributed or had helped spare the projects from major crises. People, especially women, admitted that mentors and bosses had advised them—and they had often advised one another—to avoid taking on invisible work to focus on work that would afford more recognition. Stemming from these informal discussions, a narrative about the importance of invisible work began to spread throughout the organization.

For senior managers who saw the link between invisible work and their goal of moving to a team-based structure, the challenge was to find ways to make invisible work visible—and to ensure it was valued and more widely shared by men and women.

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A task force on the topic proposed a new organizationwide evaluation system that would gather input from peers and direct reports—people to whom an employee’s invisible work is visible. Although that step seemed insignificant to many, it was approved and launched.

Several years later, people say that the institute is a different place. The first small win—the new evaluation process—gave way to others, such as a new process to increase information flow up, down, and sideways; new criteria for team leaders that empha-

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size facilitation rather than direction; and new norms about tapping expertise, no matter where it resides in the hierarchy. Implicitly, these changes challenged the prevailing masculine, individualist image of

competence and leadership and opened the way for alternatives more conducive to teamwork. Today both men and women say there is a stronger sense of fairness. And senior managers say that the systemic changes brought about by the small-wins strategy were central to the institute’s successful move to a team-based structure.

Small Wins Can Make Big Gains

It’s surprising how quickly people can come up with ideas for small wins—and how quickly they can be put into action. Take, for example, the case of the finance department at a large manufacturing company. The department had a strong norm of *overdoing* work. Whenever senior managers asked for information, the department’s analysts would generate multiple scenarios complete with sophisticated graphs and charts.

The fact was, however, senior managers often only wanted an analyst’s back-of-the-envelope estimates. People in the finance department even suspected as much, but there was an unspoken policy of never asking the question. The reasons? First, they worried that questions would indicate that they couldn’t figure out the scope of the request themselves and hence were not competent. Second, many of the requests came in at the end of the day. Analysts feared that asking, “How much detail do you want?” might look like a way to avoid working late. To show their commitment, they felt they had to stay and give every request the full treatment.

The norm of devoting hours on end to each request hit women in the department especially hard. As women in an industry dominated by men, they

felt they had to work extra hard to demonstrate their competence and commitment, especially when commitment was measured, at least in part, by time spent at work. However, the norm negatively affected men, too. The extra work, simply put, was a waste of time; it lowered productivity and dampened enthusiasm. The organization suffered: talented people avoided the department because of its reputation for overtime.

The small-wins process at this company began when we met with a group of analysts and managers in the finance department. We presented our diagnosis of the root causes of the overwork problem and asked if they could come up with small, concrete solutions to counteract it. It didn’t take them long. Within an hour, the analysts had designed a one-page form that asked senior managers to describe the parameters of each request. How much detail was required? What was the desired output? The form very simply took the onus off individuals to ask taboo questions, relieving women of the fear that they might appear less than committed and allowing all analysts—not just women—to use their time more productively.

Interestingly, after only a short time, the form was dropped. Analysts reported that simply having a conversation with their managers about the company’s norms and taboos changed the department’s dynamics. By establishing an open dialogue, analysts could now ask clarifying questions without fearing that they were signaling incompetence or lack of commitment.

Small wins make sense even at companies that already have programs designed to combat gender inequity. Consider the case of a New York advertising agency that was particularly proud of its mentoring program aimed at developing high-potential female leaders. Although that program got women’s names into the mix, the jobs that women were ultimately offered tended to be in human resource-type positions—positions women were thought to be particularly well suited for. These jobs often required a high level of skill, but their lack of rain-making potential resulted in career disadvantages that accumulated over time.

The situation was compounded by an unspoken rule at the company of never saying no to developmental opportunities. This norm, like so many others, seems gender neutral. It appears to be a risk for both men and women to pass up opportunities, particularly those offered in the name of developing leadership potential. Yet because of the different types of opportunities offered, women stood to lose whether they said yes or no. Saying no signaled lack of commitment. But saying yes meant they would

spend valuable time and energy doing a job that was unlikely to yield the same career benefits that men were deriving from the opportunities offered to them. What made the situation particularly problematic for the organization was that the HR-type jobs that women were reluctant to accept were often critical to overall functioning.

The women in the mentoring programs were the first to realize the negative impact of the company's informal policy of channeling women into these critical HR positions. So they got together to brainstorm about ways to extricate themselves from their double bind. (Like many small-wins campaigns, this one was launched with the knowledge and approval of senior management. For ideas on how to start the change process without official sanction, see the sidebar "Going It Alone.") The women coached one another on how to respond to the HR-type job offers in ways that would do minimal damage to their careers. For instance, they came up with the solution of accepting the job with the stipulation that senior managers assign its year-end objectives a "rainmaking equivalency quotient." The group pushed senior managers to think about the underlying assumptions of putting women in HR jobs. Did they really believe men could not manage people? If so, didn't that mean that men should be given the developmental opportunities in HR? These questions led senior managers to several revelations, which were especially important since the organization had recently decided to sell itself to potential clients as the relationship-oriented alternative to other agencies. The full effect of this small-win effort, launched recently, will likely be seen over the course of the next few years.

The Power of Small Wins

Small wins are not silver bullets; anyone familiar with real organizational change knows that there is no such thing. Rather, the reason small wins work so effectively is that they are not random efforts. They unearth and upend systemic barriers to women's progress. Consider how:

First, small wins tied to the fourth approach help organizations give a name to practices and assumptions that are so subtle they are rarely questioned, let alone seen as the root of organizational ineffectiveness. When the retail company started using the phrase "unbounded time," people began developing a shared understanding of how the lack of discipline around time affected men and women differently and how the lack of boundaries in the culture contributed to people's inability to get work

Going It Alone

One of the most important virtues of the fourth approach is that it helps people realize that they are not alone: the problems are systemic, not individual. That said, individuals or small groups may still have to "go it alone" without the support of an organizational mandate or formal change program. Although first efforts are aimed at subverting the status quo, over time they may, in fact, be embraced by the organization because they create the impetus for learning and positive change.

Individuals can adopt one of two methods. First, they can simply operate solo. They can conduct a diagnosis, identify sources of gender discrimination, and design small wins themselves. That approach is hard, as the process depends so heavily on frank discussion and testing of ideas. That is why we suggest that individuals use a second method: finding like minds to join them in the exercise. The group can be internal to the organization or it can include people from various organizations. It can include only women or it can include women and men. The point is to hear one another's stories about workplace practices and their consequences in order to discover common themes and underlying factors. Small groups can generate small wins on their own and experiment with them quietly but persistently.

So often, the "problem with no name" is experienced by women as a situation that affects them alone or worse, as a problem with them. In our executive education programs, we have seen that when women share their experiences, they recognize that many of the problems they experience as individuals are actually systemic and not unique to them or to their organization. And they realize that promoting change can benefit the organization as well as the men and women in it. That insight motivates them to work on their own and in collaboration with others to create small wins that can make a big difference.

accomplished. The act of naming the "problem with no name" opens up the possibility of change.

Second, small wins combine changes in behavior with changes in understanding. When a small win works—when it makes even a minor difference in systemic practices—it helps to verify a larger theory. It says that something bigger is going on.

Third, and related, small wins tie the local to the global. That is, people involved in small wins see how their efforts affect larger, systemic change, in

much the same way as people taking part in small-town recycling campaigns come to understand their impact in decreasing global warming. This big-picture outlook is both energizing and self-reinforcing, and it links seemingly unrelated small wins together.

Fourth, small wins have a way of snowballing. One small change begets another, and eventually these small changes add up to a whole new system. Consider again the investment firm that revised its recruiting processes. It realized that something as simple as lengthening interview time could begin to address its recruitment problem. But if it had stopped there, it is unlikely that fundamental changes would have occurred. Recognizing why the length of an interview was an issue—how “feeling comfortable” and “fitting the mold” had been implicit selection criteria—helped the firm make additional, more substantial changes in, for instance, the questions asked. This change is encouraging the executives to look into initiatives to revise other practices, ranging from publicity to training, that also held hidden biases, not just for women but also for other underrepresented groups.

The fifth and final source of power in the small-wins approach is that it routs discrimination by fixing the organization, not the women who work for it. In that way, it frees women from feelings of self-blame and anger that can come with invisible in-

equity. And it removes the label of troublemaker from women who complain that something is not right. Small wins say, “Yes, something is wrong. It is the organization itself, and when it is fixed, all will benefit.”

As we enter the new millennium, we believe that it is time for new metaphors to capture the subtle, systemic forms of discrimination that still linger. It’s not the ceiling that’s holding women back; it’s the whole structure of the organizations in which we work: the foundation, the beams, the walls, the very air. The barriers to advancement are not just above women, they are all around them. But dismantling our organizations isn’t the solution. We must ferret out the hidden barriers to equity and effectiveness one by one. The fourth approach asks leaders to act as thoughtful architects and to reconstruct buildings beam by beam, room by room, rebuilding with practices that are stronger and more equitable, not just for women but for all people.

1. Statistics on women of color are even more drastic. Although women of color make up 23% of the U.S. women’s workforce, they account for only 14% of women in managerial roles. African-American women comprise only 6% of the women in managerial roles.

2. The small-wins approach to change was developed by Karl Weick. See “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems,” *American Psychologist*, 1984.

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