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The Real Glass Ceiling

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Everyone has heard of the glass ceiling in companies: an invisible barrier that prevents otherwise able employees from promotion to top positions. Usually the context is the problem that women face in being accepted into the highest corporate ranks. While gender discrimination is still a shameful fact in some corporations, there is another, far more powerful and common cause for the presence of a glass ceiling – and this one affects men just as much as women.

Merit Rules, OK?

Let's take a hypothetical young high flier. It won't matter whether our choice is male or female. The outcome will be exactly the same.

From the start of this high flier's career, all the emphasis is on achievement and performance. He or she works hard, learns well and rises through the management hierarchy entirely on one principle – merit. Each promotion is fairly and fully earned, based on performance delivered. That's pretty much how it is in the major corporations of the world. Professionals and managers rise through the lower and middle ranks primarily on merit. Those who deliver excellent performance advance and the rest stand still or are let go. It's known as a meritocracy: a place where merit rules.

The long-standing GE dictum of always letting go of the lowest performing 10% of people is a perfect example of this kind of process at work. Results and achievement – merit – are the value base of any meritocracy. Looked at another way, they're the currency that buys advancement. If you're rich in this currency, you're highly regarded and probably well rewarded materially and financially.

Same Game, New Rules

Somewhere around the boundary between upper middle management and executive level the currency suddenly changes. The

precise point of the change varies a little between organizations. Sometimes it's right at the step up to senior executive level; sometimes one or two ranks lower. Wherever it is, the change is invisible and rarely, if ever, acknowledged openly. Here's what happens to our high flier.

As he or she crosses the invisible barrier, the rules change. To advance further, he or she must play by the new rules, even though they've probably never been explained to you or even acknowledged openly. Indeed, those above the barrier, who operate by these new rules, generally see them as so important that they may use them to prevent an otherwise admirable high flier from crossing the barrier at all. This is the real glass ceiling that has nothing to do with merit or discrimination. If you aren't judged as a person likely to work well with the new rules, you won't get across the barrier. If you cross, then fail to change, you'll be sent back or ejected from the organization altogether.

To understand what's going on, we have to step back and ask what makes up the phenomenon of corporate culture and what purpose it serves. We'll leave our hero or heroine waiting at the barrier for a while and explore what's really going on.

The Hidden Power of Corporate Culture

We usually think of culture as social phenomenon: something related to the way people choose to interact with one another.

In fact, it's far more important and influential than this. Cultures, corporate or national, are made up of shared values. It's not really "the way we do things around here." That's just the visible manifestation of something that goes far deeper. We should see it more as "what's valuable around here and what isn't." We try to increase the amount of what we value and reduce or eliminate the rest. The culture tells us which items fit into each category. The unspoken rules of action and behavior are derived later from these value-based choices.

Values are emotional entities, not rational or intellectual. Our values carry a strong emotional charge, like a packet of high-voltage emotional energy that can give us a burst of pure pleasure and elation, like the feeling when we achieve something we've set our hearts on for years. When our values are blocked, denied or violated, the same energy can also explode in anger, disgust or dislike. We usually label the positive aspect of values as motivation or drive; the negative aspect is less simple to characterize in a word, but for the purposes of this paper we'll call it aversion. Strong values produce the strongest emotions, both intense motivation and powerful aversion.

Culture in Action

Let's get back to our high flier, the one who has just arrived at the real glass ceiling. Until now, we must recall, he or she has been operating within a corporate culture – a set of unwritten rules derived from shared values – which we've labeled meritocratic. The culture has by now trained our high flier well. Motivation by achievement and success has become intense and habitual. It's second nature. And since our high flier has made it almost to the top, we can assume that he or she has internalized the associated unwritten rules well and acts on them automatically, striving to excel at everything and avoiding any mistakes or failures.

In a meritocratic culture, of course, aversion is reserved for the kinds of behavior opposite to merit and success: failure, lack of ambition, mistakes and limited determination. People who show these characteristics are dealt with in ways that reveal a deep emotional core of dislike. Nowadays they are, thank goodness, normally treated with some basic respect, but their fate evokes neither pity nor compassion. Phrases like, "she had it coming to her," or "if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen" show the emotional edge to the supposedly rational decision to let such people go or leave them on career plateaus. The common name for such groups of people, dead wood, is another strong hint of the emotional bias in meritocratic cultures.

So much for the constituent parts of a corporate culture; now we need to seek out its purpose. Values tell us what's good and what's bad, what's right or wrong. They allow us to make decisions and discriminate between ideas, events, opinions or people. They form the basis for rules of behavior and even thinking. Since a corporate culture is simply a set of shared values, it does exactly the same job, only this time on an organizational scale. It acts as the judging function of the organization, just as our personal values allow us to make decisions based on what's right and what's wrong. Whatever fits with the corporate set of values is good and anything else is either neutral or bad – mostly bad. The purpose of all corporate cultures is to discriminate.

Any large organization will have a whole family of cultures: team, section, department, function, location, product group – all will have their own cultures. In more cohesive organizations, these cultures are more or less aligned and have many shared values. In many organizations they are in opposition, producing all kinds of tensions, internal conflicts and inter-team or inter-company rivalries and antipathies.

Hierarchical Culture Differences

What we're concerned with here is another way corporations experience multiple cultures: by hierarchical level. In most hierarchies, managerial or professional levels share the same culture, typically a meritocratic one. It works well to discriminate between people who are building their careers and credibility, sorting out the strong performers from the weak. It feels fair and defensible. We probably all went to schools where merit was rewarded by good grades and those who achieved success in sports were local heroes. We are very well used to meritocratic cultures, including their shadow side: the disdain for those who are neither athletic nor clever, and the constant state of competition for popularity, honors and status.

Here's the problem. In an organization where people rise by merit, the differences between them continually shrink. First the downright poor performers are removed. Then the marginal and unsatisfactory ones are left behind. Next to be surpassed are the average performers, then the above average ones. Finally, right at the glass ceiling, all that's left are the truly outstanding people. Merit no longer discriminates between these people effectively. On a scale of 1 to 10, they're all 10s.

The need to discriminate remains, of course. A major corporation may have scores of Vice Presidents and Executive Vice Presidents and perhaps a dozen or more people at Officer level. But it will still have only one or two top positions as CEO or Chairman. Those responsible for top executive succession must seek to discriminate effectively amongst people who all have outstanding ability. It's a tough job.

We've also come to rely on the idea that the best people, the most productive departments, the most powerful ideas and new products, should be favored in budget allocations. Since resource allocation is the

primary role of top executives, they need to know which are the best ideas, the products and services most likely to provide exceptional profits, and – in human endeavors – who are the best, most successful leaders. In short, they have to find a way of discriminating that isn't based entirely (or even primarily) on proven merit.

If one set of values no longer serves to discriminate, we turn to others. That's what happens at the level of the real glass ceiling. The value set – the culture – changes dramatically. In my experience, it nearly always changes to the same kind of culture: a power culture.

The Top Executive Power Culture

The power culture is perhaps the most commonly occurring value set in our world amongst people of all types. Perhaps that's why it's the intuitive choice in so many situations. Even other primates, like chimpanzees for example, live in power cultures. So do most social animals.

A power culture can be summed up in two phrases, "It's not what you know, it's who you know" and "Walk softly, but carry a big stick." Power cultures work through values based on influence and importance. Often we describe them as political. Indeed, it's one of the most typical complaints of those who bang their heads against the real glass ceiling: "I could do the job, but I couldn't cope with the politics." The trouble is, dealing with the politics is the job at this level. Most everything else can be delegated, but the politics – the exercise of power and influence in decisions on strategy and resource allocation – is what top executives do. Their divisions or functions rely on them to win in the constant jockeying for influence, since winning is translated into big budgets and the approval of investment or research projects. Heaven help the top executive who can't defend his or her department's budget in the horse-trading

that goes on at the top level. Despised by his or her own subordinates, robbed of credibility and support, this executive's days at the top are numbered.

These are the new rules: succeed in getting and keeping a position of influence and power, from which you can secure resources for your division or function. Do this amongst a highly competitive group of people who are all outstanding individuals, all working hard to secure their own positions and resources, and all committed to winning first and worrying about any casualties later, if at all. Oh yes, and be a good team player at the same time.

The Real Glass Ceiling

How does the real glass ceiling work? As our high flier is considered for these top posts, he or she finds that the achievements that brought him or her into the short-list no longer count for very much. Less clear-cut criteria will be used. Will he fit in with the top team? Will she be able to operate as a leader, no longer as a top specialist? How will his arrival affect the balance of power? Will she be an ally or an opponent? Will the available resources have to be spread more thinly?

It's not uncommon for people to burst through the real glass ceiling on the basis of the momentum built up in more junior ranks, only to find themselves lost and bewildered by the sudden and unexpected change in culture. They try to act as before and constantly find themselves offending against rules they didn't know existed. In time, they lose credibility and become marginalized in the race for influence. If this happens, they're usually considered mistakes or failures and removed. At the very best, they're allowed to sink back below the magic barrier, perhaps into some kind of special project role.

Because the change of culture is not overt or acknowledged, it's impossible to talk about it or prepare people for what they will encounter. Some people seem to grasp the change intuitively, adapt their behavior and prosper. Some come to love it. Others feel constantly lost, bruised and devalued by all the political maneuvering and the patient building of networks of influence. Remember, these are **all** highly able, intelligent people whose past performance has been outstanding. If they are rendered ineffective at this stage in their careers, or held blocked below the real glass ceiling, this is a real loss to the organization. It's not a trivial matter, either in financial or talent terms.

Women Still Get the Worst Breaks

Women are perhaps the most visible victims of the real glass ceiling because of deeply ingrained attitudes at **lower** levels, not at the top. They've often had to be not just as good as the equivalent male colleague, but better to win in the promotion handicap stakes. It's been tough to make it to the top, requiring even higher levels of merit to achieve senior executive status. Because of this, they've probably internalized the values of the meritocratic culture to an intense degree. They can find the sudden change in culture extremely hard to understand, so they go on as before. Only now what used to work for them works strongly against their future prospects.

In a recent two-year study, many younger female managers also indicated that they felt morally superior to "power politics and machismo" and above the need to conform to its requirements in order to be successful. The study, carried out by Kate Mackenzie Davey of Birkbeck College, University of London, England, indicated a real resistance amongst some women to a culture that they felt was unkind and unnecessary. Instead of going along with the politics, they clung to the notion of success based on rational criteria. This may be a highly principled

outlook, but it could work strongly against getting past the real glass ceiling.

Top executive ranks are still predominantly male, so the conventions of most power cultures also tend to be male oriented. Faced with the unexpected and unacknowledged culture change, together with a group whose criteria for power and influence are automatically masculine, many able women find themselves quickly marginalized and barred from real influence. Some still make it, of course. There are more high profile posts held by women than ever before, but they are still very much the minority.

Measure Potential as well as Performance

Talent is not such a common commodity that corporate America can go on wasting it in this way. Some people will never adapt well to the typical top executive power culture. They may have to accept that the top jobs in most organizations are not for them, however technically able or intellectually clever they are. Yet others, perhaps even a majority, could adapt perfectly well if they were prepared for the inevitable changes. Those charged with succession should start to look specifically at how flexible and expansive these people can be, in their values as well as their thinking. Potential is always expansive, able to grow to embrace many options and possibilities. That's why it's more important than performance alone in indicating who will make it at executive level and who may not. Our potential allows us to broaden our approach and our responses to deal with change, without letting go of the things that have worked well for us in the past. It lets us step past our old habits and adapt to the new world.

Only when we all acknowledge the changes that accompany the real glass ceiling and talk about them openly, without condemning what seems to be a completely natural process, will we be able to handle this transition more skillfully and successfully. We need to pick

people for top positions on the basis of potential as well as performance. We need to prepare them to operate in a new and unfamiliar culture. And, by bringing that culture into the open, we need to ensure that it doesn't conceal chauvinistic values that work against corporate ethics and standards. If we do this, all our high fliers and outstanding performers will benefit, whatever their gender.

About the Author

Adrian W. Savage is an international authority on organizational development and potential. More than a decade ago Mr. Savage co-founded the forerunner of PNA, Inc. to help clarify the way people view employee and organization potential. Mr. Savage believes that employees can align themselves more successfully with their commitments and opportunities by exploring their unused talents and fundamental values.

PNA, Incorporated provides corporations with solutions for talent management, organizational development, succession planning and key staff retention. Using proprietary approaches that have been developed and proven over more than 15 years, the company helps national and international clients maximize individual, team and organizational strengths to achieve their business goals. PNA is part of the global RSM International network. Visit www.nettps.com for more information or call 908-541-1700.

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Founded by Camille Smith, Work In Progress Coaching specializes in increasing the performance and productivity of executives, managers and teams. Her approach enables people to achieve organizational goals while maximizing personal and corporate resources. "When people access their potential and produce results that they thought were impossible, two powerful things happen: the bottom line benefits *and* people's view of what they can accomplish together is expanded. This gives the individual and the organization the ability to create and fulfill rewarding futures."

As an associate of PNA, Inc., Camille is a certified NetTPS™ Solutions Provider. For more information, call 831-685-1480 or visit www.wipcoaching.com.