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WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP



Female Entrepreneurship: Shrinking the Glass Ceiling

Words by Andrea Newell



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The term glass ceiling was first [used in 1984](#) to reference an invisible barrier that kept women (and minorities) from achieving corporate leadership solely due to bias and not skills, experience or ability. In the past 30 years, attitudes toward gender and race have evolved. The current business landscape includes many who are working to affect change -- quite different than job roles and mentality in the 1980s. Women are redefining the meaning of success, and it isn't solely based on climbing the traditional corporate ladder.

Female leadership numbers in Fortune 500 remain low

The numbers for women in top corporate leadership positions remain low. According to

the [Pew Research Center](#), 26 women are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, representing 5.2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs. Pew's most recent numbers (2013) report that only 1 out of 6 board members for Fortune 500 companies are women. Women haven't made much headway breaking through the glass ceiling to attain C-suite positions, despite the [data](#) that proves that women in leadership positions result in higher financial returns. The numbers also show that while women are occupying more than half of managerial and professional occupations (52.2 percent in 2013), they still make up less than a quarter of senior management (22 percent in 2014).

In the Fortune 500, the numbers show that the glass ceiling is firmly in place; women don't occupy a leadership role in the business world, and only a small number achieve success (as defined by reaching the top of the ladder). However, with the rise of women-owned businesses and an increase in freelancers, the definition of success has expanded to include other factors rather than just top-level corporate leadership. Women are setting different goals and traveling different roads to achieve their own definition of "the top." As the business world has evolved, the traditional linear climb up the ladder is the less traveled road, and factors like flexibility, meaning and quality of life are changing the journey and redefining the career goals for women.

Michelle Stansbury, CEO of [Little Penguin PR](#), believes that -- for the upcoming generation of female leaders, especially -- the concept of the glass ceiling is becoming irrelevant.

"Millennial men and women are beginning to change the tide to prioritizing quality of life over the corner office and lofty title. Women especially are not only looking to climb the corporate ladder, but create a situation in which they can pursue what they love with people they respect in an environment with flexibility."

For some, the definition of success changes over time.

“Entering the workforce, I saw no limit to where I wanted to go. Why wouldn’t I want to be the VP or president or name-the-function role? After working for many years, having a family, and trying to balance work and home life, my aspirations changed. What was truly ‘good enough’ for me to enjoy work and enjoy my family and home life? So, the (glass) ceiling shifted for me. Most importantly, it is about the work and people with whom I work,” says Peggy Ward, Ph.D, sustainability strategy leader at [Kimberly-Clark Corp.](#)*

Stepping out from beneath the glass ceiling

While the traditional glass ceiling appears to still be in place over the top spots at Fortune 500 companies, women are stepping out from under it in increasing numbers in favor of starting their own companies and becoming freelancers in order to have more control over their career trajectory.

The [2014 State of Women-Owned Businesses report](#) estimates that there are more than 9 million majority-owned and privately-held women-owned firms, employing around 7.9 million employees (in addition to the owners), and generating over \$1.4 trillion in revenues. Between 1997 and 2014, the number of U.S. businesses increased by 47 percent, while the number of women-owned firms increased by 68 percent. Add to that the fact that a [2014 study](#) found that 53 percent of full-time freelancers are women, and there is a significant number of women striking out on their own -- free to be their own boss, build their own company and make their own way.

“Men who are at the top today did not get there by climbing a ladder, but rather by building their own ladders, and if women want to reach top positions where they are truly free to live rich lives, they should also

make their own paths,” says Anna Faktorovich, Ph.D., director of [Anaphora Literary Press](#).

“Given the options available to women, (entrepreneur opportunities, freelance, starting own business, etc.), we can decide what our limits should be versus being told what they are,” Peggy Ward of Kimberly-Clark says.

Instead of a glass ceiling, women work to shed their lead boots

Although, as a company owner, the traditional glass ceiling is gone (except if we talk about the bias in startup investing favoring men), there are other factors that can hold women back. Some business pundits believe women themselves hold the glass ceiling above their heads by not being more confident, not asking for more money and not owning their success.

Instead of a glass ceiling, Liz Maw, CEO of [Net Impact](#), describes internal factors like self-doubt as more like wearing lead boots that weigh female leaders down.

“The only glass ceiling I pay attention to is the one in my head (the one where the 'inner critic' says I'm not powerful enough for the impact I want to make),” says Henna Inam, CEO of [Transformational Leadership Inc.](#)

However, not everyone agreed that the glass ceiling is mainly an internal force.

"There is no question in my mind that external forces keep that glass ceiling firmly in place. Whether or not women assert fair expectations (for equal salaries and opportunities for advancement, for example), there will be no satisfaction until men (and women) in power make the changes that are needed," says Alice Korngold, CEO of [Korngold Consulting](#).

So, why bother breaking the glass ceiling?

If women are sidestepping the glass ceiling and new generations of female leaders aren't daunted by it, is it still important to break through? One reason is to empower women poised to lead in the larger corporate arena so that they can have a positive impact.

When women are involved in making top-level decisions that have a wide scope, it leads to better products that address the needs of both men and women.

“The views someone has on personal freedom and privilege will influence the products they build for finance, healthcare and other key sectors that are being revolutionized by tech right now,” says Sarah Nahm, CEO of [Lever](#).

More diversity at the top of big organizations means that organizations will be more diverse and therefore more resilient.

What do we have now that we didn't have in 1984? Despite the glass ceiling's stubborn placement over the corporate world, many feel that we are closer than ever to demolishing it, both by stepping out from under it and smashing it altogether.

Women are showing such widespread ingenuity, entrepreneurial spirit, leadership skills, and ability to thrive and forge ahead despite these roadblocks. Because now we have data, great role models, sponsorship and mentoring programs, and insights into the benefits of female leadership. Although the corporate numbers don't show it, women are making progress, affecting change and persevering. They are improving their leadership skills and building confidence. With each new generation of female leaders, more cracks appear. Soon, maybe the glass ceiling will be as irrelevant as some young female leaders already believe it to be.

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**All views expressed here are personal observations of Dr. Ward and do not represent Kimberly-Clark.*



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