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Women's work: Cynthia Roney



Women who break through to leadership

Over 50% of Canada's workforce is made up of women, but only 4% break through to top leadership, according to Statistics Canada and research from Catalyst on the Financial Post 500 CEOs. Why do so few women make it, and how did they get there? Is this an issue for women or men?

The problem

More women than ever are working today, only to vapourize as they climb the corporate ladder. At the start of their careers, they are well represented in the talent pool and consumer markets and they have big dreams: a study by Bain & Company found that 82% of women aspire to be senior leaders. As their careers advance, however, many women struggle with balancing "career-building" and "care-giving," causing them to disappear from top jobs. This results in a brain drain, loss of talent and reduced earnings for women. Simply hiring more women won't fix the problem. In January 2010 the Economist said, "Coping with this change will be one of the great challenges of the coming decades."

An issue for women or men?

The Shriver Report - A Woman's Nation Changes Everything emphasizes, "When women work, it's no longer just for the little extras." Half of all families rely on the earnings of both parents; 20% of all families rely on a single mother as primary breadwinner; and two million wives support their families while their husbands seek work. When women are unable to advance their careers and earning potential, we are all affected.

Women who break through to leadership fascinate me because I am part of this quiet revolution as women become the majority of the workforce. My life reflects the shift of the past 50 years, from my mother staying home to raise four children to my juggling a family while pursuing a career supported by bosses, nannies and my incredible husband. It has taken "a village" of support. In my experience, men encouraged me to pursue leadership and respected my choice for both a career and family. Only once in my 25-year career did I see blatant discrimination when, as CEO, a prospective investor said: "We believe a man should run the company, preferably an American" – a demand quickly dismissed by our board.

Women who break through to leadership

Like any revolution, women who break through to top leadership are taking extraordinary action to cope with balancing their career and family.

- **Carol Bartz, CEO of Yahoo**, married with three children, worked through seven months of chemotherapy when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.
- **Ilene Gordon, CEO of Alcan Packaging**, told RHR International that when she was leading a billion-dollar global business, her daughter fell down a flight of stairs and was seriously injured. Ilene moved into the hospital, working from there until her daughter recovered.
- **Pharmasave Drugs CEO Sue Paish** described to Business in Vancouver that her husband left his film set-design job to care for the family full-time when Sue's role as managing partner of one of Vancouver's largest law firms required regular coast-to-coast travel.
- **Bev Van Ruyven**, one of the **Women's Executive Network's top 100 most powerful women in Canada**, shared with me that earlier in her career an opportunity opened up when she was nine months pregnant. "I walked into the room to face the nine-member male interview panel and told them, 'I am the best person for this job.'" The panel agreed and promoted her. Years later, however, when Van Ruyven was ready for her next career advance, the company required her to relocate her family.

The challenges women face and how we respond as we advance our careers are as different as the women themselves. Some of us shift our career focus or choose to leave the workforce when family responsibilities take on greater priority. Some of us never wanted leadership responsibility or thought we weren't good enough. Many of us never asked.

The Shriver Report reminds us that both genders are trying to figure out how to navigate this new world. Women have a responsibility to be clear about what they want and need. Men are not mind-readers. The only remaining rule seems to be: "Stay flexible." •

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