

# Maryland Entrepreneur Quarterly

## Who Says, 'We've Come a Long Way, Baby'?

by Joan Athen



How often have you sat around a conference table and participated in discussions about how to “make things better,” to “increase sales or

profitability,” to “improve employee productivity and reduce turnover”? Lots of creative ideas make it to the white board, but then what?

Some of the ideas do make it to action items. But real change is often slow, especially if the organization’s culture does not truly embrace and celebrate such change. The good ideas basically become Band-aids that may have short-term result blips before people return to their old habits.

A couple of factors that are important to note here are “culture” and “habits.” For an organization to truly experience change that translates to any significant bottom line improvement, the culture has to change first; then the people can change through encouragement and training.

One particular area of cultural change to be addressed by companies seeking to enhance the bottom line is gender diversity in the boardroom. Headlines and conference room discus-

sions have addressed this topic for years, but the statistics still indicate that a significant gender gap exists in most medium-to-large organizations.

In fact, based on research conducted in 2007, fewer than 13% of Fortune 500 companies have women CEOs — and fewer than 15% of all board of directors positions for large companies are held by women.

There is great irony to these statistics when one considers that not only are women today included in the workforce in record numbers (and may outnumber men in some geographic areas), but that having women in upper management delivers results to the bottom line.

Specifically, a study by Catalyst Research revealed, “On average, companies with a higher percentage of women in top jobs posted a 35% higher return on equity and a 34% greater return to shareholders than firms with fewer female executives.”

So, the question remains: “Why is the gender gap still so wide?”

### **Foreign Language**

Many articles offer suggestions as to the culprit. Some suggest discrimination is just human nature and that the “old boy’s network” is alive and well. Others suggest that women are too

divided between the priorities of family and work.

Consider the possibility that the real cause of this gender gap is simply gender-based communication differences.

Plain and simple: Men and women perceive the world around them differently and do not speak the same “language.” Unfortunately, most people do not recognize gender-based differences, so traditional diversity training misses the mark in closing the gender gap, leaving women feeling slighted, unrecognized and unappreciated, and men wondering why.

According to a January 2008 *Washington Post* article, a study of 830 mid-size to large U.S. companies (over a 31-year period) indicated that mandatory diversity training exercises were ineffective in increasing minority representation in management when compared to voluntary diversity training that focused on specific skills.

As a specific skill, gender-difference communication training needs to be a priority for organizations that acknowledge cultural change must occur to take the company to the next level.

The training should start with the cardinal rule being stated at the begin-

## Who Says 'We've Come A Long Way, Baby'?

by Joan Athen

August 2008

---

ning: Neither men nor women are wrong; they're just different. Once that is out in the open, and the participants' defenses are neutralized, effective training can take place, especially if it is eye-opening, dynamic and engaging.

### **Hers and His**

The first step in gender-communication training is to create awareness of the differences between the genders. The second stage is to offer strategies for dealing with these male-female differences and to offer specific suggestions that help each employee and manager modify his or her style of communication by "blending" the best of both genders' styles into his or her own.

For instance, women are collaborative thinkers by nature. They tend to ask for others' opinions and then move forward with a plan. Men, however, think that asking others is a sign of weakness. If a male boss, therefore, sees a female manager in her collaborative mode, he may perceive she lacks confidence or is not knowledgeable, yet that is not the case at all.

On the other hand, women are often reluctant to speak up during a meeting unless they are 100% confident in what they are saying. Men are greater risk takers and know the importance of being heard to maintain top-of-mind awareness with management.

Women, who are nurturers, tend to give credit to others and are motivated by accomplishment itself, peer recognition and being accepted. Men are motivated by a higher salary and outward signs of status (title, big office).

Men manage their careers. Women manage their "to do" lists and "teams."

And the list goes on.

### **Playing the Game**

With just these few examples of gender-based differences, it doesn't take long to realize that if women need to be recognized by male supervisors in order to advance their careers (or vice-versa), it is imperative not only to understand the other gender's "language" and differences in perception, but to willingly modify one's own style to be more compatible with the promotion decision-makers who can

make the journey to the top easier — or impossible.

Gail Evans, author of *Play Like A Man, Win Like A Woman*, says it this way: "You [women] don't have to do it a man's way. But you do have to: 1 — Understand the difference between how he plays the game (or business) and how you play it. 2 — Recognize that, for the time being, his way of playing is the accepted way. 3 — Decide if you want to change the way you play."

She adds, "When women choose to fulfill ourselves by what we do, rather than what we make, we're not playing the game the way the guys are playing it."

---

*Joan Athen is a managing partner of Gender-Strategy ([www.GenderStrategy.com](http://www.GenderStrategy.com)), a gender-communication training company based in Howard County. She can be reached at 410-695-1260.*