ABSTRACT. This article describes “Project Breakthrough: A Survey of Corporate Practices for Shattering the Glass Ceiling.” Evidence is presented that the “glass ceiling” remains in tact in many areas. A list of barriers (social stereotypes) that support the glass ceiling are presented. Some corporate strategies found in the literature are also presented. Sixty-nine companies in the Houston area were surveyed. A summary score based on responses to thirty-four practices listed in the survey were computed. The top twelve organizations were identified as “distinguished,” and site visits were conducted. The practices of these companies are listed.

The Glass Ceiling Commission, a Labor Department-led panel, has been holding hearings to hear success stories of advancement for women and minorities. Joyce Miller, the executive director noted “We know the sob stories. Now we want constructive suggestions.” (Salwen, 1994) The purpose of this article is to describe “Project Breakthrough: A Survey of Corporate Practices for Shattering the Glass Ceiling.” The

Institute for Diversity and Cross Cultural Management, College of Business Administration, University of Houston, in conjunction with the Greater Houston Women’s Foundation conducted the study. Strategies of Houston-area private, public, and non-profit organizations for ensuring the movement of women into upper-level management positions were identified. The study allowed participating companies to benchmark their activities with those of other companies.

Justification

There are two significant reasons to “shatter the glass ceiling” for women and minorities. The first has to do with justice. When women and minorities follow the same paths of education and work experience to prepare themselves as qualified candidates for upward career mobility, it is simply unjust to stand in their way. The second reason has to do with a pragmatic approach to business success. “A company that mirrors the general population is better prepared to understand the needs of its customers and develop products and services that meet their demands.” (Martin, 1992)

Literature review

There is a lengthy literature available to support the notion that “the glass ceiling” exists for women and minorities. Although this problem has been appearing in the literature for a number of years, for the purposes of this study references were limited to 1990–1994.
The evidence remains

There continues to be evidence that “the glass ceiling” remains intact in many areas. The following are some examples:

* Only about 5 percent of the nation’s big six accounting firms’ partners are women.
* Of the 1000 biggest U.S. companies, women represent only 16.9 percent of more than 31,000 managers (Berton, 1993).
* Men outnumber women as executive vice presidents by three to one (Korn/Ferry International, 1993).
* Five hundred women hold 721 (6.2%) of the 11,715 board seats (Dobrznski, 1993).
* Men average 50 percent more compensation for similar positions (Littlejohn, 1993).
* Women occupy less than 3 percent of the top-level jobs in the largest U.S. corporations (McGonigle, 1991).
* At the current rate of increase in executive women, it will take until the year 2466 – or over 450 years – to reach equality with executive men (The Houston Post, 1991).

Cultural barriers

A number of cultural barriers have been identified that support “the glass ceiling.” Social stereotypes have been in place for centuries (Bass, 1990–91). The social stereotypes translate into the list of barriers in Table I.

Company strategies

There are some interesting examples of corporate strategies that have been successfully used. These examples represent a sensitivity to the problem.

Corning. The CEO and top executives attended a gender training program. A three-year followup program directs managers to incorporate what they learned into daily working life. One executive organizes special lunches with female managers and puts gender-bias “episodes” on every meeting’s agenda (Bergman, 1991). In addition, there are career planning and mentoring programs (Castro, 1993). Corning also sponsors quality improvement teams that focus specifically on issues related to Blacks and women, hold mandatory workshops to reinforce its policies against racial bias and gender discrimination, and encourage better working relationships among its diverse employee sectors (Loughran, 1991).

Amerco Inc has tied a part of an executive’s bonus to his or her progress in promoting women and minorities, which has resulted in a 25% rise in the numbers hired (Garland, 1991). Tenneco also created eight advisory councils composed entirely of women. Networking seminars were encouraged (Taylor, 1991).

DuPont Co has a rotation process that moves men and women through at least two or three functions before they reach top positions (Lopez, 1992).

Other suggested strategies found in the literature include the following:

* Place more women on boards of directors to (a) provide role models for senior management as a constant reminder of women’s capabilities and judgment (b) hold senior management accountable for promoting qualified women into line and general management posts.
* Help women with flex time and child care (support system).
* Ensure that company policies and programs educate everyone about sexual harassment.
* Understand that women and men approach managing differently and that both approaches may be valid (Korn/Ferry, 1993).
* Provide visibility (networking with successful men and women).
* Take control of women’s forward direction are actions that assist advancement (Eads, 1991).
* Combine (1) commitment and champions