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Debating The Glass Ceiling – is it a Myth?

Caroline Shannon

Before she even approached the age of 22, a computer-savvy Laura McHolm had already graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, worked with the likes of big-time companies, like Apple and Intel, created and marketed games, such as Pac Man and Atari, and earned her computer law degree from the University of Oxford.

Just ask her and she'll tell you she punched right through what is referred to as a "glass ceiling," the invisible barrier that has been held responsible for hindering women's career advancement. But that's not to say she wouldn't agree with the notion that gender bias is still 100 percent alive and well.

"It does exist – just look at the number of CEOs who are women, senators who are women, presidents who are women, managers who are women," said McHolm, who is now the co-founder of [NorthStar Moving Corporation](#), one of San Fernando Valley's 50 fastest growing companies. "I don't believe that 51 percent of the population just decided, 'No, I don't want to do that.'"

McHolm is referring to one of the several statistics that say women are being met by a few broken rungs in their attempts to climb the corporate ladder. Last year, 45 percent of women ages 25 to 34 had a college degree, as opposed to 36 percent of young men. But the median earnings of all women were still 14 percent lower, according to a [May 2008 Wall Street Journal article](#). Many successful women business professionals, like McHolm, agree that, while the glass ceiling can be permeated, its permanent deletion has yet to be accomplished.

"One might argue that [the glass ceiling] has moved from being glass to plexiglass, and, therefore, has some pliability in certain organizations," said [Linda Stewart, president and CEO of Boston-based EPOCH, LLC](#). "But any of the hard data existing in the marketplace confirms that women are not in proportion to men in any company – with a few exceptions in female oriented businesses – or in any industry from a percentage of leadership or salary standpoint." But that's not to say, Stewart said, that women are not making puncture marks in the steady exterior of the roof overhead.

"I would be remiss in not acknowledging some level of progress," Stewart said. "I have been in business for over 30 years. When I first started, I felt as if I had to appear to be a man or at least to diminish my femininity. Today, I believe I can at least be authentic and my chances at progressing are no more or less as a result of that."

Mary Crane, owner of consulting firm Mary Crane & Associates in Denver, CO, said she recommends women begin to have a Mel Gibson-esque epiphany, as he did in the film *What*

Women Want. A quick plot summary of the movie includes Mel Gibson's character's ability to have a first-hand view of what women are thinking.

"We need to recognize that we may see the world in a manner that is very different from our male counterparts," Crane said, referring to Gibson's wake up call. "We don't need to become more like them. But we do need to acknowledge those differences."

What's more, McHolm says, there are four principles to keep in mind when looking to upgrade your professional position:

1. "Don't let anyone tell you that you can't," McHolm says. "And don't buy into the stereotypes that are out there. If you want it, figure out a way to go and get it."
2. Make sure you are taken care of at home. "Unfortunately, women are still responsible for most of what occurs at home and we don't really have enough help," McHolm said. "Get yourself help!" This includes, McHolm said, hiring a nanny or housekeeper, or even buying a master schedule that allows you to delegate through other people. "House cleaning, homework, shopping – whatever it is, get the support you need," McHolm said.
3. Shut Up. "Stop explaining yourself!" McHolm says. "Explaining yourself leads people to believe, 'Boy that poor woman is really stretched already,' when you could have easily taken on the task because you have already got it handled. You don't want to give anyone a reason to not give you another level of responsibility."
4. Match yourself to your corporate culture. "I am not a prude, but it is just based on the old adage that you should dress for the job you want, not the job you already have," McHolm said. "If you're not representing yourself well, how are you going to represent who you are working for well?"

Dr. Nancy O'Reilly, owner of O'Reilly Health and Wellness Consulting Service, LLC, said it is also important for women to do their homework and investigate the company in which they want to work. "Match with them (men) and sell yourself," said O'Reilly, who is also the founder of Women Speak. Make yourself valuable and irreplaceable.

Stewart agreed with O'Reilly, adding that women should stop being "ashamed of being women." "Stop trying to compensate for it, and stop accepting less," Stewart said. "Learn to ask for what you truly deserve. Men do it, so why shouldn't you?!"

And, like McHolm said, honoring feminine power is exactly why successful women business professionals – glass ceiling or not – are here to stay. "I do what I do, so that someone else looks at me, and says, 'Hey, I can do that, too,'" McHolm said. "I mean, why not?"