



## ***Is There a Crack in the Glass Ceiling?***

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18th Feb 2014



For several months, we've been working on putting together a forum for Women in Family Business. We already have three other forum groups for men and women that are up and running with great success. So why a "Women's Forum" and why not a "Men's Forum?" Do the interests of women in their family enterprises differ from those of their male counterparts? And does asking that question date us?

Twenty years ago, I had the pleasure and challenge of launching and facilitating a Women's Family Business Forum in a university setting. Among the near dozen participants were heirs apparent to both leadership and ownership in their family enterprises. The concerns of most included how to break into the "Old Boy" network, how to crack the "Glass Ceiling" and how to balance life as a mom and wife with that of family business leader. Or as one woman crisply stated, "When my brother goes home at night, he goes home to a wife. I don't."

We've spoken with scores of women over the past several months about joining a Women's Forum. We ran a well-attended reception to introduce the concept of a

Women's Forum that was to be facilitated by one of the leading experts on family enterprise - who just happens to be a woman.

### **The Premise**

The roles and responsibilities of women both within and outside the family enterprise are extensive. Research indicates that a growing number of women are taking on leadership positions in the family enterprise. Economic and social factors have played a part for years, but today it's more complex because of the unique challenges and opportunities women face as leaders in both the family business as well as in the family.

We presented The Peer Alliance Women's Forum as an occasion for women who are stakeholders in their family business to share and explore these challenges and opportunities with a goal of personal and professional development. We intended for members to have the opportunity to delve into topics such as:

- Finding a work/family balance.
- Doing it all: is it possible?
- Making decisions: what works?
- Women's ways of leading and mentoring.
- Managing conflict.
- Increasing credibility.
- Coping with stress.

We presented the key benefits to the Forum experience:

- Build enduring peer relationships.
- Address challenges at an in-depth level.
- Explore, evaluate and test ideas with your peers.
- Confidentially share knowledge, skill and experience.
- Develop personally and professionally.
- Connect with a supportive network.



- Drive better business results.

### Businesses and the Challenges Within Them

Maybe we're naive, but the feedback we've been getting is surprising. Rather than being focused on challenges relating to their gender in business, the women with whom we've spoken are focused on their businesses and the challenges within them. They want to meet with other bright, successful family enterprise leaders - regardless of their gender. Several, in fact, said they would prefer to be in a forum with both men and women. They want to learn from their peers - other current and emerging leaders - to be more effective in managing their lives on a personal, family and business level. Gender, like race, religion and sexual orientation, is a non-issue.

Does this mean that women are no more concerned with finding a work/life balance than their male counterparts? Perhaps they are the daughters of enlightened parents. Perhaps they are the wives of enlightened men. Perhaps they have been empowered, more so than their mothers who had careers of their own. Does Sheryl Sandberg's statement in her book, Lean In, that "men still run the world" convince women they can learn more from their male counterparts? We don't know. But surely flextime and technological advances, along with legislative and big business efforts to eliminate discrimination, contribute.

Some of the not-so-dated literature suggests that women need to work twice as hard to prove themselves, take on additional assignments and bond with supervisors one level above their own. A bit reminiscent of vintage '50s?

The women with whom we've talked simply want to do the best they can. As one colleague said, "Their gender is neither the litmus test nor on their radar screen. Could you imagine a Men's Forum? So why a Women's Forum? Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique was published over 50 years ago and helped start the revolution. Isn't it time to dispel the myths?" So we probably found the answer to the question we asked earlier: why a 'Women's Forum' and why not a 'Men's Forum?' The answer reflects

the changing role of women (and men) in business. Women just want to be with other smart, committed people.

And after all, isn't that what men want, too?

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