

Working: She's broken the glass ceiling and now is trying to bring others along

By Vickie Elmer
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Beth Brooke recalls one of the first board of directors meetings she attended. She sat at the end of a long gleaming table and listened to discussion by men all around her. The change in policy they were considering didn't make sense to her. "This won't resonate in the hearts and minds of our people," she thought.

Eventually she worked up the courage to voice that sentiment and "every head simultaneously turned and looked at me" as the lone woman among many male leaders. She felt pretty embarrassed, and she recalls that she thought, "Okay, I don't belong here."

"It took me a good year to regain my confidence," she said.

Even now, as one of the top executives at Ernst & Young, that meeting still illustrates how women are often not "heard" until there are a few of them at the table. "It is such an important point and why having just one of anything is not sufficient to get the true benefits of that diverse viewpoint," she said.

Advertisement These days, Brooke leads board discussions at nonprofits and business organizations as well as serving as a vice chairman of the accounting and consulting giant, focusing on public policy and sustainability. Over the last year, she helped develop the CEO Challenge Initiative, launched this month with the intention of advancing more women into executive jobs.

"It's pitiful, glacial," said Brooke of women's progress in getting senior roles.

Though women represent about 47 percent of all U.S. workers, they accounted for 13.5 percent of executive officer positions at Fortune 500 companies in 2009, according to Catalyst, a women's research and advocacy group. While about half the leading companies have one or two women among their senior-most executive ranks, almost three in 10 have no women in those positions, Catalyst reported.

Finance and insurance companies had the highest number of women officers. The professional and business services sector averaged 1.4 women officers among 10.9 total senior executives. Ernst & Young, which is recognized by Catalyst and others for its advancement practices for women, has six women on its U.S. senior leadership team of 22.

"We as leaders need to ... give women visibility, access, circumstances under which they could perform or not," Brooke said.

One way companies can do that: Demand a diverse slate of candidates for every senior opening. "This makes the organization look to the invisible, it makes the invisible visible," she said.

She wrote a succinct business case on why it's smart to invest in female managers and professionals and presented it, all based on existing research, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. She did it, she said, after several women's leadership conferences when she and others realized: "We've got to stop talking to ourselves."

Brooke's career started at the accounting firm's Indianapolis office, where, she recalls, "I got a ton of responsibility early on." A former college basketball player, she believed her future lay with small and mid-size businesses as clients. Then to her surprise she was asked to lead the insurance practice. She tried to sidestep the position, but her managing



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partner persuaded her to give it a year. She eventually became partner, moving to Ernst & Young's Washington, D.C., office in 1991. That led to a stint with the Clinton administration and other leadership roles.

It also taught her a valuable lesson: Lean into opportunities, even when they make you feel uncomfortable or unprepared.

Many women limit themselves instead of seeing themselves as making a difference.

"Think big and think bigger," she said.

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