

Success on Our Own Terms

Tales of Extraordinary, Ordinary Business Women



Foreword by Lynn Martin, *former U.S. Secretary of Labor
and first Chair of the Glass Ceiling Commission*

VIRGINIA O'BRIEN

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ing women in increasing numbers in leadership positions mask the reality that not all progress is distributed evenly throughout a company or throughout the country. Countless women are still the only women professionals in an office, or on a job, or in a community. The issue for these women is not the overburdened women at the top. Unlike many of their male colleagues, whose careers are often assisted formally or informally by their male superiors, these women do not have any mentors or any colleagues who are women.

These voids must be filled by something or these women, their companies, and our country will pay a steep price. And that is what Virginia O'Brien has done with this book. Its premise is that women are making real progress in the workforce and are doing this on their own terms. I agree. I just don't think the change is happening fast enough.

What will speed things up? Obviously a more committed, smarter corporate leadership will help. So will having more women in more leadership positions within companies. But until these things happen, until women are less isolated as gender role models, women need some practical help.

This book fits the bill. It is a how-to manual for women in the pipelines, for women at midcareer, and for women struggling with choices and issues they believe are unique to them. The fad in management today is to identify, adapt, and apply the best practices from other companies to help improve their own company. The examples of the successful women in this book are more than the stories of successful women. They are the best practices, the lessons that each of us can adapt and apply to help us all realize "Success on Our Own Terms."

—Lynn Martin
Former U.S. Secretary of Labor
and first Chair of the Glass Ceiling Commission

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INTRODUCTION

My Irish temper and stubbornness account in part for this book. I was compelled to write it because I got extraordinarily aggravated reading negative reports about women's progress in corporate America. Yes, I know that the old boys still rule at the top and there are less than a handful of female Fortune 500 chief executive officers. And, yes, I know that many women have left the corporate arena because they grew tired of dealing with a value system based on a male, hierarchical model and a culture they often found wanting. My instincts, however, told me that corporate America had to be laced with the stories of women's success—stories that we didn't hear about because they didn't take place on the CEO level or because they weren't about women on the verge of breaking through or dropping out, but stories that, nevertheless, would reveal how far women have come in business and how much feminine energy has infused the organizational system. My logical mind told me that there were holes in prevalent claims of a glass ceiling. I didn't think we were getting the whole story.

The Glass Ceiling Commission and groups like Catalyst, a New York-based nonprofit organization, have conducted valuable research that has kept us aware of organizational cultural issues with regard to the advancement of women in management. However, the data from these studies generally get presented with an emphasis on the negative. Press coverage tends to focus on the small number of females in corporate CEO and senior management posts, rather than on the programs and initiatives that have moved women forward.

Highlighting bad news isn't unique to women's issues—it's a common complaint heard in reference to the media—but with the

manipulation of statistics and the burying of good news, the picture of women's progress gets distorted. In 1996, Catalyst studies drew negative headlines across the country from "Women at the Top Still Are Distant from CEO Jobs" in the *Wall Street Journal*¹ to "Glass Ceiling over Women Still Intact in Workplace" in the *Los Angeles Times*.² Similarly, an article in the *Boston Globe* started with this negative lead: "Nearly a fifth of Fortune 500 companies don't have women directors."³ Well, that's true, but the flip side is that four out of five companies do have female representation. And female numbers *are* growing: Between 1993 and 1995 the number of female board members increased by 12 percent.⁴

Headlines finally started changing a little in 1997. The *Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page article: "Broken Glass: Watershed Generation of Women Executives Is Rising to the Top." But the paper couldn't leave this positive header alone; it had to tag on the sub-head: "But Ranks Are Still Lopsided." The article ended, as many articles do, with an often-heard line, "But it's painfully slow."⁵

My argument is that too much focus is placed on counting the number of corporate CEOs. With that focus we tend to see only the negative side of the story. Moreover, these numbers alone are not an accurate indicator of progress. They need to be scrutinized more carefully and not accepted at face value as proof of lack of progress. Using this sole measurement skews perceptions of women's advancement in business. This statistic misleads us: It doesn't give us room to understand the broad spectrum of women's success or how the combined impact of organizational culture, societal values, and market changes contributes to these numbers.

We are, in fact, beginning to see changes in corporate America and we need to herald those changes. Between 1982 and 1992, the number of female executive vice presidents at Fortune 1000 companies more than doubled and almost a quarter of senior vice presidents are now female.⁶ By 1994, 48.1 percent of the managerial/executive positions in U.S. organizations were held by women,⁷ and by 1995, 417 Fortune 500 companies had one or more women on their boards.⁸ The companies represented in this book show how women's numbers in senior management are growing. At Bell Atlantic 10 percent of the top officers and 21 percent of the company's senior executives are women. At US WEST, over 20 percent of the corporate officers are women, including the CEO of MediaOne, the third largest cable company in the country. There are three women on the board of directors, and, in 1995, the first woman of color was made an officer of the company. And at Gan-

nett, women represent 33 percent of the board of directors, 23 percent of operating unit heads, and 40 percent of all department heads.

In the first chapter of this book, I show how the numbers of females at the top of major corporations couldn't have added up to be much more than they are today. Corporate leadership requires mentoring, training, and experience acquired over time. When today's male CEOs began their grooming process 30 years ago, there were few women being trained alongside them. At that time, women didn't think about being, nor were they educated to become, CEOs in the 1990s.

Another factor of great significance—and one that often gets lost when the lack of senior female executives is discussed—is that many women are achieving according to their own definitions of success. And these definitions don't necessarily include climbing to the highest rung on the corporate ladder. Studies show that more men than women aspire to these top jobs.⁹ If we can turn our focus away from these numbers, we gain a better view of the progress women have made in the corporate world.

When I look back 33 years to the time I first started working, I see an enormous difference in women's position in business. Women now have options and choices that didn't exist when I entered the workforce. My feeling of hope and sense of opportunity stem in part from my own story, which is atypical in some ways, and yet in other ways serves as a metaphor for all the challenges women have faced.

Graduating from high school in the early 1960s, my ethnicity and socioeconomic class shaped and limited my options. Mine was an Irish-Catholic household in which education money was set aside for the three male children. If a young woman didn't want to become a teacher or a nurse, which I didn't, money spent on education was considered wasted. My sister and I were expected to get married and produce children, and how we occupied ourselves in the meantime was of little significance. After high school I worked as a clerk in the Bell system, where my first job was taping nickels and dimes onto postcards to send back to customers who were owed change from public telephones. Needless to say, after counting and taping coins for a while, I realized I needed to take some kind of action and I signed up for evening courses at the local university. But because of my meager wages (I made about \$40 a week and paid my parents room and board), I couldn't afford more than a course or two a semester. After several years, with the road ahead

seeming endlessly long, I left home and joined a major airline. This was considered a bold and daring move in my neighborhood, where young women didn't leave home before marriage. Today, the job of flight attendant is not viewed as it was when I was young. At that time, being a "stewardess" had an aura of glamour to it. Years later I saw the sexist nature of that glamour, but back then I thought it was a grand adventure—it gave me an escape, a way to be independent and to travel.

While I was flying I met my first husband and I eventually turned from a stewardess into a corporate wife, which actually didn't require much of a transformation. Unfortunately, those stories about corporate wives of the past are true—we were expected to be corporate cheerleaders. It was a recognized fact that a successful man had a wife at home to take care of all the details and to provide the moral support that was needed. In fact, before my husband was hired by a major pharmaceutical company I had to go through an interview process as well. The company needed to make sure that I would be a team player. I was still working for the airlines at the time, and the interview contained a string of questions about my willingness to quit working and follow my husband wherever his career path led. I had to convince his future employer that I wouldn't be a snag in his upward progression. And I wasn't. I did what I was supposed to until divorce caught me by surprise. Then, at 34, I found myself with a young daughter, no husband, and no education.

By the time I was 41 I had a master's degree under my belt and I had started writing and working in the field of communication, both in a small business environment and as a freelance writer. In some ways I fit into a category of women that Joline Godfrey calls "late bloomers"—those women whose strength comes from reflecting on past experience and confidence gained from age and survival.¹⁰ I definitely consider myself a survivor. This book is a means to expand my reflection beyond myself—to reflect on the positive experiences of women across a span of age ranges, so that we can share an understanding of our progress.

Perhaps because of the fact that I have come from one end of the spectrum, I find the growth women have experienced to be exciting and uplifting. But I know I'm not alone in my feelings. When I spoke to the women whose stories shape this book, each one of them got excited. It buoyed us both to talk about their progress, their professional accomplishments, and the support they have received from their organizations as well as from their husbands

and families. Story after story revealed how they used their intelligence, their ability to form relationships, and their management and communication skills to move themselves into positions of their choice and to join with other women in making change within their organizations.

When women join together, their merged energy makes its way through the organizational system. Female managers at Texas Instruments told me about the Women's Initiatives they helped to create. The Initiatives opened the way for the advancement of more females into senior management positions and drew attention to the need to create better work/life policies. At Deloitte & Touche, women joined with senior management to improve the retention rate of female partners by creating more flexible environments and greater understanding of gender differences. At Hewlett-Packard, women described how female engineers banded together to create a professional network that enabled them to highlight their work, gain recognition, and share knowledge. The women's enthusiasm and power drove these efforts. Margo Davis, a 54-year-old ex-teacher who is now a corporate education program manager at Hewlett-Packard, cochaired HP's 1995 Technical Women's Conference. After 2,700 women spent three days learning together, Margo says the atmosphere was incredible: "It was like the roof was coming off. The energy level was so high it was terrific. Lew Platt, our CEO, just stood there and he could feel it. He said, 'If we could harness this energy, there isn't a company on earth that could top us.'" Women came away from the conference profoundly moved. A woman on the verge of quitting HP called Margo to tell her she had changed her mind because the conference gave her hope.

When women visibly come together in support of themselves, it makes the struggle that women have endured worthwhile. That's part of what has motivated me to undertake this project: to give recognition to women's successes and to pay attention to how far women have come, in order to support further movement. Corporate America has made changes in the last decade. I believe we are going to feel women's energy in the corporation even more as the twenty-first century unfolds.

My goal in writing this book was to find out how women across a wide management spectrum gauge their own success and to provide a forum for them to share their success strategies. So, I set out to track the business journey women had undertaken over a quarter century ago and to answer some key questions. Could women get where they wanted to go? How did they feel about the level of

management they had attained? What motivates them? What are their visions and goals? What strategies helped them achieve their objectives?

In search of the answers to these questions, I interviewed 45 women at various management levels in 23 major companies and their subsidiaries. I asked the women to tell me about their careers, to define success, and to explain how they balanced their lives. In conjunction with *Executive Female* magazine, I also conducted a national survey that reached beyond this corporate sample in order to ensure that I heard from a broad range of women in management. Almost 700 women responded, describing their viewpoints of success and their feelings of satisfaction with their own advancement. Over and over, whether the women in this survey worked in corporations or whether they worked in smaller enterprises, they described success in terms of being happy, meeting goals, and having passion about their work and their lives. Their feelings are reflected by one woman who wrote, "Success is not a destination; it's a journey," and another who wrote, "It's not all about advancement; it's about enjoying your life."

These findings encouraged me and spurred me on to write this book honoring not only the women who have climbed corporate ladders, but also those women in management who seek career satisfaction in a multitude of other ways. The 45 women I interviewed aren't superwomen, but they are extraordinary, ordinary women. They represent the woman next door and the woman down the street. Their stories demonstrate how far we have come. Several of the women I interviewed are CEOs and presidents of banks and subsidiaries, and some are vice presidents in a range of functional areas. But half of the women are managers and directors at middle management levels with a range of professional goals.

I purposely chose to interview women working in major corporations that have been identified as progressive with regard to women's issues because I wanted to acknowledge the corporations that have developed programs and initiatives in support of women. Policies and programs in these companies provide useful benchmarks, and women who work in less-than-supportive companies can see the possibilities that exist when corporate cultures are changed. My focus on the corporation as opposed to small businesses or female entrepreneurs stems from the fact that corporate America has tremendous influence in shaping society; therefore, women's success and influence inside corporate walls is extremely important for determining the course of our future.

The women in this book represent the best of all of us—they helped establish initiatives for women in their companies; they participated in new accelerated development programs and used the programs their companies offered to help themselves advance. When some of the women realized they couldn't find the balance they wanted working full-time, they broke new ground and created job shares, flextime, and part-time arrangements in their companies. They have been true pioneers. These managers learned how to make the corporation work to their benefit and they found ways to achieve their goals. They built their careers with their own determination, quest for excellence, and balance, yet they acknowledged they could not have found success without the help of their mentors, husbands, and families. And they pay tribute to the role that enlightened senior management played in helping them to get where they wanted to go and allowing them to work in the way they wanted to work.

These women planned career strategies, held onto their values and their management styles, and articulated their needs to their bosses. They worked on developing significant relationships and learned how to use the system to improve their expertise and skills. Through their stories I hope you will be able to learn lessons you can apply to your own career. And through their voices I think the true story and the full scope of women's success emerge. I cling to my belief that progress has been made and the wind is at our backs.