

# THE MODERN WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE IN CORPORATE AMERICA

By Michelle Patterson

Women are taking a more dominant place in corporate America as they climb the career ladder and step into important roles and leadership positions. As a result, corporate America is shifting, tilting the power balance in women's direction. Because more women than men are currently present in the U.S. workforce, women have an opportunity to take a stand on some important issues that continue to impact them in their multiple roles as professionals, wives, and mothers.

While the glass ceiling clearly now has large cracks and even holes, more work remains to be done to leverage women's earning potential and talent, catapulting corporate America toward greater success and helping women along the way.

## CHANGING THE FACE OF THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE

Here are some tips for taking charge of these issues and continuing to turn the tide on long-ingrained barriers in corporate America:

► **EQUALIZING PAY AND NEGOTIATING THAT RAISE:** This issue remains one of the major sticking points for women in America: women still earn just 77 cents for every dollar that their male counterparts earn. Not acceptable! That's why it is important to continue pushing for raises and negotiating pay increases based on talent, knowledge, and specialized skills that others in your workplace do not have; these abilities increase your importance and value to your firm. Too often, women undervalue what they bring to the table, when their abilities may in fact far exceed those of others in the workplace. When negotiating for greater (or even equal) pay, focus on the quantitative evidence that supports your getting more money, including your accomplishments and firsthand knowledge of today's most powerful consumer—women.

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With corporations under so much pressure to perform and retain the talent that drives their success, you need to realize just how many cards those firms hold, so you can call their bluffs and get them to put their money on the table. And before you go in and collect on that raise, make a list of all the specific ways in which you add value to the company. Then use these points as your bargaining chips. Most importantly, develop the mindset that you deserve a raise. When you believe in yourself, that confidence positively and powerfully influences the belief that others have in you.

► **ENJOYING MATERNITY LEAVE WITHOUT THE GUILT:** Women often feel torn between their careers and their roles as moms, a feeling often exacerbated by hormones and the exhaustion that comes with being pregnant or just having given birth. Often, women feel guilty for taking time to let their bodies recover and bond with their little bundles. Maternity leave should be provided to women without hassle or guilt and enhanced by comprehensive support, so

that money and professional responsibilities do not have to be top of mind until you are comfortable with your physical and emotional life changes. Having this time means asking for the longest maternity leave possible. Every pregnancy is different: you may bounce back quickly from one but find another much more challenging. Either way, take the time to enjoy this special addition to your family. You'll always have work, but you will never regain those precious memories of your children's first few months.

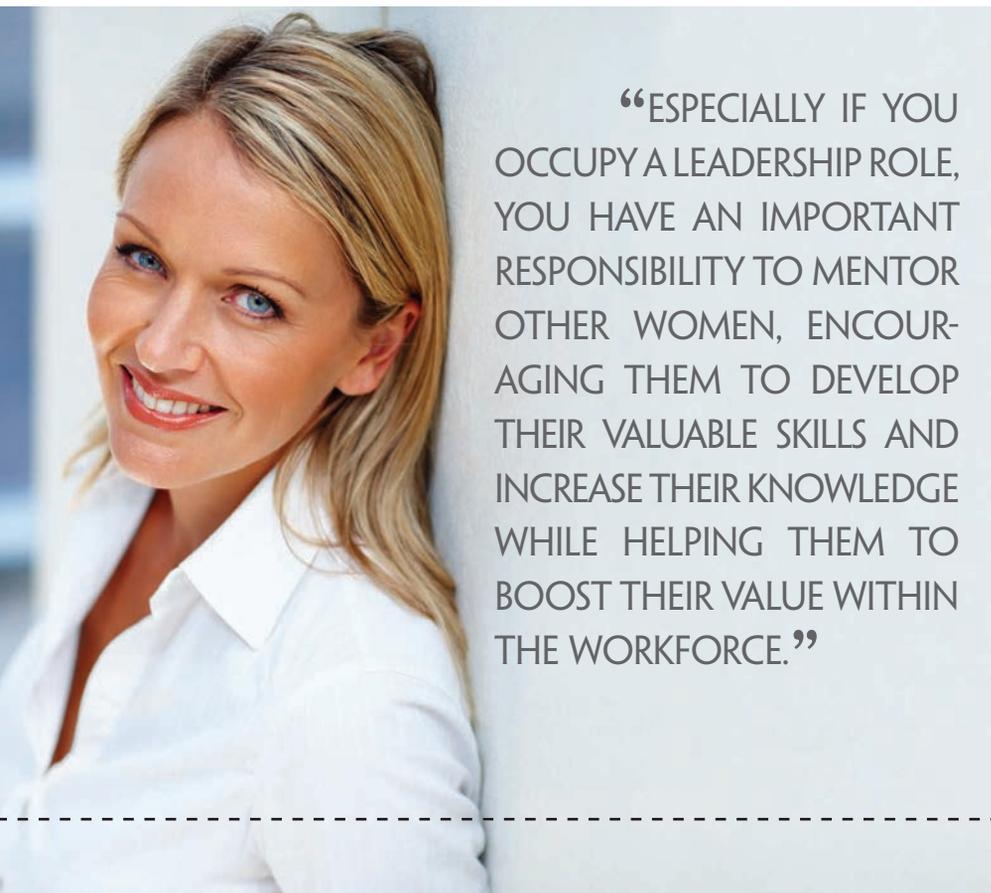
Don't let your company bully you to come back earlier than planned or make you feel guilty about slacking off; if anything, you are working harder than you ever did before, this time on a VIP project that needs your attention. Know what you are entitled to during maternity leave, and what an employer can and cannot ask of you during this time. Don't even think about taking on work at home while on maternity leave! Do, however, offer telecommuting as a point of negotiation when you are ready to come back to the office; you might suggest telecommuting for a

day or two each week so that you can spend more time with your children while maintaining your contribution to the company.

► **MENTORING OTHER WOMEN TO HELP THEM CLIMB THE CORPORATE LADDER:** Especially if you occupy a leadership role, you have an important responsibility to mentor other women, encouraging them to develop their valuable skills and increase their knowledge while helping them to boost their value within the workforce. Not only are you providing them with the assistance they need to generate additional bargaining power for themselves, but you are also building an army of women united by their determination to smash what remains of corporate America's glass ceiling and its unequal standards for pay and benefits, not to mention its perception of women's value in the workplace.

► **ADDING A FEMININE TOUCH TO A MALE-DOMINATED WORK ENVIRONMENT:** By this, I do not mean adding flowers to every office and cubicle or putting a doily under the water cooler. I'm talking about leveraging those feminine traits that help the staff achieve strategic objectives: clear and regular communication; a nurturing and caring attitude toward one another; and even intuition, that incredible sense we women have for determining how best to handle a situation. Research has found that having such traits as part of a workforce culture has helped achieve objectives, solve problems, and unify talent. Don't be afraid to use these feminine skills in the workplace—they are something you have that a male-dominated firm does not, which can make you a standout employee and a potential candidate for that next promotion. **N**

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