Building Constituencies for Culture Change in Organizations by Linking Education and Intervention

The Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) is known for its unique approach to organizational intervention. CGO partners with organizations to analyze deeply embedded work practices and cultural norms that undermine the *dual agenda* of both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. Our change work aims to initiate *small wins*[1] that contribute to both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. This is a long-term process in which team members from CGO work with internal stakeholders to carry out all phases of the collaborative, interactive action research approach.[2]

As part of its mission to extend this work, CGO experiments with alternative ways to retain the essence of the dual agenda in organizations, but in ways that may be less time- and effort- intensive. One such experiment involves linking leadership education for women to an ongoing process of inquiry and change. Although the CGO approach operates at the systemic level and leadership education is primarily aimed at individuals, in this experiment, we explicitly linked individual education to systemic change with very interesting outcomes for both the individual participants and the organization that sponsored them. The purpose of this briefing note is to report on this experiment, a partnership between Executive Education and CGO at the Simmons School of Management.[3]

The Leadership Program for Women is an innovative executive program that blends an individual focus on education and training with constituency building and organizational dialogue that can result in small wins. The Program was developed as an experiment in response to a request from an engineering organization we will call IBEX. The firm was concerned that women middle managers felt isolated and excluded from important decisions and were not represented in the more senior positions in the organization. IBEX came to CGO and Executive Education because they had identified specific problems that women in the organization faced: under-representation in leadership positions, exclusion from high profile assignments, and high turnover, among others.[4]

As with many organizations, these gender-related issues were deeply embedded in work practices and cultural norms in the firm. Part of the task of the Program was to help women become more effective in navigating and succeeding within the current environment. But helping the women is not enough. Just to help individuals become more proficient does nothing to change the environment, and so is likely to have limited success in helping the organization deal with its identified issues. Thus, skill building for women needs to be part of a larger agenda in order to address systemic issues of inequity. In the Leadership Program, this was accomplished by:

1) building a community among the women participants;

2) creating alliances between participants and their coaches; and

3) developing a small wins strategy.

Working on Individual Skills

Skill building in the Leadership Program is intended to help participants analyze their organizational environment and develop competencies that will help them be more effective in their day-to-day

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work in the organization as it currently operates. The curriculum and the structure of the Program are always based on a diagnosis of the gender-based issues in an organization.

The IBEX Program was structured around core modules that were developed based on interviews and focus

groups at the company with potential participants, men and women in comparable positions, and leaders of the firm. The modules had several learning themes. The first, analyzing complex organizations, helped participants see their gender issues as embedded in the culture of the organization, rather than as problems that could be solved simply by changing policies.

The second module focused on skills, particularly in negotiation, in order to help the participants become individually more adept at dealing with conflicts and challenges in their work. For example, one of the continuing problems was that women would be expected to pick up extra tasks—such as taking notes at meetings and helping underperformers in the organization—that added to their workload and for which they received no recognition. Enhanced negotiation skills helped the participants to push back on these requests, a change that challenged the norm that women will do "invisible work"[5] and not get any reward or recognition for it.

Another significant theme in the course was gender and leadership. Participants had multiple opportunities to receive feedback and assess their leadership strengths and weaknesses. The final module of the course exposed participants to what CGO calls *fourth frame*[6] thinking about gender, the dual agenda, and the small wins approach. Using this framework, participants identified themes that linked gender with the strategic objectives of the organization. At IBEX, effectiveness was one of these strategic objectives. Such an analysis forces people to look at key cultural assumptions in their organization that impact gender equity and organizational effectiveness. As part of the analysis, organizational members must consider why these as-

sumptions have been functional to the organization and delineate the gender and organizational consequences of each assumption. At IBEX, the assumptions included:

1) working in crisis mode, which created time binds for working parents that also affected the quality of work;

2) "connections count," and as a result, there was differential access to opportunities that not only left women out of key leadership roles, but also had negative consequences for the organization as a whole; and

3) communication patterns that not only left women out of the decision-making process, but also meant that important decisions were made without all the relevant information.

The educational component of the Program helped the women to develop a more complex understanding of their organization and its culture and to develop the skills that could help them navigate more effectively within it. In the follow-up interviews after the completion of the Program, the participants themselves felt more confident in their skills and more empowered to claim their space and role in the organization. Their bosses and colleagues echoed these perceptions.

Building a Community among the Participants

A major goal of the Leadership Program is to foster constituencies for change. A small wins approach is not a one-time program, but is an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation, and learning to transform the culture of the organization to be more equitable and effective. The more members of an organization share this agenda, the more likely it is that small wins will spread. The first step in

building a coalition for change involves the participants themselves. But participants often are not ready.

When women are singled out to come to a leadership program, they often experience this as a negative statement about their competency—as if they require remedial help. The presenting issues that prompt an organization like IBEX to develop such a program in the first place further compound this. Participants feel, and often rightly so, that the problems are not with them but with the organization. To build a community means first working with these perceptions to help people reframe their understanding. Using a process we call Group Experience Sharing (GES), participants share experiences, present dilemmas to each other, and coach each other on actions. Over time, participants started to see their situations differently; their experiences were not unique. They recognized that the problems were not solely with them as individuals, nor could they blame the organization and its leaders. Rather, they came to see that gender issues are embedded in taken-for-granted organizational practices and cultural norms. The participants also experienced the power of sharing and support, and cohered as a group who believed that they could act together to make changes in their organizations. The process of doing a fourth frame analysis of their organization also contributed to these perceptions. They came away with an analysis that connected gender issues to critical organizational challenges.

Creating Alliances with Coaches

In order to support the participants individually and to expand the internal organizational constituency, participants worked with coaches from IBEX throughout the Program. Par-

ticipants selected their own coaches and most chose people they had not worked closely with before. Many of the coaches were men and several occupied significant leadership positions at IBEX. This group thus began to constitute the beginnings of an emerging constituency for change that had clout in the organization. The bi-weekly schedule of the IBEX Program enabled participants to brief their coaches, keep them up to date on what was happening in the program, and generally reflect on their learnings and the implications for themselves and the organization.

At an individual level, coaches helped participants think about how to apply their skills most effectively in the organization. Some of the coaches also became advocates for their participant partners. But one of the most consistent findings from the follow-up interviews was how these relationships altered coaches' perceptions of the gender issues in the firm. As one coach put it, "It is hard for men in senior positions to see how difficult it is for women to cut a path here, even when they have support. I used to think the problem was the individual woman, but now I see it's not. My consciousness was raised." This view was widely shared.

Recognizing that the gender issues were systemic, not individual, and that they therefore had repercussions for the organization, was an important step in building an expanded constituency that included men and that involved significant leaders in the firm. Based on the fourth frame analysis in the program, the participants, with support from CGO, designed and delivered a feedback session to their coaches. This feedback session was organized around the three major themes that were seen to impede both gender eq-

uity and organizational effectiveness: time and crisis management, differential access to opportunities, and exclusive communication patterns. During the session, coaches and participants worked further on these themes and refined them. Three task forces, made up of participants and coaches, were formed to continue to develop the themes and recommendations. This phase marked a significant transition—an expanded constituency now owned the dual agenda for change at IBEX.

Working on Small Wins

One of the major goals of the Leadership Program is to initiate an ongoing process of change in the organization. The task forces, comprised of coaches and participants, became more permanent and constituted themselves as the Group for Organizational Improvement (GOI) in order to continue to work on the three themes. GOI made several presentations to senior management that included their analyses of cultural barriers and the dual agenda, action plans, and specific recommendations. In addition, GOI presented examples where the organization was successfully addressing an issue. For example, GOI highlighted projects that had more inclusive modes of communication and the ways in which this benefited the decision-making process and thus the organization, and enabled the women involved to feel they were having more input on decisions that affected their areas. GOI also recommended innovative ways to use technology that would encourage more inclusive participation.

The GOI presentation to senior management was important not only because it was constructive—in that it focused on quality improvement—but also because it connected gender with organizational effectiveness issues. It

was therefore easier for senior management to endorse the proposed changes since they were now seen as benefiting the entire organization instead of benefiting only women. GOI also presented their findings widely across the organization to employees in different departments and geographic locales, thus enabling others to become involved. There were a significant number of small wins that we hope will continue to have an impact on the culture. Brown bag lunches to discuss the themes and recommendations, behind-the-scenes consultations, more staff meetings, more planning, and a language to discuss tough issues, for example, have meant

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that the critical themes are constantly being discussed and addressed. Program participants are also playing a leadership role outside of their job responsibilities by serving as coaches and facilitators around the dual agenda issues.

Conclusion

The Leadership Program had several goals. One was to help the women participants become more effective workers in their organization as it was currently operating. A second goal was to intiate a small wins strategy

for organizational change within IBEX. The participants, their colleagues who work closely with them, and the coaches were unanimous in their belief that these goals had been achieved.

In the past, gender issues at IBEX tended to be seen as individual. However, as a result of the program and GOI process, people at all levels of the organization began to appreciate the systemic issues and the negative impacts they were having on the organization.

The experiment revealed several challenges as well. In all such programs, expectations are raised. While many supported the GOI process, others felt that it only touched the surface of deeper issues. This is obviously true. Fourth frame change is not a one-time intervention, but must be an ongoing process of inquiry and experimentation. An ever-enlarging constituency is in place, but to continue the process requires that any changes be aligned with more traditional organizational structures and procedures. As in all the projects that start from a concern with gender, it is common for that purpose to get lost. It is easier for the organization to deal with its effectiveness issues, but more difficult to continue to focus on gender equity.

Overall, we see this model of education and intervention as a promising one. It accomplishes some of the same goals as traditional education, but by linking participants to coaches, we begin to build an organizational constituency for change. Many of the coaches are very influential in the organization and so voices for change were at the highest levels. In this innovative way, it becomes possible to link systemic and individual change so that both individuals and the organization can benefit. Clearly, there is more to learn from these kinds of experiments.

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Notes

[1] Meyerson, D. and J.K. Fletcher. 2000. A modest manifesto for shattering the glass ceiling. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February: 127-136.

The small-wins approach to change was developed by Karl Weick. See Weick, K. 1994. Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems. *American Psychologist,* 39: 40-49.

[2] Rapoport, R., L. Bailyn, J.K. Fletcher, and B. Pruitt. 2002. *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[3] The CGO team that worked on this project included Joyce K. Fletcher, Deborah Kolb, and Deborah Merrill-Sands. The Simmons Executive Education experience positions women to take on senior-level roles in their organizations. The programs provide new frameworks and tools, enabling women to become stronger influential leaders, to better navigate in their current organizational environment, and to re-position themselves for success. For more information, please go to: www.simmons.edu/som/exec_ed/index.html.

[4] There was also an implicit threat that a lawsuit might be filed.

[5] Fletcher, J.K. 1999. *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[6] Kolb, D., J.K. Fletcher, D. Meyerson, D. Merrill-Sands and R. Ely. 1998. *CGO Insights No.1, Making Change: A Framework for Promoting Gender Equity in Organizations*. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.

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Linking gender and organizational effectiveness

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