

Glass Ceilings: Prevention is Better than Cure

Why would you try to break through a barrier if you could stop it forming in the first place? Many barriers to achievement in personal and business life arise because other people consider it too big a personal or organisational risk to give us the opportunity we desire; even if we are demonstrably more than capable of rising to the challenge. It's true of buying decisions. It's true of promotions generally and it's particularly true of top appointments.

Whether we are male or female, not everyone wants to make it to the top of their business or profession. Capability, ambition, energy and resilience vary, as do levels of responsibility and commitments outside the work environment. But, let's suppose you really are good enough and have actively decided that the board room or equivalent is your goal. In that case, what do you do to stop a 'glass ceiling' forming above you and thwarting your ambitions?

Appointments to top leadership teams are a balancing act between capability, contribution and risk. If you are bringing a new person into a leadership team you want to be confident they can do their specific job, make a meaningful contribution to the success of the wider business and enhance the team dynamics. If you are an unknown quantity you may well be seen as too big a risk to the team.

Great Relationships Build Confidence

At People buy from People the business is underpinned by the belief that great relationships are based on being Known, Understood, Valued and Trusted. If you have built a great relationship, this gives a person the confidence to make decisions and take actions that would previously have felt too risky individually and/or organisationally.

So, if you are good enough and ambitious enough, and want to stop the formation of a glass ceiling over your head, **stop thinking of it as a glass ceiling and think of it as a risk ceiling**. This gives you a very specific and tangible focus on the creation of the relationships that will give people the confidence to make a choice that previously might have felt high risk to them. Best of all, this mind set enables you to take control of the 'glass ceiling'. You can now choose to do things consciously and proactively, rather than just hoping that a leopard will change its spots.

Here are three guidelines followed by a specific action in each area to get you started:

Guideline 1:

You must know **at least one** respected person in your organisation **at least two** levels above your own (and ideally higher), and speak to them regularly during the course of a year. As you become more senior, extend this to creating a senior network outside your own business.

Guideline 2:

Find a mentor **outside** your organisation who you can talk to absolutely openly and who has already been where you wish to go.

Guideline 3:

Actively manage your career and look for things to do that give you visibility and enable you to **stand out from the crowd**.

Whether you are at the start of your career or well into it, these three simple guidelines should be an integral part of your investment in yourself and your future. Here's one specific action to go with each guideline to get you going on shaping your personal action plan.

1. **Know People Higher Up Your Organisation**

Work out who will be influential in making decisions in your business and who can affect your progress e.g. CEO, HR Director, Sector Partner. Sad to say, in some cases your direct manager may have a vested interest in keeping you where you are ; especially if you are really good at what you do. This is one reason why you need relationships outside this direct line.

To get a new dialogue going with these influencers, why not ask them for their advice and insight on what they are looking for in the future leaders of the business and what would make them sit up and take notice of you? If this feels daunting, ask yourself "how can I proactively work towards my goal if I don't know specifically what is being looked for?" Once you've had the conversation(s), set about using the advice you have been given and keep your contact informed. This is a good basis for meeting up, say, quarterly to review progress and refine emphasis.

2. **Find an External Mentor**

You probably have someone you look up to as a role model. Ask them if they will mentor you. If no one comes to mind, ask people you respect for their suggestions. Some organisations have internal mentoring schemes and you should take advantage of these, but there is no substitute for an external perspective.

Before approaching a potential mentor, think through what types of things you would like to be able to explore, roughly how much time might be involved and what the mentor might get out of the relationship. Then make an approach. If they say no, you are no worse off than before. If they say yes, you have a real opportunity to be challenged in new ways. Agree a rule of absolute honesty. Mentoring without honesty is a waste of everyone's time. Expect to be challenged to do difficult and different things. Ask to be rehearsed before you do them.

3. **Be Visible; Be Different**

Find something to do that makes you stand out from the crowd, internally and/or externally. Speak at a conference or a breakfast seminar; arrange an Away Day; develop a new idea for the business in your own time. What you do to achieve this varies significantly depending on where you are in your career.

As you near Board level, consider taking on a Non Exec Directorship or become Chair of a charity. This will increase your network and show you can do perform at the right level as well as the satisfaction of

making a difference beyond your work environment. Often forgotten is the need to take your own people with you. Whatever level, treat your own team with respect and lead by example so you have a core of people both above and below you who are backing you. You might also consider improving your qualifications in ways that are relevant to your goals. This could vary from a language that makes you more flexible than others or an MBA or equivalent which you can use to tackle issues in your business.

Your goal through these activities is to be known properly; **not just as a name** that is recognised, but **as a person** that key people can relate to, believe in and are keen to support.

What about the Old Boy Network and Prejudice?

For those who are part of an OBN and have kept in touch with key people over the years, these people have the advantage of being thought of as lower risk than new 'upstarts'. I say good luck to people who have recognised their advantage and have invested in maintaining their network. This doesn't stop you creating your own network that will fulfil the same function and be even better because you have selected who should be in it. If you believe someone is likely to be prejudiced against you because of gender, ethnicity etc, get to know them. Prejudice is addressed one relationship at a time.

In summary, whatever your goals, proactively work to create a relevant network of people who will actively advise, challenge, guide and support you. And if you've been helped, be ready to do the same for someone else who is earlier in their journey than you.

About People buy from People (PbfP)

For **women in business and** others who feel hampered by a 'glass ceiling' there are specific tools and behaviours in the Results through Relationships Framework to enable them to succeed. These support the creation of the networks and development of personal presence and visibility that enable people to become properly known and supported and set up to fulfil their potential.

More generally, PbfP works with businesses that thrive when they consistently establish and develop enduring relationships that deliver results that are good for both parties. People come to PbfP when they want to release the full potential of their business relationships (internal or external), and win business without selling. We tackle these challenges by addressing the execution of the business winning strategy and relationship model. In addition we give people the understanding, skills, tools, practice and support to grow their businesses through relationships that last.

The result: good business, more easily, more often.

Our focus is on organisations where the people who provide relationship leadership and are accountable for business and relationship performance are business professionals, rather than sales professionals.

The service is underpinned by the PbfP Results through Relationships™ Framework which has at its core The Relationship Code™; an original intuitive model developed by PbfP.

For more information visit www.peoplebuyfrompeople.co.uk or call People buy from People on 07990 542 122.