

Holding up Half of the Corporate Sky

Women's professional groups can help us reach higher in the business world

By Lin Gao



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Even in China, where women have made tremendous strides, gender equality in the workforce is still a vitally important goal that we continue to strive toward.

We have come a long way from the times when women could not aspire to top business leadership positions. However, with only 12 female executives of Fortune 500 companies, it appears that, in the corporate world, “women holding up half the sky” is more of an aspiration than reality.

With today's increasingly global business environment, companies understand the need to develop a diversified workforce—including strong women in leadership. Some companies impose hard measures to consider at least one female candidate during the hiring process. Others choose to tackle the issue from its root cause by developing more women leaders within the company, attracting and retaining talented women with a “women friendly” corporate culture. Having a women's networking group is an effective way to promote such a culture. Companies such as IBM, GE, Cisco and Motorola have championed such efforts, including recently in China.

When companies first establish women's business groups, many people often have doubts about whether they are necessary. This was certainly initially the case at Motorola China when we initiated a program. After all, women in China seem to enjoy more career opportunities than in other Asian countries. Additionally, some male colleagues inevitably tend to suspect these groups are just social clubs.

We anticipated skepticism from men, but discovered that some women

also wonder if such groups imply that they have a sort of inherent disadvantage. Therefore, it is important that these groups stress that women may not necessarily have more challenges than men, but we have different needs and challenges, and we learn differently. Working together, women can address some of these common issues.

A women's networking group is about developing strong female leadership so we have the strength to cope with the unique challenges we face. From the start, having a vision is important, as volunteer organizations that lack purpose often lose focus and value. A focus on leadership development, and addressing the skills and social gaps, often incorporating men into the activities, is a good place to start. Some successful programs at various companies include:

Lunchtime seminars and workshops

One to two-hour lunchtime learning sessions can provide information on technology and soft skills such as effective communication, time management and leadership required to get ahead in the corporate world. Of course, there are also topics that tend to affect women more like childcare and dressing for success.

Toastmasters

Traditionally, women have been taught to be less assertive and tend not to be as vocal as men when it comes to self-promotion. Organizations like Toastmasters International help people with communication and leadership. As members participate in the various roles, they can gain confidence and skills in speaking their mind and leading others, which can help women seek out visibility and promotion at work.

Parents Clubs

To many mothers in China, “work-life”


balance refers to work-child balance. The reality is that women still bear a majority of the child-rearing duties. A parents club can help mothers address work-life balance issues.

Networking Events

Studies have shown that for managerial advancement, strong networks and good mentorship trump performance at traditional managerial tasks. Yet, breaking into men's networking world is often difficult for women. Sometimes men's networking activities—like golf—hold less appeal for women. Women's networking events can help us break through that barrier and set up activities that may be more appealing to us.

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Women should realize that the issues they face are not unusual. This gives us the opportunity to create synergies with other companies and the community in general. Together, we can share resources, best practices and our passion toward developing stronger women leaders.

It is great to see that AmCham-China has formed the Women's Professional Committee to deal with some of the issues we face. Individual companies should consider their own programs to complement AmCham-China's initiative. Cracking the glass ceiling takes more than one person, or one company, and is strengthened by numbers. If we keep pushing forward, women will truly be able to hold up half the sky. 

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