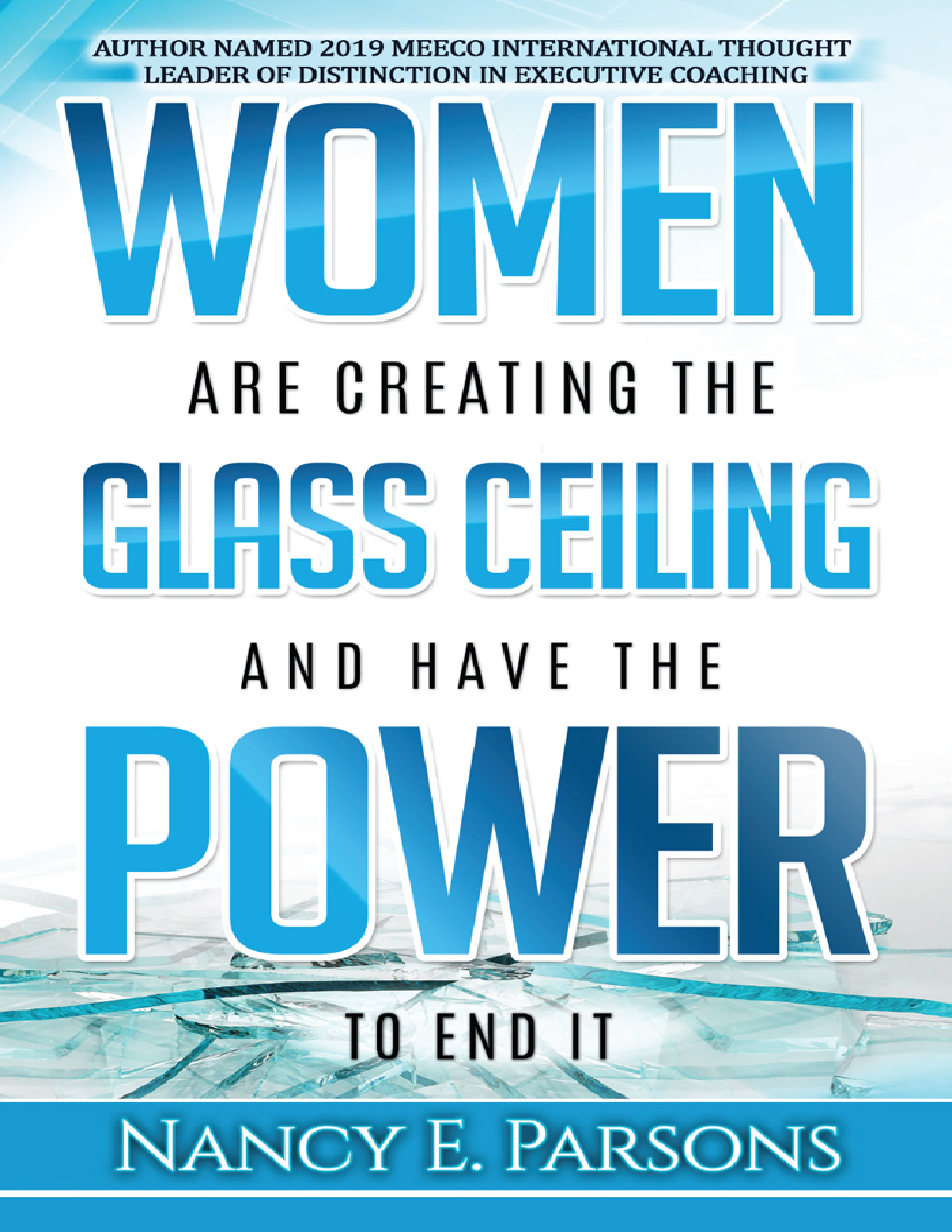

AUTHOR NAMED 2019 MEECO INTERNATIONAL THOUGHT LEADER OF DISTINCTION IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

WOMEN ARE CREATING THE GLASS CEILING AND HAVE THE POWER TO END IT

NANCY E. PARSONS

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Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

CHAPTER 1 – The Problem and the Power

- The Research
- Recent Cultural Shifts Are Creating Fresh Tensions and Dynamics
- Solutions with Good Intent Aren't Enough
- Women Have the Power

CHAPTER 2 – A Brief History

- 1964
- 1979
- Time for a Game-Changing Solution

CHAPTER 3 – Obstacles and Disconnects

- The Myths and the Blame Game
- Lack of Traction with Diversity Initiatives
- Cultural Quake: #MeToo, the Kavanaugh Case, and the Gender Diversity Imperative
- Google's Firing of James Damore: Is the Pendulum Swinging Too Far?
- Expanding the Dialogue
- Men's Views on the Glass Ceiling

Tokenism Is NOT the Answer
Sexual Harassment, Bullying, and Likely Victims
Lack of Leadership Accountability
Psychological Safety, Tolerance, and Respect

CHAPTER 4 – Performance: Do the Math!

Can Women Lead as Effectively as Men?
Performance Results of Women in Leadership
LEADEROCRITY®
The Math
Time for Change

CHAPTER 5 – About the Research

About CDR Assessment Group, Inc. and the Assessments Used in the Study
    CDR Character Assessment
    CDR Risk Assessment
Our Original Study Was Not About the Glass Ceiling
Research Overview
The Study Participants
2018 Research: IE Business School (IE.edu) Study of Western Europe Executives and Leaders
Pew Cultural Survey: Women and Leadership
2018 Pew Research: How Men and Women View Gender in Leadership

CHAPTER 6 – The Root Cause

The "Break-Through" Finding
A Summary of the Glass Ceiling Research Findings
    #1 — Women Leaders Are "Worriers"

#2 — Men Leaders Are "Egotists," "Rule Breakers," and "Upstagers"

#3 — Women CEOs and Corporate Executives' Risks Are More Like Men's Risks

#4 — Perceptions Are Often Wrong and Much Tougher on Women

#5 — Western European 2018 Study: Personality Risk Factor Study Confirms Worrier Trends in Women

#6 — Executive Women's Relationship-Building Skills: A Key to Their Success!

The Crux of the Problem *49* Men's Risks Are Viewed as More "Leader-Like"

Women Pulling Themselves Out of the Running

Takeaway from the Book *Lean In*

How 360° Leader Scan™ Feedback Describes Risk Factors Impacting the Glass Ceiling

CHAPTER 7 – Why Are Risks So Important?

Risks and Derailers

8 Universal Leadership Derailers

Examples of 11 Risk Behaviors

The Most Important Step for Leadership Effectiveness Is to Identify Risks

Why Leader Risks Are Not an Excuse for Bad Behaviors

CHAPTER 8 – Risk Connections and Clusters

Ineffective Coping Strategies or "Risk Clusters"

Understanding Those Who "***Move Away***"

Developing the "***Moving Against***" Leader

Understanding Those Who "***Move Toward***"

CHAPTER 9 – Advice and Stories from Women Executives and Leaders

Advice from Women Executives

Karen – A COO in Educational Sector and Formerly in Manufacturing

Nicole – A National Partner in a Top Financial Consulting Firm

Elaine – A CEO in a Stage Pharmaceutical and Biotechnology Firm

“Worrier” Stories and Struggles Shared by Women Leaders

Ann – A CEO of Creative Services/ Communications and Marketing Firm

Melanie – An Executive Vice President in Energy

Diane – A President of a Women’s Entrepreneurial Leadership Organization

Kathy – A Business Manager of Consulting Firm

Joanne – A Vice President of Marketing in Banking Industry

Brenda – A Consulting Firm Intern

CHAPTER 10 – Top Executive Coaches Offer Advice for Women “Worriers”

Carolyn Maue

Marianne Roy

Brian Epperson, PhD

Barbara Mintzer McMahon

Daniel Feldman, PhD

Lynne Pritchard

Patricia Wheeler, PhD

Rosa Algarrada

Lynn Harrison, PhD

CHAPTER 11 – Women: Tactics and Insights for Women to Develop Leadership Capability

First: Self Awareness
Know and Build Your Strengths
What Are Your Risks and Vulnerabilities?
What Drives and Motivates You?

CHAPTER 12 – Analyzing and Developing Your Risk Factors

Identifying Your Risks
Analyzing Risk Factors: A Step-by-Step Approach
Developmental Tactics and Ideas to Manage Your Risks
Develop Your Executive Presence
    How Risks Can Impact the 7 Traits of Executive Presence

CHAPTER 13 – Cultural Study Shows Bias Is More Damaging Than Most Think

Rubbing Salt in the Wounds: Biases Holding Women Back
Comparing CDR Assessment Results to the Pew Social Trends Survey Data
Why Is This Research So Compelling?
There is Good News: Perceptions of Women's Ability to Lead

CHAPTER 14 – Action Plans and Solutions for Glass Ceiling Stakeholders (Including the C-Suite)

Who Are the Stakeholders?
Key Roles of Stakeholders
C-Suite and Senior Leaders
Fix the System: Making Gender-Neutral, Objective Succession Planning and Promotional Decisions
Leadership Development Experts

Women's Interest Groups

CHAPTER 15 – The Glass Ceiling Ends

Summary of Eight Practical Steps to End the Glass Ceiling

The Power of Women to END the Glass Ceiling

Vision 2030: The Glass Ceiling Ends

Looking Forward

CHAPTER 16 – The Research Findings

Reviewing the Profiles of Corporate Executive Women and Women CEOs

Differences in Original Study Group vs. CEOs and Corp. Executives

How Female CEOs and Corporate Executive Women Differed from the Women in the First Study Group

The Female CEOs Are Egotists, Upstagers, and Rule Breakers

New 2018 Study Group: Western European Study (Source: IE Business School Results)

Summaries of Each Leader Group

APPENDIX I – Recommended Resources to Help Manage Leadership Risk Factors

APPENDIX II – Research Methodology

About the Author

About CDR Assessment Group, Inc.

Our Assessments

Our Services for Women in Leadership

Key Services

Women's Leadership Workshop

Notes

When it comes to women in top leadership positions, the trends are dismal. In 2018, women actually lost ground. The number of women CEOs fell by 25%, leaving women holding a mere 24 or 4.8% of the top positions at Fortune 500 companies. Prior to this, in 2017, we saw a record high for women CEOs who held 32 seats or 6.4%.[1] As of June 2019, there was a rather sudden uptick to 33 women CEOs leading Fortune 500 companies, an all-time high of 6.6%; however, it was largely due to fallout from the #MeToo Movement and male CEOs being fired for ethical violations. In spite of this recent, anomalous upswing, only 11% of the top earners at the most profitable companies are currently women.[2] The glass ceiling remains stronger than ever.

This is true at a time when investments in women-in-leadership initiatives are at an all-time high—and studies consistently show that when more women serve in senior leadership roles, business performance improves. According to a Peterson Institute for Global Economics study,

> Companies with at least 30% female leaders—in senior management positions—experienced a 15% increase in profitability of more than 20,000 global companies from 91 countries.[3]

This is just one of the many studies showing similar results. So, even if we forget about the gender disparity for a moment and think about company performance and the bottom line, we would realize it makes business sense to promote more women.

Looking back in history, the US Pregnancy Discrimination Act went into effect in 1979, and, along with the earlier Civil Rights Act of 1964, the doors were *finally* wide open for women to be promoted based on their talent and performance. That was four decades ago, yet the numbers of women reaching the CEO or C-Suite level are dismal. Women's progress continues to be stalled and perhaps, one could argue, is sliding backwards.

Interestingly, every year since 1982, women have been surpassing men in the number of bachelor's degrees conferred. Since 2005, women have also received more master's and doctorate degrees.

With gender diversity initiatives in high gear, organizations are launching new women-in-leadership developmental and mentoring programs and are diligently tracking the progress of women's upward success. My firm's ongoing research reveals that while the intentions and investments are positive, today's solutions are not addressing the key problem. Using the same approaches will not produce different results. Here's a disturbing conclusion from my 2017 book, *Fresh Insights to END the Glass Ceiling*:

> ***"If we stay on the same trajectory, it will take 400 years for women to reach just 50% of the CEO positions."***

Before you dismiss me as a doomsday prophet, note that McKinsey's study, Women in the Workplace 2018, shows a similar finding. This study reports that, at the current rate, we will only move forward 1% in the next 10 years.[4] If multiplied forward, it will take 450 years for women to attain 50% of the CEO positions.

In December 2018, the Global Gender Gap Report stated, "At the current rate of change, the economic gender parity remains 202 years off." [5] The results of this global gender study include all jobs in the private and public sector, while the 400- and 450-year estimates are based on women attaining CEO positions.

Clearly, whether it is 200 or 400 years, this wait time is unthinkable. To slide further backwards or to continue to not make significant progress is unacceptable and preventable.

So, with investments in developmental initiatives for women leaders at a record high and women consistently earning more college degrees and advanced degrees than men for decades, how is it that merely a few women make it to the top? Why are investments in training, development, and gender diversity not yielding better results? The answer is that these well-intentioned initiatives are missing the mark on *why* the glass ceiling really exists and what is really holding women back. They are not addressing the root cause of the problem. Consequently, the solutions are not sticking or facilitating the progress needed.

The Research

Our team at CDR Assessment Group, Inc. did not originally set out to study the glass ceiling. When Kimberly Leveridge, PhD, and I founded our firm in 1998, our vision was to *revolutionize* leadership. We knew leadership performance was not particularly effective back then, and we were excited to help leaders thrive.

CDR is a globally recognized assessment, leadership development, and talent management firm leading the way with cutting-edge tools, executive coaching, consulting, team development, research, custom leadership training, and CDR 3-D certification services. From executive coaching to employee selection, we provide services that wrap around all areas of human performance. Our unique tools and distinctive coaching services are designed with the foremost psychological insights and applied business know-how.

Developing highly talented leaders and teams requires accurate, concrete, and business-oriented information about each individual's differences—character, acumen, inherent risk factors, and motivational drivers. Our CDR 3-Dimensional Assessment Suite® provides unique insight into a leader's key strengths and development needs in the following areas: character assessment, drivers and rewards, and risk assessment.

The CDR Character Assessment measures personality traits with seven primary scales and 42 subscales. This tool identifies leader or professional acumen, vocational suitability or "best fit" roles, emotional intelligence, key strengths, noteworthy gaps, and more.

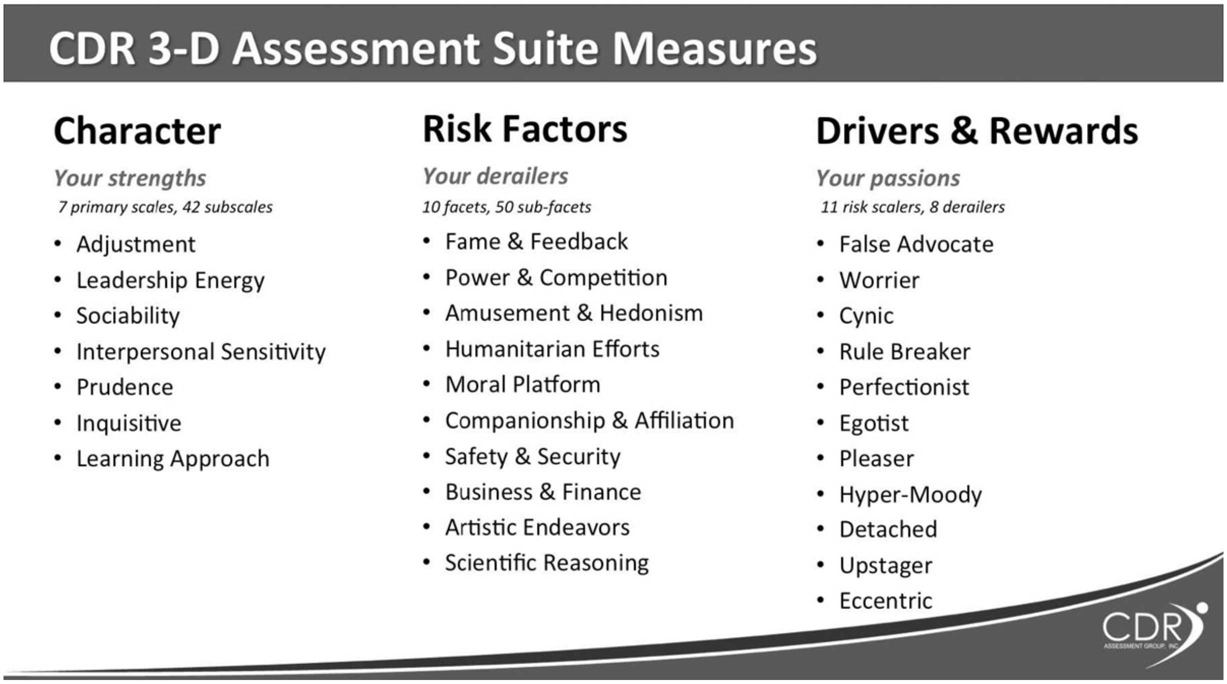
The Drivers & Rewards Assessment defines and measures 10 primary personal motivators and provides important information about job function and work environment fit. This assessment, in the aggregate, is a great tool for measuring the living culture and values of an organization.

The CDR Risk Assessment measures 11 inherent personality-based risks or ineffective coping strategies that can undermine effectiveness, damage relationships and communication, and lead to derailment. These risks tend to be revealed under stress, conflict, and pressure.

ILLUSTRATION 1

The CDR 3-Dimensional Assessment Suite®

These scientifically validated personality assessments and our work with clients allow us to perform ongoing cutting-edge research. I'll share more specifics of the dimensions of each assessment as the book unfolds.



CDR 3-D Assessment Suite Measures

Character

Your strengths

7 primary scales, 42 subscales

- Adjustment
- Leadership Energy
- Sociability
- Interpersonal Sensitivity
- Prudence
- Inquisitive
- Learning Approach

Risk Factors

Your derailers

10 facets, 50 sub-facets

- Fame & Feedback
- Power & Competition
- Amusement & Hedonism
- Humanitarian Efforts
- Moral Platform
- Companionship & Affiliation
- Safety & Security
- Business & Finance
- Artistic Endeavors
- Scientific Reasoning

Drivers & Rewards

Your passions

11 risk scalers, 8 derailers

- False Advocate
- Worrier
- Cynic
- Rule Breaker
- Perfectionist
- Egotist
- Pleaser
- Hyper-Moody
- Detached
- Upstager
- Eccentric

SOURCE: Nancy Parsons and Kimberly Leveridge, PhD, CDR Assessment Group, Inc., 1998.

In a particular research study a few years back, we were comparing our personality measures—the CDR Character Assessment and CDR Risk Assessment—to 360º performance data (from a random group of 137 women leaders and 126 men leaders from 35 companies in North America) when we stumbled upon an unexpected finding—*the root cause of the glass ceiling*.

In this study, there was nothing unusual about the CDR Character Assessment results: both men and women were shown to have strong leader capabilities and strengths; however, the inherent personality-based CDR Risk Assessment differences of men and women leaders were profound and unexpected. Once we had time to mentally process and review these stark differences in risks further, the impact was clear: Women had statistically significant higher risk scores as “Worriers” while men had high scores as “Upstagers,” “Egotists,” and “Rule Breakers.”

After our initial research, something still seemed off to me as I thought about the women who had made it to the top. I knew from coaching these senior leaders over the years, and from what I recalled about their individual CDR data, that they did not fit the Worrier profile. This presented a question that led us to the next part of our research.

We looked at the aggregate risks of women who are top corporate executives and women who are CEOs. My hunch proved to be correct: both of the executive women groups' CDR Risk Assessment data aligned more with the men's group than with the women's group of mid-level leaders. These risk differences have been key to their ability to make it to the top without being held back by the Worrier traits. The women executives we studied were able to remain aggressive and push their views and positions regardless of conflict and stress. They did not shut down and go inside their heads when times were tough. Unfortunately, many more women, and most of those in the leadership pipeline, have Worrier traits.

In late 2018, we completed a third study of Western European women leaders, women executives, and men leaders, and the results were even more stark. This data was compiled from Executive Education Department at IE Business School (located in Madrid, Spain) program participants that included women and men leaders and executives. The women leader sample size was slightly larger with 145 women. Their average scores as Worriers were even higher at 75%. While our original North American women's group in our first study was at 63%, both were significantly higher than the respective men leader study groups. The 294 men leaders in the Western European study had lower scores as Worriers than their female counterparts. These men had slightly higher "Detached" scores but did not show the same risk trends as the North American men leaders. What was different was that the Western European women leaders' Worrier scores were markedly higher. The executive women's group in Western Europe (IE.edu) sample size was not large enough but showed the same trends that we saw in the executive and CEO women in North America in the second part of our study.

Recent Cultural Shifts Are Creating Fresh Tensions and Dynamics

While we've been discovering fresh insights into how differences in risk factors impact men's and women's potential for promotion, major cultural events and shifts in 2017 and 2018 are impacting both genders in the workplace. As a result of the #MeToo movement, which began to sweep through the media in 2017, dozens of significant and horrific cases of sexual harassment were exposed, many that had been hidden for decades. This has helped women to begin to stand strong against abuse in the workplace. This was long overdue, to say the least. Then in 2018, the emotional intensity surrounding the Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Judge Brett Kavanaugh hearings added to the gender discussion and tension.

Unfortunately, we are now left with an ultrasensitive climate of fear, risk aversion, and pushback from men executives and leaders. Meanwhile, women are becoming angry, mistrustful, defensive, and fed up. I am afraid that rather than making the progress women in leadership so desperately need to end the glass ceiling, we are moving in the wrong direction. Fear and anger, rather than rational thought, are running high. The topic of gender in the workplace has become a tinderbox. According to a survey commissioned by a Lean In initiative (LeanIn.org is an initiative of the Sheryl Sandberg and Dave Goldberg Family Foundation), the number of male managers who are uncomfortable mentoring women has tripled since the #MeToo movement first started back in October 2017.[6]

For Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO and author of *Lean In*, these findings are something to worry about:

> If men think that the way to address workplace sexual harassment is to avoid one-on-one time with female colleagues—including meetings, coffee breaks, and all the interactions that help us work together effectively—it will be a huge setback for women.[7]

In the mid-1980s, when I was in HR leadership in the pipeline industry in Oklahoma and Texas, I routinely drove hundreds of miles with my boss and/or other male counterparts. There were no other women in key positions in the industry at the time. I had many exceptional and developmental work experiences at the various field locations where I was needed. There was no fear of working or traveling alone with a man. I wonder if this can happen today. For most people, the best learning experiences are on the job. If we end up holding women back from real-world experiences out of fear, this stymies their developmental opportunities.

Currently, I have a millennial client who is a high-level leader at a top technology development firm in Silicon Valley. He oversees a department of more than 200 people, of whom most are engineers, and about 50% are women. The diversity and inclusion team at the company was impressed and wanted to interview him so he could share what he was doing to onboard and promote so many women into leadership roles. He declined the interview. He told me he was not doing anything special. “All I am doing is hiring the best people, giving them chances to grow, and holding them accountable, but that may not be what the diversity team wants to hear,” he said. The other telling comment he made was, “I make sure at every meeting that I call for the women leaders to speak up to give their input because otherwise the men leaders on my team will take up all of the airtime.” What is concerning is that even those men leaders that are doing well developing or promoting women on their teams are fearful. He also mentioned he will now only meet with women in open lobby-type spaces, never in an office alone. Other executives have told me similar stories. Men are fearful, which damages working relationships and the ability to build and foster trust.

Solutions with Good Intent Aren’t Enough

Examples of common solutions deployed by organizations to help develop more women for leadership posts include the following:

- Assigning a mentor
- Creating opportunities for networking
- Engaging an internal or external leadership coach
- Funding an MBA or certification
- Providing assertiveness training
- Providing on-the-job experiences
- Providing training targeted at negotiating skills
- Sending to leadership training

According to the McKinsey 2018 study based on four years of data and insights from a range of experts, there are six actions recommended that companies take to make progress on gender diversity:

1. Get the basics right—targets, reporting, and accountability
2. Ensure that hiring and promotions are fair
3. Make senior leaders and managers champions of diversity
4. Foster an inclusive and respectful culture
5. Make the "Only" experience rare (this is where there is only one woman on a team or role)
6. Offer employees the flexibility to fit work into their lives[8]

These are all worthwhile, needed, and practical steps, but they are *not* the ultimate solution to ending the glass ceiling.

Women Have the Power

None of these solutions addresses the fact that women are holding themselves back. Women are actually taking themselves out of the running for upward progression. ***No one is doing it "to" them.*** Women are, in fact, creating the glass ceiling themselves because their Worrier risk factor behaviors are pulling them out of the running.

So, what can reverse the current backwards trends and accelerate the end of the glass ceiling? The good news is that women themselves *have the power* to reverse the trend—and to do it rapidly. Our research and extensive work in leadership development shows that women just need a different type of development to get them past the glass ceiling. It begins with self-awareness and taking responsibility for their own careers.

Equipped with a new crucial level of self-awareness, including identifying their own inherent risk factors (as well as specific strengths and motivational needs), individualized development, and support, women can ascend to the roles previously thought unreachable or unimaginable. Each woman's success is truly in her own hands. With a new deeper level of self-awareness and a commitment to overcome self-imposed barriers, the sky is the limit.

As individual women grow in self-awareness, all others in leadership positions need to do so as well. Women and men alike need to understand that all personality-based risks are actually ineffective coping responses. Thus, rewarding any of them is not productive. Organizations have historically promoted men despite their risk behaviors. Currently, perceptions of risk behaviors are out of whack and women are judged more harshly.

The solutions in this book are not about bashing men or falsely promoting women. The research findings and solutions detailed in this book lead us to identifying, developing, and promoting authentic talent—both women and men—with objective, scientifically valid measures. It is about changing norms that have led to fictitious and subjective systemic performance, leadership development, and talent management processes. To do so, incorporating science, objectivity, and solid practices is required. It is about accountability. It is about helping decision makers see talent much more clearly, and objectively, so they no longer accept and promote bad behaviors, particularly those risks more typical of men. Decision makers should, in fact, give all leader candidates a fair look.

Systemic change will take commitment from the top. The C-Suite and executives, mostly men at this point, must champion new approaches to assessing, developing, and promoting leaders—both women and men. The historical cookie-cutter, superficial approaches to these processes and decisions need to be tossed. We must add science and objectivity to end the gender-biased leadership selection, promotions, and succession planning results.

Despite the anxiety, chaos, and unsettled times, there is good news. There is a clear path to ending the glass ceiling that is a win-win for women, men, and the organizations they serve. The research in this book reveals this straightforward course.

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