

Why Are There So Few Women Managers?

When Peggy Merriss walked into her first Georgia city managers' annual conference, she counted three women, including herself. That was in 1984, when Merriss was Decatur's personnel director. She was encouraged to attend the conference by her boss, City Manager Curtis Branscome, the man whose job she took over in 1993. Today, Merriss is heartened because in 1996 that same statewide conference had more than 25 women in attendance. "It seems that it is getting better. I think the numbers are growing," says Merriss.

Indeed, Merriss is right: the number of women in the local government management profession is increasing, particularly at such mid- and upper-management levels as the assistant position. But the percentage of women chief administrative officers around the country has not changed much since Merriss attended her first managers' conference. However, Merriss's training under the guidance of a supportive boss, and experiences like hers, show a pattern of women managers rising to the top with the help of a mentor who could provide a model for breaking the glass ceiling in local government management.

Statistics Indicate Change

While the number of women managers increased from seven in 1971 to more than 100 in 1986, according to an article by James Slack in *Public Administration Review*—by 1994 that number had climbed to 379—the number of localities selecting the council-manager form of govern-

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Lee Szymborski

ment also has risen. For example, ICMA's *Municipal Year Book* data reveal that between 1986 and 1994 the number of communities in the United States choosing the council-manager form of government increased from 2,680 to 2,962—an increase of more than 10 percent. If the amount of job opportunities has increased because more localities are seeking professional administrators, it would seem that the proportion of women achieving the public manager's job should also increase. That, however, has not happened; the percentage of women managers has remained static.

The percentage of women managers in the United States has not changed significantly in the last decade, according to data assembled by ICMA. For the 1987 *Municipal Year Book*, ICMA surveyed 7,046 localities. Out of 4,644 officials designated as holding the chief appointed administrative officer or city manager position, 10.6 percent were women. A similar survey for the 1995 *Year Book* showed that out of 3,403 officials assigned top administrative duties, 11.1 percent were female.

The number and percentage of female managers compare poorly with statistics for women mayors and assistant managers. Between 1986 and 1994, women's representation in top elected posts increased from 9 percent to over 14 percent; the number of women occupying the position of assistant manager increased from 29 percent to more than 34 percent during this same time.

Women also are seriously underrepresented in the local government management profession, especially when compared with other sectors of public service. Evidence of this is found in Bureau of Labor Statistics data summarized in the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission's report, *Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital*. The commission's findings show that out of the 1,201,000 positions ranked as execu-

tive/administrator or manager in public administration, women held more than 41 percent. This figure compares favorably with such other industries as finance, insurance, and real estate; business services; and retail trade in which women also hold a considerable number of high-level positions.

While these numbers illustrate how opportunities for women in public management executive positions lag behind those in the private sector and other quarters of public service, it is noteworthy that the position of assistant city manager—the employee typically seen as the successor to the top job—has posted an increasing percentage of women occupying those ranks.

In 1986, women filled close to 30 percent of the assistant manager jobs. By 1994, the proportion of female assistant managers had increased to almost 35 percent. Though it appears that the opportunities for women are increasing, some data suggest that for women the job of assistant manager may be heading to those local positions traditionally held by women, that is, to mid-management jobs that may actually sidetrack women from avenues of advancement or may represent the ceiling of their achievements.

Promotion Is Not Always Beneficial

For example, according to the 1995 *Municipal Year Book*, more than 75 percent of city clerks are women, as are 67 percent of city librarians and nearly 48 percent of municipal treasurers. Yet when councilmembers hire a female city manager from within the organization, there is an equal chance that they will promote the city clerk as that they will promote the assistant manager, according to research conducted by Tracy Breen at Central Michigan University. This may suggest that for women there is little benefit to promotion

from the second-in-command post; at best, the organizational advantage presumed inherent in the position of assistant manager has not been fully exploited when it comes to the women in the profession.

The 1994 survey of female city managers conducted by Breen showed that despite 58 percent of her respondents' indicating that they were hired from within their own organizations, only 21 percent had been assistant managers. From this fact, Breen concludes that "a link could not be made between a direct promotion from the assistant city manager position to city manager." Given the professional talents and training required of a city or county manager (a broad knowledge of all local government operations is more pertinent than experience in running a single department), there have understandably been few instances when councils have hired the locality's librarian or financial officer as the next manager.

Still, the typical career path for a local government manager—a master's degree in public administration and increasingly responsible administrative positions—appears to break down for women, suggests Breen. "[The] data correlate with the existing research that it is very difficult to identify a definite career path for aspiring female city managers." Add to this statement the belief held by many of Breen's respondents (47 percent), who said that gender bias was a barrier to job advancement, and Slack's assertion that "women have little opportunity in local government for entry into the managerial enclave." Clearly, the profession has an issue it must confront.

Viewpoints of Women Managers

Women managers and assistant managers representing local governments ranging in population from 15,000 to more than 980,000 were interviewed

for this article. They disagree on the merits of establishing an ICMA committee to address issues about women in the profession. Some believe that a formalized group focusing on women's issues and showcasing their peers in top management would provide role models and encouragement for females to enter the profession. Others contend that women should assimilate; they say that how you manage a government does not vary with gender.

Still others, like Danvers, Massachusetts, Assistant City Manager Diane Norris, view the idea of a committee as a double-edged sword for women. Professional women's issues warrant further exploration, yet "I don't want to be out of the mainstream," Norris explains. "I want to be part of the real conversation and not at the kids' table at Thanksgiving."

What the people who were interviewed all agreed on, however, was a factor generally supported by the literature on women and management, the importance of mentoring. Heidi Voorhees, the village manager of Wilmette, Illinois, periodically tracks statistics about female managers and wonders if her colleagues are giving women assistant managers the same skill-developing challenges as male assistants are receiving. Voorhees believes that her experience with a mentoring manager was atypical; she inherited her job from a long-tenured male manager, whom she credits with helping her prepare for the manager's job. She points to an increasing amount of responsibility and complexity of assignments as examples of how her skills were honed for the top job.

Voorhees acknowledges that there are barriers for women but also says that such factors as the makeup of the elected officials—the hiring body—and the demanding nature of a local government manager's job are additionally influencing women's entry into the field. While she did not personally encounter any bias,

Voorhees says, a number of her women colleagues have experienced discrimination from councils, still largely composed of men.

Voorhees says that a women's network under the auspices of ICMA may be too formal a vehicle for advocating issues on women, leadership, and advancement within the profession. The process might "be better coming from the grass roots." Nevertheless, she maintains, mentoring is vital. Voorhees takes time to meet with other women in the profession, especially assistants from other municipalities in the Chicago area, because "women are not seeing other women managers—and it's affirming when they do."

Bartlett, Illinois, Village Administrator Valerie Salmons reports that she found no barriers to reaching the top management job. "I took the traditional route [for getting to be a city manager] and found the impediments were no different from any other professional in the field. There is nothing prohibitive for a woman being a city manager." Salmons, a former regional vice president of ICMA, does not foresee any benefit from a separate women's issues committee within ICMA. Salmons believes that women will gain more from networking in a diverse setting and should not segregate themselves from male managers: "Professional contacts should be broader—separate associations do not help."

What is helpful and important, says Salmons, is mentoring. She credits retired Decatur, Illinois, City Manager Les Allen, for whom she worked in the late 1970s, with the help, advice, and support she received as she advanced through various jobs and communities. Salmons says that Allen "continues to be my mentor."

When Jan Perkins spends time with public administration students, she notices that the women are reluctant to state local government management as a career goal. It's a matter of women's self confidence,

Perkins believes; "we should be encouraging" women to seek top management positions as viable career opportunities. Perkins links mentoring to improved self-confidence: "Mentoring is important—[that has been] true for me personally. Mentors [were] critical to my self-confidence . . . to be a city manager."

She believes that mentoring can occur through the encouragement of women to get involved in networking and professional development. "The aspirations of women need to be validated," says Perkins, reflecting that perhaps there may be a need to resurrect the group she was part of in the late 1970s, the Women and Minorities in the Profession Committee. At minimum, she suggests, "there's an important role for state associations to help foster mentoring."

ICMA needs to explore the issue of women in the profession more deeply than it has in the past. A look at what the literature and the private sector offer would be a first step. Examining the importance of mentoring and collecting more public sector examples could provide the basis for a dialogue within the profession and could contribute toward the building of models that will enhance advancement opportunities for women. First, here is a definition of mentoring and a description of how it differs from simply playing the role of boss.

Defining the Term

Joan Jeruchim and Pat Shapiro, in their book *Women, Mentors and Success*, describe the mentoring relationship as "unique." It "has qualities that distinguish it from other work relationships . . . the mentor has more power within the organization; [there is a] stronger degree of identification between a mentor and protégé than in any other work relationship [and it is marked by] the intensity of the emotional involvement."

Why is mentoring important for capturing top jobs? Much of the liter-

ature about women in management consistently points to case studies, field research, and surveys in which successful women have themselves credited the help of a mentor. Mentors empower women with the training opportunities, assignment challenges, and networking contacts to build their management skills and confidence.

A benchmark study of women executives, Ann Morrison's *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?*, has found that "every single one of the success cases in our study . . . was said to have had some help from above." In fact, Morrison's study points out 11 "success factors" that her respondents mentioned most often. Cited more often than the "ability to manage subordinates," the "drive to succeed," and "track record" as an indicator of probable success, "help from above"

was a factor mentioned by 100 percent of the executives questioned.

Other works affirm the importance of mentoring. Bette Woody's report *Corporate Policy and Women at the Top*, the result of a study done for the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, cites "grooming programs" as one of eight "strategies for increasing women at the top."

This approach is additionally supported, in much the same terms, by a book by Judi Marshall, *Women Managers: Travellers in a Male World*. Marshall asserts that "facilitating mentor relationships and membership in informal networks . . . [will] integrate women into current organization systems as equals and [increase] the number and prospects of women in management jobs." Marshall writes that mentoring programs are more important for women than for men because women are generally ex-

cluded from informal networking and need a mentor's guidance through a labyrinth of gender-based roadblocks.

Scores of mentoring programs exist in the corporate world. They point to a national recognition of the imbalance and under representation of women in management. The private sector has a lesson for local government management. A few examples of cases summarized in the Glass Ceiling Commission's report illustrate the depth and variety of approaches that could be explored for their adaptability to local government management.

CIGNA Insurance Company, for instance, has produced a guide for its operating divisions to use in their own development of a mentoring program. The guide serves "to provide a benchmark for best practices and approaches to mentoring and coaching." A comparable approach by which model mentoring guidelines would be developed under the auspices of ICMA could be made available to members of the state associations.

First Interstate Bank of California offers both an individual mentoring program and group mentoring. The bank tracks participants' career development over a three- to five-year period. Perhaps, a similar program to facilitate mentoring where it could not naturally occur in a smaller community, could be adapted by the state management associations to pair managers and assistants.

The management profession does offer some programs that could be built upon by ICMA or by the state associations. The Illinois Association of Municipal Management Assistants and the Urban Management Assistants of North Texas offer annual brown-bag events at which assistant managers, administrative assistants and interns buy lunch for manager who have volunteered to meet with them and help broaden their networking connections. The afternoon discussion is often wide open, with topics ranging from career development to trading "tales from the front." Assistants typically target managers based on the managers' reputation on the characteristics of their town. In many instances, long-term contacts have resulted from the program.

ICMA has another potential model in its Range Rider program. Range Riders are retired managers who volunteer their time to meet with working professionals to discuss personal or professional concerns arising from the job. The program emphasizes counseling both for managers under pressure from the

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lected officials and for managers who have been fired.

The Range Riders' career development potential for young professionals, however, has not been fully tapped. "Women and assistants should use the resources of the Range Riders," encourages Illinois Range Rider Bob Morris. "Mentors to women do not have to be women—men can help as much," says Morris. He additionally suggests that male local government managers can help by showcasing the work of women in their organizations and encouraging women to network.

Women's own assertiveness also can lead to the development of a mentoring relationship, suggests Phoenix management analyst Lisa Takata. "You need to take the initiative to seek out mentorship," says Takata, recalling the benefits of volunteering to do an internship in order to get started in the profession. When Takata was an undergraduate at UCLA, she sent dozens of unsolicited offers of her time to Los Angeles area municipalities. One letter hit home, and what she got in return was the opportunity to work for an assistant city manager willing to delegate substantive projects and to share an office so that Takata could observe how city business was conducted. Considering that her work experience was minimal and her talents untested, Takata says of the assistant manager, "I now realize the magnitude of what he did for me."


More research and dialogue on women managers is needed. Little has been written about women in local government. If there is indeed a glass ceiling within the profession, and the data suggests that there may be, ICMA's Strategic Plan offers a reason why it is imperative that the profession deal with it: "Attract[ing] new talent to the profession and . . . improv[ing] career opportunities . . . [for] people from diverse backgrounds . . . [will] enhance the qual-

ity of local government and . . . support and assist professional local administrators."

The dialogue about women in the profession must contain several elements, including those topics discussed here: mentoring and matters of discrimination. Engaging elected officials in this discussion will be essential. Gender bias, both blatant and blanketed, still is practiced by hiring authorities. "When I interviewed for city manager positions," says Wheeling, Illinois, Assistant Village Manager Joni Beaudry, "I was amazed by many councils' reluctance to hire a woman. It was evident in what they said and didn't say." Diane Norris concurs: "Elected officials are reluctant to hire women . . . they don't expect leadership qualities from women."

Hiring women managers should be part of the ongoing discussion that ICMA has started with the National League of Cities and the U.S. Conference of Mayors regarding the stability of the council-manager form of government. Demographic trends published by the U.S. Labor Department show that more women than men will be entering the workforce in the 21st century. If women are going to constitute a larger share of

the future work pool, will the profession be assured of attracting "the best and the brightest" if it does not develop methods to advance women today?

Exploring why the number of women managers has remained static also might illuminate the job itself. Are women entering public administration choosing other sectors of public service as better and more fulfilling alternatives to local government management? Is there something fundamental about the manager's job that needs reexamining? These questions also need exploring. Perhaps, then, when Peggy Merriss attends the Georgia managers' conference in 2006, progress on the issue will be measurable, and the percentage of women in attendance will give less cause for concern. 

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