

Change at the top: It's slow but happening for women

Did you ever have a feeling that the more things change, the more they stay the same? That was my initial reaction when I read the latest tally on the number of women who occupy the top executive positions and board seats at the region's largest companies.

In 2010, women filled only 11 percent of board seats at 100 companies that were included in a new analysis by the Forum of Executive Women. That number was unchanged from 2009. Women held 10.1 percent of senior executive positions in 2010, down slightly from 11 percent the previous year. Women comprised 9.6 percent of the "top earners" at those companies, up from 9 percent the year before, according to the findings.

The Forum – made up of many of the top women executives in the region – does an annual accounting in its "Women on Boards" report of the status of women at the 100 largest public companies in the Philadelphia area. The effort keeps the spotlight on the reality that much more has to be done to get women into key leadership roles.

This year's numbers seem once again discouraging if looked at in isolation. But the Forum's report also includes six-year trend data, which offer evidence that women are gradually making inroads into the highest levels of corporate America. The report noted that the share of women in top executive jobs at the 100 Philadelphia-area companies increased 17 percent from 2005 to 2010. The proportion of women on boards of directors grew by 4 percent. Over time, more women

also made the list of those companies' best-compensated workers.

Even though the trend numbers are nothing to cheer about, the gains indicate that some progress is being made toward reaching a better gender balance in executive suites and boardrooms. The Forum report doesn't blame any one factor for the snail-like pace of change. Instead, it rightfully calls on all interested parties to pick up speed. The report, titled "Changing the Face of Leadership: By Chance or By Choice?", notes that "leaving change to *chance* hasn't delivered good enough results; companies must *choose* to implement a strategy for bringing more women into leadership roles. At the same time, women who aspire to leadership roles cannot leave their careers to chance – they must *choose* to build the specific skills and experiences needed for top jobs and they must *choose* to invest time and energy in establishing professional networks both inside and outside their organizations."

That's good advice to hear as we head into the time of year in which we take stock of where our careers and businesses stand and where we want them to go in the coming year. Passivity doesn't get us anywhere. Neither do unconstructive complaining and vague promises. Change is most likely to come about when the stakeholders put specific plans in

Taking Charge

Eileen Connolly-Robbins,
founder of Society of
Professional Women, Main
Line Chamber of Commerce



place to shift the status quo. The Forum report reminds us that women, perhaps more than men, need to be strategic in career planning – carefully building and broadening their résumés, making their accomplishments known to the people who matter and seeking out challenges rather than waiting to be asked to take on an assignment. Companies must recognize that having a diverse lineup of talent is not just good for the individuals involved, but it can help to improve profit sheets as well. It's tough out there. Businesses need to have a variety of thought leaders if they want to be innovative and stay competitive.

The Main Line Society of Professional Women (SPW) wants to be there for you as you are making those necessary choices to build skills, establish professional networks and grow (and brag about!) your innovative ideas. The 2012 line-up of events is full of topics, including equality, leadership, marketing, entrepreneurialism and communications. Our programs can help you take your career to the next level. Visit us at www.SPWMainLine.com to see the new and

exciting calendar.

Change truly does happen one employee and one company at a time. Let's hope that by the time the Forum's next annual report on women comes out, the numbers won't seem like déjà vu.

Eileen Connolly-Robbins is executive vice president and COO of the Main Line Chamber of Commerce and is a member of the Forum of Executive Women.