Changing the Paradigm for Women of Color

A presentation given at the August 21, 1998, Roundtable on Women of Color and the Justice System II by Ms. Benita R. Horn of Achievement Architects

When I was asked to speak to you today, I gave considerable thought to the title of my presentation. Presentation titles tend to generate a level of expectation for the audience. My goal in the time we have together is to generate a level of expectation for developing strategies to support the success of women of color in the justice system which will alter the current paradigm.

I have lived my life as a woman of color experiencing what it means to be a woman of color in this nation and living through expectations set by me and set by others based solely on my being a woman of color. I have had my share of being the "first." Among my firsts was a participant in a corporation fast-track program designed specifically for women of color. I am here today because I am a woman of color and because of my belief in the untapped potential of all women of color.

Women not of color and men often tell me that they don't notice that I'm visibly different from them. I often hear statements to that effect. The statements I hear most often are similar to these:
* "I don't notice difference, I was taught to treat each person as an individual."
* "I was raised by the golden rule."
* "I think we should just ignore differences and treat people all alike."
* "Once you remove the outer layer of skin, inside we're all alike."
* "If we were all blind, skin color would be a non-issue."
* "I don't think of you as black." or "I don't think of you as a woman."

How many of you have heard these or similar phrases expressed to women of color in the justice system and the legal profession?

Think for a minute, I'm not asking you to visibly respond, but think what impact might these statements have on a woman of color? Think about personal characteristics or dimensions that you feel distinguish you and provide you with an identity. What would be the impact if you were regularly told by others that they did not see or disregarded those characteristics or dimensions?

Most of us in this room today are not practicing racist misogynists, but if we were born or raised in this country, we were taught to be.

Andrew Hacker surveyed people of European ancestry living in the United States. He asked them how much money would it take for them to choose to live their lives as African Americans. The average amount was in the seven-figure arena. And yet he did

not ask people of other than European ancestry how much money it would take for them to choose to live their lives as European Americans. His research covered only half of the question. What were the underlying assumptions that framed his mental model of the questions to be asked and the questions not to be asked? This phenomenon parallels the dilemma women of color face each day.

Our recent history tells us that in 1995, when the first national conference on eliminating racial and ethnic bias was convened in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a previously scheduled seminar on women of color was cut from the final program. This action precipitated the meeting of 39 women and 4 men, both of color and not of color, at La Placita restaurant. The proceedings from the meeting of this ad hoc group resulted in a document approved unanimously by the conference on March 5, 1995. That document, now known as *La Placita Manifesto*, has helped create a heightened awareness of women of color across this nation in the justice system.

Were the series of events which culminated in the birth of *La Placita Manifesto* an anomaly inherent only in the justice system? The evidence, regrettably, reveals that the exclusion, omission, and limited awareness of the plight of women of color has more often been a common occurrence. My expectation today is not to explore the intent of actions resulting in these occurrences, but to explore both the impact of and possible alternatives to these occurrences. To do this, I will first explore with you the results of recent assessments on the status of women of color, including my own experiences. Then, using these assessments and experiences, I will define some common barriers to the promotion and advancement of women of color. I will invite you to discuss these barriers and determine which ones parallel the experiences of women of color in the justice system. Finally, based on these findings, we will explore strategies for establishing and maintaining equitable treatment and consideration of women of color in leadership roles. It is my hope that this information will prove useful to you in the working groups scheduled for the afternoon session.

Results of Recent Assessments

In the 1960s I began working for a major telecommunications firm. We were wrestling with the implementation of equal employment opportunity and affirmative action in a company which previously had never hired a man as a telephone operator, had never hired a woman or person of color in a skilled technical position, or promoted a woman or person of color above the level of director.

I was often told during that time period by women not of color and by men that "I had it made". The implication was that as a woman and a person of color I could be hired or

promoted and fill two affirmative action targets for an organization, "two for the price of one."

In the 1970s, that same telecommunications firm and its national affiliates were found by the federal government to be out of compliance with equal employment opportunity laws and were placed under a consent decree for three years.

In the 1980s, a group of women of color in our corporation formed a coalition to identify and address the disparity of their experiences in promotion and advancement compared to the experiences of women not of color and men. The sum of their collective experiences indicated that women of color as a group appeared to have fared less well than did men in our company during the two decades of affirmative action efforts. They undertook an in-depth study to quantify the progress made by everyone under affirmative action to determine if what they felt was perceived or real. Corporate management approved their request for access to the promotional and salary data. On their own time they procured and reviewed the data and conducted an extensive analysis of the company's progress. One area analyzed was that of promotions to and within management. Their findings surfaced the following disparity:

- For men not of color, 1 out of 21 had been promoted.
- For men of color, 1 out of 42 had been promoted.
- For women not of color, 1 out of 136 had been promoted.
- For women of color, 1 out of 289 had been promoted.

Similar ratios were found for salary comparisons, career-advancing assignments, and other developmental opportunities.

In the 1990s, Catalyst, a nonprofit research and advisory organization, released two studies. The first one, titled *Women of Color in Corporate Management: A Statistical Picture*, was released in 1997. The statistics in this study were developed for Catalyst by the Institute for Women's Policy Research from 1994 and 1995 U.S. census data. Catalyst states that this is the first time Census Bureau data on women of color in private sector management has been published in a report. The good news is that in 1997 a report was published! Selected findings from this report indicate:

- Women of color are underrepresented in management, especially given their long history of labor-force participation: women of color represent 23 percent of the women in the workforce but 14 percent of the women holding managerial positions.
- Women of color who are managers experience a gap in earnings: for every $1 earned by men not of color, men of color earn $.73; women not of color earn $.59, women of color earn $.57.

- Women of color continue to experience a gap in earnings at the senior level: women not of color at the senior level earned an average of $250,000 annually while women of color earned an average of $229,000.

The second report, *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Dynamics of Career Advancement*, was released in early 1998. The data for this report came from qualitative studies, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and secondary research materials on company policy at 15 Fortune 500 companies. Selected findings from this report reveal:

- Women of color perceive formidable barriers to their advancement that have not been adequately addressed by corporations: 57 percent of the women of color surveyed report they are satisfied with their jobs, but only 34 percent are satisfied with their advancement opportunities.
- Women of color experience a slower rate of job advancement: women of color spend an average of 3.6 years in a job grade, women not of color spend an average of 2.6 years in a job grade.
- Fewer women of color perceive an improvement in advancement opportunities over the last five years: 47 percent of women of color perceive an improvement in advancement opportunities while 60 percent of women not of color perceive an improvement.
- Women of color perceive that they are qualified for advancement: over 50 percent hold graduate degrees.

The National Foundation for Women Business Owners also released a new report this year titled *Women Business Owners of Color: Challenges and Accomplishments*. The report is based on findings from 679 telephone interviews with women business owners and is billed as "the first ever comparison of women business owners of all races." In this report, we find:

- Women of color–owned businesses are growing faster than all firms: between 1987 and 1996 the increase in all firms was 47 percent, for women-owned firms the increase was 78 percent, and for women of color–owned firms 153 percent.
- Women of color own one in eight (13 percent) of the eight million women-owned businesses in the United States.
- Between 1987 and 1996 women of color–owned firms increased in employment by 276 percent and sales by 318 percent. (It may interest you to know that the top state based on firms, employment, and sales is California.)

I cite this report because my sense is that women of color are starting their own businesses in record numbers in part to escape the disparity in income and advancement opportunities in their former employment. In fact the Catalyst report states: "Catalyst's findings from this research show that women of color, while largely satisfied with their

jobs, are largely dissatisfied with their opportunities for advancement in their companies. This perceived lack of opportunity, no doubt, contributes to the numbers of women of color in this study who reported an intention to leave their current employers…. The loss of talented women of color is not inevitable if companies act now to eliminate 'perceived barriers to their advancement'." The accelerating number of women of color–owned businesses points to an increasing outflow of talented women of color already.

Common Barriers to the Promotion and Advancement of Women of Color

Given these assessments that begin to capture the unique experiences of women of color in business, what has gotten in the way? What are the barriers to outreach, hiring, promotion, and advancement faced by women of color in their respective organizations?

The common barriers experienced by women of color in my former company and as reported by Catalyst were:
- High-visibility assignments and/or promotional opportunities;
- Mentors and/or sponsors and role models of same race/ethnic group;
- Informal networking with influential colleagues;
- Stereotyping and preconceptions; and
- Parity in salary treatment.

Each of these barriers presents undue challenges to women of color and most often each woman experiences an array of these barriers, not just one.

It may prove to be more illustrative to examine the assessments and experiences of women of color which quantified these barriers.

High-Visibility Assignments and/or Promotional Opportunities

In the article "Who Handles a Diverse Work Force Best?," a woman of color says, "Women and people of color accept the intelligence and contributory potential of other women and people of color — at once. White males force women and people of color to 'prove' themselves over and over thus losing valuable creative, productive time." In the Catalyst report, a woman of color says, "If people don't perceive you as someone that can fulfill certain stretch targets or developmental opportunities, if they don't feel that you're competent to survive that test, then you won't be given that first opportunity." The experience in my firm for women of color was very similar. Women of color were regularly moved from one assignment to another in the same job grade. These were labeled as "developmental assignments," but resulted in lots of movement and very few promotions. Managers of these women seemed less likely to take a risk in promoting a

5

woman of color than they were in taking risks in promoting others. Ironically, the fact that there were so few women of color in senior management positions was an additional barrier. The thinking was that if a woman of color was promoted and was not successful, everyone would know because they would be in a spotlight.

Mentors and/or Sponsors and Role Models of Same Race/Ethnic Group

When surveyed for the Catalyst report, 29 percent of women not of color found lack of mentors as a barrier to advancement while 47 percent of women of color reported the same barrier. A woman of color said, "It's easier for management to mentor those who are like them, so you get the same people rising through the organization and you don't see change." Another woman of color said, "Accessibility to mentors is easier for white women because of comfort level." While another woman of color said, "I took a white male as a mentor for selfish reasons — I know that the world is white male, so I had to think and do as the white male so he would help me." In our company, we found few women of color had mentors in senior management or in influential positions. The role of the mentor is not only to be a sounding board and offer advice, but also to serve periodically in the role of advocate for the woman of color. When there is doubt about her experience or expertise to handle an assignment or simply the necessity to get her name on the table for consideration of high-visibility assignments, the difference is whether someone involved in or influencing the decision making can present her qualifications.

The Catalyst report states that, "Many women of color find their career advancement suffers due to a lack of company role models of their own race/ethnicity. Such models may also serve as influential colleagues or mentors." In a 1996 *Catalyst Women in Corporate Leadership* study, women executives not of color did not mention lack of role models as a barrier, while in the 1998 study, 29 percent of women of color cited lack of company role models of same race/ethnic group as a barrier.

Informal Networking With Influential Colleagues

In my former company, in the mid '80s women of color in senior management or executive positions were less than 1 percent of the total employee population. Women of color had limited opportunity to network with influential colleagues in their own group. In the *Working Woman* article, a woman of color states it this way, "I am always aware that I am different. It seems there is a 'club' atmosphere but I'm not a member — nor have I been invited to join." In an article from *Pittsburgh Business Times*, a woman of color who is a business owner and entrepreneur states, "I understand networking is one of the most important factors in starting a business. It's all in who you know and that can be

a plus or minus." In the business world, networking has been a barrier for all women, but women of color find an additional challenge in that they lack the informal access channels open to many women not of color. One woman of color expresses the experience this way: "Access to opportunities is easier for white women because they share informal experiences with the power structure (live next door to each other; kids go to the same schools; husbands/brothers are head of something, etc.) As well as interests in activities like golfing. Networking is a game that not everyone plays; somebody has to ask you to play. But you have to recognize that there's a game being played in the first place."

Stereotyping and Preconceptions

Another barrier faced by women of color is stereotyping and preconceptions of them by senior managers and others in their organizations. When a group of high-potential women of color were brought together in my former company, women who were visible women of color separated themselves from women who were invisible women of color and challenged their right to be in attendance at the gathering. Invisible women of color often experience jokes and crude remarks made about their own ethnic group because people not of color see them as part of their group. Visible women of color share some similar experiences. A few years ago I attended a conference in my industry here in San Francisco. A group of us went for dinner together one evening and shared a cab to the restaurant. At a stoplight, one of my colleagues pointed to a man of color who appeared to be homeless and was standing on a street corner. My colleague pointed to him and said, "Look at that dirty old 'n-----'." When I called him on this comment, he said, "I don't see why you're so upset, you're not like him, you're one of us." My colleague hadn't a clue about the impact his words had on me. Women of color also experience excessive scrutiny of their hair, clothing, communication style, and mannerisms. A woman of color in my former corporation was told that she would never be taken seriously as a candidate for promotion as long as she wore her hair in cornrows. She was told her hairstyle reminded senior management that she was a woman of color and made them uncomfortable.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article, the authors cite a case where a vice-president received notice from one of his managers, a man of color, that he intended to demote a woman of color he had promoted three months prior. When he investigated, he found the manager had promoted the woman of color based on his observations of her strong leadership at church and in other community settings. When asked why she didn't bring those skills into the work environment, the woman of color replied, "I didn't think I would last long if I acted that way here. My personal style of leadership — that particular style — works well if you have the permission to use it fully; then you can just do it and not have to look over your shoulder." The question becomes, is this an example

of competence or cultural mismatch? What would it take for the organization to support the woman of color manager so that her strengths and skills were transportable?

Parity in Salary Treatment

The experts tell us that salary is never a motivator, but low salaries are demotivators. Women of color as human beings have an expectation to be paid equitably for the work that they perform. More and more organizations are finding that even given the fair and equitable salary and compensation plans currently in use, findings support that women of color still earn less than any other groups at all levels of organizations. I shared with you earlier the findings of Catalyst for women of color in corporate management. Recently, one of my clients, a high-tech firm, found, when they conducted a compensation audit, that some women of color were so low in their respective salary grades that the firm dedicated a budget for across-the-board salary increases for them. Unless organizations are willing to do the necessary research and comparisons, these disparities will never come to light.

Strategies for Establishing and Maintaining Equitable Treatment and Consideration of Women of Color in Leadership Roles

If we are to create an environment in the justice system and in other organizations where women of color and all individuals experience the opportunity to be judged on their individual merits and rise to their full potential, action must be taken to address the excessive inequities experienced by women of color. The following strategies are a result of my research on this issue and my 20 plus years of working both as an internal and external organizational development consultant.

- Conduct internal and external benchmarking.
- Create and execute strategic initiatives to place women of color in leadership roles and place them in the succession planning process.
- Implement mentoring and networks.
- Expand recruitment approaches.
- Hold organizational leaders accountable for results.
- Challenge cultural stereotypes and assumptions.

Conduct Internal and External Benchmarking

Before any actions are taken or plans put into motion, it is imperative to quantify the issues faced by women of color in your structure. We are beginning to see data from a

national and industry perspective and that data already indicates the unique challenges women of color face by industry and by organization. For example, according to the National Foundation of Women Business Owners, firms owned by women of color are growing faster than for any other group including the nation as a whole, yet women of color are less likely to have bank credit and access to capital. The strategies you deploy must be based on the findings in your structure — the justice system — not what others have experienced. You may consider entrants to law school, appointments by judges, appointments as judges or commissioners, leadership in industry organizations, turnover, and retention. Benching is also important because it will allow you to measure the effectiveness of your strategies and your progress over time.

Create and Execute Strategic Initiatives to Place Women of Color in Leadership Roles and Place Them in the Succession Planning Process

In my former corporation, immediately after the research on the status of women of color was completed, the coalition of women of color sought and gained officer-level support to launch an accelerated development program for women of color. The goals of this program were:
- Locate high-potential women of color within the corporation to promote one to two levels above their present positions within a five-year time frame, provided they successfully complete the program.

Expectations:
- Assure each woman of color obtains a breadth and depth of experience internal and external to the organization based on her overall career goal, skills, background, and experience.
- Assure each woman of color obtains training and background commensurate with her career goal and development plan.
- Provide mentors/coaches to assist her in her success.

Implement Mentoring and Networks

Mentoring and networking is the life and breath of career advancement. Because of preconceptions and stereotypes, women of color often are excluded from formal and informal mentoring. Many times this is not a malicious act; it is human nature to seek out and fraternize with people with whom we are most comfortable. In today's environment of heightened awareness of cross-gender issues, potential male mentors can be hesitant to step up to this opportunity. Male senior managers regularly report that if they meet with a high-potential male over dinner, no one pays attention. If they exhibit the same behavior with women, the grapevine overloads with sexual innuendoes. A formal

mentoring program must address the needs and constraints of all parties. Women of color should have an expectation of mentoring other women of color. In mentoring relationships all parties benefit.

Expand Recruitment Approaches

Few organizations have all the potential resources they need to adequately reflect talented women of color in positions of leadership. Some organizations today are taking the strategic approach of recruiting women of color as advanced hires to fill key leadership roles. With the growing number of women of color who are entrepreneurs in their own right, the talent is potentially in the marketplace.

Hold Organizational Leaders Accountable for Results

The old adage of what is measured gets rewarded and what gets rewarded gets done is more than true for keeping the momentum in place to support women of color. At all levels and in all roles of leadership an accountability for changing the paradigm for women of color must reside. In some structures like the justice system, this may mean voluntary accountability for some leaders; in others, it may be part of the organizational mission and strategy. Recognizing and celebrating successes is another way to send a message about priorities.

Challenge Cultural Stereotypes and Assumptions

Women of color often face the invisible barrier of the expectations and assumptions others hold about them, including the expectations they have of themselves. A comprehensive strategic plan may need to include a component on efficacy for women of color and others in the organization. It will be necessary to move beyond the worldview that what has worked for women in general will work for women of color. As they know and as the statistical and anecdotal data support women of color have unique challenges and barriers which no other group faces.

In my former organization, one of the early steps taken was a women of color grassroots conference. Like the group which drafted *La Placita Manifesto*, the location of this conference was in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It seems that Albuquerque is the home of originating events for women of color. That grassroots conference, like this roundtable, was a forum for airing, defining, and quantifying issues which need to be addressed to change the paradigm for women of color.

Bibliography

Arthur P. Brief, et al., "Beyond Good Intentions: The Next Steps Toward Racial Equality in the American Workplace," *The Academy of Management Executive*s (Nov. 1997).

Catalyst, *Women of Color in Corporate Management: A Statistical Picture* (1997).

Catalyst, *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Dynamics of Career Advancement* (1998).

Harris Collingwood, "Who Handles a Diverse Work Force Best?," *Working Woman* (February 1996).

Katherine Giscombe and Adrienne D. Sims, *Breaking The Color Barrier, HR Focus* (July 1998).

Lorraine LaFemina, "Uptick in Women and Minority Employment," *LI Business News* (Nov. 6, 1995).

The National Foundation for Women Business Owners, *Women Business Owners of Color: Challenges and Accomplishments* (1998).

Sharon Nelton, "Minority Women Set the Pace," *Nation's Business* (July 1998).

"The Other Half: Blacks in America" (African American Women's Socioeconomic Status), *The Economist* (Nov. 4, 1995).

Patty Tascarella, "Breaking New Ground" (Business Success for Minority Women), *Pittsburgh Business Times* (Dec. 2, 1996).

David A. Thomas and Robin J. Ely, "Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity," *Harvard Business Review* (Sept.-Oct. 1996).