CAN CORPORATIONS KEEP WOMEN ENGINEERS?
ONE COMPANY'S APPROACH

Jan M. Schmuckler, PH.D.

Sun Microsystems, Inc. San Jose, CA
Sr. Organization Development Consultant

"Treating women as a business imperative is the equivalent of a unique R & D product for which there is huge demand." (Schwartz, 1992, p. 106) This statement was part of the opening remarks of Curt Wozniak, senior Vice President of Engineering at Sun Microsystems, Inc. at the Forum for Opportunity: A Day for Women in SMCC Engineering, held in October, 1992.

Prior to the Forum, Curt Wozniak was willing to make a commitment to changing the culture in engineering at Sun. His commitment included examining the perceptions of Sun's women engineers and objective data regarding numbers of women in all job categories in engineering. In early 1991, his HR Director hired an outside firm to conduct the study and give Curt and his staff (all males with a female administrator) a workshop on the data gathered at Sun to help them understand the issues.

The workshop created a willingness to change in Curt and his staff, but no clear pathway on what or how to implement change.

Shortly after that time, in consulting to the Diversity Programs Manager, Deborah Yarborough, and to the HR Director in Engineering, I brought them together to explore their interests in gender issues. Deborah and I submitted a proposal for a one-day conference for women only to the HR Director and Senior VP of Engineering. The name of the conference became a Forum for Opportunity: A Day for Women in SMCC Engineering. Our focus in the engineering community was in effecting large cultural change in hopes of keeping the women as well as attracting more women to Sun. We hoped that the forum would serve as a model for other divisions and functions at Sun as well as other diverse groups. We knew that a talent drain of women existed; engineering wasn't utilizing their talents as well as they could. Other studies also show this phenomena . (Business Week, June 8,1992; Catalyst, 1992)

First, we created a taskforce of women representing many of the job functions in Engineering, including engineers, project coordinators and administrators. The initial goal of the taskforce was to help design and conduct the one-day conference. The taskforce had to deal with whether or not to include men at the conference. It was decided after many discussions at many meetings to go with the organizational principle that you differentiate before you integrate. The taskforce wanted to create safety for the women to fully participate by having only women at the forum. It was decided by the taskforce, however, to include the senior Vice President and his staff on that day to begin a dialogue between senior management and women in engineering to seek solutions for recruitment and retention.

As Woman Engineer Magazine pointed out in 1992, salary is not as influential in women engineers' choice of a company as training and educational opportunities. The conference was designed to offer a series of training tracks with an opportunity for small group discussion on the topic.

The tracks were designed with a specific model for ensuring positive outcomes for all participants. The model looked like this:

Topical Expert

Participants

Senior Management   Track Facilitator
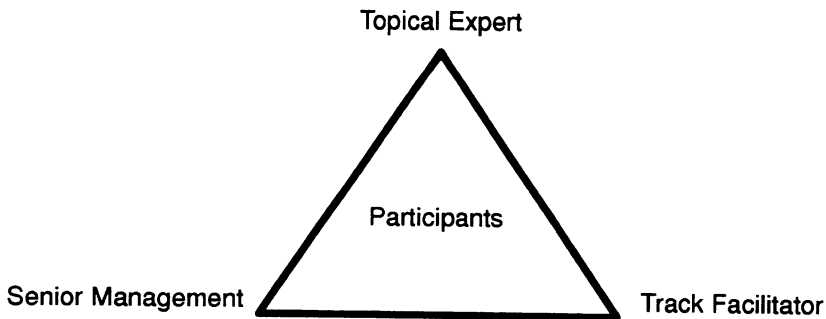
Each role was clearly delineated and training or coaching was provided for each of the individuals. The topic expert would present ideas and issues pertaining to the specific topic they were hired to address, e.g. Communication with the Dominant Culture; Career Development; Succeeding as a Technical Professional, etc. Then the facilitator would lead a dialogue or set up small groups to discuss the topic. The last 20 minutes would be focused on solutions to the issues raised with prioritization of the top two solutions, one for management to carry out and the other for the women themselves to implement. The senior executives were coached to listen throughout the track and

only participate in the last 20 minutes solution discussion. It was felt that this would provide a unique opportunity for the men to experience being the only male in the room, and we hoped it would be a transformative experience. In addition, it was felt that if the men spoke out earlier in the session, they might dominate the session and the women would not contribute fully.

The forum was not seen as a one-day event, but rather it was viewed by Curt and his staff as the beginning of a process of cultural change in the organization. To that end, pre-forum sessions were held with women in engineering and an electronic alias was set up for dialogue and registration. In addition, Deborah and I presented the goals, objectives and agenda to the VP of HR, Curt and his staff and at an all managers meeting for engineering.

We also established a post-forum evaluation process including end of forum feedback survey, debriefing sessions with key groups, and focus group feedback brownbag lunches.

The end of the forum feedback survey was completed by 60% of the participants.

The key results from the feedback survey:

* Ninety percent of participants said that the day met or mostly met their expectations.

* Ninety – three percent of participants said that they would like to participate in opportunities to continue the process started at the Women's Forum.

* Eighty – nine percent reported that a day long program was sufficient in length.

This is the summary of what was perceived to **go well** at the Forum gleaned from all the debriefing and feedback sessions.

* Enthusiasm

* High participation

* Networking

* Learning

* Curt & Staff visibility

* Self-empowerment

* Validation

* Safety created

* Positive feeling about SMCC Engineering & Sun Microsystems, Inc.

This quote seemed to summarize the positive impact of the Forum, "I was listened to. This was a wake-up call."

A summary of the concerns from the debriefings and feedback sessions that were not addressed or could be improved are listed below.

* Self esteem issues not addressed

* More recognition of people of color

* Summary of tracks less detailed than discussions

* Not enough time – tried to do too much in one day

The major concern for the participants was about commitment from senior management expressed by a participant who said, "I'd like to know what action items Curt's staff commit to and how they proceed."

The process of cultural change in organizations is often slow and the changes are not always readily identifiable. One member of Curt's staff is actively working with the women in engineering to create recommendations to Curt and his staff on career development for women. Some original members of the taskforce and some new members as a result of the Forum are continuing to meet and work on some of the recommendations established at the Forum.

The Forum raised to the surface some issues that had not been readily discussed before that time such as sexual harassment. More open discussions between men and women was another more subtle outcome for the organization. While the changes seem small or too subtle for some, it is important to keep the organization focused on the overall vision of the cultural change.

"It doesn't make sense to cut yourself off from half of the talented people in this world," observes George Harvey, Chief Executive Pitney Bowes. "If we're known as a good place to work, more good people will want to work here, that will make us more competitive which means more sales and higher stock prices." (Time, Fall 1990)

References

Kelly, Anne. What Do Women Want? Woman Engineer Magazine, April/May, 1992, p.32 – 37.

Schwartz, Felice. Women as a Business Imperative. Harvard Business Review, March – April 1992, p. 105 – 113.

Segal, Amanda T. and Zellner, Wendy. Corporate Women. Business Week, June 8, 1992.

Women in Engineering: An Untapped Resource. New York, NY. Catalyst, 1992.