

# Can Corporations Keep Women Engineers? One Company's Approach

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## A Forum for Opportunity: One Engineer's Perspective

The other speakers hopefully have given you a clear understanding of what the Sun Engineering Women's Forum was, and how it came about. I'm here to illustrate the value and influence of the event and how it has effected personal and organizational change at Sun. I am a semiconductor quality engineer by day, but for the last year I have worked on the Women's Forum, during my "off" hours. I weakly said yes when asked to help plan the Forum, with no inkling of how it would enrich my work-life. Both working on the Forum planning team and attending the event as an individual were powerful experiences. The planning team was tasked with defining and naming the event, recruiting speakers and facilitators, promoting the concept to managers and women participants, creating tee-shirts and posters, organizing the space and catering: in a nutshell making it happen!

## Opportunity

The event was aptly named "Forum for Opportunity". Planning and attending the Forum gave me the chance to bring to light many of the skills and strengths I have that are hidden and frustrated by my normal engineering work. Driven by project schedules and technical crises on the job, working on people issues has been expanding. It has given me the chance to care about people, in this case other women, at work.

## **Leader**

Familiar in childhood and college with “leader” as my natural position, rediscovery in association with the Forum has been reassuring. Yet I don’t feel like a “leader” in my everyday job. Intellectually I recognize I’m leading, but I simply don’t feel the same.

## **Writer**

One of the ways I found to lead was through writing. The planning team wanted to get discussion going prior to the event so that the participants would blow off steam early and be ready to work together during the event. To initiate this I wrote about the angry and questioning reaction of my peers during a staff meeting and how I explained to those men why the Forum was important. Writing about my feelings and experiences in a public forum was a new experience for me, and opened the door for others to share their reactions.

## **Women helping women**

The planning team was made up of women from all different functions and levels in the organization. We each started work on the forum project somewhat tentative about our involvement. After the event we held a post-forum debrief session. The team members were passionate and forceful about what was accomplished and what needed to come after. This was an amplified image of what happened during the Forum event, the women shifted from tentative to passionate. This is an important image because it has women admitting and accepting their power, other women recognizing and benefitting from the powerful women.

## **Discoveries**

This year has been filled with discoveries and growth from all the stages of the Forum. The planning work, the focus groups prior to the Forum, the Forum event, post Forum debrief meeting, and finally task teams. The major revelations I had were centered around how I compete with women, the impact of power perception, and the potentials of feminine strengths.

## **Competition**

I came to realize that I reacted much more strongly to women I perceived as competing with me than I did men. If interrupted in a meeting by a woman, for example, I was much more likely to take offense. I have no excuse for this behavior. I went to a women's college and loved it. It was a shaping experience. My mother, who also graduated from a women's college, said "enjoy it while at Mills. It's the last time you will experience women being good to each other". I've discovered that I must work very hard not to be part of the problem.

## **Power**

A critical way that women relate to other women at work is in recognizing how they perceive power in women, and how we map our own feelings of power or powerlessness onto other women. When the unusual occurred, and a meeting was mostly women, I noticed my reaction was "am I in the wrong room?" as though important decisions/real work were not going to happen there. In contrast a powerful woman director appreciates a meeting of women as a place where good work with a minimum of jockeying for position will go on. The perception of women lacking power may also be the reason a female secretary will shy away from working for another woman. These perspectives were all shared during Forum discussion groups, and together painted a clear picture of how power self-perception plays a strong role in women's relationships.

## **Feminine strengths**

In other discussion groups on the cost of assimilating into the male dominant culture we talked at length of the energy it took to blend in as "one of the boys". In a 15 year career spent as the only woman on otherwise all male staffs, I felt like a split personality between my work and home lives. After one of the discussion sessions I got the notion to check if this was working. I asked "the boys" how they perceived me and found the masquerade was not successful. I decided to stop pretending and be myself, however masculine or feminine that may be. A corollary to this decision is that I have committed myself to work towards changing the environment to value feminine characteristics.

## **Role Models**

Another discovery the Forum provided was access to role models. We are spread so far apart in the organization we rarely see other women, much less senior technical women. A chance to study them, talk with them, gain their perspective is of particular value. I can now run a behavioral check of myself against these role models and have a clear idea what will be successful in our engineering environment.

## **Change is Slow**

Several women were not ready to participate in the Forum. It seemed their feeling of powerlessness was so strong that they didn't think their involvement could effect change. A women colleague describes others in this way, "some women have been empowered but some have gone back to their quiet, miserable little existences because they are familiar."<sup>9</sup>

No one can make women's issues a first priority as we all have a least one full time job. Change must be worked "on the side". In addition the changes needed are within ourselves as much as in the organization and personal growth takes lots of time. The exciting thing **is** that change is happening.

## **Futures**

One of the most exciting aspects of the Forum is that it didn't end after the event. Work to influence the organization continues based on priorities and areas of interest established during the Forum. New members joined the planning group. We compiled issues and solution suggestions from the Forum into major problem areas. Small teams were formed to address three of these areas: career development, management training, and job rotation.

## **Career Development**

The Career Development team opened their monthly meetings to a large audience for greater representation and have generated a problem description and set of initiatives for presentation to senior management.

## **Management Training**

The team tasked with management training is meeting with Human Resources and senior management to review the current management train-

ing courses, recommend additional courses and course content, and formulate a “minimum course list” for managers. The goal is to add breadth to diversity training and awareness of feminine strengths.

### **Job Rotation**

Another team is investigating the merits of a job rotation program to aid mobility of employees within Sun. Too often internal candidates are typecast with their current job function, and an outside candidate is hired to the new position. This consequently perpetuates the glass ceiling.

### **Vision**

Each of the task teams are working on high priority issues for women at Sun. These are important for making progress but they are not an end in themselves. We’ve got to keep an eye on where we are headed. Sun has a loosely formed women’s group who’s vision is to “Make Sun a compelling place to work for women”. I see that compelling future as a Sun where women are comfortable about association with other women, where women have equal chance at jobs, promotion and satisfaction, and where women and the organization understand what feminine strengths have to offer. A Sun which values and uses those attributes whether they occur in women or men.

For this to happen women must trust in their power and learn to be good to one another. In addition Sun must continue the culture of self improvement and commitment to change as a success strategy. The Women’s Forum is a prime example of how we at Sun are striving to improve our working environment

