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*In-depth interviews with some of the most prominent women executives in America provide new insight into how these women made it to the top.*

# *On Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Political Seasoning of Powerful Women Executives*

LISA A. MAINIERO

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*The glass ceiling is of our own making, if there is one at all.  
We have to keep banging our heads on the glass ceiling and eventually  
it will shatter—or our heads will.*

—A FEMALE EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT  
OF A FORTUNE 500 COMPANY

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In the past decade, a quiet revolution has taken place in corporate boardrooms across America. Senior management women are being developed for bona fide officer-level positions in their corporations' executive suites. Today's high-profile executive women have earned the same credibility accorded senior male colleagues. They have managed major line and operations areas. They have performed turnaround management tasks. These are women who, simply put, have broken through the glass ceiling—to be recognized as successful, talented, practicing executives.

Ever since the staff at the Center for Creative Leadership used *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* as the title for their landmark book—subtitled *Can Women Make It to the Top of*

*America's Largest Corporations?* (Addison-Wesley, 1988)—the term "glass ceiling" has been widely accepted as a metaphor to explain the paucity of women in upper management. According to a recent *Fortune* magazine poll (September 21, 1992), less than 5 percent of the top positions in American corporations (i.e., positions within three levels of the chief executive officer) are held by women.

How has this select group of women executives—the 5 percent continually cited as having broken the ceiling—accomplished such a feat? What lessons allowed them to mature into credible, powerful executives? How did they manage the politics of their corporations so that political relationships enhanced, rather than detracted from, their executive de-

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*I would like to acknowledge the support and helpful comments of David M. Mangini on earlier drafts of this work, and to express my gratitude to all the executive women quoted herein.*

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