

*Women and Global Leadership at Bestfoods**

Laura Brody had just finished analyzing the progress she'd made in her first two years as director of diversity and development for Bestfoods International, formerly known as CPC. Brody is a stylish woman in her forties, possessed of a droll sense of humor. She had begun working for Bestfoods 10 years earlier in management development. The position provided Brody the opportunity to meet and develop good relationships with many of the managers who were identified as having senior management potential and who were now in senior executive positions. Brody spent eight years coordinating the company's well-respected annual Senior Management Development Program. The program, taught by world-famous professors, was for managers who had been tapped to become leaders. She also had helped organize Bestfoods' global action-learning programs (where knowledgeable people were brought together from all parts of the company to tackle strategic, systemwide issues). These programs were often held at Arrowwood, an off-site corporate conference center just outside New York City.

Brody came to Bestfoods in 1988 and was surprised to find that the company seemed to be far behind most leading companies in promoting diversity, particularly in the company's proportion of women and minorities. She found herself revisiting what it was like to work with senior men who had limited experience working alongside high-level professional women. Corporate efforts to date had been limited primarily to diversity awareness training. When Brody was asked to take over the diversity function in 1995, she wanted to be sure that real, substantive change was possible. Brody explained to her prospective boss, Dick Bergeman, senior vice president of human resources, that she needed to be assured of the company's sincerity and willingness to support progress and changes in this area. Bergeman is an engaging, well-respected, 22-year veteran with Bestfoods who spearheaded the transformation of human resources from an administrative function to an integral part of the global strategy team. He replied, "I can't tell you I will automatically agree to everything you propose, but I will agree that it is your job to make change happen. And if I say 'no' the first time, then it is your job to figure out a different way to approach it or structure it and come back at me again and again and again." Since Brody was not expecting "carte blanche" up front, she was sufficiently reassured by his response and took the job. Brody's diagnosis of her new job was that the company supported diversity, but there were few specific strategies in place for her to implement. She saw her position as "a double-edged sword."

It was a wonderful opportunity to stand out on my own, set an agenda and implement it. As this was a senior position, I was expected to establish the goals and strategies for the company-wide diversity function. If I was successful, I could be well positioned for future career progress. If not, like my two predecessors, I might have to look for future career growth elsewhere.

Bestfoods has had a diversity function since 1989. It evolved from traditional EEO¹ compliance reporting and had two previous directors, a male Hispanic and a male African American. Unlike Brody, both were disadvantaged by not having an established network throughout the organization, since one was brought in from outside the company and the other had experience only in the U.S. division in labor relations. Brody suspected that the climate had not really been ripe for change in the area of diversity until the last few years. Another advantage Brody enjoyed was the fit between her personality and the challenges of this particular job. In the early years of her career, she had received feedback that she was too direct and not easily deterred from pursuing a

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certain path. Brody was counseled to "go along to get along." Characteristics that had formerly been seen as weaknesses, however, were now perceived as her strengths:

In my current job, I am expected to be the conscience of the organization. Like an Old Testament prophet, I am frequently expected to preach fire and brimstone, nudging the company in a certain direction even though they may not want to go that way. For once my style and the type of person I am fit exactly with what my job demands and what my boss expects me to do. I love my job! As I told Dick Bergeman, "I can't believe you pay me to make trouble—I would have done that for free!"

COMPANY BACKGROUND

Bestfoods is among the largest global food companies, with annual sales in 1999 of \$8.6 billion. Its most well-known brands include Hellmann's and Best Foods condiments and dressings; Mazola corn oil and margarine; Knorr soups, sauces, and bouillon; Skippy peanut butter; Thomas' English muffins; and Entenmanns's baked goods. Bestfoods also has a catering division that is known as Caterplan in most global markets. Bestfoods has operations in more than 60 countries and markets products in 110 countries. The 93-year-old company is well positioned internationally with over 90 years of operating experience in Europe, 70 years in Latin America, and more than 68 years in Asia. Although headquartered in the United States, the company earns 60 percent of its revenues from non-U.S. sources. The company projects future growth to continue to come primarily from outside the mature markets of North America and Western Europe. Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and the countries of the former Soviet Union are projected to lead increases in twenty-first century revenue. At present the company has four geographic divisions: Europe, North America, Asia, and Latin America.

Bestfoods has a highly decentralized structure, which gives general managers and local management the autonomy to adapt and modify changes suggested by corporate headquarters. One of the company's strengths is its global strategic vision combined with a consistent local focus and decision making. CEO Dick Shoemate appreciates the difficult balance between giving the local divisions power to make their own decisions and integrating these units into a coherent whole. "It's our strength, but it's also a challenge when we try to make changes."

The company's vision (see Case Appendix A) is to be the best international food company in the world by building on the organization's core businesses, values, and strengths. Bestfoods has three global *core businesses*: savory products (e.g., soups, bouillon, sauces), dressings, and catering. The company's *core values* are:

- Growing (financial success, business growth, people development, and diversity)
- Caring (adherence to the law and highest moral and ethical standards, respect for individual worth and ability, satisfying customer and consumer needs, safe workplaces, and protecting the environment)
- Sharing (valuing teamwork, internal and external partnering, learning from experience and transferring learning with pride)
- Daring (courage, candor, conviction, pioneering and leadership, quick decision making, and aggressiveness in seizing new markets).

The company's identified *core strengths* are:

- A unique culture combining global strategic vision with local focus, decision making, and action.
- A proven ability to transfer and use products, skills, technology, and people from all parts of the world.

To best link employee actions with the company's vision, Bestfoods uses a strategic performance measurement system called the Balanced Scorecard. "The Balanced Scorecard provides a framework that helps shape our activities and measure our performance in four critically important

areas (customer satisfaction, people development, business practices, and innovation and learning) which together result in a fifth critical area, financial performance, the ultimate measure of the best."² Instead of one uniform global measurement system, each division, affiliate, department, and functional group within the company creates its own Balanced Scorecard that identifies the key activities, or "strategic drivers," that will move its particular business closer to the company's goals. Nevertheless, the CEO may announce specific new goals to add to the Corporate Balanced Scorecard at WorldTeam Meetings, which the company holds about every three years. At the WorldTeam meetings, approximately 150 of the most senior executives from around the world spend several days together focusing on strategic issues, sharing innovative implementation plans, and learning together. The WorldTeam meetings are another way to coordinate the far-flung global company.

Dick Shoemate is chairman, president, and chief executive officer of Bestfoods. He joined the company in 1962 and held positions in manufacturing, finance, and business management in the consumer foods and corn refining businesses. Shoemate was president of the Corn Refining division before assuming the corporate presidency in 1988. Shoemate is not only bright but unassuming and down to earth. He is both approachable and an excellent listener. Shoemate is equally as impressive and comfortable dealing with board members as with the 60 children of employees he addressed on "Take Your Child to Work Day." Shoemate, in his late fifties, wants one of the marks he leaves on Bestfoods to be increased diversity worldwide and at the most senior levels.

DIVERSITY AT BESTFOODS

Of the corporation's 44,000 employees, two-thirds currently work outside of the United States. In the U.S. division, Bestfoods has 10 to 15 percent more minorities than the industry norm, but 5 to 10 percent fewer women. Bestfoods has been known as a company where people spent most of their career. Similar to many companies, however, a disproportionate number of women and minorities leave Bestfoods within their first three to five years. Historically, women at Bestfoods tended to hit the "glass ceiling" at the middle-management level. Women have succeeded primarily in staff positions, such as the corporate legal department, which has the highest representation of women. There are numerous entry-to-midlevel women in human resources, but the division-level executives are all male. There are women in marketing who have attained midlevel jobs and some who have been promoted into senior-level positions, but only one woman has successfully made the leap from marketing to a general manager position. The usual career path that men followed in Bestfoods to become senior executives has gone from general manager positions to operating division presidents to corporate officers. Women have remained a small percentage of the candidate pool for senior executive jobs because they tended to be scarce in the usual career pipelines to the top—line positions and high-level positions outside the United States.

Not surprisingly, the 1997 employee survey in the United States showed that minorities and women perceived less opportunity for advancement and career development than did whites or men. Similarly, they perceived their performance to be less linked to compensation than did whites or men. It surprised many at the company, however, that men ranked "workload and pace interfere with work/life balance" as the number one issue among the five diversity-related issues they would like the company to address. Although women ranked this issue last at number five, the work/life integration issue cut across gender and hierarchy. For example, while female administrative staff might worry about making it to a day care center by 5 or 6 P.M., some senior men grumbled that their wives were "threatening to divorce them" if they missed one more family event.

Retention analyses revealed that at every management level, women and minorities had more turnover than males and whites. As a result of these findings, Brody's objective within the United States was to have better retention and development of both women and minorities.

When Brody and her staff did a global analysis of female employees, they discovered that 15 percent of the employees who had been designated as "high potential" were women. They also

found that there were more U.S. women in management positions when compared to other regions, although Europe appointed the first woman as a country general manager. Among the approximately 264 participants who attended the Senior Management Development Programs from 1988 to 1998, the company sent only 15 female managers. It wasn't until 1998 that a senior female manager attended who was not an American. Brody knew that attitudes toward promoting women varied widely throughout the company, from extremely supportive to indifferent—or even chauvinistic in a few cases. For the most part, she believed that although managers were well intentioned, they were uncertain about what improvements could be made regarding career advancement for women. The company was committed to advancing diversity as a key competitive element in its overall business strategy.

Bestfoods has a diverse board of directors. Of their 14 directors, two are female CEOs, one is an African American CEO, seven are white U.S. American male CEOs, and four are male CEOs from other countries. Bestfoods has three female corporate officers, one each from manufacturing, marketing, and public relations. By 1997, 14 percent of the members of the board of directors, 15 percent of the corporate officers, and 13 percent of directors and vice presidents were women.

THE REASONS BEHIND THE FIGURES

When Brody and her staff ponder the barriers that women face at Bestfoods, they think some attitudes and behaviors may be due to generational rather than gender issues. For example, most of the corporate officers are in their late 50s and early 60s and have stay-at-home wives. They have never watched their wives struggle to climb the corporate ladder or juggle the competing demands of work and home life. Nor have their own careers been affected by the demands of a dual-career marriage. As a result, Brody wonders how well some of the senior male executives really understand the barriers or challenges today's women often face.

For example, a common complaint among women is that men have the luxury of coming to work early and staying late if they want to attempt to impress the boss in this fashion. Because many women are responsible for dropping off and picking up children at school or day care and then supervising them at home while preparing dinner, they have to work more regular hours. This does not mean the women work fewer hours or less hard. However, to the extent that the corporate culture values time spent in the office (rather than actual time spent working and achieving results) as an indicator of loyalty and promotability, working mothers (and some fathers) are at a disadvantage. One division manager has the night watchman keep track of the time employees leave at the end of the day; accurately or not, his employees interpret this as a clear signal that, "If you want to get ahead, you must work late."

Another factor that could be hindering development and ultimately retention is that the company has few women at high enough levels to be selected for senior management development opportunities. The corporation's senior-level management training programs are offered to senior managers whom the company has already promoted up the hierarchy. Few women attain that level and, therefore, receive little in the way of company-sponsored, formal management and career development opportunities, or the executive-level exposure and visibility that such opportunities provide.

DIVERSITY AS A STRATEGIC ISSUE

While the number of senior women, corporate officers, and board members at Bestfoods is respectable when compared to many companies, neither Brody nor Shoemate think it is adequate to support the future they envision for Bestfoods. Consumer foods, not unlike many other industries, has become increasingly competitive; only the companies with top talent and top brands survive. Moreover, whereas many consumer foods companies used to be able to operate as loose confederations of fairly autonomous country operations, global competition is now forcing all members of the industry to more closely coordinate their worldwide operations.

To succeed in such an environment, Bestfoods needs to attract and retain the best talent available globally and have local employees from each country in which they operate reflect the consumer base. With women making more than 80 percent of purchasing decisions for Bestfoods' products, the company will suffer if it fails to understand women's perspectives, needs, and decision-making criteria. Shoemate sees promoting women into senior management positions not primarily as a matter of diversity but rather as an issue of strategic competitive advantage. On numerous occasions, he has explicitly expressed his commitment to developing the most highly talented women and men from around the world:

We believe that one of Bestfoods' unique competitive strengths is a management team that delivers outstanding performance in the local marketplace and also works together to build the "Best International Food Company in the World." ... We actively seek to identify and to develop high performing Bestfoods' managers throughout the company, including men and women from all countries and ethnic backgrounds.

Shoemate knows, however, that words are not enough to change an organization. He personally appointed all three of Bestfoods' female corporate officers during his tenure as CEO. Nevertheless, he wants to see more rapid progress on the goal of including more women in senior management and leadership. He made a note to himself to discuss with Brody what form this change should take at Bestfoods.

MANAGING CHANGE AT BESTFOODS

No CEO can simply mandate change in a highly decentralized multinational that values local autonomy. Focusing on diversity further complicates change efforts because it is sometimes viewed as a "U.S. issue." Within some cultures, equity among women and men is not a well-publicized concern, and diversity is locally defined to refer to other groupings within the population. Therefore, for companies headquartered in the United States, the leadership has to tread carefully. Both within the food industry and within Bestfoods, employees tend to work their way up, and executives brought in from the outside often do not adjust to the informal norms and values of the company. This practice has the advantage of providing continuity and a strong organizational culture, but the downside is less new blood and fewer innovations. Bestfoods' U.S. employees tend to reflect "Middle America"—conservative, traditional people with "old-fashioned American values." Brody affectionately describes the company as a Norman Rockwell painting. While the pace and pressure has picked up in recent years, it is neither an industry nor a company with a prior reputation for being "fast-paced." Brody describes Bestfoods' culture as traditional, conservative, polite, "gentlemanly," and nonconfrontational. While the politeness contributes to the pleasant relations Bestfoods is noted for, it also makes face-to-face confrontations rare; criticism and dissent tend to go underground. The emphasis on tradition makes change slow and risky. Some executives are leery of being blamed if changes they initiate don't work. As a result, some managers use the "drip method" of change—small changes over time that eventually add up to progress.

While individuals may approach change somewhat cautiously, Bestfoods has developed a very effective group method for taking advantage of opportunities and resolving problems that affect all divisions. When the global action-learning task forces come together, they analyze situations and, toward the end of the meeting, present their recommendations to top management. The CEO and his direct reports immediately consider each recommendation and respond to the task force before the meeting ends.

As a result of all these factors, Brody's strategy has been to focus on getting the decision makers "on board" and then making incremental changes. Her style is to plant the seeds of ideas and provide information and options to the executive team so they can begin thinking about diversity more broadly and from different perspectives.

BRODY'S PHILOSOPHY ON HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Brody has a very clear idea of the role of human resources, as seen in the following description of her job.

As an HR executive, I do not see myself as merely an ombudsperson for employees. I have always seen HR as a critical management responsibility. There are several aspects of HR in which one is required to be the conscience of the organization. I spent many of my formative years as a consultant working with clients on diagnostic and implementation issues to help make organizations more effective. So my focus is more proactive and action-oriented, trying to create programs that lead to long-term change rather than compliance. My goal has always been to "make a difference" at work. I've learned that everything has to be linked to the business. Line management has to have an itch they want to scratch, and it's my responsibility to make them feel that itch—whether they know it or not. So I don't see HR as an administrative staff function, but as an organization development function that needs to work with line managers. Although people like me are sometimes seen as mavericks, I think you have to understand the needs of the business, create effective relationships with line management, and bend rules to solve problems. Traditionally, HR has a reputation for writing the policies and then telling people why they can't do things.

Brody went on to explain that the traditional HR roles are switched at Bestfoods. In most companies, corporate HR establishes policy and procedures and then administers them, while the operating divisions creatively try to bend the rules to meet the needs of local line managers. At Bestfoods, HR policies are frequently developed and implemented at the divisional level, while the corporate group often has more freedom to experiment and be innovative.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR CHANGE

Bestfoods already had a Diversity Advisory Council (DAC) when Brody took over. It continues today and is composed of 14 members—senior executives in the U.S. business, corporate staff, and the vice presidents of human resources from each unit. The council is chaired by the CEO and facilitated by Brody. Her predecessor met with the council a few times a year, and their primary achievement was coming to consensus on a common diversity training program for senior managers throughout North America. By contrast, Brody adopted a team-building approach with the council. She knew they had to establish a common vision, so Brody spent almost her entire first year working with them to craft a vision and to agree upon a definition of diversity. Brody worked to ensure that Bestfoods defined diversity very broadly (see Case Appendix B) for two reasons: (1) to avoid excluding white males; and (2) so that other countries would not see diversity only in light of U.S. EEO requirements. The council also developed a Balanced Scorecard for diversity that mirrors the Corporate Balanced Scorecard (see Case Appendix B). As Brody states,

In corporate life, you only make progress on things you measure, and you only measure things that are important—such as operating income, profitability, ROI, ROA, and market share. These things are all measured and tracked very, very frequently. So in terms of making progress on diversity, the measurable goal was increased career opportunity—promotions, salary levels, and representation at senior management levels—and not the "nice-to-haves," like calendars with every ethnic holiday posted or "feeling included"; it was in fact about being included. I preached that you could not have an effective diversity function without, at a minimum, having effective equal employment policies and actions in place.

Brody and the council also linked diversity to the corporate vision.

It's very simple. We could not be the best food company in the world if we weren't recruiting and retaining the talented women and minorities who make up large proportions of current M.B.A. programs and who bring different perspectives and experiences from those of whites and men. Since the number of minorities we have is fairly good, one of the first things I did was to focus on the representation of women, an area in which our numbers were not so good. I had industry measures to justify doing this. I also had my own personal experience in the organization and the frustration at seeing a lot of diversity awareness training going on but not seeing many tangible results coming out of it.

Consistent with the CEO's perspective, Brody sees diversity as a business issue and insists on promoting it as such. She does not see her job as reengineering society or changing societal attitudes; her primary focus is on behaviors and practices that will benefit the company. Brody's team building with the Diversity Advisory Council paid off. After about two years, the council wanted to raise the bar on diversity and chose to go forward in a proactive way. To learn what leading companies were doing about leveraging workforce inclusion to increase their business competitiveness, Brody invited outside practitioners who were involved in best-practice efforts to make presentations to the council. She also gathered a variety of benchmarking and best-practice studies and reports for council members.

In addition to the groundwork Brody was laying with the Diversity Advisory Council, she established a program called Cultural Connections, an employee-driven education and awareness program, and a peer coaching and mentoring program for new hires called SOS, "Sponsoring Our Success." Brody's new initiatives complemented Bestfoods' long history of involvement with INROADS (Bergeman is on the board of directors for the northern New Jersey chapter). INROADS is an internship program for high school and college-age minority students that had proven successful for the company in recruiting top talent, as many interns later joined Bestfoods. Brody's department, which consisted of one other professional and a secretary, coordinated entry-level diversity awareness training, sexual harassment prevention training, and diversity training for the most senior 300 managers and executives in the company. At her suggestion, Shoemate sent out an open letter to all employees in 1997 regarding the company's diversity initiative (see Case Appendix B) and another "state of diversity" letter to U.S. employees in 1998 (see Case Appendix C). Brody's job is made easier by both Shoemate's and Bergeman's sincere belief in the strategic importance of diversity.

While these efforts have been successful, Brody knows that still more has to be done, and she too would like to pick up the pace of change. Among others, she has been considering three alternatives that might have an even larger impact.

1. Conduct a survey that would compare the differences in perception between women and men regarding development and retention in the company and more clearly identify the unique barriers women face.
2. Hold a meeting modeled after the global action-learning programs to tackle the problem of retaining and promoting women.
3. Offer a leadership development program for midlevel women managers.

One day Brody was in Shoemate's office getting his signature on some letters. He was in the midst of reviewing the 1997 employee survey data and said, "Laura, if you could do one thing to improve things for women in this company, what would it be?" Brody knew this was a big opportunity. The mental Rolodex in her head started spinning as she quickly considered a variety of options she'd been pondering. Brody took a deep breath and pitched her best idea.

I really cannot speak for all women. But if I were the CEO, what I would want to do is to engage a significant number of women in this dialogue. What about sponsoring a global forum for high-potential and senior women representing all the businesses from around the world

and bringing them to Arrowwood? They could help us better understand the environment and culture in the company and how it impacts women. We could do what we always do with a business issue that needs to be driven from the center—have an action-learning program with outside experts to design and facilitate it. We could receive both information and recommendations from participants on how to proceed and make progress, and we could also do some leadership training at the same time.

Shoemate asked a few probing questions and suggested she flesh it out with Bergeman. Brody and Bergeman prepared a position paper that Bergeman discussed with the Corporate Strategy Council (CSC) at its next meeting in April. The CSC is composed of the six most senior corporate officers, who are responsible for the four geographic divisions, the baking business, and the corporate staff. The CSC immediately approved the forum idea. Shoemate requested that it take place no later than the end of July. That meant Brody had only 90 days to organize her company's first-ever Women's Global Leadership Forum.

Brody and her staff dove into preparations, and the plans began to fall into place. The question that continued to nag Brody was how to ensure that the forum resulted in real organizational change. She worried that participants might leave feeling good, with raised expectations about what the company would do for women, only to be disillusioned if the recommended changes didn't materialize afterward. As it turned out, senior management shared Brody's concern about unrealistically heightened expectations. Some of them also wondered how they could participate and interact with the attendees so that neither group would feel threatened.

FORUM INVITATIONS AND REACTIONS

To create a comprehensive list of senior and high potential women, Brody solicited nominations from all division presidents, which she personally reviewed along with the corporate high-potential lists and succession plans. Next, the CEO sent a letter to all six members of the Corporate Strategy Council describing the forum and requesting that they rank order their nominees. As Bestfoods does with its Senior Management Development Program, the company allocated spaces at the Women's Global Leadership Forum according to the relative size of each division and geographical area to ensure balanced representation. Brody's goal was to invite 50 participants, of which at least half were to come from outside the United States. As an early indication of the high level of support, every division requested additional spaces. Brody responded by increasing the number of participants to 60 and choosing 10 of these as facilitators for small group sessions. Shoemate personally sent a letter of invitation to each participant. Fifty-five women from 25 countries were able to accept the invitation.

Brody knew that merely asking the division presidents to identify their high potential women, thereby adding them to the recognized and visible talent pool for the company's future leadership, was a significant intervention in and of itself. "Even if we'd never held the forum, it was a good exercise for the senior executives to stop and consider how many highly talented women managers they had and where they were in the company. One president promoted a woman a few months earlier than he had planned to as a result of thinking about whom he wanted to nominate for the forum!"

The reactions to the forum announcement were, for the most part, very positive. Several people commented that this was one of the most exciting and forward-looking initiatives the company had ever tackled. Many women were gratified to be identified as participants. Not all women, however, reacted positively. Some senior women, primarily Americans, worried that attending an all-women forum might encourage others to think their success was owed primarily to their status as women rather than to their competence; they had no desire to be at the forefront of women's issues. Some women who were not invited, from secretaries to directors, felt excluded from yet another "private club." Some invitees were also concerned about the potentially negative reactions from their male colleagues and bosses, including worrying about the likelihood of a male backlash.

There were sporadic dismissive and skeptical comments by both men and women who doubted that the forum would result in anything more than a "bitch session." One senior male manager told his female subordinate, "Have a good time at the coffee-klatch" as she left for the forum. Some men complained of discrimination because they were not invited. However, other men thought the forum was long overdue and emphasized their support. Brody kept Shoemate and Bergeman informed of the resistance she encountered so there would not be any surprises regarding this controversial program among the senior managers. At one point, Brody sent Shoemate a note saying, "You know how women get crabby and lose their sense of humor when they're left out? Well, guess what—it seems that men also get crabby and lose their sense of humor when they are excluded!" Given her strict deadline, Brody didn't feel she had enough time to deal with the backlash in depth, other than being aware of it and trying to deflect it with humor and an ongoing reiteration of the CEO's rationale and goals for championing the forum.

PLANNING THE FORUM

As far as Brody was aware, no other company had ever held a global meeting for its most senior and high-potential women with the intent of opening a dialogue on global leadership and organizational change. There were no models to follow, so she began searching for outside consultants to help design and implement the forum. One of the consultants she hired began by interviewing Shoemate, Bergeman, all corporate officers including the three female corporate officers, and one of the female board members to get a feel for the organization. She and Brody began designing a program to fit Bestfoods' needs and to meet the forum's goals:

- Increase the global competitiveness of Bestfoods.
- Develop the global leadership skills of Bestfoods' most highly talented and senior women.
- Create an internal network among Bestfoods' women leaders to facilitate their global effectiveness.
- Develop both global and local recommendations for enhancing Bestfoods' ability to support the career advancement and success of an increasing number of highly talented and senior women.

Early in the process, Brody warned Bergeman that the cost of the program would be higher than the original estimate. His response was, "Spend whatever you need to put on an outstanding program." Bergeman was aware that some people who were ambivalent about the program might try to find reasons for it to fail. He, therefore, insisted that everything about the program be first rate. While Bergeman remained available when Brody wanted his support or advice, he allowed her to take full responsibility for the program.

PRE-FORUM SURVEY

Brody's team carried out a survey-feedback process aimed at producing data that would serve as a baseline and cause people to reexamine their thinking about the opportunities and barriers for women's career advancement. Brody was especially interested in surveying both senior women and men, so both groups' views would be visible at the forum. She developed a survey modeled after the Catalyst³ report, "Women in Corporate Leadership: Progress & Prospects" (Wellington, 1996). A primary purpose of the survey was to determine whether there were significant differences of opinion between the views of women and men in Bestfoods regarding individual and corporate strategies that would most benefit women, common reasons preventing women from advancing, beliefs about women, and personal experiences in the company. Brody sent the survey to all corporate officers, the 125 most senior executives who were being invited to this year's WorldTeam meeting, and the 60 women who had been invited to the forum. The response rate for the survey was 70 percent. Brody understood quite clearly that for any significant organizational change to occur, the senior levels of management, almost exclusively male, had to be part of a coalition for change. For that to happen, they had to be included on the front end as part of the overall organizational change process. Brody sent the survey results to all the survey participants after the forum.

The survey data revealed the following key points:

1. Although women and men agreed on most of the barriers perceived to be inhibiting women's career advancement (women's lack of mobility for international assignments and lack of both general management and line experience), the women reported a number of barriers that appear to have been invisible to the men:
 - Senior men's discomfort with ambitious women
 - Senior men's negative stereotyping and preconceptions of women
 - Senior men's difficulty in reporting to a woman
2. While women and men agreed on the three most important strategies for women's career success at Bestfoods (consistently exceeding performance expectations; gaining line management experience; and seeking difficult and high-visibility assignments), they disagreed on other key strategies.
 - The majority of women believed that they had to "develop a style that men are comfortable with" in order to succeed, whereas men ranked this strategy next to last in terms of importance.
 - Women were more likely than men to believe they had to develop a relationship with an influential mentor in order to succeed.
 - More men than women stressed the importance of gaining international experience.
 - None of the men stated that they would consider changing companies to get ahead whereas 14 percent of the women stated that they would consider leaving Bestfoods for another company.
3. Men and women agreed on the five most important corporate strategies that would benefit women (more assignments managing people; include more women on divisional and global strategic task forces; include more women in the Senior Management Development Program; hold managers more accountable for identifying, developing, and advancing high potential women; and include a higher percentage of women in succession plans). However, women placed greater importance on each of these corporate strategies than did their male colleagues.
4. It was noteworthy that both women and men perceived the barriers facing women to be greater than the reality of what women actually experience. For example, although some men hold stereotypical assumptions about women in general, they reported that these assumptions usually disappear when they actually work with or for a woman manager. However, the specific women they know and work with are typically viewed as "exceptions" to the rule.

Brody and her team worked long hours to analyze the extensive survey data and present them in such a way that both women and men in the company would be able to understand each other's different views of reality. She hoped the survey results would trigger more in-depth discussion at the forum, so more people would be motivated to eliminate the gap in perceptions and find new ways for women and men to work together.

THE WOMEN'S GLOBAL LEADERSHIP FORUM

Brody and the consultants wanted to ensure that the forum was more than just an effective leadership training seminar for women that developed recommendations for organizational change. They had confidence that the participants would develop recommendations that were appropriate for Bestfoods, but what would happen afterward? Much depended on the continued support of senior executives and their reaction to the forum. To encourage their growing support, the majority of Bestfoods' most senior executives (CEO, Corporate Strategy Council, Diversity Advisory Council, corporate officers, and a board member) joined the women participants at the welcome dinner, as well as at other sessions (at which their presence would not be inhibiting), and at the all-important presentation of recommendations on the final morning of the 4 1/2-day Women's Global Leadership Forum. The senior executives' inclusion allowed them to see the women participants in action, hear their opinions firsthand, and learn for themselves what the company needed to do, and to avoid doing, in order to succeed.

The design of the forum tried to enhance the women's preparation for proactive roles in the company's future leadership. The forum design included three types of sessions: (1) individual professional development sessions focusing on global leadership skills; (2) organization development sessions aimed at gathering information and making recommendations to the company on women's retention, development, and advancement; and (3) sessions facilitating the formation of a women's network. At the participants' request, the design was modified to allow more time in small groups to formulate recommendations for presentation to the senior executives at the final session. Leadership development activities included "herstories" about significant women who influenced the values and leadership styles of the participants, skill assessment, skill building and coaching, experiential exercises, a panel of female CEOs and Bestfoods' highest-ranking women, and another panel of Bestfoods' senior male executives who gave career advice, and Brody's presentation of the survey results.

As predicted, the forum had some intense and challenging moments as the widely diverse group of 55 women with differing goals, opinions, experiences, and communication and behavior styles met and discussed key corporate and personal challenges. Nevertheless, the participants judged the forum to be a resounding success.

Forum Recommendations and Executive Response

A highlight of the forum was the participants' presentation to the CEO, Corporate Strategy Council, and the Diversity Advisory Council on the last day. The women stayed up late the night before, working in teams on the various recommendations. In an offer that reflected their skills as mentors and coaches, the senior American women graciously suggested that younger women from outside the United States do the actual presenting so that they could benefit more directly from the high visibility. Before the presentations began, Shoemate requested that the participants be candid and assured them that they could be totally honest in their feedback. All participants were visibly pulling for the presenters. At one point, a highly articulate and self-assured Chinese woman in her late twenties brought down the house when she assured Shoemate that "There's no need to feel threatened by us—we don't want your job. We want to be CEOs of bigger, better companies than Bestfoods!" Their specific recommendations (found in Case Appendix D) focused on three key areas: career development (enhancing career opportunities), diversity (increasing representation of women in senior and high-level positions), and work/life balance (enabling women to perform to their highest capabilities while recognizing their multiple roles). In addition to recommending what the company should do, the participants also identified what they themselves should do to enhance their own career opportunities.

While the women participated in a final small group session, Shoemate and the senior executives discussed the recommendations and planned their response. Shoemate suggested separating the recommendations into three categories:

- Current company initiatives—recommendations the company is already doing but which need to be accelerated and better communicated to employees.
- New corporatewide recommendations, which the Corporate Strategy Council could consider at its next meeting.
- New "local" recommendations best addressed within specific countries, regions, or divisions.

When the women rejoined the executives, Shoemate responded to each recommendation, some of which he immediately accepted. He was very open to feedback and did not argue with or become defensive about any points the women raised. He promised to look into existing programs and policies that were not consistently working to the benefit of women's development and retention. Shoemate eloquently referred to his belief that the company's strength lies in its local decision making and explained why he hesitates to mandate most policies from corporate headquarters. However, he also clarified what he could do as CEO to make change happen and assured the women that he would communicate to them the outcome of each recommendation as soon as possible. Shoemate's obvious sincerity and thoughtfulness made a positive impression, as did

the response of other CSC members. Shoemate closed the session with an inspirational story about his first experience as a very young manager whose orders were obeyed because, like the women at the Forum, he had the backing and utter confidence of his boss. Shoemate and Bergeman then led a standing ovation for Brody and her staff.

Two hours later, after bidding goodbye to participants about to jet off to all corners of the globe, Brody gratefully collapsed on a lawn chair on Arrowwood's manicured grounds. She was delighted that the forum had ended on such a positive note. The immediate feedback at least seemed to indicate that it had indeed been the catalyst she was hoping for. Nevertheless, Brody still had that nagging question, "What next steps have to take place so that real change in the company and its leadership occurs and becomes institutionalized?"

NOTES

1. Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) laws, under the provisions of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, were created in the United States to ensure work environments free from illegal discrimination on the grounds of race, color, religion, disability, age, national origin, or sex.
2. 1998 Vision and Policies pamphlet.
3. Catalyst, located in New York City, is a well-respected research and education institute that focuses on corporate women in senior leadership and management positions.

Case Appendix A

The Bestfoods Vision

