

— ENDPAPER: DOING THE RIGHT THING —

In his acceptance speech at the School's Botwinick Prize ceremony last fall, J. Michael Cook, chairman and CEO of Deloitte & Touche and member of the School's board of overseers, described his company's commitment to closing the gender gap.

As we entered the '90s, although we didn't have a glass ceiling in our organization, we certainly did have a leaky pipeline issue to deal with, because we saw significant differences in turnover between men and women. A number of factors were at play. One was the culture of the organization. We had a male-dominated culture. Not surprisingly, virtually everyone in our organization in leadership positions was male and had been with the organization for the best part of his professional career. We were all aware of the differences that were taking place in terms of the number of women joining our organization, but we were lost in terms of understanding what that meant to an organization such as ours.

Second, we thought we had absolutely equal opportunity for men and women. But as we learned more about ourselves, we found that wasn't always so. When we looked to see how people were assigned to our largest clients—important work for people to do in order to advance—we found far more of those assignments going to men than to women. When we asked why, the assignment directors told us that continuity is most important; our clients want to deal with people they have dealt with year after year. And women leave the organization sooner than men—so how are we going to fulfill this expectation of continuity on these very large accounts? Of course, the way to do that is to assign the men instead of the women.

Well, the women would see the men more frequently getting the assignments to the major accounts, and they would say, "Whoops, don't have enough opportunity here." So guess what? They'd leave. Guess what the assignment director would say? "See, I told you that's the way it would work." So most kept assigning the men to the larger engagements. Once we saw what was happening, we took steps to correct the situation, and it has made a big difference in terms of women's having not only received a real equal opportunity but their share of the most important assignments as well.



Another important item is flexibility. Once again, those of us "knowledgeable" senior people in the firm said, "Of course we encourage flexibility. Look at all these terrific programs." And on paper, they were terrific. The only problem was that they didn't work. The reason they didn't work goes back to the culture of the organization. If women came to talk about one of these flexible work arrangements—they had been reading about all the state-of-the-art programs we had—the first thing said by the supervisor would be, "Why do you want to do that?" Or, "Aren't you committed to your career?" Or maybe if those weren't the words, the body language connoted the same. The culture had not adopted flexibility. So we had to change the culture.

The results have been dramatic. We now have more than 200 women partners—that's triple the number when we began this process. We have been recognized by *Fortune* magazine and *Working Mother*, among others. And the ultimate payoff: We have substantially reduced the turnover of not only women but also of men in the organization by being much more sensitive to their needs and to human resource issues. Three years ago our turnover rate was about 25 percent. Today it is 16 percent. In the current year, we hope to take that down into the low teens and may be able to reach a level where 10 to 12 percent will be the norm. This makes an enormous difference in a client-service organization—being able to retain experienced, high-talent people makes us that much better able to serve our clients with excellence.

While it was the smart thing to do—and I can give you all of the business reasons why this is so—I'd like you to also note that we did this because it was ethically the right thing to do to fulfill our obligation to the people of our organization to provide them with the maximum opportunity to realize their full potential as professionals.

J. Michael Cook and Deloitte & Touche received the 1998 Botwinick Prize in Business Ethics for their commitment to helping employees balance work and family. Cook established the company's Initiative for the Retention and Advancement of Women.