

ELLEN PAO CASE CLOSED, BUT TECH INDUSTRY NOW OPEN FOR IMPROVEMENT

By Molly D. Shepard, MS, MSM

March 30, 2015



Ellen Pao's case against her former employer, a Silicon Valley Venture Capitalist Firm, was strikingly similar to the Boom Boom Room scandal of Wall Street. The difference: Wall Street's epic scandal took place nearly 20 years ago. Despite years of forward movement in women's rights, women in the workplace continue to experience inequality, especially when it comes to positions of power and leadership.

In her lawsuit, Pao described the firm as an "old boys club" where she was treated "despicably, maliciously, fraudulently and oppressively," and limited in her growth and opportunity for promotion because of her gender. Since Pao's case began, two similar gender discrimination lawsuits have been filed by female tech employees in Silicon Valley: one against Facebook and another against Twitter. Pao's case has closed on the side of the firm, but the critical issues remain unresolved: even in the hub of U.S. technological innovation, gender roles remain dated.

In the top 500 U.S. companies, approximately 50% of the "middle management" positions are held by women. However, only 4.2% of these companies are *led* by women. Furthermore, the income gap between men and women has barely budged in a decade: In 2013, among full-time, year-round workers, women were paid 78 percent of what men were paid.

The tech industry is notoriously male-dominated, as evidenced by the workforce numbers and compounded by the fact that colleges continue to struggle to enroll women in computer science programs. In these types of industries consisting mostly of men, there can also be an issue of unconscious bias - that is, the unintentional tendency to discriminate based on our past experiences and the environment. For example, a male employee who grew up with a stay-at-home-mom may have an unconscious bias that women are better supporters and caretakers than full-time workers. When faced with a woman in a leadership position, especially in a boardroom full of men, that bias may reinforce concerns about her inability to lead, problem-solve, and make decisions. In Ellen Pao's case she alleged that her colleagues engaged in stereotyping, exclusionary activities and biased behavior.

Challenged with not being taken seriously and not being promoted as deserved, women tend to voluntarily leave corporate environments. When *The Leader's Edge/Leaders By Design* surveyed more than one hundred female senior executives across the country to find out why, they told us their number one reason for leaving was "a corporate culture that road-blocked their advancement."

So can women succeed in executive positions when it seems the cards remain stacked against them? Yes, but it may involve taking additional steps that are beyond what seems logical for women in the workplace.

Logic tells women to:

- Work hard, put in long hours
- Always be on time and on budget with projects
- Foster positive relationships with people they work with
- Take a minimum amount of time off
- Be considered the expert in their area

But, the reality is, women need to:

- Work smart, get known by those who count
- Promote their accomplishments
- Take considered risks
- Think, speak and act strategically
- Grow and enhance their leadership skills
- Build a network of contacts internally and externally
- Develop impact and presence
- Communicate ideas effectively and speak up

While the logical steps will make a highly-regarded employee or manager, they will not put a female executive in line for the top slots in their company. As a female, if you work long hours and are great at what you do – *but the right people don't know you or your work* – you'll still find yourself road-blocked.

As we continue to follow the Silicon Valley issues, we must remember that the crux of the problem lies in preconceptions, and not allow our unconscious biases to form dangerous stereotypes. When they do, not only the employees, but the company suffer by losing key talent.

For more information on developing key leadership skills or advancing your career, visit: www.the-leaders-edge.com.



Molly D. Shepard, MS, MSM is President & CEO of The Leader's Edge/Leaders By Design, a leadership development, executive coaching and consulting firm headquartered in Philadelphia, PA.