You can talk your way
through glass ceiling

By Deborah Tannen

Recently, a caller to a cable television talk show on
which I was a guest bellowed, "There is no glass ceil­
ing anymore. Women are getting all the promotions
now." What an optimistic view, I thought. If only he
were right. Instead, a new study finds that an invisible
barrier to women's advancement is still firmly in
place. Of the Fortune 500 companies, a mere 13 in­
clude a woman among their five highest-paid execu­
tives, and of the companies' top 2,500 jobs, only 1% are
held by women. Right now, the federal Glass Ceiling
Commission is readying its preliminary report for pre­
tation to Congress next month. And lest the caller
think that this is only a concern of the left, it's
interesting to recall that the commission was estab­
lished in 1991 after prompting by Senate Republican
leader Bob Dole.

Why has the glass ceiling been so intractable? One
element (though surely not the only one) is what I call
"conversational rituals" — automatic ways of speak­
ing that affect the responses we get when we talk to
others, including how we are judged on the job.

A man who heads up a large division of a multina­
tional corporation was presiding at a meeting devoted
to assessing employees' performance. One after an­
other, every senior manager pronounced every wom­
man in his group not promotable because she lacked the
necessary confidence. The division head wondered
how this could be.

Although I do not doubt that some women (and
men) lack confidence, my conclusion, based on obser­
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often judged to be less confident than they really are because their automatic
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the ritual is shared, this works fine.

He underwrote the blame back on herself and
offered the omitted information. But ritualistically,
the people who don't recognize it as a ritual

I heard a woman saying "we" about a successful
project I knew she herself had engi­
neered. When I asked her why, she
said, "It would seem too self-promot­
ing to say 'I.'" I thought of this when a
photographer who was taking my pic­
ture for a magazine asked her assist­
ant for a lens he hadn't brought, and
wouldn't "be promoted," he objected. "Ask her," his boss
insisted. The next day he reported, with genuine sur­
prise, "She accepted." Promotions often go to those
who seem to want them, but many women feel they
should not act as if they want a position higher than
they've got, although when offered a higher position
they assume it with alacrity and skill.

The seeds of these contrasting styles are sown in
childhood. Girls learn, from their peers as well as
their parents and teachers, that it's more common for a
girl to avoid what to do in too assertive a way, rather than to big up
or try to claim credit in an obvious way. Men, on the other hand,
are more likely to say "I'm sorry" in this "ritual" way, men (and women who

I was talking to her. Damned if
you didn't talk one way or the other.

The solution is to
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