Attitudes continue to limit women

By Lynn Eisaguirre

Not long ago, the Rocky Mountain News provided an excellent report on the affirmative action debate. But the coverage omitted one essential point: Women and minorities are still uninvited by many at the highest levels of business and government. Subtle and covert discrimination is hard to confront, but attitudes continue to limit the advancement of women and minorities, even in 1995.

A surprisingly good made-for-TV movie based on the Tailhook scandal made this point well. In one scene, several high-level Navy brass — two men and one woman — are discussing how to handle the investigation. While the woman officer is pushing for a full and fair investigation, the admiral supports her, but the other male officer resists. Finally, in frustration, the resister admits that the Navy’s Top Guns really don’t want women aviators. Nor, he says — in the heat of the moment — do the Marines, the Army, or the Air Force. And, he finally yells, “I don’t either. I would rather work with men.” He stomps out of the room.

The woman officer follows him, a look of surprised excitement on her face: “You said it!” she shouts after him. “You finally said it!”

A recent Louis Harris/Working Women poll confirmed what many women feel. It surveyed women at the highest echelons of Fortune 500 companies. The surprising finding: Most of these highly successful women feel “unwanted.” They feel like “aliens,” as if they’re “working in a foreign country.” They believe they’re judged and compensated differently than men are and they’re tired of trying to “thread the needle” in terms of behavior: being aggressive, but not too aggressive, feminine, but not too feminine.

Women are bailing out of corporate America in droves — not to stay home and raise children, but to start their own businesses, at a rate at least one and a half times that of men. Women-owned businesses now employ almost as many people as Fortune 500 companies.

One of the best descriptions of this phenomenon came from Margaret Meade’s daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, in her book Composing a Life. Given her famous parents, Bateson assumed that she would be free from discrimination in academia, but as she moved up through the ranks, a strange thing occurred. Men who had been her friends, mentors and equal colleagues deserted her and actually worked against her when she became an administrator at Amherst College.

Because the discrimination is usually so subtle and covert, and most men — unlike the honest Navy official — will not admit their own attitudes, a woman in that position can dismiss her feelings as paranoia. The stress of that whole internal debate, Bateson explains, can throw even a competent and successful woman off her game and increase mistakes.

A woman engineer in one of my training sessions expressed the same problem to me privately. “You know,” she said, “when I started with this company, the highest-ranking woman told me that I would have problems as a woman at two phases of my career. When I was first hired, she said, I would have to convince men I could do the job. Then I would go through a period when my colleagues would accept me for the work they knew I could do and be friendly with me. Then, later, when I made it into management, I would be forced out of the information network I would need to do my job well.”

“And that,” she said, her voice rising in anger, “is exactly what happened.”

When I asked a male colleague about this issue, he shrugged and said, “Change takes time.” I understand this, but I graduated from law school in 1977, and 25% of my class were women. Two of the top three people in my class were female, the majority of the women were in the top third. Today, only one remains a partner in a major 17th Street law firm. If anyone had told me then that we would still be dealing with discrimination almost 20 years later, I would not have believed them. Change takes time, but 20 years?

A recent poll of women who worked on Capitol Hill revealed that 30% felt they had been sexually harassed, and of those, 90% would not report it for fear that they would lose their jobs or would not be believed. This is after Anita Hill, Tailhook and Robert Packwood. Change takes time but the numbers are not changing.

It is the brave man who will admit that he has problems dealing with powerful women. In my experience I know of only two: One is a minister and the other a seminar leader. Both are charismatic and successful by any standard. Both are wise and conscious enough to know that honesty is the first step to changing their own attitudes. The reason the female Naval officer in the TV movie was so excited to have her colleague admit his own attitudes was that she recognized the difficulty of dealing with attitudes that remain hidden.

We’re all prejudiced. It’s impossible to be raised in our culture and not be. We have to be willing to examine our own biases and be honest before anything can change.

The Working Women poll did have one ray of hope. The women who worked in companies with good diversity training and a cultural commitment to diversity found that made a difference. The most successful organizations did this work not out of a sense of social justice but because they’re enlightened enough to realize that discrimination affects their bottom line: They need a diverse workforce and diverse leaders to compete in a global market and sell to a changing customer base.

Opponents of affirmative action frequently profess the view that people should be treated equally, regardless of their sex or race. Believe me, most women and minorities would like nothing better.