



Conversations with the Experts

Conducting Applied Research to Create Change for Women of Color

An Interview with Katherine Giscombe

Bio: Katherine Giscombe, Ph.D. is a Senior Research Director at Catalyst, a research organization dedicated to the advancement of women. Dr. Giscombe directed the groundbreaking study that examined the status of women of color in mid- and upper corporate management, their perceptions of career opportunities, and strategies to further advancement. Dr. Giscombe currently directs Catalyst's research on career outcomes of women MBA's and works on proprietary advisory services projects in several corporations. She speaks to corporate and academic audiences nationally on the issues facing women of color in corporate America. Dr. Giscombe is also the author of many articles for academic publications and a frequent presenter at academic conferences.

Editors Note: When we decided to focus this issue on the importance of expanding the research lens to include population groups that are understudied, we immediately thought of Catalyst's multi-phase study on women of color. We thank Katherine Giscombe, the project's director of research, for telling us about this influential study.

Katherine Giscombe's strong personal commitment to her work stems from her previous experience as a woman of color in corporate management positions. Her decision to join Catalyst was spurred by this experience: "I knew first hand how difficult it was, and I really wanted to be part of a solution to make corporate management aware of some of the issues that women of color face." Giscombe's professional goals parallel Catalyst's own mission, which is to use applied research to make change for women.

Giscombe observes, "Catalyst understood the importance of extending the research lens beyond gender to include race." In the 80s and 90s, Catalyst's research focused on white women, but Sheila Wellington, President of Catalyst, recognized that a huge talent pool was being neglected when the focus was "woman's issues." Giscombe applauds the strong commitment of Wellington, who sought and received funding for a major study designed to investigate "the impact of racial and ethnic status on opportunities and barriers for women of color in corporate management."

Committed to the applied research model, Catalyst designed the study to provide recommendations and best practices for corporate policy and practice. This multi-phase study produced reports that focus on specific phases or topics studied. The most comprehensive report, "Women of Color in Corporate America: Opportunities and Barriers," focused on the current status of women of color in corporations, success factors and barriers for women of color, retention of women of color, and corporate diversity strategies. Drawing on the data from all phases of the study, the report makes recommendations for companies and presents six case studies that represent best practices.

Giscombe provides us with an overview of the women of color study. The study expanded the research lens by looking at three groups of women of color: African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic-American women in U.S. corporations.

The study used a multi-method approach. Giscombe emphasizes the "importance of using different methods and collecting data from different entities" in order to ensure a comprehensive study. The project included: surveys of 1,735 professional and managerial women from 30 companies, an analysis of National Census data, qualitative study of women of color and corporate personnel at 16 Fortune 500 companies (focus group and in-depth interview data), and content analysis of diversity policies at 15 companies.

Additionally, a longitudinal follow-up study was conducted with the women who were included in the study. Giscombe observes, "This long-term perspective allowed the team to look, not just at women's intentions to leave their companies, but also to look at differences between women of color who decided to stay and those who elected to

leave their organizations.” The Catalyst team statistically linked conditions at the organization at “Time 1” with women’s behavior at “Time 2.” The findings, Giscombe notes, “lend some statistical credibility to the business case: If employers want to stem the loss of an important part of their talent pool, they will need to make workplace environments more open, more accepting, and more supportive.”

Based on their multi-method approach, the Catalyst research team was able to extract significant observations and conclusions from their work. Study findings revealed that although many companies had diversity policies with career development elements aimed at women of color, “there was a gap between the policies as written and the policies in terms of their perceived effectiveness by the targets.” According to Giscombe, this central discovery served as a “wake-up call for many HR executives, who just assumed that their programs had to be really good because there was something on paper about accountability and career development.”

An important outcome of the study is the use of the research findings to make the business case: It is in the best interest of corporations to create and support diversity practices that target women of color (see report, “Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Barriers”).

Giscombe and colleagues view their work as a way to educate corporate executives about the experiences of women of color. This education, they believe, will bring the subject out into the open, raise the “comfort level” in speaking about the issues, and help pave the way for women of color in management. Catalyst speakers are often engaged to speak for organizations in the private sector, as well as for professional associations and some government-sponsored groups.

Currently, Giscombe and colleagues are focusing on an in-depth analysis of individual racial/ethnic groups within the broader women of color study. The team is examining the complex issues associated with Latina women in the workplace, (e.g., how companies can meet challenges related to diversity in accents and language, etc.)

Beyond further analysis of the data obtained in the context of the women of color study, Giscombe plans to build on the research findings to help companies develop strategies for managing diversity in the workplace. In synchrony with Catalyst’s objectives, Giscombe will work to broaden understanding of gender issues by researching and reporting on women of color.

Selected Related Publications

Catalyst. (1997). *Women of color in corporate management: A statistical picture*. NY: Catalyst Advancement. NY: Catalyst

Catalyst. (1998). *Women of color in corporate management: Dynamics of career advancement*. NY: Catalyst.

Catalyst. (1999). *Women of color in corporate management: Opportunities and barriers*. NY: Catalyst.

Catalyst. (2001). *Women of color executives: Their voices, their journeys*. NY: Catalyst.

Catalyst “is the nonprofit research and advisory organization working with business to advance women.” For more information go to <http://www.catalystwomen.org>

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