

A Global Vision of Inclusiveness

An Interview with Ilene H. Lang,
President, Catalyst

EDITORS' NOTE Ilene Lang was appointed to her current post in August 2003. Lang was the founding CEO of AltaVista Internet Software Inc., a subsidiary of Digital Equipment Corporation. Prior to that, Lang was Senior Vice President of the Desktop Business Group at Lotus Development Corporation. Lang currently serves on the board of directors of Art Technology Group, Inc., was named to the Global Agenda Council on the gender gap at the World Economic Forum, and is a member of the National Nominating Committee of the Girl Scouts of the USA. Lang earned a BA degree in history and literature from Radcliffe College and an MBA from the Harvard Business School.



Ilene H. Lang

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Founded in 1962, Catalyst (www.catalyst.org) is the leading non-profit membership organization working globally with businesses to build inclusive workplaces and expand opportunities for women in business. With offices in the United States, Canada, and Europe, Catalyst has more than 400 companies, firms, business schools, and associations as members.

What are Catalyst's key areas of focus?

Our mission is to work with businesses to build inclusive workplaces and expand opportunities for women. When I joined Catalyst in 2003, we had about 200 members. Today, we have more than 400. A key focus is to support members in their journey to bring more women into the workplace and into leadership positions.

Has workplace inclusiveness evolved, and have there been major changes in opportunities for women in business?

We've been counting women in corporate leadership since 1995. Until about 2004, there was a steady increase in women corporate officers and women on boards of directors of the Fortune 500 companies, from around 8 percent to more than 15 percent, where it has leveled off. Our research shows that companies with the highest representation of women in their leadership, on average, financially outperform those with the lowest representation. There are companies that get it and companies that don't. The ones that do are exemplified by the Catalyst Award, which we have bestowed to

honor initiatives by companies that have led meaningful change with measurable results in the advancement of women in the workplace. Since 1987, 66 initiatives have won the Catalyst Award. Organizations can't just fill out a form and get on a list, nor can they pay money to be part of it – this is about hard work. Everyone from CEO down is interviewed, and we look for measurable progress over a number of years to show that the initiative is sustainable and is part of the company's culture. In addition, each winning initiative must be unique as compared to its industry sector and former winners.

Are you ever surprised that certain companies still don't understand the importance of diversity and inclusion?

I'm always surprised. This is about building a sustainable competitive advantage. When you're competing with others for talent, you've got to be as good. It's not just about having good maternity leave benefits; it's about how you capture and retain talent so that you're choosing the leadership of tomorrow from the best talent of today. For example, if you look at law firms, they're really struggling. When I came to Catalyst, we had seven law firm members; today we have 50. Law firms have realized that, for 20 years, women have represented almost 50 percent of law school grads, yet firms are struggling to retain women associates long enough to become partners. Even when they become partners, women are languishing because they're not in leadership. The traditional culture of law firms is very clubby, and, when combined with an "up or out" mentality, anybody who is different is excluded. They have to change their culture.

Do you define diversity and inclusion differently?

These are two different concepts, but you can't have inclusion unless you have diversity first. A company might say, we have our culture and it doesn't matter what you look like or where you come from, you can fit in and be like everybody else. Over time, they realize it doesn't happen that way. People who feel marginalized in the workplace leave. So companies must proactively look at how to capitalize on the diversity. They've been focusing on women first because half of everything is women. If you can solve the problem for women, you can solve it for other dimensions of diversity.

Are you happy with your board's level of engagement?

We expect participation, but we don't ask a lot. The issues we cover are really important to the CEOs on our board, who look forward to our meetings to discuss Catalyst research findings. Participation has increased, and we have more women CEOs on our board than ever before. That is a huge draw for the men because they respect these women leaders. There is collegiality. They value our board for providing them with an opportunity to learn, share, and enhance their credibility as leaders on this issue.

Do you work at different levels within the member company?

When we're talking about change initiatives, we focus on senior leadership support, but you need other elements as well, so we leave it up to the company to assemble its leadership team around this issue. It might be led by human resources, diversity, the women's network, the CFO, or the COO. We won't work on a project unless there's CEO support because we're small and we're a catalyst. It's in service to our members and our mission that we agree to the work only if there are internal champions and resources dedicated to mission effectiveness.

Do you foresee offering additional services in the future?

We are a global organization with a global vision. The issues for women in leadership are everywhere, but we have to stay focused so that we don't spread ourselves too thin. So we work with our members, academics, and other applied research groups to figure out the questions that Catalyst should be addressing.

Are you happy with your team?

We have a great team, with members from corporate, entrepreneurial, and academic leadership – a dynamic mix. We have new people who are building careers here because they're so excited about the work. Our longest-term employee has been here two decades. We've been a catalyst for almost 50 years and we're always looking towards the future.

In 2003, when you came to Catalyst, what excited you about the opportunity?

I have passion for the Catalyst mission and always have. I've mentored women and understood how important women's talents are to the continued success and sustainability of companies. So I was excited at the prospect of my avocation becoming my job. ●