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by

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MARY KAY ASH AND HER CORPORATE CULTURE FOR WOMEN

Ueenly conscious of its symbolism, Mary Kay Ash wears a diamond lapel pin shaped like a bumblebee. “Aerodynamics have proven that the bumblebee cannot fly,” she says. “The body is too heavy and the wings are too weak. But the bumblebee doesn’t know that, and it goes right on flying, miraculously.”

In 1963, when she was forty-five and when most American women did not hold full-time jobs, Mary Kay (as she is universally referred to) launched a direct-sales cosmetics company run by women. From modest origins in a Dallas storefront, Mary Kay Cosmetics grew into a vertically integrated corporation with annual sales of over \$950 million. In 1976 it became the first company chaired by a woman to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Just how did this bumblebee soar so high?

Mary Kay’s success is based upon sound business practices combined with tenacity and original thinking—about the marketplace, about corporate structure, and about women themselves. Mary Kay built a new corporate culture based on the education, participation, and empowerment of women. Her company’s entrepreneurial structure inspired hundreds of thousands of Mary Kay saleswomen to become, in effect, small-business operators. With a home-spun management style, she boosted their self-esteem and confidence through constant positive reinforcement and material rewards. By harnessing the American woman’s economic and productive power, she forged an economic liberation movement and flew through the glass ceiling two decades before that phrase even existed.
