

# Business

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Section D

## Small network groups give women vital links

By Diane Kunde

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Cynthia Comparin recently was invited to serve on a statewide science and technology council formed by Gov. George W. Bush.

The appointment is a coup for the Dallas telecommunications executive, and she attributes it directly to her membership in a



**Karyl Innis - Founder of unique program, OF COUNCIL™**

new network of high-ranking women.

The program, called Of Council, was created by Dallas entrepreneur Karyl Innis and is being offered through the Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce. It places executive women from different firms in groups of 10 or fewer. The groups, which meet monthly, form a type of brain trust in which high-achieving women give one another advice, support and referrals.

Ms. Comparin, president of enterprise network services for Alltel, was recommended for the governor's council by one of her new peers.

"I've been able to broaden my horizons... and there have been a couple of instances where being part of this organization has helped me directly," said Ms. Comparin, who joined her group last spring.

Experts on women's careers give the idea high marks. "It sounds very constructive, personally. It's the beginnings of an old girls' network," said Tara Levine, senior associate at Catalyst, a New York-based organization that fosters women's careers.

Although its structure is unique, Of Council is part of a larger networking and mentoring movement nationwide, Ms. Levine said. In Boston, female lawyers meet regularly for

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business contacts, she said. Locally, Minneapolis-based Mettium has launched a "Dallas 100" program that will pair promising women with senior mentors outside their companies.

Ms. Innis, whose firm, The Innis Co., does outplacement and consulting for corporate clients, said she wanted to create a "more powerful, sponsorship type program" for women far along in their careers.

employers pay \$500 to join an Executive Women's Roundtable and an additional \$350 to participate in the peer discussion groups.

Making it a paying

proposition could actually help ensure success, said Pat Harrison, who heads the Washington, D.C.-based National Women's Economic Alliance, formed to get more women onto corporate boards. "With an investment, it becomes something more professional and more immediate than, 'Let's all help one another,'" Ms Harrison said. "It's important that it not disintegrate into a chat group."



**Cynthia Comparin (left) and Susan Maguire are part of a group called Of Council, made up of women in executive positions who meet to discuss common issues.**

Feedback has been good, said Rick Douglas, Chamber president. "This program, because of its focus and the way it works, really represents a high quality opportunity for women business executives... I think it's been quite a success so far."

The program isn't cheap. Interested women or their

Susan Maguire, general counsel for GE Capital Realty Group in Dallas, said she joined the program to meet women facing "similar kinds of issues -- executive-level issues."

"I really have just moved this year into that level of management, and it's different ... I'm making more strategic

decisions. It's a focus I hadn't had before," Ms. Maguire said. Women facing similar issues have given her a valuable perspective, she said.

The groups began with a structured format that had each member think through career achievements and future goals. Now, her group works both as a confidential "sounding board" and a referral network for anything from leadership training to boards, Ms. Maguire said.

Programs such as Of Council meet a real need for women and minorities, who are still relatively isolated at the tops of corporations, said Don Vanderwalle, who teaches organizational behavior at Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.

"Anybody could benefit, but the reality is that it's already happening with white males through their social contacts.

When you have only about 5 percent of top positions held by women and people of color -- if they're not members of the clubs, their opportunities are diminished," Mr. Vanderwalle said.

Mentoring from peers improves confidence even at high levels, he said "If you look at the research on self-efficacy, the belief that you can do something, there's a link. If you see someone else successful who comes from a similar background, it gives you confidence yourself."

Donna Snyder, general attorney for Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. in Dallas, agreed. The Of Council experience is worth even more because it's occurring in small groups in which the women get to know one another very well, she said.

"You can go to a thousand success seminars and hear all this stuff. But to sit with six other women and understand what they've accomplished, and how they got there --- it's powerful," she said.

To learn more about the Of Council program, call The Innis Company at (972) 702-9484.