

Five Imperatives for Women's Career Advancement

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Overview

While women have made considerable progress achieving equal representation in the workforce, the path to management remains murky. Women currently make up 46.3% of the total U.S. labor force and yet only 15.4% hold corporate officer positions at Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2007). With little representation at the top—and therefore few role models in management they can identify with—many women seek more dialogue with leaders who have actually achieved management status. The “rules” of advancing are complicated more by the fact that many are implicit and deeply imbedded in organizational culture.

Compelled by this reality, I was determined to find out what women in management have in common, and how it figures into the business of leadership. In January of 2008, I began conducting interviews with 30 women CEOs, CFOs, COOs, Chairs, Presidents, Executive Vice Presidents—and even a Mayor. These successful women represented different industries, the public and private sectors, and a range of different educational and professional backgrounds.

The interviews yielded invaluable insights into the professional lives of women. I asked questions related to managing subordinates, using influence, developing a sense of presence, self-promotion, and methods for augmenting credibility, among others. My primary intention was to find out what women leaders wished they had known earlier in their career and what knowledge was most essential for advancement. The advice shared in the interviews uncovered important career practices and expressed a clear sense of purpose: these women were on a mission to help other, less experienced women get ahead.

Regardless of interviewee context—whether entrepreneurs, officers of Fortune 500 companies, or high-ranking officials in government—five predominant themes emerged from the interviews. These themes appear to be “career imperatives” for women who want to lead, which I discuss individually below.



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Get the Most Out of Networks

People who secure management positions do not reach the top on their own. Women are no exception to this rule and can get considerable mileage out of engaging in well thought out networking relationships. Networking and affinity groups can help women stay motivated in their ascension to leadership positions and represent a venue to speak openly about professional challenges and successes. In addition, these groups can serve as a forum for receiving valuable feedback on one's professional image.

As Vicki Ho, General Manager of GE Homeland Protection Asia, shares, networking can also serve a powerful role in the current climate of downsizing and layoffs. "Networking is critical. Create a network where you can become known by people other than just your immediate boss. This networking group can eventually vouch for you. Being liked by all your companies' senior leaders is not necessarily in your control, but making yourself known in networking groups is." Networks not only present an external platform to demonstrate talents, but they help professionals more easily develop contingency plans in the event their job situation changes.

The etiquette of networking should not be underestimated. When joining a network, a member often has expectations of the group, but the group also has expectations of the member. Being an actively engaged participant is critical to getting the most learning out of a network, improving oneself, and leaving a positive legacy. The very best forum is one in which a professional woman has a natural interest or inclination; joining networks just for the sake of listing them on a résumé is an anti-advancement strategy.

Supplement Your Work Portfolio

Professional women hunger to be heard, and yet are not always given the credibility at work they desire. Augmenting work experience with outside activities can bolster a woman's résumé and her confidence. Courteney Monroe, Executive Vice President of Consumer Marketing at HBO, recom-

mends, "Read everything you can on your field and your company. Go to conferences and tradeshows and really try to immerse yourself in what your company does. In my case, I need to be an avid consumer of entertainment...but I also make a point to see what our competitors are doing."

Taking a big-picture perspective of one's company (and industry) can help a professional woman to be a strategic thinker—an attribute that is essential in the top ranks.

Furthermore, staying current on developments in one's field can quickly increase the chances of having an intelligent angle to share or insight to bring to a meeting. Journals, periodicals, blogs, and other websites are helpful resources for staying connected to breaking industry trends. Augment credentials by taking a substantive volunteer role at a non-profit organization. Rather than taking a passive role, it is advisable to look for volunteer positions with a leadership component such as handling the finances of a fundraiser, managing an annual event from start to finish, or serving on the search committee for a new board member. These practices can also help women who have stayed at home to transition back into the workforce.

Pursuing continuing education, whether through succinct training experiences or a more prolonged degree, is a step that vastly improves a woman's credibility. The finding from my research in this area was simple: women are encouraged to obtain as much training as they can, and seek out an advanced degree from the best school they can afford.

Navigate Organizational Politics

Organizational politics are intrinsic to nearly every workplace. Whether new on the job or strategizing for a long-needed promotion, women need to learn to maneuver through organizational politics without getting stuck in them. Cynthia Egan, President of T. Rowe Price Retirement Plan Services, astutely notes, "...People just entering the workforce can be naïve about the extent that politics control decisions. Each organization has its own personality so you need to identify what



that personality is, decide if you want to exist in it, and have good mentors or relationships to help you navigate through it.”

Women that get ahead have the perceptiveness to see how the “implicit” gets carried out in their organization. They seek to understand who holds power and influence, and when and how leaders like to be challenged. At a minimum, identifying key decision-makers can be helpful, since women are likely to rely on organizational alliances in order to advance. These alliances are mutually beneficial coalitions that help both parties to better meet their individual and collective needs. While alliances do not need to mirror the exact qualities of friendship, they can be instrumental when a woman needs people of influence to vouch for her.

Even if an aspiring leader needs to understand and maneuver through politics, she can still make a point to be seen as a transparent, open leader in the making. A sure way to achieve this is by keeping communications fact-based. Facts are much harder to dispute than conjecture; speaking with data or evidence models for others that an individual values truth more than politics.

Assemble Your Own Personal Board of Directors

Barbara A.F. Greene, CEO of Greene and Associates, Inc., encourages women to create their own advisory boards. She points out, “I guarantee you that if you look at any company with a board, there’s usually a lawyer, a real estate person, an accountant, and so on. Just as a company surrounds itself with expert coaches, so should a woman. Surround yourself with people who have skill sets that you don’t, and adjust this board of directors as your career goals change.”

A woman can begin to assemble an advisory board by identifying existing people in her network or organization whom she admires. These advisors are people with important connections and those who want to see aspiring leaders succeed. This board can provide guidance around professional image

and presence, expose a mentee to valuable connections, or provide job leads and endorsements.

Just as a code of behavior applies to networking groups, it is also critical to thoughtfully manage the advisor-mentee relationship. Most advisors are more than happy to provide guidance to a protégé that is eager to learn and uses the advisor’s time well. Expressing gratitude to advisors is a requirement of the helping relationship. Mentees can also reciprocate their board’s generosity by offering to help advisors in their future endeavors.

Manage the Brand That is You

Branding is critical in conveying the unique combination of capabilities that a woman possesses. Professionals have begun realizing the power of self-branding by making a point to identify their key strengths, vision for their future, and overall professional message. Tom Peter’s landmark article “The Brand Called You” (Fast Company, 1997) uncovered this emergent trend citing, “Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in ...our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.”

My research categorically confirmed this sentiment. Interviewees pointed out that at its core, personal branding is about self-awareness. Once a professional woman has a good sense of who she is, including where her passions lie and where she would like to be in the future, she can then set about the business of leveraging her brand. Identifying one’s strengths and unique characteristics is the first step, whether through self-assessments, self-reflection, or external feedback. This ongoing process of discovery will serve aspiring leaders by giving them an accurate picture of how they are perceived in the workplace.

After a woman identifies her mix of talents and interests, it is a matter of negotiating for well-matched opportunities. Negotiation requires confidence in one’s capabilities and persistence in approaching leaders for projects and promotions that maximize the woman’s potential. Erin McGinnis, National Committee Chair of

the Society of Women Engineers, recounts, “Persistence has played a large role for me. I have persistently pushed hard for more responsibility, higher-level positions, and to stretch professionally. As a result, I obtained a Chief-level position in my mid-twenties, as well as having been slated for a Board level position in a non-profit.”

Many interviewees suggested keeping logs or diaries of career successes and lessons learned to reflect upon. The concept of a professional diary fosters accountability and progress, and represents an organizational system for documenting talents. Documentation has a practical use as well; it becomes handy in hiring, promotion, and compensation conversations. Creating a personal brand is not the same as shameless bragging. Branding means owning and promoting successes and distinctive personal capabilities, then thoughtfully seeking out experiences that lead to greater professional growth and fulfillment.

How We Can Help

Management Concepts offers *The Professional Woman*, a course designed for current, new, or aspiring women managers, supervisors, and team leaders.

You will be able to:

- Create a powerful presence
- Find strength and confidence in your qualities
- Identify specific behaviors that can address the obstacles and challenges in implementing your leadership vision
- Propel your image as a leader
- Approach your professional growth in a systematic way
- Identify and leverage leadership opportunities
- Communicate effectively to strengthen professional relationships
- Use networks as a source of energy and intelligence

Course topics include:

- Characteristics of a powerful presence
- Assessing your individual qualities
- Developing and implementing a leadership vision
- Enhancing your leadership image
- Professional growth opportunities
- Communication skills
- Building formal and informal professional networks

Learning methods:

- Individual, small, and large group practical exercise
- Discussions
- Role-plays
- Facilitator presentations
- Application planning

Coaching Services

Management Concepts executive and leadership coaching services are designed to develop talent and help individuals be more effective in their work. Through the unique benefits of a confidential, trusting, one-on-one relationship, coaching provides the extra support an individual needs to create positive change and enhance performance.

Coaching Framework

Management Concepts executive and leadership coaching is a formal engagement in which a qualified coach works with a leader in a series of dynamic, confidential sessions designed to establish clear goals for improving personal and organizational performance.

Keeping the organization’s strategic goals in mind, Management Concepts coaches follow a results-

oriented process in which assessment instruments help clarify goals and development plans, and performance is assessed over time. Both the coach and the coaching client are accountable to their purpose and the established goals.

We are confident that each one-on-one coaching session, coupled with repeated practice and feedback, helps individuals to explore new ways of thinking and behaving to unleash their potential.

References

Catalyst (2008). *U.S. Women in Business. 2007 Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners of Fortune 500*. Catalyst Research.

Peters, Tom (1997). "The Brand Called You." *Fast Company*. August–September.

About the Author

Selena Rezvani is an Assessment Consultant for Management Concepts (www.managementconcepts.com), a professional services company that partners with individuals and organizations to improve performance through consulting, training, and publications. Selena has guided numerous clients in assessing their workplace and identifying strategies for transformation. She is experienced in consulting with Fortune 1,000 clients, as well as non-profit organizations across many industries. Her work currently focuses on competency modeling, human performance, and organizational change. Selena has a Masters degree in Social Work from NYU, and is currently completing her MBA at Johns Hopkins University's Carey School of Business. Selena has authored several publications in the area of management and presents at conferences nationally.