



Book The Girl's Guide to Power and Success

Susan Wilson Solovic
AMACOM, 2001

Recommendation

Author and consultant Susan Wilson Solovic tells how working women can be more effective in top positions and move up the career ladder. She highlights the differences between male and female styles, and cites ways that women often sabotage themselves by showing weakness and a lack of confidence in how they speak and act. Using examples and diverse quotes, she illustrates what women should do to express the power they have, which is the key to being taken seriously as a leader. Solovic challenges many overly optimistic beliefs about how things have changed for women in the U.S. workforce and backs up her assertions with recent statistics and research. *BooksInShort* highly recommends this book, which provides a welcome strategic reminder that is clearly directed toward businesswomen – though why call them girls? Oh, that’s a little irony from the author or, at least we hope so.

Take-Aways

- Many women don’t understand power or how to leverage it.
- Women need to assert themselves, challenge old expectations and demand change in traditional workplace inequities.
- Power comes from having a "go for it" attitude, and not waiting for permission.
- Get rid of negative people; surround yourself with supportive people who help increase your confidence and self-esteem.
- Communicate more forcefully by avoiding indirect statements and speaking more loudly.
- Develop a comfortable personal style that makes an appropriate statement about the image you want to project.
- Seek a blended leadership style that combines the female relationship-oriented approach with the male autocratic style.
- Keep the right people informed about the good job you are doing.
- To project more self-confidence, take control of your body language.
- Stay in balance by seeking to become a "Superstar," not a "Superwoman."

Summary

The Myth of Achievement

Women have not moved as far ahead in the workplace as many people believe. Many women are held back by expectations others hold about them and by their own inability to understand power and how to leverage it. For example, most women suffer from the "good girl" syndrome, so they try to be too nice, limiting their ability to compete effectively in the business world. To be truly successful, you have to exercise your power. This means turning off negative messages and "shoulds," and pursuing what you really want. Be willing to take risks courageously and to seek excellence.

“Women continue to fight the same battles over and over again because we do not understand the concept of power and how to leverage it.”

Despite major progress toward increased equality, long-held societal attitudes continue to hold women back. Many people are still ambivalent about women in the workplace. Some still feel that a woman's place is only in the home. Since relatively few women have made it to high positions, successful women are seen as unusual. Then, too, women face the long-standing view that men are superior in business.

“Power comes from fearlessly taking risks and striving for excellence.”

Since physical strength is less important in the information age, today's critical skills are not gender-related. Men and women can possess the major abilities - knowledge, intellect, creativity and communication skills - in equal measure. Even so, women must battle against flawed beliefs and expectations, such as the view that women shouldn't be given demanding jobs because they will leave to marry or raise families. Women generally have to show they are more qualified and harder workers than men to get a job. Even so, women are still paid less in the same position, particularly as they go up the corporate ladder - earning about 68% to 76% of what men earn.

“Because there are relatively few high-ranking successful women, we are seen as anomalies - a novelty.”

To change this picture, women have to expect and demand more. They have to leverage their power to overcome inequities in the workplace.

Have a "Go For It" Attitude

Power requires an assertive, proactive attitude. Don't wait for permission or approval. Conformists wait; to be a leader, take the initiative and create your own opportunities.

“The majority of the women who have succeeded in business attribute their success to developing a style with which male managers are comfortable.”

Build a supportive team. If you let negative people surround you, they will hold you back by sucking away your emotional strength and your self-esteem. You need people who believe in you to give you confidence. By getting rid of people who are negative and toxic, you will make room for others who are positive and supportive.

“Knowledge, intellect, creativity and communication skills are the key components for success in the information age, and these skills are gender-neutral. Therefore, there should be no difference between men and women, but we all know it is not a level playing field.”

It helps to have a role model - who could be your mentor or not - or a successful woman or man whom you look to as a guide. Watch and learn from this person. Always observe people in senior positions and draw lessons from the way they speak and act.

Seek out companies that support career advancements for women. If you work in an organization with a traditional culture that doesn't support talented women, you are throwing yourself against a wall and won't succeed. Leave and work somewhere else. At the same time, be ready to adapt your style to make men comfortable. To do this, combine the female traits that are workplace strengths, like team building and consensus building, with some traditional male traits such as being direct and straightforward.

Keep Your Eyes Open

To fight discrimination, harassment or other insults to women, first you have to be observant and aware when such actions happen. For instance, many women may recognize intellectually that discrimination against women exists, but they may not recognize when it happens to them. You are being stereotyped, for instance, if you are the only woman at a meeting and everyone else there expects you to take the notes. Would you be aware of a problem if you saw a woman who had been given a high-sounding title, but no commensurate authority?

“To get ahead, women must not simply demonstrate that they are qualified; they must be better qualified and willing to work harder than men.”

Such discrimination happens in the corporate world, and in academia and non-profit organizations, where men still hold most of the top positions. Women entrepreneurs also face discrimination, particularly in being taken seriously. Often people assume that a woman's work is just a sideline, even when she heads a multi-million dollar company. The U.S. government erects obstacles too, such as making it very difficult for women to get federal procurement contracts.

“It is time for women to expect more, demand more, and be more proactive and aggressive in addressing workplace inequities. To truly enjoy success, women must leverage their power.”

Sexual harassment still affects nearly 90% of the women in the U.S. workforce. In more than half of the cases, the person doing the harassing is a woman's direct supervisor. Women commonly don't speak up, since they fear retaliation, including being fired. To fight back, you have to make it immediately clear that you don't welcome such behavior. If this doesn't work, complain quickly before your motives can be questioned.

Communicate Like a Pro

Another key to power is having an effective communications style, which includes learning to use both male and female styles of communication strategically. These styles are very different, since boys learn early in life to be goal-oriented and competitive, while girls learn to be open, to share feelings and to be accommodating. Speech reflects these differences.

“Seize the moment and make it happen, because power and success come from creating your own destiny.”

Learn to recognize communication differences based on gender, age, race, religion and national origin and then accommodate for these differences. To do so, focus on people as they listen to you and notice if they are responding positively or not, then adapt your style accordingly to build rapport. Consider the impact of personal interests. For instance, men talk a lot about sports and often use sports analogies in their messages. Even if you don't know much about sports or have much interest in them, stay current on sports topics so you can at least speak the language and be seen as an insider - one of the guys.

“Rid yourself of the negative people in your life who are pulling you down and draining your emotional strength and self-esteem. You need a team of true believers.”

Most women need to communicate more forcefully. Often women speak too softly or pitch their voices too high, so they seem weak or become effectively invisible. To crack the invisibility shield, speak louder and at a lower pitch that commands attention. Don't end sentences with a question and avoid words that convey emotions, such as "I feel really good" or "I'm so excited." Don't talk about your problems and minimize other personal topics. Men speak from a base of goal orientation, and you need to do the same. Be ready to interrupt rather than waiting your turn to speak, and be more confident about stating your first reaction. Women often hold back to listen and gather more information, but that can be viewed as unwillingness to speak or shyness. If you are prepared to discuss a topic, your initial reactions are likely to be correct, so share them; don't hold back.

“You will never reach the top levels in an organization if it has a culture that does not embrace the talents of women. Therefore, the first step on your road to greater success is to make certain that you are working with an organization that 'gets it.'”

You can also improve your communication style by avoiding indirect statements, such as saying, "It's hot in here," in hopes that someone will fix the problem. Instead, ask directly for what you want: "I'm hot. Would you please open a window?" Don't apologize or accept blame for things you didn't do.

Developing personal charisma will contribute to your power. As product packaging affects a consumer's decision to buy, your outward appearance plays a major role in the first impression you make. Develop a fashion style that feels comfortable to you and makes the appropriate statement about the image you want to project. The ideal is to create a signature look that will lead people to both notice you and take you seriously.

Take control of your body language, so you project self-confidence. Avoid physical cues that sabotage your success, such as nervous fidgeting. Stand up straight and stop nodding, smiling or tilting your head. Make direct eye contact. Avoid self-deprecating comments and focus on your strengths and accomplishments instead. Learn to take compliments graciously, but don't try to make yourself look good by being derogatory about someone else. Don't try to wing it either - presenting a professional, confident image requires rehearsal. Try visualizing yourself speaking at that upcoming partners' meeting or making a formal presentation. Rehearse the situation in your mind.

As for your leadership style, seek a blended approach. While women excel at building relationships, men have a more autocratic style. Make your style a combination of both. Use your feminine charms as necessary to get yourself in the door; but once you are inside, show your expertise and professionalism. At times, it works well to use a more collaborative approach to promote teamwork and sharing ideas. But, sometimes, you have to be bold and call the shots. Be willing to terminate people who are not working out. Don't let an open door policy sabotage you by draining your energy. Shut the door as needed to focus on your own work. To be an effective leader, don't take work issues personally, don't shy away from confrontations, keep your emotions in check, and recognize that you can negotiate if you use collaboration and compromise.

Planning, Balance and Advocacy

Other keys to leveraging your power include:

- Use lifetime and job planning to assess where you are going and work on getting there - Be alert to opportunities and continually network to stay up with current trends. Create a written mission statement and develop strategies to fulfill it.
- Let the right people know what you are doing - Keep your boss informed about your high level of performance. When you produce results, look for ways to let people know, such as memos or regular progress reports. Be sure to recognize others' achievements.
- Be willing to take risks - Be out front, but maintain a positive attitude.
- Be open to lateral moves - Or, if necessary, consider moving into other industries.
- Find a mentor - A professional coach can help you learn and move ahead.
- Up your educational credentials - Education gives you a competitive edge and enhances your life. Read books and magazines regularly to expand your knowledge.
- Expand your contacts - Reach out by networking at special events, professional association meetings and civic groups. Select events that benefit you the most. When you go, focus on how you can help others and be sure to follow up with the people you meet.
- Stay in balance - Don't try to do too much. Seek to be a "Superstar" not a "Superwoman." Don't think you have to be perfect and good at everything. Learn to delegate. Learn to say no and really mean it when people demand more of your time. Many women have trouble saying no, since they want to be liked.
- Trust your instincts in making decisions - Listen to your inner voice, which will also help you follow your passion to do what you really want, rather than trying to play a role someone else sets for you, a frequent problem for women.
- Be ready to support women's issues - Be an advocate. Get involved in the issues you care about most. Take the lead in politics or use your checkbook to support women who represent your views. Join advocacy groups like the League of Women Voters to add your voice to those supporting women's issues.
- Learn to be comfortable around money issues - Women tend to come from a weaker financial position since they are earning less. Learn to be a better negotiator. Learn about the market rate for your position in your industry and factor in your own performance and special skills. Don't be afraid to ask for what you want. You may not always get it, but you are likely to gain more money and respect when you know what you are worth and say so up front.

About the Author

Susan Wilson Solovic is president of Susan-Says and a consultant, columnist, and public speaker who deals with women’s issues. Although she was educated as an attorney, Solovic’s career has included television news broadcasting and an executive level marketing position at a *Fortune* 400 company.
