



Book The Next Generation of Women Leaders

What You Need to Lead but Won't Learn in Business School

Selena Rezvani
Praeger, 2009
[Listen now](#)

- [play](#)
- [pause](#)

00:00
00:00

Recommendation

Getting ahead in today’s competitive, cutthroat business world is tough, particularly for women, who account for only 3% of *Fortune* 500 CEOs, even though females comprise nearly half the US workforce. What are the reasons for the “thinning effect,” in which fewer women advance up the professional ladder? Selena Rezvani, a consultant on women and leadership, has the answer to that question and many more, based on her studies and interviews with 30 female executives from a variety of fields. Rezvani targets her advice to Generations X and Y women, who are now entering the marketplace and can most benefit from the experiences of those who have gone before them. She explores networking, negotiating, managing office politics and “integrating” (rather than balancing) your work and your life. *BooksInShort* considers this thoroughly researched text a must read, not only for women launching their careers, but also for anyone, male or female, with leadership aspirations.

Take-Aways

- Many fields are suffering from the “thinning effect” of losing women at every rung of the professional ladder.
- “Social, economic, psychological and generational barriers” keep women from attaining leadership positions.
- Aligning your career goals with your values and passions leads to fulfillment at work.
- Master the “core competencies” of your job to move ahead, but don’t neglect your leadership, communications and people skills.
- Strive to become indispensable to your boss and co-workers.
- Networking, both inside and outside your organization, expands your knowledge and acts as a professional safety net.
- Activities outside work will help you gain experience and enhance your résumé.
- Knowing how to negotiate is crucial to advancing your career; get comfortable with it.
- Don’t ignore office politics; understand its dynamics, but avoid gossip.
- Work and life never balance, so focus on what needs your attention at any given time.

Summary

Where Are the Women?

The issue of equality for women in the workforce may seem outdated. After all, women make up 46.5% of the American workforce. However, when you look more closely at the statistics, certain inequities become very clear: Almost 85% of *Fortune* 500 corporate officers are male, and only 3% of CEOs at these companies are female.

“While there is a pervading perception that men and women have achieved generally equal status in the US workplace, statistics tell another story.”

Each year, universities award women more than half of all US bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and almost half the students graduating from law school and medical school are women. Yet female employment in some fields exhibits the “thinning effect,” in which women fail to move up the professional ladder. Therefore, each generation of women entering the workforce has few female role models at the top. The barriers would-be distaff leaders face can be “social, economic, psychological – even generational”:

- **Social** – Childhood conditioning teaches both boys and girls that women are not natural leaders. Society stereotypes women as passive, emotional and less intelligent than men.
- **Economic** – Women still earn only 80% of what men earn for the same positions. Pay inequality can deter women from advancing their careers.
- **Psychological** – Women often hold themselves back, believing they need more training or experience before they can handle a promotion or new opportunity.
- **Generational** – The few women who made it to the top in the past didn’t always reach down to pull up those who followed.

“If a woman looks upward and sees few or no leaders she can relate to, she may never see leadership as a believable future for her or other women.”

“Womenomics” explains why companies should encourage women to pursue leadership roles: Their skills and know-how are in greater demand than ever before. In addition, women’s natural leadership style, which is relationship-based and collaborative, works well in a global business environment. Generally, women are also terrific multitaskers, great communicators, strong decision makers and good problem solvers.

Will Work For – Passion!

What gets you out of bed each morning to face your job with excitement and enthusiasm? It’s not your paycheck, although compensation matters. It’s your work that makes you feel good about yourself. Aligning your career goals with your values and passions is the secret to finding happiness and fulfillment at work. However, this lofty goal isn’t always easy to achieve. Identifying your true career path requires self-discovery, reflection and examination. Naomi C. Earp, chairwoman of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, explains, “We need to know what we’re really good at and figure out what we love, what gives us pleasure...It’s important to do something that you feel is enjoyable and fun.”

“The key to leveraging your strengths and leadership abilities lies in having a career that feeds your passion.”

You can turn to several self-assessment tools to help identify your true calling, including “personality and psychological” tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and “interest and career” assessments such as CareerKey and the Princeton Review Career Quiz. Pinpoint your strengths and weaknesses in your next job performance review. Keeping a journal can be an effective tool for self-development, while career coaches can help you strategize your next move.

The Best You Can Be

To advance your career, first do the best job possible where you are now. Focus on mastering the primary skills and core activities of your current position. Management will not consider you for a promotion if you aren’t competent, but you don’t need to become a technical expert in every aspect of your work to move ahead. Leverage your soft skills, such as problem solving or relationship building, to excel at your job. DeeDee Wilson, CFO at Aritzia, notes, “Too often, women are focused on technical training, believing that if we are really good at our jobs, we will ultimately be rewarded. I think finding your voice as a leader is perhaps more important than getting more proficient in your technical role as you are moving higher in an organization.”

“You simply cannot separate ‘you’ from your career.”

Once you are confident in your day-to-day duties, seek other ways to contribute. Your ultimate goal is to become “indispensable” at work. Identify your unique talents you can put to use at your job. Take initiative when you see opportunities for improvement and apply yourself to finding solutions. Katharine Weymouth, CEO of Washington Post Media, recommends, “Continuously go above and beyond in your work. Don’t send the message that you’re too good for a job, do the bare minimum or just ‘punch the clock’.”

“Navigating the work world requires learning many written and unwritten rules – most of which were not originated by women.”

The way you present yourself at work is very important: Project confidence and competence to inspire “followership.” The way you dress, behave, speak and interact with others contributes to your image. Create a compelling “30-second commercial” to use when you first meet new people. Include your name, title, main job duties and a statement that you wish to be of service, such as “Please come directly to me if..”

Your Personal Web

Male executives are often good at developing a web of contacts. Patricia Deyton, a director at the Simmons School of Management, explains, “Networking can help women a lot but we’re not ‘there’ yet. Men have much stronger informal networks.” Developing a personal web will keep you current on trends and advances in your industry. Your contacts will help you identify job opportunities internally and externally, including special assignments or volunteer openings. Connecting with new people can help you create and disseminate your “personal brand”: “the unique combination of capabilities that you...possess.”

“Remember, your total contribution to your organization is made up of far more than just your specialized knowledge.”

Most of all, a strong network provides a professional safety net. If your company experiences a crisis or other factors threaten your job, you’ll have resources in place to move to another position. Vicki Ho, a general manager for GE Healthcare Clinical Services, points out, “In this day of reorganizations, you can work your butt off at a company and still find yourself out of work one day. Having a broader circle can help you recover quickly.” Develop contacts through all avenues, both inside and outside your company. Women-only groups are helpful, as are industry and alumni associations, community groups and charities. Online networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook can be fruitful and are easy to use.

In Addition...

You can partake in a variety of activities outside work that will bolster your confidence and marketability. Rosslyn Kleeman, chairwoman of the Coalition for Effective Change, agrees: “Any activities you can engage in that broaden you as a person will make you smarter, more interesting and more likely to move up at work.”

“While you can strategize many different ways to succeed on the job, success is more of mindset than anything else.”

Be a dedicated student as part of your job: Continue learning and studying your industry by reading relevant journals, attending workshops and conferences, engaging in webinars and researching your competition. Decide if you want to pursue a higher degree, such as an MBA. Alexandra Miller, CEO of Mercedes Medical, Inc., confirms, “Knowledge is power, and the sooner young women learn that the better.”

“Once you open yourself up to networking, you will be amazed by people’s willingness to connect you to people and resources that can help you.”

Volunteering at an organization can boost your credentials and provide leadership opportunities. Identify a cause about which you feel passionate, find an organization that supports it and learn how you can contribute. Determine what kind of role would work best given your skill set and time constraints. Think about what you’d like to learn in the volunteer position, then leverage that experience in your career advancement.

Give a Little, Get a Little

Many women avoid asking for what they want because they view negotiating as confrontational. They doubt they can achieve a positive outcome, and they often settle for less than what they really want. In fact, research shows that women forfeit more than half a million dollars in income by the age of 60 due to their reluctance to negotiate salary. Yet women are working, changing jobs, buying homes, starting businesses and getting divorced, all of which require negotiating skills. Get comfortable with negotiating, either through practice or training. Some simple guidelines are:

- Recognize the “leverage” you hold in the negotiation.
- Before entering talks, run through all possible scenarios to prepare yourself.
- Imagine reaching a favorable consensus.
- “Regulate” your emotions.
- Find existing data that support your argument.
- Identify “the least you are willing to accept (worst case).”
- Identify “the ideal state you are striving for (best case).”
- “Take a win-win approach”: Think about how both parties can benefit.

Navigating the Political Maze

Every organization has internal politics, the “unspoken, unshared rules of how things get done.” Women need to be politically savvy to get ahead; ignoring office politics could mean “surprises, attacks or missed career opportunities.” Tune in to what’s going on around you. Donna Callejon, COO of GlobalGiving, counsels women to “get a good read early in a job on the organizational culture.” Understanding the power flows, symbols and jargon that are important in your firm enables you to start contributing sooner and helps you align your work with company practices.

“Communicating directly and honestly with people will win you more respect than buffering your remarks.”

Although no one is exempt from office politics, you can avoid becoming its casualty. Recognize other people’s contributions, and treat everyone within your organization, regardless of rank or position, like a client. This “internal customer service approach” is a great way to build relationships, gain allies and establish a solid reputation. Don’t indulge in water cooler gossip; instead, understand “the difference between gathering information and gossiping.” Do not say or write anything that you wouldn’t be comfortable broadcasting for public consumption. Approach someone directly to resolve an issue. Let facts, not emotions, guide your communications.

You’ve Come a Long Way...Not!

The idea that “you can have it all” is not only misleading, it’s demoralizing. The current 24/7 work environment, fueled by constant connectivity via smartphones, pagers and the Internet, has led to the “extreme job,” which demands 60-plus hours per week. But society still expects women to care for their aging parents, keep the spark alive in their marriages and never miss their children’s soccer games.

“Whether you are seeking a special assignment, a formal promotion, a new title or a raise – ask for it!”

This increased pressure to work around the clock is one reason for the thinning effect: Women are leaving the corporate world in search of a more accommodating lifestyle. Dominique Schurman, CEO of Papyrus, confirms: “There’s a doctrine out there that women can have it all, and while that’s a wonderful message, it’s not that simple...women can pursue it all, but there are sacrifices involved.”

“The ‘career ladder’ of the past looks more like a ‘career lattice’ today, where people can move in a way that is zigzagged or linear, fast or slow, multifaceted or extremely focused.”

Instead of seeking work-life balance, which implies devoting equal time and energy to the various areas of your life, try for “work-life integration” – concentrating on what is necessary or most important at any given moment. At times, your attention will be on work; at other times, it will shift to your family. Jamie McCourt, president of the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team, reflects, “Our focus will usually go where it’s needed most at the time, and that’s a target that is always going to change. Sometimes the focus might be a husband, kids, philanthropy, teaching or work.” Some strategies for achieving work-life integration include flex- or part-time work, job sharing, telecommuting and using a support system of parents, spouses and friends.

The Future

Map out your career with your ultimate destination in mind. Clear long-term goals will help you make the right short-term decisions. You may not work your way steadily up the corporate ladder, but sometimes the detours or lateral moves can be beneficial if they provide new experiences and exposure.

“Positioning yourself for leadership requires you to go into new job situations with the end in mind. How do you want to be remembered on the job? What kind of legacy will you leave at your workplace?”

However, at some point you must take a risk. Grasp new opportunities even if you might feel in over your head at first. Says Vicki Ho, “If you get a wild job offer, take it or someone else will. Some women define their boundaries too much, but you need to be agile. The company is not there to make you successful – that is your job.”

About the Author

Selena Rezvani is a consultant, coach and speaker on women and leadership.
