

Women in leadership: practical guidelines to get you to where you want to go

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As Managing Director of Management Consultancy International, the author of this article consults to seriously innovative organisations such as Insurance Australia Group Limited (IAG), Telstra, Qantas and Suncorp to energise their teams and develop a positive team culture. What these organisations value in her services is her ability to use the appropriate learning methodology to drive change and to develop managers into leaders. She is particularly passionate about the Women in Management program that she developed to build a strong cohort of women who are confident in taking the next step in their career development.

The gap is there. There is no denying that women are not as strongly represented in management and leadership roles as they should be, given their representation in the overall workforce (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency [EOWA], 2010; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2015). Neither can it be denied that there are several factors at play that create challenges for the advancement of women in management, including the role of unconscious bias, societal perceptions and barriers formed by socio-economic conditions.¹

The focus of this article is on women taking the power back and proactively managing their career development, thereby creating for themselves the possibility of growth into management positions. Instead of waiting around for the ideal of meritocracy to kick in and for perfect, inclusive working situations to arise, women are fully capable of setting their own destiny. The author explores five practical steps and shares a few bonus pointers that are in your sphere of control and influence and form the basis of preparing for a leadership role. Women are encouraged to become emboldened to take a few risks and to put these guidelines in to action in order to relentlessly pursue opportunities.

It is all about how you “show up”!

How you present yourself and how you come across in your work environment is one of the most powerful leadership tools. Whether you like it or not, eyes are on you all the time. No matter what you are feeling personally, you need to appear strong and confident because others take their cues from you. If you are moving ahead with determination, they will be inspired by your attitude and your drive. No matter how many personal struggles you are experiencing, when you arrive at the office front door, you demonstrate a feeling of “credible

optimism” at all times. Doubt in a team has huge toxicity and you cannot allow that feeling to gain momentum. There is no sense in relying on other people’s energy - it is up to you to set your energy to “triple-A battery” high levels. When you project trustworthiness and confidence, people tend to mirror you and your credibility factor grows stronger. Research shows just how well people respond to that warmth; it is usually valued far above your level of competence. Warmth and confidence in fact account for over 80% of our positive or negative perceptions of others (Cuddy et al., 2008). It is worth remembering that real leadership power does not reside in hierarchical position but rather in the willingness of others to follow you. By creating this energy, people are attracted to your aura and you become firmly established as a leader. Harness this ability to connect with others by looking out for those ‘barbecue moments’ when you have some chit-chat with team members, colleagues and senior managers and amaze yourself by just how that leads to better outcomes. Never under-estimate the power of the smile - but it needs to be the “Duchenne” smile! That is, the authentic smile that lights up your eyes and causes those crinkles in the skin around the eye. Think about topics that give you the opportunity to smile naturally and thereby make these firm connections.

Network

A network is a set of relationships that is critical to getting your work done and to getting ahead. There is strong evidence that women who have very strong peer groups do well professionally. It is important to have both a close, tightly knit network that forms a board of trusted advisors, as well as what is termed the “strength of weak ties”. In terms of a group that “has your back”, you can create a common sense of “we are all after all the same outcomes through the struggles we face”. This in turn leads to an openness to give and receive genuine feedback and will spiral upwards in to greater achievements. At the same time, we need a diverse and diffused network where others can broker connections on our behalf.

Value your network and take active steps to build it to a real point of strength. The real influencers have networks with thousands of weak ties to many different circles. The really great networkers form hubs of disconnected networks and make the linkages where appropriate. Evaluate how strong your network is by plotting it out on paper. Think about how many new connections you will make this year. Take the leap of faith in investing in the expansion of the breadth and depth of your network. Be opportunistic as well – ALL encounters form part of networking.

¹ <http://www.eowa.gov.au/>. There are several studies that speak to the barriers that women find in improving their status in the workplace, such as access to childcare, lack of workplace flexibility and lack of attention to ‘return to work’ programs. The EOWA website has substantial research in this regard.

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When it comes to finding a formal mentor or coach through your network, remember to tap in to social media. The world is socially connected and with 1.7 billion Facebook users and more than a country's worth of people on Twitter, your subject experts and mentors from a range of industries are literally at your fingertips. Value the informal settings where amazing learning can take place - industry association events are usually well priced and offer you the opportunity of connecting personally with all sorts of leaders, colleagues and role models.

Bear in mind that it takes time and patience to build a strong network and you are going to need to invest in the network without expectation of immediate payback.

Build your brand

We cannot assume that our titles speak for themselves. It is up to you to make your value visible and if we look at how top firms brand themselves, there are many lessons we can learn from this in terms of what we have control over in our own value formation and projection. You need both an online and a face-to-face presence. As you step into the room, your very presence needs to say volumes and even before you enter, if anyone has done a search on you via the Internet, your brand should speak eloquently in terms of what you represent.

The world is constantly on the move and you need to move with it by updating how you are portrayed and what branding is attached to your presence. This includes refreshing your CV and proactively being seen in both on-line and off-line events.

For face-to-face encounters, work on being highly articulate. Develop your word power and practise speaking 'off the cuff' in a way that turns the conversation to being in your control. Speak up clearly and leave those fillers such as "actually", "really" and "ummmm" where they belong – and that is not in your range of key words to use. They detract from your overall presence and lead others to think that you do not have leadership potential. Work instead on your posture and ensure that your sternum and your chin are always up. The slump in the shoulders and the chin down, from a body language point of view, indicate a lack of sureness and assertiveness. Always arrive well turned out and dressed as appropriate for the occasion; whether we like it or not, dress and appearance are part of the overall perceptions that people have of us. Build your online presence in the following ways:

- Check to see what comes up when you search on your own name. If the first thing that is said about you on the Internet is not positive, you need to proactively promote yourself.

- Join a social media business connection website such as "LinkedIn" and place a professional photo of yourself on the site as well as a well-constructed "bio" that encourages people to want to know you.
- Beware of what you place on other social media sites such as Facebook. Many potential job candidates have been known to lose out on roles as searches are conducted that could reveal inappropriate photos and comments.
- Set about creating your own Blog or Twitter account so that you can send out professional and positive messages about your innovative ideas.

Associate with the superstars

If you would like to strengthen your brand even further, associate yourself with other superstars. First, through aligning with the best, you expose yourself to new networks and opportunities that you might not otherwise have access to. You also set yourself into a winning and continuous upward spiral that is limitless. Find these superstars in the same places that you develop your networks. Overcome any shyness you might have and ask to be introduced if possible by others in the network whom you may know. Attend events where there are strong guest speakers and often those attending are like-minded individuals who are also keen for exposure to the best of the best. If you are seeking a senior management role, ask through your network to be introduced to more senior managers – this can be the ultimate game-changer!

Take an inventory of your own strengths and depletions

This ability to hold a true mirror up to where you need development and where you are at your best, is a trait that has stood Oprah Winfrey, one of the world's most influential women, in good stead. Oprah knows where she is strong and where she needs to delegate to others or rely on their abilities. She makes decisions about the right people to work with based on her overriding determination to achieve her mission and remain authentic to her purpose. Take an emotional inventory as well so that you are fully aware of your preferred behavioural styles and psychological makeup. If you are not great at self-assessment, at least be open to constructive feedback from others so that you can initiate required changes. It is not good enough to talk about the things that you are going to do; the business world is waiting for things that are already working. Defer to others where you do not have the skills, but do not delay on your path to demonstrating that you do have the right leadership abilities.

Be very clear about the story you tell yourself

Some bonus pointers:

- Do not give up too quickly. Trust the process provided your end goal is clearly stated and articulated. Write it. Draw it. Feel it. Talk about it. Pulse-check constantly to ensure that what you initially designed as your true objective still holds true. Be proactive in the service of your long-term vision.
- On the other hand, look out for the small details. Keep your antennae raised and listen and watch out for challenges and the unsaid things that you could easily miss.
- Be very clear about the story you tell yourself. Yes, we do talk to ourselves and what we hear in that inner voice becomes how we conduct ourselves externally. If your story is one of “woe is me”, don’t expect miracles. Your story is about taking the power that you have and using it to push and promote yourself beyond what is possible. Starting small often snowballs into bigger things, so even if the goal looks distant and too large, the tiny things that you change help you make enormous advances.
- Learn to negotiate effectively and become a strong influencer. Women are not inherently better or worse negotiators than men are. However, when it comes to negotiating on our own behalf, we are not as successful as men. An effective practical tip - go in to a room prior to a major negotiation. Stretch out and make yourself larger than you are physically. And then step in to the room and own the room! Women also negotiate better when all the parameters are transparent. Make the effort to find out what others know so that you are fully informed.
- Tweak your environment. You don’t always have to wait for major changes to eventuate in your workplace. These can take years and lead to increased frustration. Rather adopt what Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset” so that you are resilient to the bumps in the road and can remain standing when things don’t always proceed smoothly (Dweck, 2006). Learn from these events and circumstances as a necessary part of the process.
- Literally feed and water yourself regularly, both physically and mentally. It is up to you to maintain a high level of fitness and to include healthy eating habits to be at your best in the workplace. Make it a habit to read and learn and learn even more. Aim to manage your energy well to reach your goals.

To quote from a wonderful poem by Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day” (Oliver, 1992), know the answer to this question: “What do I want to do with this one wild and precious life?”

Acknowledgement

This is an updated version of an original article published in *HIM-Interchange*, Volume 2, Number 1, 2012.

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