

What Brings Women to the Top?
Factors for Success

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What Brings Women to the Top?

The number of women in management has doubled over the last 30 years. In the United States, women hold 37% of all management positions, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005). The higher the managerial level, however, the lower the proportion of women. Why is that the case? Numerous studies have investigated barriers to women's advancement to managerial positions, including stereotypes (e.g., Schein, 2001; Scott and Brown, 2006; Heilman and Okimoto, 2007), recruiting practices (e.g., Reskin and McBrier, 2000) or the lack of access to powerful networks (e.g., Ibarra, 1993). These studies have provided important insights, but as psychological studies show, a focus on barriers enhances negative emotions and makes it more difficult to find solutions. Therefore, the current research project took a different, more positive approach. We wanted to learn from successful women managers. What had enabled them to have a successful career? Which traits, skills or behaviors do they consider crucial for women's career advancement? What lessons can women aspiring to a successful managerial career learn from their examples?

Method

1. Participants

Twenty-five women holding positions in middle to upper middle management participated in this study. They are employed in a wide range of industries including financial services, energy, healthcare and manufacturing. The Boston Club facilitated introductions by sending a letter to potential participants who met the author's criteria. These criteria included requirements that potential interviewees hold a mid-level managerial position in a large commercial organization (with 900 or more employees overall), and have had at least seven years of professional experience. These characteristics were selected to gain insights into how senior women in large organizations make their way up the corporate ladder.

Among those participating in the study, the average age was 48 years old, and participants had between 15 and 33 years of professional experience (average: 25 years, of which 18 years were as a manager). The number of direct reports to the subjects was eight, on average. The majority of participants held Vice President or Senior Vice President titles and earned over \$250,000 annually. All of them had a

college degree, and about half of them had completed a graduate degree. The vast majority of female managers interviewed were married and had children. For more details on the personal demographics, please refer to table 1.

Table 1	
Personal Demographics	
Age (mean)	47.6
Job Title	
Vice President	28%
Senior Vice President	20%
Senior Director	8%
Other	44%
Education (highest degree received)	
Bachelor	44%
MA/MS	16%
MBA	36%
PhD	4%
Marital Status	
Married	84%
Divorced	12%
Single	4%
Children	
No children	20%
One child	16%
Two children	52%
Three children or more	12%

Table 1: Personal demographics of the women managers interviewed

2. Interviews

The interviews ranged in length from thirty-five minutes to one hour, with the majority of interviews taking approximately 50 minutes. A semi-structured interview format was used to ensure that comparable data were obtained from each respondent. While each interview covered the same range of topics, issues that were

of particular significance to any respondent were explored by deviating from the sequence of the interview guide in order to follow interesting lines of inquiry and to facilitate an unbroken discussion. In addition, at the end of the interview all participants were asked to make a quantitative rating of the importance of several factors that are discussed in the literature with regard to female managers' career advancement (on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most important).

All interviews were conducted in person by the author, tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded. The coding process consisted of reading the transcription of a particular interview, integrating literal quotes into statements, and summarizing the information. In the next step, a system of categories was developed based on both the statements from all interviews and findings from previous research. Then, the individual statements for each interview were allocated to these categories. The system of categories was then re-analyzed to see if it included all relevant categories alluded to in the statements. Coding facilitated the retrieval of literal quotes categorized under the same codes.

Results: Success Factors

1. The Usual Suspects

It is not surprising that the participants gave the highest ratings to four factors: performance, resilience, perseverance and mentoring. Of these, the women said performance was most important. In fact, the average rating of its importance for women managers' career development was 10 (on a scale from 1 to 10). High performance was regarded as a necessary (but certainly not sufficient) condition for career advancement. As expressed in many interviews, outstanding performance was perceived to be the crucial factor that enables women to get recognized. Many of the interviewees even expressed the view that performance was even more important for women as compared to men who aspire to a managerial career.

"It was absolutely clear to me that you had to be a good deal better than all the men to be on an equal footing."

The factor that emerged as second most important for women's success in corporate America was resilience. About ninety percent of the women interviewed rated it as 8 or higher. The interviews revealed that virtually every woman had experienced a number of disappointments, failures, or missed opportunities over the

course of her career and many had been faced with enormous barriers. Thus, when reflecting on the factors for success in the long run, many of them pointed to their ability to face challenges and find ways to deal with them.

“Not giving up when the bad stuff happens to you is really important, because there can be a lot of bad stuff.”

Similarly, the women managers in this study stressed that it is not possible to have a successful managerial career without a high degree of perseverance. This includes the ability to adopt a long-term orientation, see the bigger picture, and exercise a certain amount of patience. Perseverance differs from resilience in that it does not include the concept of overcoming negative influences.

“Having the energy and the stick-to-it-ness to execute your plans is crucial”.

While the success factors mentioned so far are predominantly under the women’s own control, the involvement of others can also be very influential for one’s career development. In particular, the interviewees talked about establishing connections with people who are more experienced and can therefore serve as mentors, and found that very helpful for advancing to higher levels. Mentors were reported to serve both instrumental (i.e., directly career-related) as well as psychosocial functions. Among the instrumental functions mentioned were career support, coaching, providing challenging tasks, and helping the mentee to become visible. The psychosocial functions include emotional support, guidance, and being a role-model.

“I had a number of people who were wonderful mentors; analysts who knew a lot about different industries, who could fill me in on how different industries work.”

“I have been able to work with some very strong women in my career and so I think I’ve had some good mentors. People who really were able to develop me and to say, you know, I really think you’ve got some potential so let’s work on these particular areas or let’s go in kind of this direction.”

One way to find a mentor is to become part of a certain network. As many women pointed out, they have greatly benefited from being part of a network that allows them to connect with people outside of their organization. This helps them

figure out who else does it? Who else does it well? Can you emulate them? What can you learn from them?" In addition, the women managers in this study highlighted the knowledge, inspiration, and support they had received from their networks.

"I belong to a wonderful women's leadership group and there are people from all over, every industry, and that is not only an intellectually stimulating group to be with, but also a dynamic group of women who are there to effect change. I have drawn on that many times if I have been in a transition."

2. Beyond the Expected

The interviews also resulted in some surprises. The participants rated certain factors as highly relevant to their success, even though those factors are not commonly discussed in the literature. The women rated the factor of risk taking as a 9, on average. Many women stressed that they had constantly pushed themselves beyond their comfort zones, taken on jobs they had not been trained for, volunteered for tasks no one else had wanted, moved to new firms, taken lower level positions, and declined promotions, even at the risk of being disqualified from future promotions at the same firm. Overall, the willingness to take risks was regarded not only as crucial for gaining experience and new knowledge, but many times it was seen as the only way to be recognized as a leader.

"I think taking risks out of my comfort zone, almost pushing myself like off a cliff, was crucial. It's like, 'I don't think I can do this, but okay I'm going to give it a try'".

"And I took the job. Most people thought I was crazy, because I was going from managing 600, 700 people to a systems planner role that the CIO of this much smaller firm had just created. And they said, 'Why are you doing that?' I said, 'Well, I think it'll be interesting. I think I'll learn something'".

As illustrated by the quote above, continuous learning is seen as a prerequisite for continued career advancement. More than two-thirds of the successful managers spontaneously mentioned this as one of the most important success factors for their careers. The participants continued to foster their learning in a number of ways: participating in formal educational programs, reading books about job-specific topics as well as general topics of importance (such as leadership or career planning), volunteering for new responsibilities, consulting with more experienced people,

watching role-models, attending conferences, giving talks, and writing books. Whatever their method, particular industry or age, all of the women who participated in this study shared a deep commitment to continuing to learn.

Another factor that emerged as essential in the interviews, again not much discussed in the literature, was self-reflection/self-awareness. About half of the women managers revealed how important self-reflection had been for their careers. While some mentioned explicitly that they always reflected on the things that they had done well or planned to improve when finishing a project or taking on a new job, others described episodes in which they had learned important lessons about their capabilities, strengths, and areas for improvement.

Even more unexpectedly, more than a third of the interviewees said that it had been important for their careers to treat people on lower levels of the hierarchy well and to help them. Many of the women managers highlighted that it had been very important to them to share their knowledge, teach more junior employees and colleagues and to serve as a mentor for a broad spectrum of others . not only their direct reports. In spite of their very demanding jobs, several managers described their involvement in their communities, churches, and volunteer organizations and expressed their willingness ~~to~~ give back+.

“It’s my desire to help you, so if you feel that you have a need, I want to share that information and that knowledge.”

Almost a third of the women managers in this study stated that their values had been crucial for their careers. Some expressed the notion that once you figure out what your values are, it is easy to make decisions and stick to them, even if faced with opposition. Others pointed out that integrity and honesty had always served as their guiding principles. Although these may not have led to instant benefits, they had been a success factor in the long run.

“I absolutely stuck to my guns of how I wanted to treat people, especially the people I was supervising, and there’s an awful lot of pressure not to do that, to do what’s in the company’s interest, rather than balance the two. I really hold firm on balancing the two and having a high level of honesty and integrity, especially with the people I manage”.

3. Challenges

Of the factors rated as important for women managers' career development, two represent particular challenges for women. The first is to develop a leadership style that is accepted by both men and women. As many female managers stressed, women have to be careful not to come across as too aggressive . that provokes negative reactions from men as well as women. On the other hand, it is necessary for women managers to be perceived as assertive and not too nice, so that they will be taken seriously as leaders. As one woman manager summarized, *"What's expected for leadership styles from men and women does vary, so I think that women need to be particularly mindful that they need to be forceful and direct, but they can't cross a line or a gender issue will come up."* Or, as another woman put it, *"There's a very narrow, narrow path that women can walk to be acceptable, whereas there's a very wide one for men."*

A second challenge for women is to overcome gender stereotypes and ask for the things they deserve. The following quote nicely illustrates what many women experienced: *"I never asked to be promoted. I just expected that they would see that I was a great salesperson and that they would promote me. And I was constantly frustrated. One year I finally said, 'my expectation is that in the next three months I will be promoted to the next level.' And then, a month later I was promoted to the next level"*.

4. The Negligible Ones

Some factors may be regarded in other publications as important for women's career development but were of only minor importance to the participants of this study. These factors are presented in order of decreasing importance.

Many popular guidebooks stress the importance of having a career plan in order to be successful. Nevertheless, the results of this study do not support this notion. The vast majority of the female managers interviewed reported that they did not have a career plan when they started out and often did not develop a clear plan as their careers progressed. Consequently, career planning was not rated highly with regard to career advancement; it was given a six on average. However, further analyses

revealed an interesting split of opinions: while forty percent of the interviewees rated career planning as a 5 or lower, thirty-five percent rated it as a 7 and higher.

“It’s all serendipity. My career was serendipity as opposed to planned.”

“But when you’re in an interview, a lot of people hate that, ‘where do you want to be in five years from now?’ But if you can’t answer that, if you don’t know where you’re going, you’re never going to get there.”

Another factor that could be expected to have an important influence on women managers’ careers is their mother’s role model. However, the majority of the women interviewed reported that their mother had followed a more traditional path and had not served as a role model for their career. Concordantly, the mean rating of importance for mother’s role model was a 5, the second lowest of all factors presented.

Finally, the factor that received the lowest quantitative rating, and that was not spontaneously mentioned in the interviews at all, were programs for the promotion of women. Although a number of large organizations have introduced formal programs to increase the number of women in management, these programs were not seen as effective by the managers interviewed. When asked about these programs, many female managers expressed the view that *“they are all a failure, because the people managing them are usually not in charge.”*

Some of the interviewees suggested other ways organizations can increase the number of women managers. For example, the nature of evaluation systems could be improved. Evaluation criteria commonly include asking for opinions on the success of certain individuals who are prominent within the organization. This tends to create a bias against women, people of color and other minorities because their style is not always in concordance with the behavioural norms of the majority. The more results are objectively measured, the more work performance is neutrally and fairly evaluated.

The second point stressed in the interviews as an area for improvement in many firms is the politics of the organization. If the organization is committed to

diversity, meaning diversity of thought, opinion, race, sex, national origin, it is easier for women to advance to positions of leadership.

What Can Women Do to Boost Their Careers?

These quotes are advice to women on their way up, shared by the successful female managers who participated in this study:

- ▶ *“Figure out what is important to you and then prioritize it as first. What’s important to you should be driven by your value system. Whatever you decide is first, put that first. No regrets. Decide and go with it.”*

- ▶ *“Be true to yourself. Don’t be pushed into a career or a job just because you think that’s the thing to do. If it’s not the right job, is money going to solve it for you right now? No, it’s not. Don’t make a career decision just based on money or status or title. The other thing is, don’t **not** do something if someone tells you you can’t. If it’s what you want to do, you’re passionate about it, then try it. Try it. Don’t give up if someone tells you no.”*

- ▶ *“If you don’t have confidence in who you are, do whatever it takes to get that.”*

- ▶ *“As a woman, you have to be very clear on who you are. I see a lot of young women who are more concerned with what it takes to play a role and less concerned with who they are, and I think who they are is very important. So what resonates and makes sense to you when you are a 20-year-old is different than what makes sense to you as a 30-year-old and a 40- or a 50- or a 60-year-old, and it is not one thing and it is not constant. So you have to know who you are.”*

- ▶ *“To win in a man’s game, you have to study it. Understand the way it works. Understand what drives them. Remember things don’t happen just for nothing. There’s always a reason behind it. So think about that. Spend some time analyzing that and think about it.”*

- ▶ *“Do what you love. Be flexible. Be willing to take risks. And, do have someone to help you, someone you can talk with. Because if you get to the point where you don’t have that someone, you can get lost very fast. And it is not always your boss whom you can talk to. Find someone who can mentor you if your boss is a creep, or if the boss is someone who doesn’t care.”*
- ▶ *“There is only one person who is going to look out for you, and that’s you.”*

And the good news for many of us at last:

- ▶ *“Don’t be so time sensitive, because what I have found is you can start your career when you are 50.”*

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