

Mapping Your Route to the Top Jobs

By Dawn Klingensmith
Chicago Tribune, June 8, 2005

In the three decades since women blazed trails into corporate America, the path has become increasingly easier.

Yet there's a hitch: Far short of the executive suite, the trail peters out.

The expanse between middle management and the upper echelon marks "the next frontier" for women in business, said **Deborah Merrill-Sands, dean of the Simmons School of Management in Boston.**

A mere 1.2 percent of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in 2004 were women, according to Catalyst, a New York-based organization that studies workplace gender issues. And women made up just 16 percent of corporate officers.

Research disproves the oft-cited explanations that women abandon careers to raise kids and that they crave power less than men do, Merrill-Sands said. Persisting gender biases are largely to blame for the dearth of female corporate officers, she said. Simmons surveys of 1,000 professional and managerial women found that nearly half aspire to the highest leadership positions in their organizations.

If you're striving, too, take heart: Women's prospects look promising, Merrill-Sands said.

"If we look back over the last 30 years, we've seen some significant advancements," she said, adding that the percentage of middle managers who are women has risen to 50 from 4 in the 1970s. "In the next 10 years or so, we'll see a significant rise in the number of women in top leadership positions."

Unfortunately, there's no map to the top. Women who already have forged ahead can give pointers but no sure-fire plan for success.

"People can offer advice, but the reality is, we all have to map out our own path," said Diane Aigotti, treasurer of Chicago's Aon Corp.

Proper preparation can make for a swifter, smoother journey, though. Here are some practical tips and insights females executives from around Chicago shared with WN on navigating the corporate roadways:

If your final destination is the CEO suite, you definitely should:

Gain plenty of profit-and-loss experience. Men still hold 90 percent of the P&L positions at the nation's largest corporations, according to the National Association for Female Executives. "Those are the jobs that provide essential bottom-line experience for boardroom and CEO slots," President Betty Spence said.

In fact, P&L experience is practically a prerequisite. How do you snag these plum positions? You ask for them.

But if the cat's got your tongue:

Read "Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and

the Gender Divide," by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever. As this book shows, "Women negotiate very effectively on behalf of their companies, but not on their own behalf," said Victoria Medvec, executive director of the Center for Executive Women at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

Their failure in this regard helps explain the persisting salary gap between men and women and also undermines their efforts to advance. "A common mistake women make is not asking for the tools they need to be successful, like staff increases and other resources," Medvec said.

Women also mistakenly believe that raises and promotions come automatically on a silver platter to hard workers, Aigotti said. You need to ask for what you want, and be specific, she advised: "Capitalism is competitive. Have some chutzpah. If you don't ask, someone else will."

To outshine other askers, it helps to:

Communicate your value to the organization. "It's important to talk about your accomplishments and make sure key people in the right places are aware of them," Merrill-Sands said. Emphasize the connection between these accomplishments and your organization's bottom line or goals and objectives.

When New York-based Deloitte, a leading provider of audit, tax, consulting and financial-advisory services, asked Ellen Gabriel to lead a companywide initiative to retain and advance women, she worried that her work on the project would be undervalued despite its apparent importance. She put together an analysis showing that as a result of her efforts, the company was able to reduce attrition of women by a certain percentage, which annually saved millions of dollars, Merrill-Sands said.



Dean Deborah Merrill-Sands

Gabriel subsequently was elected to the company's board of directors. (She died in 1999 of breast cancer, and the Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Professorship for Women and Leadership was established in honor of her achievements at the Simmons School of Management.)

Touting your achievements might be easier if you:

Create a portfolio documenting your successes. Warm fuzzies, not just facts and figures, should have a place in this brag book.

"You should include e-mails of congratulations from senior management and colleagues, articles you published, awards you won, and anything else that makes you proud," said Chicago entrepreneur Alison Chung, a former law-firm chief information officer whose 8-year-old firm, TeamWerks, specializes in computer forensics. "On a bad day, when no one pats you on the back, you can look at it and smile and pat yourself on the back."

You should also peruse the portfolio before annual performance evaluations to boost your confidence, she added.

Back pats are great, but for candid feedback, you should:

Find a mentor. Ask whether your company takes part in Mentium 100, a yearlong program that matches high-potential female nominees with male or female mentors in a complementary field, advised Lisa Tegtmeier, director of operations at CDW Corp. in Vernon Hills.

Spence said mentor seekers should play the field. "People I speak with say they have three times the amount of work they used to have," she said. "Everyone's overloaded."

Trying to initiate an ongoing, one-on-one mentoring relationship with a stressed superior might not be the most productive tack. Instead, select several "simultaneous" or "serial" mentors (more like tutors) for specific short-term assistance, Spence recommended. Start by honestly evaluating your skill set to determine which areas need work. Weak on making presentations? Single out an outstanding individual who can give you some pointers.

A mentor might boost you as high as the glass ceiling. In order to break through, though, you'll likely need to:

Find a sponsor. Medvec said corporate decision-makers "unconsciously think of leaders as men," so you'll need a sponsor — a high-ranking, influential person within your organization — to advocate for your advancement. Special task forces are one way to gain access to sponsors.

When leadership positions become available, a sponsor will "put your name on the table and make a clear argument why you should be considered," Medvec said.

It's your responsibility to get convincing data into this person's hands, she added.

Your curriculum vitae will more likely be convincing if you:

Surround yourself with a super team. "As soon as you're in a position to hire people, it's critical to take the time to find really great employees," said Martha Dustin Boudos, chief financial officer of Morningstar Inc., a Chicago-based mutual fund and stock research company. "Your success depends on it."

Don't hire too hastily. "People get desperate when there's a hole in their staff and tend to think that having someone is better than having no one, but actually the opposite is true: It's always better to have no one than the wrong person in a job," Boudos said.

Once you've assembled a solid team, make sure its success reflects back on you. Always give credit where credit is due, but "at some point you have to associate your team's success with your leadership, your involvement," Boudos said.

The right wording will call attention to your contributions without claiming too much credit, Merrill-Sands said. When reporting to supervisors or the board of directors, "Don't say, 'We're very proud that we've accomplished X, Y and Z.'" Instead, she advised, "Say, 'I'm very proud that I and my team have accomplished these things.'"

They say it's lonely at the top, but not if you:

Find one or more external advisers. The higher you advance in your organization, the more you'll find that folks around you "have their own agendas," Merrill-Sands said. So you may need to look elsewhere for objective advice.

Merrill-Sands' colleague, Saj-nicole Joni, wrote "The Third Opinion: How Successful Leaders Use Outside Insight to Create Superior Results" to underscore the importance of soliciting such input. Joni's research found that CEOs who had one or more external advisers were more objective; made sounder decisions; developed a broader and deeper understanding of their industries; and were ultimately more successful.

Serving on not-for-profit boards is one way to meet prospective advisers, Merrill-Sands said. "And since you'll be working side-by-side, you can develop a relationship with them while getting a sense of their strengths and weaknesses."

Article copyright Dawn Klingensmith May 1, 2005.

Reprinted with permission. Photo by Professional Event Images.

SIMMONS

School of Management

409 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215
www.simmons.edu/som