

The (unwritten) rules of the game

WHEN DOING YOUR BEST ISN'T ENOUGH:
KNOW THE ROADBLOCKS AND SOLUTIONS TO SUCCESS

by Margaret Gardiner

As part of her research for her planned book, The Effects of Gender Branding and Socialization on the Glass Ceiling, Margaret Gardiner has been talking to women leaders in a wide variety of fields including business, law, medicine, science, and entertainment. In this article she distills the lessons she has learned from her first-person interviews.

While we might like to think that we will be rewarded with pay raises, promotions, and a fulfilling career if we just work hard enough and succeed at the tasks we're assigned, the reality is that there are other influences at play. There are unwritten rules that give an edge to those who use a matrix of behaviors in addition to delivering on task to achieve success. Differences in socialization between genders and in behaviors related to self-advocacy may unknowingly and detrimentally be creating roadblocks to women achieving their goals. Identifying and taking advantage of these supplementary behaviors can go a long way to overcoming these roadblocks when being considered for promotions, negotiating pay increases, or working to achieve other career goals.

Beyond succeeding on task

What more is required beyond succeeding on task? The answer can be found by examining the subtle and not-so-subtle behaviors and norms that successful people exhibit that give them an edge when it comes to corporate achievement. These norms are like the defensive maneuvers of basketball's LeBron James, or the tactics used by soccer star Abby Wambach in a tight match. You won't find their moves in any playbook. Yet those who are in the game know that these skills play a role in a winning strategy.

When talking to successful women leaders, it becomes clear that excelling at what they do is merely one aspect of the skills and behaviors in their arsenal. Another determining factor is what they do with their successes.

There are a cluster of behaviors to be aware of that can help leverage your successes when applying for promotions or reaching for other career goals.

- **Self-advocate:** Communicate your goals and accomplishments with those who have the ability to influence your career so that they are aware of what you want and clearly recognize your capabilities.
- **Elicit sponsorship:** Find a mentor who will guide you and advocate for you, and who can give you opportunities to achieve successes that will help you reach your goals.
- **Bypass "no":** Understand that hearing "no" is not personal. It's an opportunity to demonstrate your creativity and problem-solve. Think about how to approach the matter at hand differently, be it by having an alternative plan or by opening yourself up to other options. You can turn a "no" into a "yes."
- **Network:** Create a network of contacts in all areas of your organization. Having the support of both your peers and those in positions above your own—within and outside of your department—are crucial to being seen in a positive light.

- **Aim high:** Ask for the high-profile job or project, and apply for positions slightly beyond your skill level.

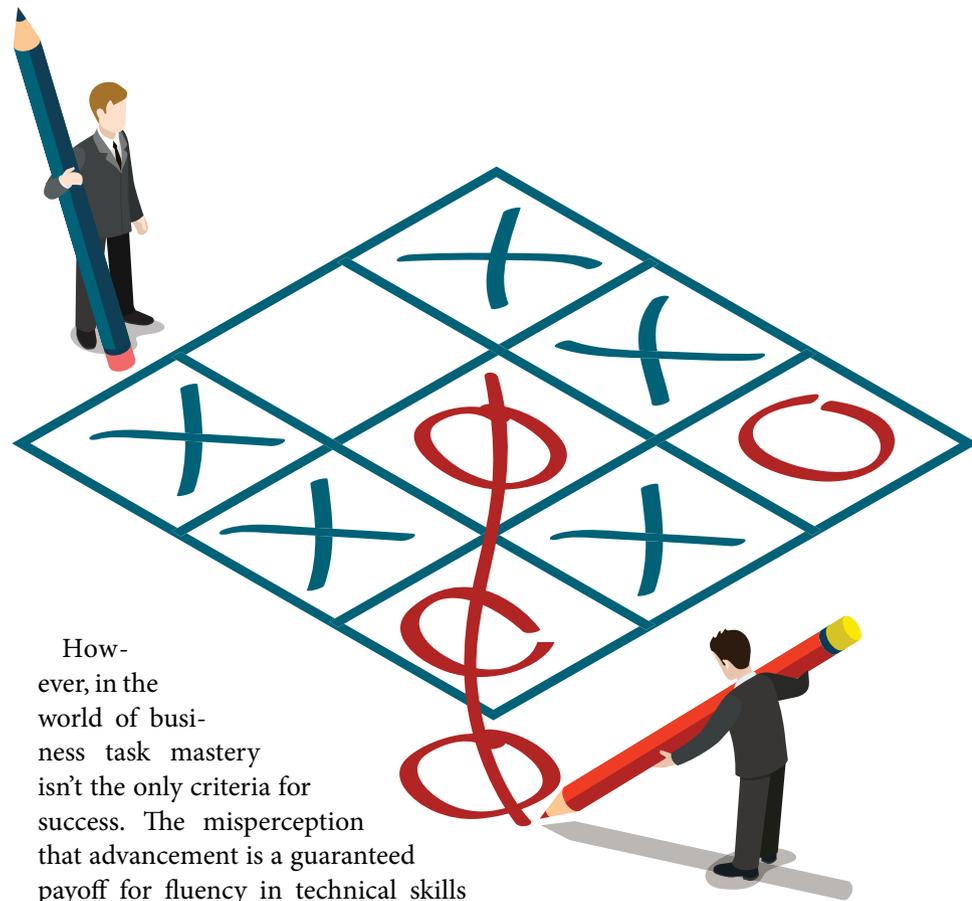
HS, a woman executive at a top cable company, notes that what will help you stand out regardless of your gender is doing your job, being creative, asking for and taking on the big projects, communicating your successes and making sure realistic expectations are in place. “You have to advocate for yourself,” she says. “You have to give 150 percent. You have to communicate, so people understand what you do. You have to manage expectations. There should be no surprises.”

To achieve her goals she kept her superiors clued in on her accomplishments, and asked for what she wanted, such as high-profile assignments. When she didn’t get them, she didn’t settle or off-ramp. Instead she sought out companies that offered the opportunity she desired. “I wanted more responsibility and asked for it. Early in my career, when I was not given the opportunity I was looking for from my employer, I accepted an offer at another company that saw my potential and was willing to give me the chance to grow. I’m still with them.”

Studies have shown that such behaviors of self-advocacy and communication as demonstrated by HS are more often utilized by men, and are less frequently applied by women. Why aren’t more women adopting them?

Learned behaviors

One of the reasons may be that from an early age women are encouraged to play by the rules. Daniel Voyer and Susan D. Voyer, in an April 2014 article in *Psychological Bulletin* point out that women traditionally outperform men in schools and colleges. From the early days of our education, the criterion for success is defined as doing what we are supposed to do, and doing it well. Women learn to demonstrate mastery of the skill set required, and are rewarded with an “A” grade. We don’t have to advocate for ourselves because the criteria for judgment is empirical. Do the work. Get the reward.



However, in the world of business task mastery isn’t the only criteria for success. The misperception that advancement is a guaranteed payoff for fluency in technical skills and succeeding on task may be a factor in the disparity between promotions of men and women.

Voyer and Voyer go on to state that there are differences in the approach men and women take that may help explain part of these workplace disparities. Men, they note, are performance focused. In the workplace this can mean that men are more likely to seek assignments that garner attention and reward, specifically in places where their performances can be seen as integral to the success of the job. Women, on the other hand, tend to be mastery focused. They strive to do good work believing that excellence in their performances will stand on their own and will get considered when promotions are due. For many women, job completion equates success, rather than personal association with job success.

These subtle differences in approach may play into our biases when it comes to awarding promotions. In a 2012 *Harvard Business Review* article by Dorie Clark, Chris X explains his strategy for obtaining a coveted vice president position in a Fortune 500 company. “Each time I opened my mouth in a meeting, I wanted the people to know that it was Chris X that made that statement,” he says. Chris knew it wasn’t enough to do good work; the people with the power to effectively change his career had to know who he was and associate him with his accomplishments.

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The self-advocacy barrier

While the women interviewed highlighted the importance of teamwork, they also emphasized that it should not be at the sacrifice of stepping up and self-advocating. Women may feel awkward in calling attention to their own individual successes when working as part of a team, and can be less likely to make certain that their skills and accomplishments are known than men. This trait may be compounded by the fact that self-advocating behavior that is viewed as acceptable in men may be labeled as negative in women. But on any team, its achievements are at least partly the result of important individual contributions. The team leader who communicates the wins helps promote awareness of the effectiveness of not only the team or a particular individual, but also her leadership. When these wins are recognized, and contributions are known and acknowledged, they are more likely to be rewarded.

Another related barrier to mastering the unwritten rules is the concern around being liked. Self-advocacy for promotions or advancement opportunities involves creating interpersonal interactions that result in a positive opinion being formed, which can be misinterpreted as a need to be liked. In their book *College Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Implications for Practice*, Shaun R. Harper and Frank Harris, III, point out that being liked has been shown to be of high concern to women; less so to men. Women may adapt their behavior in ways that are detrimental to their success in order to be liked or receive group approval. While positive interactions are important, women should ask themselves if their quest for likability is limiting their ability to compete.

Oscar winner Margaret Sixel is one of a small number of women who has edited big-budget action films—a male dominated field. While working on *Mad Max: Fury Road*, she concluded, “I got to a stage where I didn’t care if I was liked. It was freeing. You can’t lose your integrity. It’s not about gender.” She asks questions, leans in, and advocates for herself without worrying about her “likeability”—and it has taken her far.

Setting goals and strategizing behaviors

Recognizing the behaviors that can lead to success and the barriers to mastering them is an important first step. Understanding how to effectively apply the behaviors to your particular situation calls for strategic thinking. Bonnie Arnold, co-president of feature animation at DreamWorks Animation, explains that you must think carefully about your desired career progression and strategically calculate how to get there. “You’ve got to figure out where you want to be, what you want the end goal to be, and what steps you are going to take to get there.”

This careful strategizing needs to include targeted application of self-advocacy behaviors, eliciting sponsorship, networking, bypassing “no,” and reaching beyond your skills. The usage of these “unwritten rules” will be vital in helping you get ahead. Arnold notes, “Sometimes the payoff is immediate and sometimes it takes a couple of steps and a certain amount of time.”

Mary Jane Rotheram, PhD, a behavioral scientist at UCLA, who has been awarded over 80 grants and authored more than 300 journal articles, elaborates. “You have to crystallize your goals. What information do you need? What are your choices to reach your goal? What are the themes and consequences for each option? What else can you do to stand out so you get the promotion? If one strategy doesn’t work, what is number two?” Both Rotheram and Arnold achieved their ranks by having a game plan beyond succeeding at the job at hand, and by being persistent and adaptive in their strategies.

By becoming aware of gender branding and how socialization of both men and women in the workplace can create unintentional barriers to success, and by recognizing the self-advocacy behaviors that can promote success, we can break through the roadblocks and create solutions. “A fairy does not bonk you on the head with a magic wand, and empower you,” notes Arnold. Reaching your goals is within your power. By applying strategic thinking to how you are going to achieve the outcome you desire, and by using all the means at your disposal, including the clusters of behaviors that get your work noticed, you will improve your chances of reaching your goals and getting ahead. ■