

## Stepping into Your Professional Success

### 1. Introduction

Diversity provides competitive advantage. A number of recent business studies, including a 2011 research report in Catalyst, Inc. by Nancy M. Carter and Harvey M. Wagner entitled “The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women’s Representation on Boards (2004–2008),” looked at the financial returns of companies with three or more women on the board. The findings are astounding. Those companies outperform companies with all-male boards by 60 percent in return on invested capital, 84 percent in return on sales and 60 percent in return on equity.

Despite the empirical data that diversity increases the bottom line for companies and law firms alike, women are still not making it to the top. Although there are plenty of women in insurance, very few are in the C-suite. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011 data, women make up 83 percent of “insurance claims and policy processing clerks.” At the largest insurers and reinsurers, women hold only six percent of top executive positions, 12.5 percent of board seats, and 8 percent of inside business, legal or actuarial officer roles, such as chief actuary or division president, according to a recent industry study by St. Joseph’s University Academy of Risk Management and Insurance. Similar disturbing statistics persist in the law practice. According to a 2010 NAWL study, only 15% of equity partners in large firms are women and almost 80% of the firms counted either no women or one woman as among their top ten rainmakers.

The reasons for this disparity have been the subject of debate for two decades, but one reason has clearly surfaced: women are not receiving training on how to effectively self promote and maneuver through the political corporate maze. The lack of training stems from a lack of mentoring; there are so few women at the top, it is hard for younger women to find role models. This begs the question: What can be done to reverse this disturbing trend? The solution seems equally clear: empower women with the training and tools they need to get ahead. Empowerment comes from training and accountability.

Two panel members founded and all five are members of the Women’s Construction Litigation Alliance and another member co-founded an award winning women’s empowerment program - “Ladder Down.” Both are designed to assist women to take control of their careers and be self-determinative. The following provides insight into the challenges that women leaders face as they climb the corporate ladder and provides practical advice.

### 2. Stereotypes: Perpetuating or Overcoming: It’s a Choice

It is human nature to stereotype. An article in Time (Business and Money) featured a Pantene (Philippines) commercial that showed the double standards men and women face in the workplace: “While a man is a “boss,” a woman is seen as “bossy.” Men are “persuasive,” while women are “pushy.” If a guy works late, he’s “dedicated,” but a woman is “selfish.” A man who struts down the street is “smooth,” but his female counterpart is “showy.” The commercial ended with “Don’t Let Labels Hold You Back.” Sheryl Sandberg commented, “This is one of

the most powerful videos I have ever seen illustrating how when women and men do the same things, they are seen in completely different ways.”

The challenge is getting past how women are seen in the workplace so they can climb to the top quickly and effectively. Your response to how you are being stereotyped and understanding why you are stereotyping is what’s important. And it’s a choice. It is easy to sit back and assume a person is one way or the other or for someone to do the same of you. However, to get past stereotyping someone or someone stereotyping you, personal interaction and connection is vital. It is difficult to pigeon-hole someone or have someone pigeon-hole you into the cultural or gender stereotype box if you know the person – or they know you. The choice is about interacting and connecting with people so that you hold an open-mind and focus on the actual attributes of someone, rather than what society tells you the attributes should be and the same is done on you.

A 2011 article in “Womenetics” discusses overcoming gender stereotypes and offers some great advice. The article discusses counteracting others’ stereotypes, counteracting one’s own stereotypes and strategically networking. Regarding counteracting others’ stereotypes, the article focused on the importance of the need for women to demonstrate competence, i.e., using eye contact, firm handshakes, sit at the head of the table when in charge. In other words, don’t apologize for who you are or your position. When you are in a leadership position, act as a leader and don’t apologize or deflect the credit given to you. Regarding counteracting one’s own stereotypes, the article focused on how women hold their own stereotypes of each other, identifying a study that implied how women need to be aware that stereotypes can influence the types of jobs and projects they pursue. In other words, women need to support each other and recognize their own value. Regarding strategically networking, the article discussed a study of men and women working for the same company showed that women tend to be less connected with upper-level managers and less central in the organizational networks than men and because of this women were less likely to be promoted. The advice then is if women are interested in advancing, “they need to position themselves at the center of social networks and make connections to at least one person in the decision-making circle of the network.”

The overall theme to stop any perpetuation of stereotypes or overcoming stereotypes is to be confident in who you are and in what you have and will accomplish in your career, don’t apologize for who you are or for your position and don’t let how others may label you slow you down on your way to the top.

### **3. Myths and Mindsets: Reworking the Internal Dialogue in Your Head**

Sheryl Sandberg in her book “Lean In” sums up the mindset problem: “Multiple studies in multiple industries show that women often judge their own performance as worse than it actually is, while men judge their own performance as better than it actually is.” She then goes on to identify two debilitating mindsets that undermine women’s ability to succeed. They are:

1. Tiara syndrome: Belief that good job performance will naturally lead to rewards. The fallacy of this belief is the underlying assumption that if one works really hard and does a great job, someone will surely notice and reward.

2. Imposter syndrome: Capable women plagued with self doubt. Despite outward successes, accomplishments, and praise, the feeling of fear that it is only a matter of time before one is found out to be who she really is - an impostor with limited skill and talent.

The simple answer is just think differently. Easier said than done. The psychological theory of planned behavior is singularly appropriate. The theory is that behavior can change beliefs. Below are three practical tips that will not only change behavior but also can result in changed beliefs.

**Just say no.** Female professionals are inundated with opportunities to participate in legal, industry, and civic organizations, causes, and events. Participating in too many of these will spread you too thin and undermine your ability to focus on relationships and projects that will further one's career. The Tiara syndrome can result in women working harder rather than working smarter. Being selective and prioritizing will help to maximize your chances of connecting with prospective key career influencers. The best way to do that is to develop a decision tree. Before agreeing to be involved in any project or event, you should ask yourself: (1) Will this opportunity build my personal brand; (2) Will this opportunity elevate my profile with people who matter to my career; (3) Will this opportunity give me access to connectors and sponsors who can further my career? If the answer to all three of these questions is no, then you need to pass on the opportunity. If you are fortunate enough to be approached to participate in multiple opportunities, then you must undertake a qualitative and quantitative analysis to evaluate which opportunity is the best one for you.

**Ask for stretch assignments.** "The Ask" is one of the most daunting aspects of empowerment. Rejection is hard to take regardless of your gender, but females struggle with this more than their male counterparts. Overcoming the fear of rejection is a must. There is really no other way to unlearn self defeating mindsets other than to adopt the Nike mantra: "Just Do It." Sheryl Sandberg refers to a study that found women only apply for positions if they think they meet 100% of the criteria as compared to men who apply for positions if they think they meet 60% of the criteria. If offered an assignment or promotion that meets one of the criteria above, accept regardless of whether you believe you have 100% of the skill set required. But more importantly, intentionally seek out stretch assignments that elevate your profile and put you in contact with key career decision makers and influencers.

**Fake it until you make it.** Body language and tone of voice comprise 80% of all communication. The importance of this is that regardless of what you are feeling in a particular situation, you can portray yourself as confident and competent through your body language and tone of voice. In fact, the results of one clinical study at Harvard and Columbia have shown that posing in non-verbal displays of power cause elevations in testosterone, decreases in cortisol, and increased feelings of power and tolerance for risk. Rehearse your role and develop a script. If you are feeling particularly vulnerable, then practice in front of a mirror, paying close attention to body language, tone of voice and diction.

#### **4. Generational Differences: Bridging the Gap Between Baby Boomers and Millennials**

This era is not like any other in history. For the first time, four generations are working side by side with different values, experiences, styles and activities that often create misunderstandings and frustrations. Our society is evolving faster and faster due to the rapid technological advances. Technology is also changing the way we go about living our everyday lives. There is a greater focus on social media and a need to provide immediate feedback. Generational differences exist and they are not going away and neither are the tensions that exist between the generations. So how do you bridge the gap between Hillary Clinton, a Baby Boomer, and Miley Cyrus, a Millennial? Today, this generational odd couple works side by side in almost equal numbers in our workforce. The development of a shared vision, goal and values within these groups is essential for the success of any company. There are a number of techniques you can apply, but here are several to keep in mind.

**Is “no news” really “good news?”** Understanding and applying the communication preferences that differentiate these groups can dramatically boost a company’s morale which potentially can improve the bottom line. However, challenges may arise if the leader fails to adjust the preferred communication style of each generation. Baby Boomers are diplomatic and prefer to communicate in person. Millennials are polite but only like to communicate in person when the message is extremely important. By requesting regular, honest feedback from their staff on communication, a leader can assure that there will be a balance between these differing preferences.

**Leverage Off of the “Common Ground”** There are dramatic differences that shaped the childhood experiences of both Baby Boomers and Millennials. Women need to find common ground from both a social and professional perspective to develop relationships. Some common ground areas in the work force include the desire for training, job security, stability, and work/life balance. Social and personal common ground areas include food, fashion, movies and TV, parenting/grandparenting, and technology.

**“Mind the Gap”** When individuals adopt a meaningful mind-set — that is, they seek connections, give to others, and orient themselves to a larger purpose — clear benefits can result. These benefits include improved and/or greater creativity as well as enhanced work performance. Workers who find their jobs meaningful are more engaged and less likely to leave their current positions.

**Embrace the “Differences”** Each generation has valuable lessons to teach the next. Baby Boomers have a wealth of knowledge, including tricks of the trade that younger workers need for future growth. Millennials are technology wizards and can mentor the established workers to develop this skill set. Millennials hold clues to future workplace, marketing, and business trends.

## 5. Mentor and Sponsors: Who's Got Your Back?

Most professionals have had people who have helped or guided them with their careers. They generally fall into two categories – mentors and sponsors. A mentor is someone who advises, helps develop skills and character traits, assists with goal setting, and provides direction and accountability. A sponsor is someone who uses their influence to advocate for someone. A sponsor can help promote an individual within an industry or organization. Often, a mentoring or sponsorship relationship is formed by the partner-associate or manager-adjuster role. Statistics show that it is harder for young women to find mentors and sponsors than men. The reality is that women need to take a more active role in seeking out these relationships and companies need to have more formal programs to help establish these relationships.

Mentorship and sponsorship are crucial for career progression. Sheryl Sandberg didn't become the chief operating officer of Facebook on her own. In *Lean In*, she describes the critical relationships she formed with mentors and sponsors along her career path. She notes that individuals with mentors and sponsors are more likely to ask for stretch assignments and pay raises than those without sponsors. It is undeniable that having a mentor and/or sponsor increases the opportunities for promotion and advancement.

Mentoring and sponsorship relationships often form between individuals who have common interests or when the junior person reminds the more senior person of themselves when they were at a more junior level. People usually mentor or sponsor those that they connect with naturally. This means that usually women gravitate towards sponsoring younger women and men gravitate towards sponsoring younger men. Since there are more men than women at the top of every industry, the "old boy" network is perpetuated. And since there are a smaller number of women in leadership roles, it is important that women also look to men as potential mentors and sponsors. Men need to be part of the solution and support women through mentorship and sponsorship. Peers can also mentor each other. They may understand problems and issues that better than superiors do.

There are many ways to find a mentor or sponsor. Studies show that mentors select mentees based on performance and potential. People invest in others who stand out for their talent, take initiative and can really benefit from the help. For a mentee, the focus is best placed on striving to achieve and finding a mentor or sponsor in the process. Mentorship is a reciprocal relationship. The mentee receives direct assistance but the mentor receives benefits too such as a sense of self fulfillment, pride and helping their organization become stronger.

A good mentor is secure enough to share credit with a mentee, gives feedback in an honest manner, listens to the questions of the mentee and involves the mentee in the decision-making process. A good mentee is a lifelong learner who is willing to be vulnerable and commit to a process which should be consistent and predictable. Adopting a model that includes a set time to meet following the same process promotes trust and accountability. Effective mentoring sessions are not social conversations. The objective is to empower the mentee to grow professionally, develop skill and experience, make decisions autonomously and ultimately become a mentor to someone else in the future.

## 6. Self-promotion: It's not bragging—It's business.

Many people consider self-promotion to be uncouth. In reality, it's not only necessary in today's workplace, but also when done properly can be a "win-win" for all involved. However, there is a significant difference between self-promotion and just plain bragging (and boring your audience).

**Develop Expertise:** In order to effectively promote your skills, you first need to develop those skills to have something substantive to talk about with your audience. One of the best ways to do this is to get involved with industry-related events and activities and to participate actively. Seek out opportunities to write or present on industry topics. Over time, you'll become the "go to person" for your practice area(s), and you'll have plenty of substance to promote.

Once you have something of substance to offer, you need to be sure you are genuine in your communications. By genuine, we mean that you should always try to understand your audience (whether it is a large group or a one-on-one conversation), and try to relate your self-promotion to address their specific needs.

**Active Listening:** Listening is often just as, if not more, critical than speaking. Listening allows your audience to feel important and "heard", while providing you with an opportunity to tailor your message. Initially, most interactions are superficial and won't lead to future business without strategic and genuine "grooming". However, with some practice, often you can convert a random, casual conversation into future, lasting business, with either that person or someone they know. Delving deeper into a conversation allows you the opportunity to discover your audience's needs, and to respond to those needs. That way, your audience doesn't feel like you are "selling" them something, but rather you are "providing helpful solutions". For example, if you're on an airplane and start up a conversation with a fellow passenger, it would be awkward (and off-putting) to dominate the conversation up front with all of the wonderful things you're doing. However, a little "give and take" in the conversation not only allows the other person to get to know you, but also provides opportunities for you to see how your skills may assist that person.

**Intentional and Regular Follow Up:** In the end, people like to do business with people they like and respect. Establishing more than just a one-off conversation allows you to develop a more meaningful relationship. As our society becomes more globally connected, it becomes more apparent that "you just never know who is who, or who they know." Every interaction has the potential to become something more meaningful. This is not to suggest that you should invest significant energies into every interaction, but with time, you'll learn to make the most of the ones that will be more long-lasting, or even short-term beneficial to you. Adapt your self-promotion style to your audience, and follow up with contacts. For example, a speaking opportunity at an industry event lends itself to a different communication style (usually more directly self-promotional) than a networking reception. Sending an email after the event can set you apart from your competition, and encourages a more lasting relationship. Business cards are one of the most cost-effective ways to ensure people know who you are and how to reach you. You never know who may be your next client!

## **7. Conclusion**

Leadership, self-promotion, and mentoring is hard work and requires a significant time commitment by all involved. Individual success and/or self-determination is certainly worth the hard work and time commitment. Recognizing and leveraging generational differences can eliminate barriers and promote self-determination and success in the work force. But more importantly, investing in oneself and other women can change the course of this profession and leave a legacy of gender equality for younger women.