

BUSINESS NEWS DAILY

Small Business Solutions & Inspiration

5 Important Lessons New Female Leaders Need to Learn

By Nicole Fallon Taylor, Business News Daily Assistant Managing Editor February 18, 2016 08:13 am EST



Credit: Dean Drobot/Shutterstock

Women have long been told that thinking and acting "like a man" in the workplace is the only way to get ahead and to be taken seriously. This mentality may have prevailed decades ago when women were just gaining a foothold in the professional world, but modern women have learned that career success is not about adjusting to the male-dominated status quo. It's about changing that status quo by embracing what makes the female perspective unique, and overcoming the doubts that keep women from reaching their full potential.

This is especially true of young female professionals who are just beginning their careers and have aspirations of rising through the ranks in their industry. Women who want to lead may find themselves up against superiors who question their priorities or blame disagreements on them being too "emotional" or "aggressive." Worse yet, these women may have trouble find the leadership opportunities they're looking for in the first place.

"[[Research by Catalyst](#)] on women in the S&P 500 companies shows that women comprise 45 percent of the total workforce, on average, yet only 25 percent of the senior leader roles," said Marcia Mueller, an executive career coach and the talent development practice leader at the [IMPACT Group](#). "The number of women leaders drops significantly in

technology, science and industrial service industries. So the first leadership challenge women may face, is finding an opportunity to be a leader."

Whether there's a leadership role you want at your current company or you're fighting to create your own, here's some advice from successful female business leaders to help you navigate your path.

Unpack your fears – then conquer them

Fear is consistently one of the biggest challenges women say they face in the workplace. It's the fear that they won't be taken seriously by the "boys' club" that runs their company. The fear that having a family and raising children will reflect negatively on their commitment to their careers. The fear that anyone who has ever said their gender is a hindrance was actually right.

These various fears often lead to a lack of confidence and feelings of inadequacy. Sabrina Parsons, CEO of [Palo Alto Software](#), said women will try to compensate for these feelings by over-apologizing – a habit that not only betrays their fears, but also shows a tacit acceptance of "the way things are."

"Women shouldn't feel the need to apologize for who they are and the skills they bring to the table," Parsons said. "We need to come together and demand that we are given the flexibility to excel in our jobs. Confidence – and embracing being women, rather than apologizing for being women – is what will help women rise to the next level and climb the corporate ladder."

Shattering your career inhibitions starts with the right attitude. Marygrace Sexton, CEO of [Natalie's Orchid Island Juice Co.](#), said it's important to embody self-assurance and professionalism in all that you do.

"From your wardrobe to your attitude, exude confidence," Sexton said. "Be the most impressive and focus on attention to detail in everything you do. Be someone [your colleagues] respect."

Find a mentor

Mentorship can give any professional a leg up in their careers, but entry-level women stand to gain a lot from having a strong workplace advocate. Although this person doesn't necessarily have to be someone within your company, an in-house mentor may be able to connect you with the right people in the organization to propel yourself forward.

"Find a mentor who will guide and endorse you," said Paula Stephenson, director of marketing at [Smoke's Poutinerie](#). "It's not enough to find someone who will give solid advice. You also need that person to spread good news about you."

Julie Burluson, founder and CEO of [Young Chefs Academy](#), said to look for someone you work with who is particularly impressive and sets an example for others. Make the effort to ask this person questions and develop a good relationship, she said.

"Seek wisdom and advice from trusted individuals and foster those relationships," added Madison Cork, founder and president of [Cork Communications](#). "Doing so will give you a filtering system for unforeseen complications and shed light on your current shortcomings. Mentors ... become your biggest allies when you are ready to step into a new field or position. Share your sincere gratitude with those who are willing to serve in this capacity for you."

For more tips on finding a mentor, visit this [Business News Daily guide](#).

Put yourself out there

One of the best ways to get noticed at work is to promote yourself and vouch for your own abilities through the work you do. Career coach Mueller advised women to develop their leadership skills by volunteering for small-scale projects, such as cross-department committees and extra assignments to show your supervisors what you're capable of.

But performance is only one part of demonstrating your value in the workplace. Mueller also noted that networking – especially within your own company – is an often overlooked, but highly important tool for women who want to advance their careers.

"When senior leaders have special assignments or projects to be done, they go to those they know," she said. "Learning how to be 'known' is key to gaining the stretch opportunities that lead to career growth. Building a strong brand and an internal network is not bragging, it's helping others in the firm know the value you can bring."

"At work, you should develop a team of colleagues and allies – the people you can count on to help you navigate your professional journey," Cork added. "From finding the copy machine to navigating complex office politics, a strong network of co-workers will be as important to your journey as your closest friends or most trusted family members are to your world outside the workplace."

Burleson offered a word of caution, however: Taking on too much "extra" work could end up backfiring if you don't manage yourself well.

"I notice other women [put] too much on their plates when starting their careers," Burleson said. "This could lead to burn-out. For this reason, it's important to make small, but impactful goals that allow you to push yourself while still learning the ropes. Try to challenge yourself to approach a project differently or dream up new and fresh ideas to share with the leadership team."

Stand your ground and show your strength

Women ask questions, use facts and emotions in decision-making, and tend to favor collaboration, Cork said. These traits are necessary to build dynamic teams and lead them to success, but they can also be misdiagnosed as weakness by a more aggressive co-worker. Being "tough" doesn't mean steamrolling your team; it means showing others why a collaborative leadership style gets better results.

"It is imperative that women in leadership maintain their intrinsic style, while not being afraid to stand their ground when they know they have the best idea or right path forward," Cork said.

In a 2013 interview with Business News Daily, Phrantceena Halres, founder and CEO of [Nuclear Protection Academy](#), a division of Total Tactical Defence Protection Services (TTD), said one of the most important skills for female leaders to have is the ability to remain calm under pressure. Being able to confidently discuss business matters, even when emotions and tensions are running high, will show your colleagues that you're strong, confident and worthy of their respect.

"Focusing solely on the business at hand will help solve problems and bring valuable, lasting solutions," Halres said. "It requires mental discipline and is a continuous process of improvement, but female executives need to understand the space in which they're leading. Knowing about financial statements, profit and loss, mergers, acquisitions, etc., directly ties into your performance as a leader."

Act as if equality is a reality

Many female professionals have felt the effects of the gender gap during their careers, whether it was a pay dispute, a lost promotion or just a snide comment from a co-worker. Even if your work environment champions equality, you probably know other women who have faced some kind of discrimination, subtle or not, because of their gender.

It's difficult to think this way when cases of gender inequality are talked about in the news and on social media every day, but if women want to be viewed as equal in the workplace, they must stand their ground and demand the respect they deserve – and it starts by behaving as if the gap has been closed.

"I have noticed that if you act like there's equality in the workplace, then there will be," Stephenson, of Smoke's Poutinerie, said.

That's not to say that people should pretend inequality doesn't exist. Acknowledging the need for change is important, but more important are women's actions and attitudes in the workplace. A shift in mentality – that is, truly believing and acting like women's opinions and contributions are equal to men's, because they already intrinsically are – can spark the necessary discussions to truly create change in the workplace dynamic. To this end, Sexton, Natalie's CEO, reminded women that their gender should never be an excuse to settle or not achieve their goals.

"Work the hardest and excel at what you do," Sexton told Business News Daily. "Fight for what you believe is right and have confidence in your ability to succeed despite adversity. Remember, it is not a weakness to be a woman – it is a gift."