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ARTICLE **GENDER**

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A male friend of ours recently had a realization. He was walking through the bar at a private golf club, looking for a colleague he was meeting for dinner. The dark-paneled bar was filled with men and they all seemed to know each other. Will wasn't a member of the club, and he felt a little out of place. When he found his friend and they sat down at a table, he felt more comfortable. Then he looked around and realized that only about five of the 35 people in the large room were women. Even if they

were members, these women stood out in this mostly male setting. He could blend in so easily. These women didn't have that luxury.

Welcome to our world. As female executives, it's sometimes difficult for us to fit in, but we need to be in that room nonetheless.

There are typically two ways to get things done professionally. One way is explicit, established, and formalized: the job-specific mode we use to get our work accomplished every day. Job descriptions, agenda items, expertise, and hierarchy dictate how this work is done and how formal decisions are made. The other way is informal, highly nuanced, and relationship-based. It involves leveraging human connections, corporate maneuvering, physical proximity to decision makers, and personal and professional influence inside the office and outside at informal gatherings. While both ways are important, we have seen in our work coaching women executives that they overwhelmingly struggle more than men to take advantage of informal networking situations. Part of the problem is systemic: When men go out together after work, women often are not invited. [Eighty-one percent](#) of women say they feel this type of social exclusion in work situations. Based on [published reports](#), this problem has further intensified as the #MeToo movement has grown, with men saying that they feel more hesitant to socialize with female colleagues for fear that their motives might be called into question. Many men we know or work with have told us that this is a genuine concern for them today.

The other issue is that women themselves often can't or don't want to socialize after work or during work hours. They keep their heads down at the office to maximize their efforts, and then they feel the pressure to head home to spend time with their families (and often to start their "night shift" of cooking, laundry, homework help, and bedtime routines). Many of our women coaching clients have told us things like: *I don't have time to go out with the group. Nothing gets done at these things anyway. It's all politics.*

Regardless of the rationale, the effect is the same: Doing less relationship building limits women's access to sponsorship and diminishes their chances for career advancement. Developing informal relationships is one of the most important things women can do to advance their careers. With our livelihoods on the line, we need to turn this dynamic around.

By committing to a manageable combination of informal relationship building inside and outside the office, we can amplify our efforts and develop genuine influence with senior colleagues and decision makers. Here's how:

Leverage informal norms. Is your workplace a coffee culture? Do people play cards or grab a drink together after hours? Knowing what social rituals define your organization makes relationships easier to maneuver. There's no need to get a lunch on the calendar, for instance, if you know the executive vice president is in line at Starbucks every morning at 7 AM. Regardless of the specifics, seize easy opportunities to connect.

Similarly, examine the cross-silo social networks that underlie your organization. Perhaps the tech-savvy crowd all sit together at staff meetings, or the young moms meet at the park on Sundays. Even if you don't fit within any of the social networks yourself, just knowing who does can tell you who's closely connected to whom. This also applies to the social networking tools that people use. Knowing how people connect allows you to reach out to them more easily.

Make meaningless time more meaningful. Legitimate time constraints are the most common reason women cite for ditching dinner with colleagues or skipping “optional” work events. Because of that, it's crucial to maximize the time we do have. For instance, arrive five minutes early to meetings and start a conversation. Walk to the train with someone you know is going your way. An accomplished publishing executive we coach arrives to the office 10 minutes early every morning and walks around the building. Sometimes she has an agenda; other times she simply stops to chat with whoever's milling around. She always catches somebody and finds out what's going on. If she's proposing a new project at the following week's meeting, she gets early feedback and she's more prepared for her presentation. The point is to make your extraneous time more meaningful by using it to form connections. The informal information flow is powerful.

Suit yourself. Relationship building is never a one-size-fits-all proposition. Don't bother learning to play tennis if that's not your thing. Decide what you like — opera, ball games, wine tasting, trendy eateries — and invite a few colleagues along for fun. If you are an introvert, don't go it alone. Meet a few work friends and head to the company party with them. It's fine to work the room in pairs. The same goes for informal socializing. It doesn't need to be a one-on-one event. Getting a group together to have drinks or dinner makes it easier to talk to someone you don't know. Many women prefer to invite colleagues and their spouses or partners into their home, instead of meeting solo or going out to dinner together. Most of us are more comfortable on our own turf.

Doing it the way you want to makes you more comfortable and lets people get to know you in a way that can change how they perceive you.

Face forward. It's not only teenagers who can't tear their eyes away from their smartphones; screens rob all of us of precious face-to-face interactions. This is an easy one: Stop hiding behind your phone. Look people in the eye and talk to them, whether it's before the meeting starts, on your way to lunch, on the stairs, and in the elevator. Simply being fully present will help you make many more crucial connections.

As women, we need to continue to work together to think of new solutions to this old problem. The higher we rise in organizations, the more important informal interactions become. Regardless of the venue or activity, relationship building is just another part of the job.

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