

How 'old rule' thinking is sabotaging your career

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We would not have predicted that the need to take centre stage would emerge as a rule, but in our interviews about what women need to do in order to be successful at senior levels, it came up frequently. In our interviews with high-level business executives, we heard comments like these:

“She needs to quit being backstage and get on stage.”

“She needs to ask for help. She gets loaded up with the work she does for everyone else and flames out. It is dangerous for her and for our company. It is risky.”

“She is a mother hen. I think this is a strength, but she has to also learn to say no and guard her time.”

“She needs to focus on herself and get herself in the limelight.”

The women we coach say to us:

“I am afraid that if I delegate, they will think I am not doing my job.”

“When I start the day, I always say that I am going to make some time for myself. What I find is that it's 6 p.m., and I've solved everyone else's problems and did not solve mine... and I'm exhausted.”

“I prefer to be behind the scenes.”

“I really want a big job, but I am afraid that if I put it out there, no one will think I deserve it.”

The Old Rule: Focus on Others

In our work, we have found that there are specific beliefs and thoughts women have that are associated with this Old Rule thinking. Here are some of the most common:

1. I must take care of everyone else.
2. My needs come last.
3. It's not okay to ask for help.
4. I'm a great number two.
5. I don't belong on centre stage.

I Must Take Care of Everyone Else

One thing we heard was that women feel personally responsible for a long list of people. During our coaching process with Jess, she noted that she mentored her employees and took their professional development very seriously. Her clients loved her because she gave them her cell phone number and made herself available to problem-solve at all hours of the day and night. She helped out at her kids' schools when the teacher asked for volunteers. And on. And on. As women, and as people, of course we want to help our employees and colleagues succeed. Of course we want to do everything possible to show our families that we love and support them. But we need to take our own dreams and goals seriously as well.

As Jess found out, taking responsibility for everyone else can lead to burnout. When we see women feeling overwhelmed and denying their exhaustion and frustration, we say, "She's French fried." That's our phrase to describe the overwhelming fatigue that eventually comes when you nurture everyone around you and are surprised when the cracks start to appear. But they will appear ... and continue to spread unless you make some choices.

My Needs Come Last

This is the flip side of the "caring for others" coin. If you focus all of your time and energy on fulfilling the needs of colleagues and clients, not to mention your family members, when exactly can you attend to your own needs? Dead last.

A woman we coach, Denise, took this Old Rule to new heights. As a midlevel manager in a financial services firm, she was considered by colleagues to be a fast riser. She had great technical skills and was also naturally adept at handling relationships. Managing difficult personalities was her specialty. For years she demonstrated an aptitude for leadership and the ability to come through in a pinch. So when a senior-level position in her company opened up, Denise was the first person her boss recommended. It meant greater responsibility and more money. These were things that Denise had said she wanted for herself. It seemed so win-win. But everyone was taken by surprise when she declined the offer. She said the timing was not right for her.

The timing wasn't right? Her boss was astounded. When we sat down to talk to Denise about her decision, she said that if she accepted a promotion now, she couldn't live up to her current

obligations. She was right in the middle of a complex, detail-heavy client project that she couldn't just dump on someone else. She had just hired a new associate and felt obligated to show him the ropes. Her twin teens were taking their PSATs and needed her help and support. And so on and so on. But what about Denise? This promotion was something she'd wanted for years, but she decided to turn it down because she felt guilty putting her needs and desires first. We wanted to say, "What were you thinking?" but we know what she was thinking, and she's not the only one.

She was thinking that her own career needs, interest, and ambitions were unimportant. She was blind to the fact that she might never get a second chance at this type of career advancement. She put herself on the list – again. Do you do the same thing? If so, you need to examine why your dreams are taking a back seat. If you're allowing Old Rule thinking to sabotage your chances for career success, then it's time to replace it with New Rules that will work better for you.

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