

Women Need to Break a Few of Their Usual Rules

There is almost nothing more crucial to success in any organisation than developing excellent leaders. It is a no-brainer. But, although there's no shortage of ambitious people with executive aspirations, what threatens the strength of your leadership pipeline may be a scarcity of senior-level women, writes Jill Flynn.

by Jill Flynn



Jill Flynn is founding partner at Flynn Heath Holt Leadership (FHHL), whose goal is to move women and organisations forward, faster. She is also co-author of *Break Your Own Rules: How to Change the Patterns of Thinking that Block Women's Paths to Power* (Jossey-Bass; September 2011). Join the conversation at <http://www.flynnheathholt.com/> and on Twitter @FlynnHeathHolt.com. This article is excerpted from the above book.

You may have seen the stats: women are entering the global labour force in greater numbers than ever before; they attain more undergraduate and graduate degrees than men in many countries; yet just 13 of 500 CEOs running Fortune 500 Global companies are women. In addition, the gender wage gap across the world remains significant. Some of this can be attributed to the type of age-old gender stereotypes and traditions that take generations to eliminate. But there are other culprits to consider—ones that are within our control to address right now that will significantly strengthen women's chances of rising to the top of organisations.

Over the past decade, my colleagues and I have coached and trained over 7 000 professional women, travelled across the globe and to Africa to speak with women, and interviewed over 3 200 senior executives to find out how they believe women can be more successful. What we've found is that for women in middle management, and particularly those approaching the top, continued career momentum is not about adding technical skills. Many women are taught as children to behave in certain ways that don't help them to succeed as executives. What women need to do in order to succeed at higher levels in global business is to think differently.

The new rules

In essence, we've found that women need to rethink the conversations they are having in their heads and tell themselves a new story. They need to challenge some of their outdated expectations and attitudes about themselves and the workplace. These are the rules women need to break:

1. Take centre stage (instead of focusing on others)

Many of the smartest women around the conference table focus too much of their attention on other people's needs. They are assisting others, pitching in and volunteering to pick up other people's slack. This leaves precious little time and energy to allow themselves to thrive professionally and personally. The instinct to put others first can work against women by keeping them from focusing on their own career goals. The result is that too many women let their careers "happen to them" rather than putting themselves in the driver's seat. We tell women to invest in themselves and have a written plan for their career. Women who have a clear vision for what they want to achieve are much more likely to own their ambition and work in ways that allow them to succeed.

2. Proceed until apprehended (instead of seeking approval)

In our coaching sessions we've worked with countless women executives who are exceptionally collaborative leaders. They like to be liked, but the desire for consensus can slow them down. In order to succeed, women need to retain that core strength of collaboration while at the same time acting creatively and decisively to make things happen. They need to stop "asking for permission" and instead demonstrate behaviours that exhibit leadership. In terms of career success, we tell women that remaining silently behind the scenes is much riskier than putting forward bold ideas and proactively campaigning for the big assignments. »

Women Need to Break a Few of Their Usual Rules - Project personal power (instead of modesty)

3. Project personal power (instead of modesty)

We've found that many women who are motivated to move into leadership positions are ambivalent about projecting power. Modesty and self-deprecation come more naturally. In fact, some women act downright apologetic in the face of success—as if it doesn't suit them, or they don't deserve it. To exude confidence and power, women need to pay attention to their non-verbal messaging. Stance, eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expressions all send a message to others about confidence. In addition, women need to take credit for their many ideas and accomplishments. Taking credit for their success and being assertive will help women to move more quickly into the jobs they want.

4. Be politically savvy (instead of working harder)

Many women are disappointed when their hard work and long hours don't seem to pay off in terms of career advancement. They dislike politics and try to remain outside the fray. Yet being politically savvy is actually about building relationships, achieving consensus and networking—women are great at these things. We coach women to build their careers as if they are running for office: create a platform of ideas, line up sponsors, put together a coalition – and then do it over and over again as their agenda and goals change.

5. Play to win (instead of playing it safe)

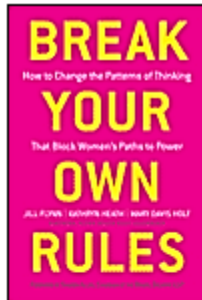
We hear in our interviews with senior executives that women need to get out of their comfort zones, be bold and take risks. Women can make themselves visible in this way by taking the lead on high-stakes projects and bringing in new business. Putting themselves out there means getting comfortable with risk and the possibility of failure. It may seem safer to let someone at a higher pay grade take the risks, but it is the major decisions that offer women the best opportunities to establish their credibility as leaders.

6. Have a both/and perspective (instead of all-or-nothing thinking)

One phrase that has crept into dozens of our coaching files over the years is the notion of having it all. It's no coincidence that many of the women who are trying to have it all are also the ones who get burned out. There's no single right way to succeed, but avoiding black-and-white thinking – and remaining flexible – can help women to establish leadership credibility. Because complexity and constant change are everywhere today, dealing with ambiguity has become a skill that all of us (not only women) need to master.

As these new rules illustrate, we've found that most high-performing women don't need to make major changes in order to give themselves a better chance to succeed. Small adjustments in how they think about themselves can have a big impact on their everyday behaviours and lead to visibility and continued career momentum. And that outcome will be good for everyone.

From a bottom-line perspective, paving the way for more women at the highest levels in leadership is a net positive for business. Women are natural consensus builders and collaborators, so they are well suited to the nimble, less hierarchical workplace of the future. And research proves that companies with more women leaders have a higher return on equity and a better return on sales. There's no doubt about it: when women get ahead, it is good for business. 🌍



Break Your Own Rules: How to Change the Patterns of Thinking that Block Women's Paths to Power

Jill Flynn, Kathryn Heath, Mary Davis Holt

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New York Times Bestseller

How women can make it to the top by adopting the new rules of leadership

Women hold just 11 percent of the most senior-level leadership positions in U.S. Corporations—a number that hasn't changed in over 30 years. How can women break through? *Break Your Own Rules* distills the six faulty assumptions (or "rules") most women follow that get in the way—then delivers the correlating new rules that promise to clear that path. For example, the old rule of "Focus on Others" must be replaced by "Take Center Stage," "Hard Work Will Get You There" must yield to "Be Politically Savvy." "Play It Safe" must give way to "Play to Win." "Ask Permission" must be replaced by "Proceed Until Apprehended."

- Features the results of over 1,700 interviews with executives in Fortune 1000 companies, as well as the authors' new research and ongoing work with over 5,000 professional women
- Showcases previously-untold stories from high profile women including Ann Moore (CEO, Time Inc.), Susan Ivey (CEO, Reynolds American), Cathy Bessant (Global Executive for Technology and Operations for Bank of America), Lynn Ford (CEO, ING Solutions), and more
- Reveals what it really takes for any woman to succeed at the highest levels
- Foreword by Sharon Allen, Chairman of Deloitte

This hands-on guide is for women who are ready to transform their assumptions and join the senior ranks of American business.