Getting anointed for advancement: The case of executive women

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Executive Overview

How do women become identified in early career as promotable, viable candidates for senior management positions? To answer that question, fifty-five high-profile executive women were interviewed about key events in the early stages of their careers that allowed them to become fast tracked. In some ways, while each had a unique story to tell, all of them faced five similar hurdles: 1) getting assigned to a high visibility project; 2) demonstrating critical skills for effective job performance; 3) attracting top level support; 4) displaying entrepreneurial initiative; and, 5) accurately identifying what the company values. In each case, effectively jumping each of these hurdles in early career contributed to their eventual success. The rich experiences of these women also revealed vital lessons for any manager—male or female—who wants to successfully move up.

Of particular interest to women managers today is how certain select women, still a disadvantaged minority at the upper management levels, break through stereotype barriers to advance to the top of their firms. How were they anointed for executive advancement and what lessons did they learn along the way? To answer these questions, I interviewed fifty-five high-profile executive women about the underlying processes that catapulted them to the top of their firms. The career paths of these women were carefully examined to determine: 1) key developmental assignments in executive careers; 2) early career events that contributed to becoming fast tracked; and, 3) critical developmental incidents that enhanced their managerial abilities on the way to the top.

What I learned from these interviews is that, unlike women who benefited from token corporate gestures during the seventies, today’s high-profile executive woman has earned the same respect accorded her male counterpart. These executives have demonstrated that they can effectively manage major line operations. They have made tough business decisions, and they have learned to avoid alienating those whose support they need most—their employees. Simply put, these are women who have broken through the glass ceiling to be recognized as successful, talented, practicing executives.

A Case in Point
Consider the case of Debi Coleman, vice president, materials operations, at Tektronix, Inc., who is recognized in her industry as a modern-day success story. Graduated in 1978 with an M.B.A. from Stanford, she signed on with Apple Computer, Inc., and became a key figure in the development of their Macintosh product. In her interview, Ms. Coleman provided new insights on her career,

I avoided joining Apple for years. I was pretty risk-averse. Even though there were other opportunities to go to Apple, I was reluctant to leave the
shelter of Hewlett-Packard, the company I first started with when I left business school. It was a really great company. But the main reason I came to Apple was that they were willing to give me a chance to serve as financial manager for the Macintosh task force. It also was a chance to work for Steve Jobs. During the interview process, what fascinated me was not just the Macintosh box, but how that box would be manufactured in a state-of-the-art automated factory. I had a secret desire to get into manufacturing and I thought this would be the way to do it.

Over time, my area became a full-fledged finance and systems organization. I built up a general accounting group, a cost accounting group for the factory, a planning and reporting group, and I also ran information systems. At the time, Steve Jobs had gone through a series of operations managers who did not meet his expectations or requirements. Somewhere along the way I lobbied to run the whole operation. It was one of those situations where you'd better be careful what you ask for because you might get it. In late May of 1984, Steve Jobs took a chance and put me in charge of the factory. I was really scared on one level, because all these guys who had fifteen or twenty years operations experience had failed, and here I came in with no experience.

It was exhilarating—mostly eighteen-hour days. I would walk the factory floor five hours a day or more. Sometimes we even put in three shifts. . . . We made a lot of mistakes but we learned from them really quickly. I got to know almost every person in the factory, we had a lot of employee involvement, employee communication meetings, luncheons with the first-line supervisors, meetings with representatives from different areas. . . . we had problems, but the cream really rose to the top. We found good people from all parts of Apple, not just the Mac group, and some of the corporate groups helped us a lot. We really became a family out there. . . . It was a wonderful time, and I don't think it could be created again.

As she became successful, the scope of her responsibilities broadened. She picked up responsibility for other factories in the area, and eventually was promoted to Director of Worldwide Manufacturing. This put her in charge of all the Macintosh and other Apple product factories throughout the globe.

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Debi Coleman is today known as one of the industry's unquestionably successful corporate executives, male or female, throughout the world. Having successfully managed the Macintosh product to its current conclusion, she weathered the political storms at Apple to be promoted to chief financial officer reporting directly to chief executive officer John Sculley.

Key Career Moves
Current statistics on women in senior management positions remain dismal: according to a recent Fortune magazine poll (September 21, 1992), less than five percent of women hold positions within three levels of the chief executive officer in American corporations. So among those women who have made it to senior management's inner circle, how have they accomplished such a feat?

About half the women I interviewed described initially slow starts to their careers, having been hired into departments primarily outside of the known upwardly oriented career paths of the firm. These women began their careers in an administrative support or analyst role and then moved their way up the hierarchy through a fortuitous match of skills and talent. Conversely, slightly
over one-third of the women were automatically placed into high-profile departments that were known as testing grounds for talent in the firm. Many of these women held M.B.A. degrees, hailed from well-known undergraduate colleges, and/or had been hired at a time when the firm was actively recruiting women. The rest started their careers by moving between two or more firms before they were hired into a growing area of an organization that recognized their talents. Despite the diversity in how their careers started, their career paths soon blended into a discernible pattern.

Over ninety percent of the women interviewed were given supervisory assignments within three years and each was quite successful in her initial management assignment. Afterwards, a number of key career moves were held in common by the majority, including: 1) an early move out of staff assignments to a line or operations position; 2) continued successful supervisory assignments; 3) time spent in corporate headquarters’ staff, typically assisting an upper level executive or working on a high visibility task force; and (later) 4) a broadening general management experience. From this point most were assigned one or more general management responsibilities heading up a major division or area of the firm before being promoted to the vice-president level reporting directly to the chief executive officer.

The Political Process of Promotability

Such career patterns reflect similar research on this subject, as reported in the popular book Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America’s Largest Corporations? However, a mere recounting of the career patterns of executive women tells little of the whole story.

Little is known about the subtle political processes that emerge to favor one candidate over another, or the reasons why one individual is identified as promotable over another who is not. For most managers, how one becomes anointed is unclear, at least until the process is well under way. Many executives hold the assumption that it is through contacts, knowledge, and timing, as well as competence, that career success is made. But all agree that once identified as promotable, progress up the corporate hierarchy can be rapid. Said one highly placed female executive vice president in the food products industry,

I didn’t realize what was happening until it was happening so fast that I wasn’t sure if I could control it. The first indication was that people respected me, that I was being singled out for special projects. At meetings I would discover that the highest level people present already knew my name. Then powerful people wanted to get me on their team. Suddenly I looked back at my career one day and realized I had served in five different jobs in three years in all four areas of the division. No one else had my track record. That’s when I knew I was going places.

To understand what political processes were operating that helped to identify these women as promotable, I asked specific questions concerning the assignments they held during their first three to five years with their firms. By comparing the key developmental events that characterized the early assignments held by most high-profile executive women across firms, I was able to capture a political process that catapulted most of these women onto the fast track early.
Essentially, a woman is hired indistinguishably from others being recruited for similar management positions. Partly as a result of luck, partly as a result of timing, the woman's abilities, background and skills are matched to a particular department or corporate unit that can benefit from the use of her skills. Generally the department is considered to be in a "hot" area of the firm, one with significant budgetary responsibility and visibility among the corporate levels.

As a new hire, the woman identifies a key project or program on which she can make a contribution. She takes the initiative to analyze the problem, recommend a solution, and present the reasons why the firm should follow her lead. Often without realizing it, she is on shaky political ground, because the problem on which she has focused is typically in a key area of some importance to top management. Top management supports her fresh ideas and, perhaps more importantly, helps her to implement her ideas. Her boss is grateful to her for an innovative and effective resolution to a previously unsolvable problem.

Her hard work, innovative problem-solving skills, and sheer initiative in the face of conservative corporate norms captures everyone's attention. An aura is generated around her. She is believed to be "good." A base of support at levels higher than her boss begins to speak out on her behalf. She becomes identified, tentatively and reservedly, as promotable.

But her supporters only champion her to the extent that they are willing to put her to a test. She is given a series of developmental assignments. She is assigned a management area with clear budgetary responsibilities. Later she usually is sent to corporate staff, to become seasoned in the art of political maneuvering at the top. Doors are opened for her to take a line or major operations position. Concerns are mentioned as to whether the woman can make it in the "hard line" area of the business.

The woman passes these tests by meeting each challenge with the same hard work and initiative as before. A combination of working on "hot" problems and then solving them in innovative, fresh, entrepreneurial ways allows her to widen her base of support. The final test is often a general management assignment with significant responsibility. Once she passes this hurdle, she is anointed as part of the "in" circle. She becomes, in the words of one interviewee, "a proven contender." This self-perpetuating cycle emerged in over eighty percent of the case histories studied.

Two Case Histories
Let me offer two examples of how this process works: Lois Juliber, Chief Technological Officer, Colgate-Palmolive, and Barbara Capsalis, formerly Executive Vice President, Chief Technical Officer, Chemical Bank.

Lois Juliber: Before I went to Harvard Business School, I had a summer job at General Foods, looking at the morality of advertising to children for beverage and cereal products. The next summer, I was asked back with two other Harvard MBAs and worked on Birds Eye vegetables. When I completed my second year at Harvard, I received offers from the major consumer products companies but the best offer came from General Foods. A week before I started work, they told me I would become the assistant product manager on Kool Aid. I was amazed—I wasn't even allowed to drink it as a kid!
Ms. Juliber raised concerns about the product and in so doing developed a turnaround strategy:

Kool Aid, at the time, was under severe competitive attack. We recommended a high growth/high investment strategy; we were asked to do the impossible and we delivered. In that job, I gained tremendous experience, exposure, visibility, and after two years at General Foods. I was known throughout the company. Basically, my career was accelerated because of my first job assignment—it put me on a fast track for the next ten years.

She attributes her early success to her willingness to demonstrate innovative problem solving skills concerning the product:

I was doing analytic work on Kool Aid, but I was also doing a lot of other things where I had to use judgement, instinct, intuition. I showed I could do the innovative thinking and I had the leadership ability which allowed them to give me important responsibilities very early in my career.

Her next assignments were designed to test her management abilities:

My next challenge was in 1978. The Post Cereal business was under competitive pressure and weak financially. I was asked to “fix it.” Within one year, we were able to show results. Then I became category manager for all the Cold Beverages, including Kool Aid and Countrytime. The key here was to put the business back on solid ground and restore the business fundamentals, which we did.

She passed these tests with flying colors. She was then granted a product development assignment that offered considerable visibility:

“I showed I could do the innovative thinking and I had the leadership ability which allowed them to give me important responsibilities very early in my career.”

Next, I ran a major new product development program in 1978. General Foods felt that you had to have a mixture of experiences, line and staff. This was about the time that aspartame (NutraSweet) was approved for human use by the FDA. We did the work for what became Crystal Light. Additionally, we were the first company to introduce the TetraPak into the U.S. market.

Her successful completion of each developmental assignment allowed her to assume general management responsibilities.

I then went back into the line as marketing manager for an SBU, then became an SBU Manager, and in 1987, became corporate vice president and general manager. All because of my unique first experience on Kool Aid.

Lois Juliber is widely regarded as one of the premier female executives in the country. She now is employed by Colgate-Palmolive as Chief Technological Officer reporting directly to the President.

Barbara Capsoles: I graduated from college like most people in the mid-sixties from Ohio University and immediately proceeded to get married. My great aspiration in life was to have a nice house in the suburbs with a pool. That was the beginning and end to my aspirations about “career.” I was a math major in college, and a good student, and I happened to interview at IBM. A friend of my father’s told me to interview at AT&T. I did, and they offered me ten dollars more a week, so I went there. I was hired in
data processing where at the time women were assigned to positions in
lockstep with men two levels above . . . I was there six years, until my
husband decided to attend law school at night in New York. That's when I
came to work [in data processing] at Chemical Bank.

She freely admits that her early job aspirations were more temporary than
career-oriented. Once at Chemical, however, her career unfolded:

I was here two years, and right around the time that my husband was ready
to graduate, I was offered a job that allowed me to move out of pure
technology into banking. It sounded interesting so I thought I'd try it. The
position was in the consumer side of banking, and at that time there was no
real track record for women at the bank. One of the major projects I was
working on was a project to determine the economics of automating teller
operations in the branches. I came to the conclusion it did not make sense
for us to do that . . . despite having my tail grilled off by [others] who
wanted to do the project. But my analysis said no way did this make
economic sense. It [the analysis] put me in the limelight so that I got to
know a number of the senior executives of the firm.

Within the first three years of employment she had the opportunity to work on a
major project that captured the interest of the upper levels:

So they said, well she's smart, she works hard, so we'll make her a line
manager. I managed a group of people of 100 or more for awhile and then
was assigned a relatively significant task—to manage the bank's real
estate activities at a time when we decided to make the move of our
headquarters from Wall Street to Park Avenue. So this was a project that
had large budgetary responsibilities, was very political, and was a
substantive business problem.

However, she wasn't sure if she should take the assignment as the person to
whom she would be reporting was known as a tough manager:

I was very happy with my previous assignment . . . and wasn't keen on the
new job. So I went to a guy who was several levels above me who I had
done some project work for and I said, "You tell me that this guy is
impossible to work with yet everyone is telling me to go to work for him.
Tell me why this is a good thing for me to do." He was as point blank with
me as I was with him. He said to me, "Barbara, this is a time when women
are going to do very well in this company. You have to demonstrate that you
can do line and staff work equally well, and not just be smart. This move
has nothing to do with the task or the person you will be working for;
instead, this is an opportunity for you to demonstrate that you can be one of
the boys."

She was grateful for the advice and took the job. It allowed her access to the
upper levels in a way she had not yet experienced:

I don't know if you know anything about moving a company, but it is one of
those corporate problems that does not respond well to pure analysis . . . it
has a lot more to do with the baggage senior executives bring to the
problem, et cetera . . . My boss on the project [turned out] not to be my real
boss; I had a matrix reporting relationship during a time of transition, and I
was in and out of the Chairman's office every hour on the half hour with this
thing.

Meanwhile, a friend at another company called her with another opportunity:
"You have to demonstrate that you can do line and staff work equally well, and not just be smart."

He called me to say that he had been picked by Ed Koch, then mayor of New York, for a task force to oversee the management of the city’s real estate portfolio. He couldn’t do it, but he gave the Koch administration my name. I owed this guy a favor, so I said, "Of course." I made some recommendations (about) what the city should do, and they immediately wanted me to come to work for them. I had no interest in a public sector career, but there were things I could learn. . . . So I went to my immediate boss, and then to the Chairman to request a leave of absence.

Her management did not want her to leave, but eventually granted her a leave of absence for one year on the stipulation that she would return to the bank. When she did, she was given two general management assignments:

I was given a job in the back office, one of the least glamorous but more important areas of the bank. Then I was given a line of business to run in one of the bank’s non-service businesses. At that point in time this was a business of thirty million in profits. . . . I was comfortable with the challenge and took advantage of the opportunity; the job had the right mix of strategic, analytic, and people management and I enjoyed that. I don’t think I ever worked harder in my life. It went very well, far exceeded anyone’s expectations, and now that part of the bank accounts for more than twenty percent of the bank’s business.

Barbara Capsalis was promoted to the executive level shortly thereafter, to a position where she served as chief technical officer reporting directly to the president.6

Getting on the Fast Track
As you can see from these two examples, becoming identified as promotable in early career involves much more than simply following a pre-determined executive career track. Both of these women made a significant contribution in early career, which allowed them to gain the attention of senior management. They worked hard, they demonstrated initiative, and they outdistanced the performance of their peers. Soon they were anointed for the fast track. However, in retrospect, they, as well as the vast majority of high-profile women I interviewed, had to clear at least five hurdles in early career.

Hurdle No. 1: Getting assigned to a high visibility project.
Fast-tracking began for many of the executive women when they became assigned to a high-visibility project early in their careers. Several women felt they benefited from a fortuitous initial job placement. Other women were given a job assignment in an area that was known to be a “career maker” department; in other words, a department known to foster mobility. For example, one woman, a high-ranking senior vice president in the insurance industry, began her career with a tour of duty in the programming area. Because computer programming became an integral part of the infrastructure of insurance firms, she learned skills that were crucial for future advancement. Said this woman, "I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time. It was very fortunate that I took courses in programming because the projects I initially worked on . . . offered a measure of visibility others did not have."

Still other executive women indicated that they made a specific contribution to their departments that soon brought them to the attention of senior management. For example, Roseanne Wlumer, senior vice president, The Bank of New York, served as the first woman to tackle securities sales at that firm and made a significant contribution in her field. Gina Husb, formerly the
highest ranking woman at The Bank of America, was responsible for developing a series of check and credit card improvements as hallmarks for her advancement in early career. Susan Kelly Barnes, chief financial officer for Richard Blum and Associates, and formerly of Apple Computer, Inc., was brought into that firm during the development of the Macintosh project to do financial analysis and later became the chief financial officer for Next, Inc. Jacqueline Smith, formerly vice president of both NBC’s and ABC’s Daytime Entertainment divisions, created several well-received children’s programs that opened doors for her as a senior vice president of programming later in her career.7

One senior vice president of finance made a conscious choice in early career not to work in departments primarily populated by women.

Other women who initially were not placed in a “career maker” department requested or were granted a transfer to an area that had more mobility. Said Debi Coleman, “Even though I had been given a number of choices as to where I would work, I chose the lowest ranking job offered. But it was a job that allowed me to create my own role, to hire a staff, and to innovate new procedures for what would become an entirely new division. That appealed to me. The job offered visibility in ways that other opportunities did not.”

Many women also shied away from areas that were known to be “pink collar ghettos” within the corporation, and aligned themselves with career paths traditionally associated with men. One senior vice president of finance made a conscious choice in early career not to work in departments primarily populated by women. Instead, she chose a job area that combined economics, mathematics, planning, and engineering skills as a way to broaden her work experiences. This was not because she did not want to work with women as much as she felt the departments populated with men had more career opportunities. Said this woman, “I felt at the time that my career would be better served in the engineering area.” Several other women echoed these comments.

Hurdle No. 2: Demonstrating critical skills for effective job performance.

Most of these women had to work hard—very hard, and harder than most men—to succeed. Said Catherine Rein, executive vice president of human resources at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, “Whatever was asked of me, I wouldn’t say no. It was a tremendous learning experience.” Diane Siegel, a senior vice president of community affairs at First Interstate Bank, recounted: “I worked long hours, but I took the initiative in my jobs to do the work on time and do it well, so my boss grew to count on me.” Jean LaVecchia, vice president of marketing at Southern New England Telephone, described it this way: “I never worked so hard in my life. I worked weekends, I worked into the night very often coming in before seven the next morning, I had no other life but my work. But people respected me for working hard and they knew they could trust me to do the work. This may sound boring, but hard work turned out to be the secret to my success.”

Part of the reason why so many executive women worked so hard was that hard work was necessary to gain the respect of others around them. Discriminatory attitudes towards women led many women to believe they had to prove their worth by outdistancing the performance of their peers. Others were hired at a time when women were being hired in token positions; they too had to prove they had the capabilities to handle the jobs assigned to them. In the words of one vice president of financial services: “It is not a glass ceiling. It’s more like it’s made of concrete. You must prove your worth constantly.”
One of the critical skills that these women had to demonstrate in early career was the ability to supervise others. To do so, some women felt they had to prove to others that they too could be "tough." Others adopted an interactive management style that encouraged ample discussion. But most took a no nonsense approach to managing others. In the words of Gina Husby, former senior vice president of The Bank of America, "My philosophy is to get the job done. I like to make things happen. What I have been responsible for throughout my career is cleaning up problems. I have spent much of my career working hard and getting others to work for me on things that others didn't or couldn't do."

**Hurdle No. 3: Attracting top-level support.**

The third hurdle that characterized the early careers of executive women was their ability to attract top-level support. Often this occurred as early as the first job assignment, as in the case of Lois Juliber of Colgate-Palmolive. For others it occurred within the first three years of their tenure with their firms. Barbara Capsalis, for example, worked for Chemical Bank for two years prior to the automated teller project that put her in touch with upper-level executives.

Some of the women interviewed mentioned a key individual who served as a mentor early in their careers. Others discussed sponsors or early bosses who provided support. But contrary to popular opinion, the majority of women did not have a single mentor who "godfathered" their careers. Instead, most of the executive women talked in terms of gaining "widespread support" from their management, attaining "exposure" with the upper levels, and achieving "visibility" with managers at levels beyond that of their immediate superior. In fact, less than twenty percent of the women executives interviewed named a particular person whom they considered to be a mentor in the traditional sense. Most named several executives whom they considered to be helpful, each of whom became aware of the executive woman's job performance at a different time in their careers.

These sponsors performed mentor-like functions by recommending the executive women for key job positions, by working the political system for their benefit, and by providing advice on how to handle particular management situations. "I'm not sure if I can identify anyone in particular as a mentor, but there have been a number of senior people with whom I have had contact over the years who have supported my career," said an executive vice president and chief operations officer. "There were people who gave me a chance, who believed in me. In particular, there was one individual ... who intervened on my behalf when I did not realize I should take a particular assignment."

**Hurdle No. 4: Displaying entrepreneurial initiative.**

Yet another hurdle that characterized the early career success of the majority of executive women studied was a willingness to take risks on the projects they were assigned. Barbara Capsalis of Chemical Bank said, "It may have been very naive on my part, but at the time when the automated teller project took place, I recommended the opposite of what others wanted to hear. (The bank) was about to move into its own automated era, and had just hired the guy who was responsible for the Sabre system at American Airlines. . . . also sitting on the Board was an IBM person and he was favoring automation. My analysis showed, however, that it was an idea that wouldn't work. . . . It was a risk, [although] I didn't realize that at the time."
Many of the executive women interviewed became intrapreneurs within the corporate structure. Debi Coleman was heavily involved in the development of the Macintosh as a separate unit within Apple Computer, as part of a four-person management team led by Steve Jobs. Barbara Capsalis took over a group of bank services that later developed into over twenty percent of the bank’s current business. Lois Juliber managed new product developments that are known even today at General Foods. Each of these women not only took risks in accepting such assignments, but they also demonstrated entrepreneurial initiative by succeeding in such assignments. They made themselves stand out from the crowd with their contributions to their business’s bottom line.

Other women purposely chose job assignments that were more entrepreneurial so that they could demonstrate their talents. Linda Daines, a vice president in the equity division at Goldman Sachs and Co., chose a job area that allowed her to prove her worth by making a direct contribution to the revenues in the firm. She said, “My area of the business is very entrepreneurial. We bring new clients and opportunities to the firm. The job is very results-oriented. I knew I would be motivated in a career where I knew I could have a direct impact on the bottom line and no one would question my contribution.”

Hurdle No. 5: Accurately identifying what the company values.
The final hurdle that many of the executive women faced in early career was accurately assessing their firm’s values and culture. “Look, I knew I was at a disadvantage, being a woman,” stated one highly placed financial officer. “But I paid attention to what was considered important in ways that others did not. I studied people. And I learned what to do, who to walk with, and how to get along with others. Managing people in a team effort is highly valued in this firm. That’s what I did, and that is [in part] how I became noticed.”

Many of the executive women became shrewd observers of their firm’s corporate cultures as a survival strategy. For those women who began their careers at a time when few women were in management positions, let alone senior management positions, keen observations of the ropes to skip and the ropes to know were essential to guarantee future success. “I became aware of the [banking culture] quite early in my career. What was valued was maximizing business value, and that is how I conducted my work,” said Rosanne Witter, senior vice president, The Bank of New York. Said Pam Flaherty, division executive, human resources, at Citicorp, “You need to learn how to influence others, how to sell others on your ideas. We are all part of complex organizations and maintaining a network is very important in the corporate culture.”

A Few Good People
Power in corporations is not given to those who ask; it must be earned through credible actions that gain the respect of others. Very few women or men are anointed for the honor and responsibilities of senior management’s inner circle. Ultimately, fast tracking results from the delicate interplay of the skills that the employee possesses, the company circumstances, and the favorability of person-job fit.

From senior management’s point of view, the ideal candidate is one who can get the job done. These executive women were able to overcome career obstacles during the time when women in corporations were supposed to have
limited ambition. While only a few men or women will ever make it to the top of their firms, it is clear that these exceptional executives have changed future succession planning to broaden the search from “a few good men” to “a few good people.” Therefore, take heart. The message of this study is to stand up and be counted.

Endnotes

1 Appreciation is extended to David M. Mangini for his comments on earlier drafts of this article, and John F. Veiga for his careful editing of this work.
2 Executive women were carefully hand-picked for the interviews based on the following criteria: 1) they had achieved at minimum the vice president level of a Fortune 500 corporation or its equivalent; 2) they were known for their accomplishments in their firms or industries; and 3) they were recommended by employees as women who were respected as credible, talented managers. Many of the women had been profiled in the popular press for their contributions to their industries and firms, and some initial contacts were made through published reports about their career successes. Thirty-one percent of the executive women held jobs in the banking or financial services sector, twenty-nine percent represented manufacturing interests, nine percent insurance services, fifteen percent communications, television, or publishing interests, four percent health or public services, and twelve percent from other firms. All of the women held positions at the vice president level, senior vice president level, or were presidents of major operating areas of their firms. The duration of time to achieve the corporate officer level ranged from seven to twenty-eight years among the executive women studied.
3 Thanks to Debi Coleman, Lois Julliber, and Barbara Capsalis for the inclusion of their career biographies in this work, and to all the other women quoted herein.
4 The median age of the women studied was forty-eight; all but seven had completed college-level education. Twenty-seven percent held M.B.A. degrees, and forty-two percent held advanced graduate degrees. Among the women who had completed college, twenty percent held degrees in economics, sixteen percent in mathematics, eighteen percent in languages, communication, or literature, eleven percent in history or political sciences, six percent in science or technical fields, and twenty-nine percent in diverse other subjects. Thirty percent were married to the same mate, thirty-two percent were divorced or divorced and remarried, twelve percent were single, and twenty-six percent felt uncomfortable disclosing personal information. Of those who were married, divorced, and/or remarried, over sixty percent had children, although one-third of this group referred to stepchildren from their spouse’s previous marriage.
5 An analysis of the positions held by women in the same corporations, based on their career histories: 1) a successful first supervisory experience (31%); 2) an early move out of staff assignments (35%); 3) an interview for a career change (61%); 4) time spent in corporate headquarters staff, typically assisting an upper-level executive or working on a high-visibility task force (73%); and (later) 4) a broadening general management experience (58%). Overall career path assignments included the following breakdown: eighteen percent of the women spent the duration of their career in human resources assignments, thirteen percent held a series of jobs in information systems, sixteen percent held positions in financial areas, eleven percent held jobs in corporate staff, typically corporate planning-related positions, nine percent completed their careers in marketing areas, seven percent in legal areas, and twenty-six percent in diverse other operations not clearly categorized by a single cluster of job assignments.
7 Barbara Capsalis has since left Chemical Bank.
8 In memoriam.

About the Author

Lisa A. Mainiero is professor of management in the School of Business, Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut. She has published several papers on women and power, office romance, and the career strategies for technical professionals in journals such as Administrative Science Quarterly, the Academy of Management Review, the Journal of Management, Personnel, Personnel Journal, and the Training and Development Journal. She is the author of the book, Office Romance (Rawson Associates/Macmillian Publishing Co., 1989) and the co-author (with Cheryl L. Tromley) of Developing Managerial Skills: Exercises, Cases, and Readings in Organizational Behavior.

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Executive Commentary

Addie Perkins Williamson, American Express

As head of management development for a Fortune 500 company, I frequently facilitate discussions regarding who gets ahead, when, and how. Most well-run companies recognize the need for a constantly replenished pool of superior talent. Identifying that potential talent early and nurturing it over the course of several years is considered a real accomplishment.

I will begin by saying that, unlike the environment for some of the pioneering female executives of the late sixties and seventies, most entry-level, female professionals today start out with relatively equal positioning with their male counterparts. In other words, as men and women enter the company from business school, there is a relatively level playing field with no one having a decided advantage over the other. To maintain that level of equality, however, means keeping in mind several key principles.

Get off to a good start early in your career. What do senior executives look for when peering down the organization for "high potential" employees? First and foremost, it is someone who does the job and does it extremely well; that is, the job to which you have been assigned—not the job you want, or the job you should have had, or that job Bob is doing that seems to be more interesting. The key here is to establish and maintain a reputation for being very competent because at the highest levels of the organization, when candidates are being selected, competence is a given and other factors become more important.

As a junior level employee, it is usually virtually impossible to display the kind of competence discussed here without hard work. I have not met a single successful senior executive who did not at some point in his or her career work like the proverbial dog. For women, taking time off to start a family or for other personal reasons means coming back and catching up—which may feel like working twice as hard as male counterparts.

Be selective about assignments. Also critical in one’s early career is to carefully select the assignments and positions you accept. One way to do that is to develop a good network of people throughout the company and at all levels. Use this network to keep on top of current and future trends in the company. Is the company phasing out one product and putting more emphasis on another? Is it moving into a different line of business or geography? This information can help you make critical decisions about where you might add the most value and perhaps get the most visibility. Just as important, it tells you which areas to avoid. On the other hand, sometimes the less attractive assignments are the best reputation builders. In those cases, management may be trying to challenge you in areas where they have not seen you demonstrate skills. For women, as Mainiero suggests, it is important not to get caught in "female ghettos." If you don’t see highly regarded male colleagues going there, you don’t want to go there either. "Line" jobs with profit and loss responsibility are usually more highly regarded than staff positions.
A sponsor is critical. It is absolutely true that one can get ahead without a good mentor or sponsor. However, in my experience, the really fast trackers always seem to have one. Many people find it amazing how little information senior management really has regarding the performance of people at lower levels in the organization. Therefore, when senior managers meet to discuss talent, it helps tremendously to have someone present at the meeting who can speak on your behalf. Other senior executives are much more likely to trust a vote of confidence from one of their peers.

A good sponsor can also help you maneuver through the political maze since he or she is likely to have access to better information than you. Most people who eventually reach the top have had several different sponsors at different points in their careers. One challenge many women face is spending sufficient time with their mentor yet making sure the mentor relationship is not misinterpreted as something more intimate.

There is no one path to the top. Having studied the career paths of a number of top executives, I have found no one sure path to the top. However, as Mainiero points out from her research, there are a number of typical experiences top managers have had. Most senior executives start out with some sort of technical/functional specialty—marketing, sales, finance, operations—which they gain early in their career. Having demonstrated technical ability, the next test is usually the ability to manage people and/or build a team. Some sort of cross-functional experience becomes important to provide a broader exposure to the business. In many cases this is accomplished with an assignment in “headquarters” which has the dual advantage of giving senior management a chance to actually see the individual at work and also to determine how well he or she fits in (more on that momentarily). A general management role is usually the last key experience as a senior level middle manager. At this point our high flying manager is knocking on the oft-discussed “glass ceiling.”

It’s a club at the top. Breaking through the glass ceiling generally means moving from middle management to senior management. This is where the game gets serious. Up to now, there have been a good number of positions available for both men and women with lots of opportunities to demonstrate how good you are. However, in most companies, there are very few senior management positions and they are highly coveted. Your chances of getting one of these positions are enhanced if the following can be said about you: 1) that you are where you are because you have demonstrated competence in several areas; 2) that you can deliver; 3) that you have a good, broad working knowledge of the business; and 4) that your personality and style have managed to fit in pretty well so far.

The key question then at this point is whether you can continue to deliver while fitting into the most exclusive of clubs—top management. Most people I’ve watched at this point in their careers find that many of the assumptions and behaviors that worked so well up to now have to be modified significantly to adapt to this new club which has its own arcane language, norms, beliefs and assumptions. Isolated as they are from much of the day-to-day activities of the company, it is easy for top management to develop a separate culture. The ability to quickly learn that culture and seem part of it seems to separate the winners from the losers.

What does all this mean for women? The old adage that people tend to hire in
their own image is just as true at this level. Since competence is a given, comfort level (fit) takes on greater significance. Women often find themselves working even harder than their male counterparts to make the club feel comfortable with them. While men in many cases are encouraged to become a clone of their mentors, most women not only don't have that option, they are often viewed negatively for trying. The language used to describe men in glowing terms (tough, aggressive, go getter) is many times the kiss of death when used to describe a woman. Many top managers, consciously or unconsciously, want women to get the job done but in a nice way.

It is also critical for women at this level to ask for and receive “no quarter.” In other words, don’t expect any breaks. The competition is fierce at this level and no excuses are acceptable. For example, women who suddenly discover their biological clocks are running out and want to have children must do so without skipping a beat because nothing seems to infuriate the other male players as much as a woman getting to take time out from the game to have a baby. Most men sincerely feel they are making tremendous sacrifices to get to the top and bitterly resent anyone, particularly a woman, who seems to move ahead as quickly without having to do so.

The good news is that, despite the glass ceiling and the club mentality, women are getting to the top. For many years many male top managers just could not visualize a female counterpart. And without that vision, it just did not happen. Now, as I listen to the discussions, the picture of the woman at the top is becoming clearer.

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Gail S. Robinson, Lever Brothers Company

We would all like to believe that career advancement is a fair and rational process. In reality, we know this isn’t so. Most articles on career development stay at the rational level and fail to deal with the complex, messy underside which we know exists. It is therefore encouraging to see an author acknowledge the power of the political process on promotability. Unfortunately, only brief mention is made of the political process and the majority of the article remains focused on the rational side of career advancement.

It is my belief that, in examining the rational side, we are still dealing with only the tip of the iceberg. While I believe that successful passage of the five hurdles may be necessary for career advancement, I certainly don’t think this is sufficient. The “subtle political processes” that the author refers to provide the key to success for men or women in any organization. While it is true that “little is known” about them, this is precisely the stuff that makes or breaks careers.

It would be interesting to interview women executives who were initially on the fast track, but derailed. I suspect a number of them passed the same five hurdles, but got tripped up by these subtle political processes. For example, superstars need to manage the insecurities of bosses who feel outshone, rivalries of jealous peers, office gossip about close relationships with mentors,
and the like. The fact is, fast trackers are threatening to others—and female fast trackers are even more threatening due to gender issues.

These subtle political processes should be brought to light in further research and their power acknowledged. This paradoxically requires us to give up the reassuring illusion of career advancement as a rational process, in order to really understand it.

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