

**PERSONAL FACTORS OF HIGH-ACHIEVING WOMEN
THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE LOW NUMBER OF
EXECUTIVES IN CORPORATIONS**

IV. SETTING THE STAGE

by

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At least 30 years have passed since women became managers in significant numbers in the United States. Today, they account for over half of the management and professional workforce. This rise has been fraught with difficulties and roadblocks. Yet the causes of the struggles cannot be attributed solely to the explicit and implicit stereotyping in the workplace. There are also social pressures, family issues and psychological factors such as low self-esteem, a lack of confidence in their abilities and conflicting values and identities that factor into the mix.

In the 1970's and 80's, the dominant themes surrounding women in the workplace centered on the conflict between women fulfilling traditional roles of wife and mother—required for their financial and psychological survival—and those women deciding to explore anti-traditional roles, seeking to repudiate their mother's generation and, with extreme intention and focus, create autonomous control over their own lives. The middle ground was fairly vague. (Gersick, et al. 2002)

However, the 1990's saw active changes in women's and men's roles in society with a slow but consistent acceptance of these changes in the workplace. Men are more active with birth and family responsibilities. More women are the breadwinners in households even in those with two incomes. As a result, more career doors are opening for women, corporations are more eager to support women seeking leadership positions and more work cultures are better accommodating of the diverse needs of all people. (McCracken, 2000; Morison, et al., 2006)

Therefore, the professional growth for women in the late 1900's centered on becoming comfortable and confident in their new roles. Now, in the 2000's, new themes are arising for women. Popular books focus on "rediscovering the feminine side" so women can couple their natural feminine tendencies with the more active and decisive male tendencies they have learned to use. (Holland, 2000) Workplace cultures are moving to accommodate and actually use the strengths women bring to the table. Recent studies show how the female brain has evolved in the past fifty years, with drastic differences in how women today see and deal with the world when compared with their grandmothers, allowing for different identities as "who I am as a woman." (Schulz, 2006) Yet little has been done to track the emerging roles, identities and behavioral strategies of women in the workplace, especially in the past twenty years as the numbers of women in management positions steadily grew.

Gersick and Kram (2002) saw this gap and created a study to see if women's behaviors were changing at work. However, they only interviewed ten executive women from one company between the ages of 35 and 45. Nevertheless, they found some consistent behavioral patterns

across the sample of women. All the participants felt that their career tracks were essentially based on fortuitous events instead of planned choices before the age of 25. However, between the ages of 27 and 33, these women became serious about their careers and formulated plans whether they were married or not. The researchers concluded that the existence of new options for women in the workplace had them thinking more about personal fulfillment/identity issues than the traditional conflicts between marriage and work priorities. (p. 109)

This does not mean that the women were no longer juggling family responsibilities and making trade-offs in their careers to accommodate their outside obligations. However, these women had more resources at their disposal to create solutions, such as having money for housekeepers and nannies. Additionally, many of the women were seen as primary, not supporting players at work and at home. They saw themselves as equal partners with the men, which changes the rules when it comes to roles and responsibilities. Finally, the women in the study described similar personal themes at work described as, "...gaining confidence in one's abilities, knowing what one wants, and being able to go after it." (p. 109)

The researchers concluded that women's stories about their careers are heavily shaped by the era in which they come of age. (p.110) Women today have a higher standard of living to maintain than ever before, a chance to do work they love and support in the home for following their dreams. (p. 112-113) Perhaps the greatest proviso the researchers found was the overall sense of confidence, pride and zest for life in the women they interviewed not present in the literature that described their predecessors. (p. 120)

As our society is shifting, so are the key dilemmas, costs and rewards shifting for women in the workplace today. They approach work very differently than the women who came before them. There are still glass ceilings and roadblocks on their paths but as the external obstacles are receding, the internal battles are changing.

Women are more responsible for their choices, and have many more choices to make. They have invented new patterns to deal with their lives and their careers. Some of their strategies have helped them to cope with the complexity. Some of them have helped them to get ahead. Yet some of the things that have helped them to be successful early in their lives end up hurting their careers as they progress.

Unfortunately, resources have not kept up with the changes. Women who enter the workplace full of confidence, pride and passion are not getting the help they need to navigate their professional journeys. In particular, high-achieving women, who have been evolving in the workplace at a fast pace, have even fewer role models or books written about their needs and behaviors to call upon. In order to help these women stay and succeed on the leadership track, it is critical that high-achieving women get more guidance that pertains to how they work and see the world.

These findings suggest that both the women and the organizations they work for would benefit from an analysis of some of the typical needs, perceptions and behaviors of high-achieving women in today's US corporations. Given the results of the Gersick and Kram study (2002), it is likely that the second generation of high-achieving women in the workplace bring with them

different values, concerns and thus, different needs and desires than the first generation of women that rose to fill these positions. As a result, these new themes and behaviors need to be identified with a focus on what is hindering as well as what is helping high-achieving women who aspire to succeed at work today.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The numbers of women who reach the highest ranks in corporate America are still appalling. Although they hold half of the management positions, they only hold 16.4% of corporate officer positions. (Catalyst, 2006) The situation is worse in Fortune 500 companies. Only 6% of those who hold titles such as chairman, president, CEO or COO are women. (Eagly & Carli, 2007)

What is to blame for this pronounced lack of women in positions of authority and power? A review of the literature shows that while discrimination is still a factor, women themselves are also to blame for their low numbers in the board room. The literature shows that many high-achieving women jump ship to start their own businesses and families or they job hop for satisfaction as well as meaning. If they stay for the money, they either burn out before reaching the top or lose interest in playing the corporate game.

Unfortunately, the literature primarily places women in either roles of victims or self-saboteurs. Is it possible that the problem has been misdiagnosed, that other factors have emerged keeping high-achieving women out of the C-suite? If so, it is unlikely that corporate leaders can prescribe an effective cure. This seems to be the case when considering how few corporations have

programs that are effectively stopping the “brain drain” of women who leave before accepting top management positions.

Given both the high cost of turnover and the imminent loss of talent with the retiring baby boomers, U.S. companies have very high stakes in understanding and revisiting their development strategies for high-achieving women. If companies are misreading the reason high-achieving women are absent from the boardroom, the solutions they invest in will not make a difference. It is critical that corporations listen and learn what these women want out of their lives and what assistance they need to get it.

Additionally, and possibly even more importantly, the women themselves need to better understand the complex and sometimes contradictory interweaving of their shifting desires and identities. They need to hear their own voices as they discover what criteria they use to make choices—as they explain how they show up in relationships and how they represent themselves in particular contexts and activities at work. In some cases, they need to recognize the salient contrasts between what they think they are presenting and the actual behavior that other people observe.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to address the following questions:

- How do high-achieving women present themselves in the workplace today? How are they making decisions? How would they define their relationships with their work and their colleagues? What drives them to give “their all” and what drains their motivation, eventually driving them away?

- How do high-achieving women define success? Do they think their definitions of success are in conflict with what the rest of society would call “a successful businesswoman?”
- As high-achievers, do they feel they are different from other men and women? How do they manage this difference?
- Are they aware of any of their behaviors that have or will hinder their career aspirations?
- Are they aware of any changes they have made since they started their careers that have helped them to get ahead? What adjustments have they made as a result of their experiences and “lessons learned?”

Women who read and discuss the findings will find new ways to manage their careers and their lives. They might also find ways to adjust their styles to better serve their career goals in the corporations they work for. The organizations will benefit by learning how to better support, develop and retain top talent in their senior ranks. Coaches and mentors who work with these women will have a useful guide to help them with their work.

Hypothesis

Because this study deals with mostly understudied phenomena at the time of this research, the following list is more a set of assumptions guiding the research than a list of hypotheses to be tested. The results will be used to see if all or parts of the assumptions are valid. These results can then be used to develop clearer hypothesis and a grounded theory.

The assumptions include:

- High-achieving women in today's workplace may still exhibit imposter and bully behavior. However, their confidence is more solid than previous generations. This has led to new presentation strategies, including roles such as the Warrior, Queen, Revolutionary, Pioneer, Rebel, Seeker, and Visionary. These roles have emerged as they demand to be significant players in the workforce and seek to be recognized for their gifts instead of needing validation for their courage.
- The definitions of success given by high-achieving women today are varied and complex. They are not single-focused up the ladder of success. They include other life factors and "whole-life" visions. Also, their sense of success is based more on feelings of accomplishment and fulfillment than on the number of degrees acquired, positions held and possessions accumulated.
- High-achieving women still feel the pinch of discrimination in the workplace. However, many of them feel it is just something that exists but doesn't affect them. They do not worry about proving that a woman can do a job. They focus on proving that they are the best person for the job. Discrimination does not have the cultural relevance it once had. These women feel they have to find their way on their own regardless of what a man or woman puts in their way.
- On the other hand, they still feel that they are measured by a harsher standard than men. However, this tends to mobilize instead of demotivate them. They love a good challenge. This behavior is very different from many of the women of previous years who just felt victimized.

- High-achieving women today are more aware of their behaviors and the impact than ever before due to self-awareness and the personal growth activities available to them. However, they have blind spots that justify certain behaviors they believe serve them when in truth, these behaviors hurt their advancement. On the other hand, high-achieving women are reflective enough to identify lessons learned and are open to feedback to better understand the impact of their behavior so they can adjust and adapt to more quickly achieve their goals. Therefore, they will embrace this research as a much-needed tool.

Beginning in the next essay, we begin the study – first by looking at the methods being deployed.