

What Keeps High-Achieving Women from Choosing Executive Positions

VIII: Conclusions

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Companies interested in retaining high-achieving women and moving them into executive positions should not approach solutions as “fixing the women.” As mentioned in a previous essay, there are cultural and procedural shifts that can be made within a company to better accommodate the needs and values of these women. In addition, the possible problems listed above are mostly a matter of perspective and not a lack of competence. If left alone, the women may gain wisdom over time and learn how to adapt their behaviors to achieve greater success. Yet sometimes they only look back on their careers and wish they had done things differently. Therefore, if they are willing, working with a coach or mentor to expand or even change their perspective can enhance the process of learning and growing through experience.

Clearly, being a leader means more than inspiring others to perform. Going from being an outstanding individual performer to being a successful leader of others requires a new self-definition. Management training and leadership books may describe what types of behaviors

work best, but the women will not take on these behaviors until they identify if they want to be a leader and who they must become to fulfill this role successfully.

The High-Achieving Leader

I was coaching a high-achiever who had been promoted to district sales manager of a large pharmaceutical company. She was struggling with getting her team to complete their administrative tasks. She said she felt like the police having to remind them to obey the rules. She asked me what she could do differently to make them comply.

Instead of brainstorming approaches, I asked her to define herself as a leader. Her answer focused on carrying out the responsibilities of the company: 1) for seeing that her district met their sales goals and 2) that her team member's names never showed up on any lists for not completing company directives.

Her definition focused solely on task. She failed to include the human element. Although she was adept at communicating expectations and quick to find resources if an employee asked for help, she omitted the responsibility of setting and maintaining an emotional tone that encouraged risk-taking and innovation (ironically, this is what she, as a high-achieving woman, expected from her manager). There was a glaring lack of words such as respect, encouragement, safety and trust. She clearly felt that her position put her above her team, not as a primary member. This made it difficult for her to accept the situation as a learning and growing experience for herself as well as her employees.

Yet when she talked about members of her sales team as individuals, it was obvious how deeply she cared about them and their success, demonstrating that she wasn't solely driven by her own desire for recognition. She wanted to help them enjoy their jobs and be proud of their individual wins as much as she wanted them to make a visible difference within the company. Yet few people saw how deeply she cared about her team. They only saw her as caring too much about getting recognition for exceeding the sales expectations.

She came to our coaching relationship committed to changing her style. She was at a loss for what to do other than delivering threats and rewards and providing quick follow-up to her employees when they made requests. Additionally, she felt constant pressure from her boss and division management to perform which was typical of the culture of the organization.

I interviewed her direct reports. It was no surprise that they described her as overwhelming, patronizing and too intense. They felt she spent far too much time demonstrating her own expertise than in trusting and developing them. She never spent time just talking with them; she didn't get to know who they were and what they needed. If they came to her with a concern, she was quick to jump in with solutions instead of coaching them to find their own. They were afraid to give her feedback because she might retaliate. They didn't think she was a bad person. But since she obviously didn't trust them, they couldn't trust her.

I could have told her to back off and quit micromanaging. I could have taught her coaching skills. I could have worked with her on specific scenarios and helped her find new solutions. Yet I didn't want to waste our time.

Before she could behave differently, she had to see her role and herself in a new light. This was not an easy process. Although the organization professed to honor human values, these came second to increasing the bottom line. Therefore, she received little support from own manager when trying to solve her problems other than looking at how each person was meeting or exceeding projections.

Yet my client's incentive was more personal than professional; she might have remained on a decent career path in spite of her team's discontent since their sales numbers were good. Yet because she cared, she chose to brave the journey of personal transformation. What follows are discussions and exercises I used to help her reflect on and shift her self-concept and to set up "communities of practice" to support her as she tested out and integrated new ways of being a leader.

A. Reflective Practice

People do not "change" their self-concept like they would a piece of clothing. The process is one of unfolding into a new sense of being. It is dynamic and non-linear. It takes place by reflecting in real-time on events that are happening or recently completed. This reflection can be done by writing or in dialogue.

As her coach, I set the context for my client to talk about how she saw herself and then to explore how this character she was playing influenced what was happening in her interactions with her employees. This led her to try out new ways of thinking and acting when in communicating with her team. As a result, she daily tested out new thought patterns and

behaviors and let go of old ones. Over time, she could see herself changing—thought by thought and action by action. This is the process of renewal.

Joseph LeDoux wrote in his book, *The Synaptic Self* (2002), that the notion of self is defined in the patterns of interconnectivity between neurons in the brain. We are what we feel and what we think. Yet, the neural patterns in our brain are not static; our sense of self is not a solid concept. These patterns are shifting all the time. We are always in a process of becoming as we move through life. Therefore, we can actively assist in the process of shifting our self-concept. A new self is realized when calling upon the information encoded in the past (self-awareness) and modified by choosing to think differently about present experiences.

The key to this shift is choosing to learn. Our genes bias the way we react to situations, as evidenced in the consistent temperament and tendencies reported by the high-achieving women in this study. However, new connections can be made, which shifts our self-concept and ultimately, our ways of thinking and behaving, by trying out new behaviors and then thinking about what happened. (LeDoux, p. 2-9). Again, this process can be done alone but is greatly enhanced when the high-achieving woman is working with a coach trained to ask questions that facilitate the reflection process.

Therefore, high-achieving women can expand their self-concept by trying out new ways of interacting with people and then discussing and thinking about their performance to create and maintain new synaptic connections.

In addition to active reflection, the women can work on creating a vision of “who” they want to be as a leader. These women tend to focus on actions and results. Engaging them in a conversation about who they are as a person driven by pride, hope, appreciation, a sense of purpose, mastery, passion and compassion promotes the development and unification of the self. They may not change their core values, but the expression of these values will shift as they redefine who they are in different situations. For example, what they most enjoyed about being an individual performer may get in the way of them being an effective leader. They may need to temper their passion as they listen more with compassion and shift the source of their pride from their own achievement to how they get work done through others.

A good place for a high-achieving woman to start the process is to work with distinctions. Instead of trying to define an abstract concept, exploring how the concept relates to a possibly more desirable concept can be more revealing. For example, some distinctions that I discussed with my client were:

- Exploring versus Reacting. When someone says or does something you do not approve of or agree with, what would exploring with them look like instead of reacting? What does exploring feel like? Is there a difference between probing and exploring? How can you make exploring a natural and comfortable process for yourself and your direct reports?
- Power versus Force. How does a leader use force to get things done? How would a leader use their personal power instead? If someone powerfully gets things done, how does this differ from forcefully getting things done? Is the payoff for using force ever

justifiable? What would it take for you to be seen as powerful instead of forceful? If you view power as negative, how can you shift your view of power to be positive?

- Influence versus Strength. How do you utilize your strength at work? How do you use influence? Are there times when your strength serves you? Are there times when your strength has caused problems? What would you do if you were considered a “woman of influence?”

The conversations I had with my client around these distinctions were rich. They bent the frames that contained how she saw herself in relation to her work and her role as a leader. The integration worked well because she was able to try out new behaviors immediately after our mental explorations. Once she had an insight, she acted on the reflection, helping to ensure that new connections were wired into her brain. According to LeDoux, this is the learning process. Insight must be paired with action to get transformation.

B. Real-time practice

In addition to coaches, it is good practice for the women to find a community of peers going through a similar growth process. Empathetic, encouraging friends committed to growth can help each other stay on course even when layoffs loom, employees whine, the kids at home scream, health issues nag and projects are cancelled. The women should find other women committed to becoming great leaders in their own or other non-competing companies to create a safe “community of practice” where they come together regularly to help each other learn and grow. High-achieving women face a unique challenge in attempting to master the role of leader; coming together with like minds will keep them from feeling isolated as they navigate this journey.

My client had peers she could call on for this support. I also suggested she look to expand her community with women from her professional associations in case there would be times she didn't feel safe talking about issues with her in-house peers.

Most importantly, high-achieving women should not follow their tendencies to always tough things out on their own. They need their coaches, mentors and communities of practice to provide sounding boards and critical eyes to help them be successful leaders. The time spent with these people is as important as the time they spend on their work. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. If they are truly committed to creating the amazing results that impact the workplace and beyond, then they need to know how to access and use the wisdom of others.

In his book, *Managing People is Like Herding Cats*, Warren Bennis (1997) said,

“We all face the great challenge to discover our native abilities and to invent and reinvent ourselves throughout life. To be authentic is literally to be your own author, to discover your native energies and desires, and then to find your own way of acting on them. When you've done that, you do not exist simply to live to an image posited by the culture, family tradition, or some other authority. When you write your own life, you play the game that is natural for you to play. You keep covenant with your own promise.”

And as JE said in her interview,

“I know now what drives me is leading the life that I know I'm meant to lead, which includes my spirituality, how I am as a wife, how I am as a mother and how I am as a leader. I want to stand true and know that I'm good enough, and that I provide value whether or not somebody sees it. Success for me is not having to prove myself anymore.”

The intention of this study has been to stimulate dialogue among high-achieving women, the executives they work for and the coaches and mentors that support them. The overall goal has been to promote awareness of this newly defined business challenge. I have found that the themes and patterns articulated in this paper are of great interest to the current generation of

high-achieving women in the workplace for two reasons. First, they give voice to dilemmas these women face in the workplace, predicaments that they have had trouble articulating themselves. Women who gather to discuss these findings may feel more empowered to invent alternate strategies for their careers and their lives. Second, they bring forward important emotional needs that have been ignored but should be attended to by the organizations they work for, their managers, and their coaches in order for these women to successfully move into executive positions. It is my hope that this study generates new ways to develop and support high-achieving women in the workplace and inspires specific practices to stimulate their desire to aspire to executive positions.

In conclusion, this study should promote awareness of how today's generation of high-achieving women in the workforce define career success. These self-reliant, highly confident women seek jobs that give them frequent and novel challenges to work on, that allow them to think creatively and permit them to test out innovative approaches to problems. They want recognition for the work when it is successfully completed and useful feedback when improvement is needed. Doesn't this sound like the model employee?

The results of this study should serve as a guide for the women and the mentors, managers and coaches who act as their partners as they navigate the labyrinth of corporate America. Hopefully, it will also give clarity and direction to the organizations desiring to retain and promote these women to executive levels.