

## Five Powerful Career Strategies For Savvy Business Women On Their Way to the Top!

*By Trudy Bourgeois*

Women comprise more than 50% of the workforce. Yet, they hold only 6.2% of the highest titles in all Fortune 500 companies (i.e., having profit/loss responsibilities that traditionally lead to the top executive positions).

This white paper seeks to answer two questions: First, why aren't there more women at the top? And second, what can professional women do to advance to the senior leadership ranks?

In answering this second question, I'll draw upon my own experiences in the corporate world. Before leaving my role as a senior executive to become a business coach and entrepreneur, I designed and successfully executed a personal plan to break through the glass ceiling in the large consumer products company where I worked. The core of my plan will be shared in the second half of this paper.

So, why does it even matter if women are in leadership roles? Savvy companies understand that in order to meet the needs of the changing consumer, they must develop diverse leaders. In fact, companies need women leaders in key positions throughout the organization. Why? In order to produce, package and advertise products most effectively to women, we need leaders who are women. After all, women influence 80% of all purchases made in America.

Corporate America must undergo a **transformation** of culture, philosophy and leadership style if female talent is to be successfully recruited, developed, and retained. It is my belief that this transformation will be led by the women who successfully get to the top of these organizations and transform them from the inside out.

## What Is The Cause?

Women are leaving the corporate world in droves. Research suggests that one reason for these departures is that women cannot fit their lives into the existing work environment. **The rules, polices, and hierarchies that exist today were designed by men for men a generation ago and they simply don't work for women today.**

During the last two years I have conducted informal surveys with my coaching clients. In these surveys I have observed a lack of willingness on the part of senior executives to embrace non-traditional work styles and non-traditional benefit needs.

It's interesting to note that most of the individuals who are currently in CEO positions grew up in what was once known as a "traditional" family. You know, a family where dad goes off to work and mom stays home and takes care of the three children, running errands, attending P.T.A. meetings and the like. These CEO's ideas of employee needs are informed by their own experiences in "traditional families". It is my belief that they are largely unaware and uninformed of the non-traditional needs of today's worker.

Today, there is no single definition of "family". Families today run the gamut - single parents, divorced parents, dual income families, domestic partners, just to name a few. Employees from these "non-traditional" families have non-traditional needs. These needs must be satisfied in order for them to be able to meet their life responsibilities and be effective workers. A few of these non-traditional needs are:

- Managing child care and elderly care, simultaneously
- Flexible work schedules
- On-site necessities like a day care center, doctor, pharmacist, dry cleaner, and an exercise gym

These new generations of women aren't and shouldn't be willing to conform to the box that was built without their needs being taken into consideration. These

women seek to redesign the box. The obstacle to this redesign is strong resistance from those who are comfortable with the way things are. It is time for corporate executives to wake up and smell the coffee. The world has changed. And you know what? It will continue to change, so don't get too comfortable.

Another powerful factor that pushes women out of the corporate workforce is that **they don't feel valued**. Research conducted by Catalyst, a nonprofit research and advisory organization that focuses on women in business, found that 44% of women who leave the corporate environment felt that their contributions were not recognized or valued. As a business coach, I have many opportunities to listen to frustrated workers and learn what is happening in the workforce. Recently, one of my clients told me she has decided to leave the company that she is working for. She is now looking to find an organization that will recognize and value her contributions. Companies should be very concerned about this type of brain drain since it directly impacts the bottom line.

It should be no surprise that **men and women identify very different reasons for the lack of women in senior leadership positions**. According to Women and Diversity Facts 2002, when asked to explain women's obstacles to obtaining CEO positions the majority of men cited "a lack of management experience" and "not being in the pipeline long enough". Women however stated it was "male stereotyping and exclusion from the informal network".

According to Catalyst nearly 30% of female entrepreneurs with prior private sector experience cite the glass ceiling as the major reason they left corporations. The glass ceiling was defined as:

- Lack of opportunity (failure to have their contributions recognized)
- Not being taken seriously
- Feeling isolated
- Seeing others promoted ahead of them

Another influencing factor that I believe plays a critical part in blocking women from getting to higher levels within the organization is that as women, **we simply don't aim high enough**. We need to aim higher. We need to develop a plan to achieve greatness and make the right choices to make our professional goals become a reality! Prior to the women's movement of the late sixties and early seventies, careers options for women were defined in the realm of teachers,

nurses and secretaries. Anything beyond these boundaries was unheard of. In contrast, today's women must understand that they can have any career that they desire, but they must deliberately plan and act in order to achieve.

In a recent women's conference, sponsored by the Network of Executive Women, this thought was put to the test. There were approximately 75 women in attendance at this conference. One of the presenters closed her session by informing the room that she was not satisfied being a Vice President. She boldly proclaimed that her goal was to become a CEO. And, she asked the audience, "How many of you want to become a CEO"? I was surprised to see only two or three hands go up. After the close of the formal presentation, I took the opportunity to engage ten different women to find out their thoughts on becoming CEOs.

Seven of the ten said that they had never really thought of being a CEO. But here's the kicker -- They hadn't thought of being a CEO because they do not like the way the CEO's that they know run the show. The remaining three said that weren't focused on becoming a CEO because of other priorities in their lives.

So, these women don't even entertain the goal of becoming CEOs. It's no wonder that women hold only 6.2% of the highest titles in Fortune 500 companies. We're taking ourselves out of the race. We need to aim higher!

It is my belief that women must change organizations from the inside out. We must get to the top and change the way organizations are run. **It is not just our choice but it is our responsibility. We owe this debt to those women who stood up for our rights so long ago and we owe it to the generations that will follow us. It's our turn to get to the top and redefine the rules!**

### **What's The Cure?**

There are five key elements to the cure:

1. Take personal responsibility for your own career
2. Create a vision for your career
3. Get cross functional experience and expertise
4. Connect with sponsors and mentors

## 5. Market yourself for success

### *Take Personal Responsibility for You!*

**Taking control of your own career is the first step in building a successful one. Taking control requires you to embrace your personal power and your personal responsibility.** There has never been a better time than now to step up to the plate and take charge of your career destiny. There is so much uncertainty in the business world that it is unthinkable to give someone else authority for designing your professional future.

Taking personal responsibility requires us to get buttoned up. That is to say that we must be willing to take a close look at ourselves in the mirror and admit that we don't like what we see and then go about developing a plan to do something about it! If you are currently a business analyst and want to be a manager, go after it. If you are a director and want to be a vice president, make it happen! Accepting personal responsibility doesn't suggest that you ignore the hurdles, landmines or quicksand that awaits anyone who is serious about climbing the corporate ladder. It means figuring out how to avoid them! Whether you are just starting your career or have been in the job market for years you have the ability to chart a course and direction that is crafted by your own imagination. I can say this with a high degree of confidence because I did it. And, you can too!

You must start with knowing yourself. You need to know your strengths and weaknesses, your likes and dislikes, and your personality type. As you come to know yourself deeper, you'll gain an appreciation for your own personal power. Each and every one of us has the power of choice. Exercising the power is what scares us. How do you know what you are supposed to do in life? Who has the answer? The answer is right inside you. To find it you'll need to know who you really are. That's probably the easy part; the hard part is deciding to accept who you are and then to open the door of possibility. If you cannot accept who you are, you will suppress your dreams and deny your aspirations. You may be standing the sight-line of your own future – blocking your own path because you are afraid to see what you are capable of.

I have coached and counseled many people on career strategies. One thing that astounds me is how many people are in careers chosen (directly or indirectly) by their mother or father. Enough already! It's fine to act like a child when you are a child, but you are now an adult. And, even if you originally chose your career based upon what your parent (or other influential person) wanted for you, there is no excuse for you remaining in that career if it isn't the right one for you. It takes courage to honor the true you. It takes commitment to step out of your comfort zone and pursue your dreams!

### *Create a Vision for Your Career*

I like to start with the end in mind so I encourage you to think about what you want to be doing when you are at the pinnacle of your career. If we work backwards it will help you to identify what experience, expertise and knowledge you'll need in order to reach your peak point. What do you see yourself doing at this stage in your life? How do your professional achievements fit into the rest of your life?

You must approach your career like you would approach a new business. It's You, Inc. If you were starting a business today, what would be the first thing that you would do? Well, perhaps it would be to research the market. Or maybe it would be to decide what product or service aligns with your values and represents something that you love and have fun doing. Or, maybe it would be to develop your marketing plan or get financing. In fact, you would probably have to do all of these things. Perhaps the first thing that you would do is to develop a vision. Yep, that's right a vision. How many of you have a professional vision? How many of you have taken the time to map out your journey? Creating a vision for your professional achievements is your personal power source.

If you get this visioning phase right you'll be able to cut your advancement curve and make better job selections along the way. You'll also gain an appreciation for the need to make several lateral moves as you advance instead of thinking that you only need to climb one mountain. With your vision in hand, you'll be much better prepared to capitalize on opportunities that match your strengths and passion!

Let me share with you an example of creating a professional vision. One of my clients has a passion for sharing knowledge. She is an expert in database and knowledge management. But here's what's interesting: She stumbled into it. She began her career in marketing and from there went into technology. She knew that she was reaching the pinnacle of her career when she was able to tie together the following variables: her passion, her career aspirations, and her values and strengths. A perfect role for her is to be in a senior level position where she can gather and impart knowledge that benefits the entire organization. I challenged her to start from where she was and craft a vision and a plan to get the vision accomplished. We came up with the following professional vision statement.

*My vision is to obtain a senior executive position as a business intelligence officer.*

Given that she has been in the workforce twenty plus years, this is a great vision for her. It certainly is achievable. It aligns with her strengths and passions. More importantly she owns it. She knows in her heart of hearts that this is her creation. That gives her energy and drive to make it happen. It's a much better life when you're creating and living your own vision rather than trying to live up to someone else's vision for you.

After stumbling through many choices in her career, she is now prepared to advance in the direction of her vision. This vision will inform all of her career choices from this point forward.

So once you have a vision, it's time to execute it. To successfully execute, you must create a personal achievement plan. What are the steps along the way? What knowledge and skills will you need to get to the top? Write out your plan as if it were your business.

I'm sure that you've heard people talk about climbing the corporate ladder and then waking up one day and realizing that the ladder was on the wrong wall. Don't let that be you! In a movie a lawyer goes on a weekend excursion where she finally admits that she hates her job. She shares this revelation with a friend and he encourages her to scream it at the top of her lungs – which she does.

Then he asks her a very simple question, “What are you going to do about it?” After several days of self reflection, she returns to work and in the blink of an eye, she walks out the door leaving the world of law behind. She accepted the truth that was inside her.

How many people do you know that go to work and hate it? I bet a lot! In fact, the vast majorities of people are in professions that they didn’t intend to be in and are doing work that they didn’t intend to do.

How can you change the tide? Regardless of where you are in your career, stop now and ask yourself a few questions. These questions can change the course of your professional journey and perhaps your life. With some serious introspection, these questions will help you define your professional vision.

**1. Am I in a position that I am passionate about?**

If your answer is no, get a plan together to get out of the job. One of the quickest ways to derail your career is to be doing something that doesn’t stir your heart. When you are not using your passion, you are not optimizing your strengths. Your ability to create magic and breakthrough results is immediately compromised.

**2. What professional achievements will I make by the time that I am 50?**

Be specific. Think about the scope of responsibilities and breakthrough contributions to the company or to the industry. Do you want to have lead projects or people or both? Don’t be afraid to dig deep for the answers here.

**3. How do my professional objectives align with my life vision?**

The best leaders are multi dimensional. They have interests in sports, music, family, and a million other things. They are able to see the world from a big picture standpoint. They recognize that work fits into life not life into work. Life will always overrule work!

**4. Do I know and understand what it will take in order for my professional objectives to become a reality?**

You don’t know what you don’t know. For example, many companies today have succession planning requirements that include taking an assignment abroad. It’s one of the benefits of a global economy. If you know for whatever

reason that a global assignment is not within your realm of possibility then you'll need to adjust your goals or find employment with a company that doesn't have this as a requirement. Understanding how much cross functional experience is needed is also a critical component. We'll talk more about cross functional experience in the next section.

### **5. What regrets don't I want to have when my career is over?**

Like it or not, each of our professional careers will come to an end. One day you'll be sitting in the rocking chair or better yet laying in the Caribbean reflecting on your career. What don't you want to say that you wished you had done?

Make a plan and work your plan!

#### **Cross Functional Experience: A Key Ingredient for Success**

To execute your vision, you need experience. And not just any experience. In today's changing environment, you need cross functional experience. Remember if you approach your career plan like a business plan you would need multiple disciplines to pull it off, including finance, marketing, sales, operations and communications. All of these elements would be critical if you were running a business. How do they come into building a successful career? These and several other elements, including leadership and people management, are the competencies that you need to get to the top.

Cross functional experience and expertise is what you will need to advance your career. The best leaders are leaders who have a comprehensive appreciation for the business. It's this heightened business experience which enables a leader to make good business decisions. What I recommend to my clients is that they obtain experience in the following areas: marketing, sales, finance, operations, and business development. If you're reading this thinking that's a lot, it's because it is. It is not necessary for you to spend five years in each of these functions. What is necessary is that you are able to understand how the functions work together in the big picture. This business acumen is what enables you to know what information to "listen" for to connect the dots.

One of the critical responsibilities and opportunities of leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to break down the silos within an organization and find a way to optimize cross functional teams. To drive home the importance of cross functional experience, I have noted below the critical competencies that you'll need to extract from serving in these multiple disciplines.

- Strategic planning
- Consumer behavior
- Consumer communications
- Sales planning
- Negotiations
- Conflict management
- Financial planning for non financial managers
- Price elasticity
- Supply chain optimization
- Designing customer relationship management
- Consumer trends and analysis
- Utilization analysis including Spectra, Nielsen, IRI

Dedicate yourself to continuous learning. There is no point at which you will know it all. It will never happen. So even after you have acquired the right competencies, continue engaging in internal and external training programs that keep your acumen high.

### *Building Effective Relationships: Connecting to Sponsors and Mentors*

A good plan and hard work is not enough to advance your career. Women are notorious for being hard workers almost to a fault. We think that if we work hard our just reward will come! WRONG! We can take a lesson from the guys in this area, ladies. The guys are great at reaching out and connecting with their male counterparts throughout the organization. Here's a newsflash: You might be great at what you do but if other people don't know what you do and what value you add to the organization, your career won't go very far. As you climb the ladder, there will be many meetings where your career will be discussed. Most of the time, you won't be present. But if you have been wise about building relationships, perhaps one of your sponsors, mentors or supporters will be present to be a champion for you.

Mentors can be male or female. I suggest that you have one of both. How do you go about building these kinds of relationships? It all starts with trust. You don't just identify a person and inform them that you need them to advance your career. Instead identify a person who has the character and qualities that you want to mirror. And, you should think about what you can bring to the relationship. You will get out of this relationship exactly what you put in. These types of relationships should be about reciprocal learning.

What I would suggest is that you begin by remembering who brought you into the company. Is that person still around? If yes, then that person should be your first stop. Go to that person with a predetermined list of competencies that you are interested in developing and ask that person for advice on who would be the best person to partner up with in these areas. You should also ask if he or she would be willing to call the potential mentor or sponsor and arrange the meeting. Also ask this person if they would give the potential mentor or sponsor a recap of your strengths, career objectives, character reference, etc. Some refer to this as warming up the call. This just gives you a springboard to start the conversation without going through all of your history.

Supporters and mentors can be a great source of ongoing feedback. I encourage you to build in candid feedback as a part of the relationship. All of us have blind spots and an outsider can help you to see what you can't see. This is particularly important for women when it comes to emotional intelligence. Women have a tendency to absorb mistakes and fester over petty miscommunications and the result is extremely negative. No matter how bright you are, no one wants to promote a person who is good with numbers but can't get along with the team. You need a mentor who will tell you the honest truth.

The most important piece of information to ascertain from a mentor or supporter is this: What is the corporate landscape and where are the political landmines to stay away from?

## Marketing Yourself for Success

According to Deborah Tannen, author of You Just Don't Understand, women use language in ways that develop relationships. Men use language to tell people what they know. To market themselves successfully, women must flex their styles to use language that tells the world who they are and what they bring to the table. Tannen suggests that women need to learn to speak with more authority. In a world where men have extremely well established networking circles, it is that much more important that a woman learn how to market her accomplishments.

Marketing is a not a new concept. It's been around since the first product was invented. But, self marketing is new, especially for women who have been trained from the time they were young to be seen and not heard. But just a word of warning, don't try to begin to self market yourself until you are absolutely buttoned up and ready to face the world. It takes a long time to earn a reputation, but in a few quick minutes your reputation can be damaged. Tom Peters introduced the idea of personal branding back in the early 90's. In his book The Brand Called You, he outlined the importance of advertising yourself. As with any good marketing strategy you have to clarify the goal. You must understand the target audience. And, you must construct a communication plan that allows you maximum visibility.

Your personal brand is the sum of your beliefs, values, experiences and desires. This includes your professional achievements. In the business world, the best way to generate credibility and personal visibility is to achieve breakthrough results. Breakthrough results validate your value to the organization. I encourage you to keep track of your successes. Write them in a journal or a notebook, but keep track. You'd be surprised how many times people are asked the question "What did you accomplish in your job?" and stumble to find an answer. Keeping track of your achievements keeps this information available for quick recall.

Practice delivering a 10-second commercial. Develop your tag line. Remember the example of the client that I referenced above who created a vision for her career? Her tag line became "empowering others through knowledge". Now at social functions when she is asked what she does she gives her tag in response.

The trick is to be concise and use powerful words that convey who you are and your area of expertise.

Personal marketing requires an internal and an external plan. Externally you should engage in active participation in industry associations, community affairs, and trade conventions. One way that you'll know when you've achieved your objective in marketing yourself within your industry is by measuring the number of requests to participate in panel discussions as an expert. From an internal perspective, you'll know when your plan is working as a result of increased visibility by being placed on special assignments, and of course receiving promotions.

### **Putting It All Together**

This whole process is just that - a process. Careers are journeys just like life. I suggest that you keep your resume up to date at all times. This will help you track your progress. Also review your plan on a semi-annual basis. Flexibility is paramount for success.

It is time for women to stand up and declare that they truly are an economic resource that needs to be valued and developed. We must diligently work to produce results that position us as strong leaders. We must also actively pursue our goals without compromise. As Sheila Wellington, President of Catalyst states, "Until more women move into line positions, you won't find women in many corner offices". To achieve this, you must be willing to take risks. Remind yourself of the positive outcomes you're working toward and you'll stay more resilient and determined. I'm a firm believer that you can't wait for anything to be served up to you; you've got to go out and make it happen for yourself. My challenge to you is make it happen!

And on your way to the top, remember your responsibility to transform the organization into one that successfully recruits, retains, and develops all of its employees.

## About the Author

Trudy Bourgeois is a performance strategist who specializes in developing leaders who can elicit the greatest contribution from every employee. She is a former sales/marketing executive who has managed teams of thousands and budgets in the billions. She is the founder of The Center for Workforce Excellence. CWE is a national coaching, training and consulting company. Trudy is the author of two leadership books, *Her Corner Office: A Guide to Help Women Find a Place and a Voice in Corporate America* and *The Hybrid Leader: Blending the Best of the Male and Female Leadership Styles*. She is frequently quoted in leading magazines and is a sought after inspirational business speaker.