

Changing the Game Board

Unorthodox Moves for Talented Women

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*Wisdom is having things right in your life
And knowing why.
If you do not have things right in your life
You will be overwhelmed:
You may be heroic, but you will not be wise.
If you have things right in your life
But do not know why,
You are just lucky, and you will not move
In the little ways that encourage good fortune.*

— WILLIAM STAFFORD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Everyone on the fast track makes tremendous personal sacrifices, but men receive far greater professional rewards for their efforts than women. Many experts theorize that the discrepancy occurs because work environments place more value on the leadership qualities typically attributed to men than on those associated with women.

Some women will elect to participate in the scramble for the corner office; others will strike out on their own and build an organization from a blank slate. Women who don't want to play the game by the current rules will challenge the traditional assumptions about leadership and redesign the game board.

Women's preference for relationships over competition — an asset that's traditionally been seen as a liability — uniquely qualifies them to act as agents of change. To turn visions of success into action, women must radically restructure three key dimensions: mindset, skill set, and heart set.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

A recent article in *Fast Company* asked the question, "Where are the Women? Not in the Corner Office, Even after all these Years. Not Now, Maybe Not Ever."¹ The article went on to cite some sobering statistics about the number of women holding the top jobs in major companies and the dim prospects of getting there in the first place.

Most women are familiar with the pattern. Across the professions — in business, law, medicine, academia, and elsewhere — the early-career hazing rituals are daunting. Working 60- to 70-hour weeks. Living out of suitcases while traveling across time zones. Juggling the demands of jobs and relationships. Living apart from significant others for extended periods of time. Personal life? A mirage.

Brenda Barnes, who famously walked away from the top job opportunity at PepsiCo, puts it this way: “When you talk about those big jobs, those CEO jobs, you just have to give them your life. You can’t alter them to make them accommodate women any better than men. It’s just the way it is.”

While both men and women in the professional fast lane face the challenge Barnes describes, there is one major difference: the payoff at the end of the rainbow. A study conducted in 2003 by Catalyst, the nonprofit research and advisory organization working to advance women in business, shows that women make up a mere 16% of corporate officers. (This is on par with the number of women who are partners in law firms, also 16%, despite the fact that women accounted for 50% of the students enrolled in top law schools in 2000.) Optimistic projections expect this number to increase to around 20% over the next 15 to 20 years.

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THEORIES OF THE CASE

One school of thought on the reason the outcomes of the executive marathon are so lopsided focuses on the corporation as an arena of competition made of, by, and for men. Business culture is modeled on war, fashioned around machismo assumptions of how a company must function. Leaders are charismatic figures, standing alone, above the fray, with nerves of steel and raw courage. They command respect, inspire, shape, and direct their followers. In this scenario, leading a company is a man’s game that few men, let alone women, are up to playing. And the role of women? Those who can’t out-macho the men need not apply.

A second theory hypothesizes that women are simply not as competitive as men and therefore not prepared to make the sacrifices it takes to make it to the top.² More often than not, the argument goes, women nearing the top usually conclude that the game isn’t worth the trophy. They drop out of the race. In what’s often dubbed the “little black dress” decision, women opt for the heat in their own kitchens, soccer games with the kids, and cocktail parties in support of their husband’s (or partner’s) career.

Mary Lou Quinlan, who stepped down as the CEO of ad agency N.W. Ayer, aptly explains a third theory: “The reason a lot of women are not shooting for the corner office is that they’ve seen it up close and it’s not a pretty scene. It’s not about talent, dedication, experience, or the ability to take the heat. Women simply say, ‘I just don’t like that kitchen.’”³

Reality is complex, and all three theories capture a good slice of it. But even if you assume, for the sake of argument, that none of these explanations is accurate, the data are still incontrovertible: women face four-to-one odds of making it to the corner office today and into the foreseeable future.

THREE CHOICES FOR WOMEN OF TALENT

Women who accept those data as reality have a few choices. First, they can ignore the data, jump on the fast track, and assume they'll beat the odds. After all, 16% of their peers have already succeeded in doing so, and women are nothing if not optimistic and tenacious.

Other women may opt for the second choice: refusing to play the odds from the get-go and pioneering their own venture alone (think Oprah and Martha) or with a partner. This path has its attractions and its challenges.

The third and perhaps most viable choice for women is to join the game but change the board on which it's played. Women can leverage their unique capabilities to create a corporate culture based on servant leadership, moral purpose, and collaboration. This is a vision of business with an ethical compass, with not just one but multiple bottom lines accountable to all the interests of all the stakeholders.

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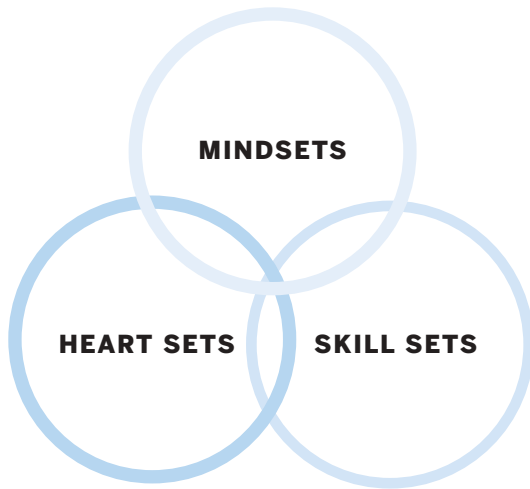
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To backtrack slightly, "unique capabilities" refer to those that have been clearly and consistently identified in gender differences research.^{4,5} They include a preference for cooperation over competition in play, the choice of relationships over individual conquests, and the willingness to be team players over claiming sole credit for success.

There are exceptions to these general attributes, and women can choose to override "natural" tendencies. Indeed, women are often encouraged (by male and female mentors alike) to see these assets as liabilities, and to be as competitive, individualistic, and egocentric as the most macho man. The business section of any newspaper is full of famous (or, more accurately, infamous) examples of women who have chosen this route.

So if the alternative to playing by the current rules or establishing new rules altogether is to change the game board, the question, of course, is "how?"



A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Any student of strategy knows it's always a sound idea to leverage your competitive advantage. If you use what Charles Handy refers to as “upside-down thinking,” women's competitive advantage is quickly apparent: their natural strong suit is their capacity for building relationships and fostering collaboration.⁶ Far from being a liability, this leadership quality flows from a distinct competency — not an innate drive to be the isolated genius at the center of command.

Women's visions of success typically encompass not only professional achievement, but also the service they provide to society and the lives they've improved. Interaction

Associates has developed a framework (illustrated below) through which women can turn their visions into action.

A recent and heartening convergence of theory and practice indicates that the vision of a new workplace is not simply some utopian ideal.⁷ It does, however, insist that the vision is three-dimensional: women can think their way out of the maze together (mindset) with disciplined competence (skill set) and passionate commitment (heart set).

REINVENTING THE GAME BOARD

Mindset: Know What

A mindset is a cognitive framework, theory, assumption, or paradigm. Women reinventing the game board and creating the new workplace must adopt five assumptions about leadership:

- Assume that leaders don't need to be heroic; they don't need to have all the answers, or make hard problems simple and painless for everyone else in father-knows-best fashion. Instead, leaders must model an adaptive style that Ron Heifetz, the authority on this topic, defines as one “that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions — problems that require us to learn new ways.”⁸
- Assume that information can be stored in databases but knowledge can only reside in people, and it can only add value when shared in a social context. It follows that knowledge-creation is dependent on the quality of relationships and commitment in an organization.
- Assume that the most valuable knowledge is not explicit or codified, but tacit and discovered in a context that respects the complexities of learning, expression, judgment, and commitment.
- Assume the best about human motives and expect the same from colleagues and others who look to you for leadership.

- Assume an asset-based mindset instead of a deficit-based mindset. Picture the glass half full and build on what's there instead of imagining what's missing and assigning blame for its absence.⁹ The core of this mindset is optimism, hope, and possibility.

Skill Set: Know How

Nothing undermines the rhetoric of leadership faster than an incompetent practitioner. Leaders must be doers, models of the behaviors they expect from others. Women can't change the game board if they assume they can outsource behavioral change to their subordinates and not put in the sweat equity themselves. As Gandhi advised, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

Women must master six collaborative leadership skills:

- Listening, reflecting, and offering feedback
- Aligning direction and vision
- Fostering inclusion, diversity, and opposition
- Facilitating agreements in high-stakes conversations
- Coaching, mentoring, and bringing out the best in other people
- Celebrating success and inspiring hope in the face of challenges.

People often assume that leaders are born, not made. While some leaders certainly have more talent than others, even the most gifted among them won't inspire others without collaborative leadership skills.

Heart Set: Know Why

The current bias toward developing intellectual and competency-based solutions often neglects the spiritual, passionate side of human nature. This is a big mistake, since humans are uniquely spiritual beings.

Taking the following steps can help women identify the passion, beliefs, moral convictions, and values that drive their leadership practices:

1. Clarify your personal values and practice what you preach.
 - Set high standards of performance for yourself and others critical to the success of your enterprise. Hold everyone accountable for living up to those standards.
 - Close the integrity gap. Show others how to take responsibility for mistakes with courage, not rationalizations. Reaffirm your belief in their good intentions and move on.

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- Accept that an employment contract is a sacred covenant and that employers owe people more than a paycheck. You owe them a place to grow as individuals, learn how to contribute, and feel a sense of self-worth.
2. Clarify your moral purpose and brand it as a hallmark of your leadership.
 - You must be motivated by more than self-interest, and your purpose cannot include the pursuit of money or power.
 - Pure altruism isn't necessary, but your intentions must be values-driven and authentic.
 3. Make character the currency of your leadership practice.
 - Leaders like Meg Whitman, the CEO of eBay; Julie Gerberding, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and Samantha Power, executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy all possess integrity, a sense of purpose, and the ability to remain calm under pressure and courageous under duress.
 - These women exemplify substance over image, a distinctive voice over conformist platitudes, and moral principle over expediency. Authentic leaders display character, which makes them credible, trustworthy, and accountable.

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SURVIVAL GUIDELINES FOR SELF LEADERSHIP

It's one thing to aspire to please and play by the rules. It's another thing altogether to aspire to shake things up and be an agent of change.

To effect change on a wide scale, women must leverage their resolve, their internal wisdom, their authentic voice. And that calls for a Credo of Self Leadership:

- All change is self-change. The most difficult challenge is breaking the habit of doubting your own truth. There's no painless, tidy way to do this.
- There's no free lunch. All change requires risk and emotional intelligence.¹⁰ Embrace risk and get used to making decisions with courage and commitment, not with fear, anxiety, or panic.
- The quality of your leadership is a reflection of the quality of your relationships with colleagues and the esteem you accord yourself and others.

- Your legacy is the life you lead. People learn who you are from what you do, not from what you say. So do what you say you will do.
- Take control of your life, identify the purpose of it, and live your values. Don't fall victim to external forces; select your priorities and take responsibility for the trade-offs that go with them. Accept that there's no such thing as having it all.
- Establish the support system you need to live the life you've chosen. Appoint a personal board of directors: friends with the wisdom, insight, and character to tell you the truth (whether you like it or not) and have your best interests at heart.

As the great German philosopher Goethe wrote in his essay, *Until One is Committed*: Whatever you can do, Or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, Power and magic in it.

ENDNOTES

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- 8 Heifitz, Ronald A. and Linsky, Marty, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Dunkel is president and CEO of Interaction Associates, Inc. For the past 25 years, Linda has focused on designing and developing learning strategies for organizations and improving the effectiveness of their human assets. She has held senior positions in two start-up companies, and was vice president of a Fortune 100 company.

In the 10 years Linda has spent at Interaction Associates, she's consulted with American Airlines, Frito-Lay, Reliant Energy, Centex Homes, General Motors, JDA Software, Shell Oil, and BMC Software.

ABOUT INTERACTION ASSOCIATES, INC.

Interaction Associates, Inc. provides people with the skills, tools and mindset to think strategically and work collaboratively to solve problems and create opportunities. We develop leaders at all levels as well as those who manage organizational change. Our skilled consultants have been helping companies overcome their toughest challenges since 1969.

We provide an integrated curriculum for developing leaders and change agents, with a focus on collaborative capabilities, strategic thinking, and self-awareness. We model the skills we teach to help clients put their learning into practice on the job for immediate results. Our work is based on proven research, and we combine vertical industry knowledge with customized consulting services tailored to our clients' needs. Unlike many firms, we work with our clients to develop a seamless solution, even integrating our work with that of other vendors. The result is a powerful, tailored solution with no internal disruption.

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