

Globe and Mail Submission

I am a senior woman in an organization whose power structure is dominated by men. How do I succeed in this game without losing track of who I am?

Women who have attained senior positions in an organization often find it lonely at the top. A 2006 Catalyst Canada study shows that only 4.2% of FP500 companies have a woman as CEO or president. Women make up nearly half the work force, but rarely make it into the ranks of corporate officer. In fact, only 7.3% of so-called “clout titles” belong to women.

As a woman in a senior position, you can maintain your personal momentum by staying true to who you are, knowing your strengths and having the confidence to show them off, as I describe below.

- Take advantage of your uniqueness. If you are the only woman, consider it a positive, not a negative. In all your dealings with your male colleagues, you are bound to get attention, simply because they do not know what to expect of you. Every time you attend a meeting or lead a presentation you have a tremendous opportunity to showcase your skills and talents.
- Seek a mentor or be a mentor. If you are feeling overwhelmed, look for a mentor. Many companies offer mentoring programs for senior managers. If no program exists at your workplace, follow the lead of great athletes and hire a coach for support and guidance. Professional coaches work closely with you to help you through any challenges you face. You can also give back by mentoring other women and helping them advance in their careers.
- Be yourself. As women have assumed more leadership roles, companies have noticed positive changes throughout the organization and in the bottom line. Remember that women’s innate strengths in collaboration and relationship building are highly valued. Play to your strengths and recognize the contributions you can make as a team builder and effective partner to customers and suppliers. There is real power in these roles. The achievements you realize can help you stand out and advance.
- Be sure you don’t unconsciously support gender stereotypes. Research suggests that there are more differences *within* gender than there are *between* the sexes. Focus on the things that really impact performance such as thinking style, work preferences and relating style.
- Blow your own horn, even in subtle ways. You have a solid record of achievements – you wouldn’t be where you are without them. Display certificates, degrees and diplomas to emphasize your credentials. Collect testimonials from clients and let them speak for you. Prepare a bio or profile that emphasizes past successes. A good portfolio of your accomplishments can stand as solid proof of your abilities, and offer you a self-esteem boost whenever you need it.
- Build your own brand. Personal branding is a buzzword you may have heard a lot lately. It is about learning what is really special about you, what your unique strengths are, and then finding ways to use this knowledge to build your reputation.

Although small in number, women in senior positions have led the charge in transforming workplace environments and bringing greater collaboration into the corporate structure. You can find inspiration in the fact that you are effecting change for the organization and blazing a trail for other women to follow.

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