



[ForbesWoman](#) 5/29/2014

The Female Tipping Point In The Boardroom

By Janice Ellig

“You’ve come a long way baby.” Remember that slogan? One of the most famous ad campaigns in United States history. Launched in 1968, it made Virginia Slims cigarettes the #1 brand with women by depicting an independent, self-sufficient woman eager to demonstrate her confidence alongside the emerging feminist consciousness and the rise of “the New Woman.”

Where Women Are Today

Today we have 23 female CEOs running F500 corporations, the highest number yet. However, of the approximately 5500 board seats, less than 17% – approximately 935 – are occupied by women.

Studies show that the leadership qualities women bring to the table are in great demand, so why such a disparate proportion? According to a 2012 Credit Suisse Research Institute study of over 2400 companies, corporations with more women in the boardroom experienced greater financial performance! This is just one in a long line of studies demonstrating that better decisions result from a less homogenous board. Forget “one and done” or “two and through” – put three or more women on the board and the financial results are even better.

How Women Can Enter the Boardroom

There is no magic bullet, but when women demonstrate their mettle with these five C’s, their success rate in getting into the C-Suite and the boardroom increases:

1. Character

Character is our moral compass. In today’s world, whether one is running the church, the government or a corporation, it is all about doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons. Much of what we see in the press proves this! Women whistleblowers have put many corporations, including Worldcom, Enron & Halliburton, back on the right path.

As Peggy Noonan says about presidents: “Character is everything...doesn’t have to be brilliant... You can hire and bring in policy wonks. But you can’t buy courage and decency.”

2. Courage

[Ginny Romnetty, CEO of IBM, puts it this way: "Growth and comfort do not coexist."](#)

Women who are successful in achieving their career goals do so because they are willing to take risks and get out of their comfort zone. They take the initiative to do something without the guarantee that it will work out and they do it despite some fear.

Sara Blakely, founder of SPANX, was full of fear when she took a Neiman Marcus buyer into the ladies room to "show" her how SPANX worked. This resulted in Neiman Marcus and others buying SPANX and making Sara a billionaire. Courage means acting despite your fear and going for you want!

The late astronaut Sally Ride, the first woman to go into space, said, "All adventures, especially when you go into new territories, are scary."

3. Commitment

Think back to "The Battle of the Sexes" on September 23, 1973. During the infamous tennis match between Bobby Riggs and Billy Jean King, King beat Riggs handily. While she was taking a very public risk and did not know what the outcome would be going into the game, she was committed to win – and to win for women!

Billy Jean King says, "Champions keep playing until they get it right." She advises, "Be bold. If you are going to make an error, make it a doozy – and don't be afraid to hit the ball."

In sports, and any other aspect of life, practice makes perfect. Commit to whatever you want in life. Be determined and focused on what you want. Practice. A half-hearted effort is not worth the effort and it won't produce the desired results.

4. Communication

Communication is an art which can be learned. All great leaders have developed their own brand of communication skills and innately understand how to inspire others. Whatever their style, they have learned the art of the message. They know that consistent, knowledgeable sound bites will engage others.

If you are giving a presentation, a speech, a pitch – make it memorable. Make it indelible in everyone's mind.

Communicate your message through a memorable story. When you are

- Aspirational,
- Inspirational, and
- Motivational

in your communication, you reach people's hearts and heads. Aim high!

5) Confidence

Babe Ruth said, “Never let the fear of striking out get in your way.” Women, in particular, can be prone to self-doubt and a lack of self-confidence. If you don’t believe in yourself and show it, no one else will. As the Co-CEO of an executive search firm, I look for candidates who demonstrate self-confidence in how they walk, talk, dress and develop others. They are not afraid to let others shine!

One way to develop self-confidence is to get some success behind you in an area that you fear. If your #1 fear is public speaking, make it a priority to do more of it.

Confidence means believing in yourself and putting aside self-doubt even when you are fearful.

Men are good at this. They have been practicing it for years, fighting as boys and raising their hands even when they didn’t know the answers. As Warren Buffet has said, the reason men have been so successful is that they have been competing with only half the population – themselves!

As boys, men use the scoreboard as a measure of success on the football field. As adults in the boardroom, it’s the numbers on the P&L. If they fail in business, they believe it was probably someone else’s fault; they brush themselves off, and start all over again. Women, however, lament over the failure, believe it was their mistakes, and hold back in the future.

Women hold up half the sky and more. By believing in themselves, breaking into traditionally male networks, and supporting each other, they can ensure a tipping point is achieved in the boardroom. With three or more at the top of the pyramid, our planet will be more balanced. Men need to welcome women and women need to embrace the five Cs.

Netherlands: Vergaderruimte Boardroom Kromhout Kazerne Utrecht (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

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