

Seven Myths About Getting Ahead — What Women Need to Know

Strategies women can use to get ahead in the workplace

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Everyone has ideas about how women can climb in their careers. But which strategies really work, and which are more fluff than substance? To find out, career-intelligence asked a number of leadership experts to share their views on the biggest myths in the workplace about women’s career advancement. Equally important, our experts assess the realities behind each of these myths, and what women should focus on instead to have a better chance of getting ahead.

Myth #1: Women Need to Model Men’s Strategies to Succeed

While businesswomen may have stopped dressing like businessmen back in the eighties, some still have a tendency to think that getting ahead means doing so in the same way that their male teammates do. “Many times, we think we have to imitate or model the men—because for so many of us, that is what we had as role models,” says Diane Conklin, owner and president at Complete Marketing Systems.

Becky Sheetz-Runkle, author of *Sun Tzu for Women: The Art of War for Winning in Business*, identifies one of the biggest myths as thinking “we can keep up with the boys” by playing the game the same way they do. “It feels increasingly politically incorrect, but not logically inconsistent to note the obvious...men and women are different!” says Sheetz-Runkle.

Career consultant Cheryl Heisler, president and founder of Lawternatives, says that if your natural tendency is to be “one of the guys,” then you should go with it. But if certain mandated activities (“We’re all meeting at Hooters after work”) or work styles

(“Our policy is to never give on anything when we negotiate”) make you uncomfortable, you should speak up or get out.

“Try to impress upon your boss that you understand why the policy is the way it is, but that you can imagine other ways of getting to the same result,” says Heisler. “In many cases, a woman’s perspective can change policies for the better. And if your boss fails to even consider your points, you’ll know that the company’s culture is not the right fit for you long term.”

Sheetz-Runkle has been asked by women what to do when they cannot—or choose not to—log endless hours at the office to remain competitive with those (often men) who can and do. She recommends shifting the focus from length of workday to what you have to offer that gives you a competitive edge over those with whom you “compete.” She also suggests making it known how you’re different and better. “Once you’re clear on what your differentiators are, some of which will be uniquely feminine—such as communication, sensitivity to the needs of others, a strong gut instinct, collaboration, or others—be sure the people you work with know it,” Sheetz-Runkle says.

Myth #2: Women Can’t Be Assertive

Although women shouldn’t expect to model men’s strategies verbatim on their path to success, there are some tips they can borrow from their toolkit. Career coach Elene Cafasso, founder and president of Enerpace, points out that women have to learn to be assertive in a way that is different from how men show assertiveness—yet notes that if women aren’t assertive, they won’t get heard. “If you are always asking questions instead of making declarative statements, you won’t get what you want,” says Cafasso. “Figure out a position and state it!”

Sheetz-Runkle agrees that it’s a myth that women can’t be “aggressive” like men, or that they’ll be penalized for doing so, citing a recent Stanford Study of 132 business school grads over eight years. “What they found was that women who are aggressive, assertive, and confident *but* can turn this on and off and dial it back based on the situation, *get more promotions* than women who cannot—and than men,” Sheetz-Runkle says. “The researchers call this acting like a chameleon and assessing situations and acting accordingly.”

Myth #3: You Have to Do It All—All by Yourself

How often do you hear a man worry about having to “do it all”? Heisler says that while she rarely hears this lament from men, she sees many stretched-to-the-max women who are both primary breadwinners at work and primary caregivers at home—and who expect to be able to pull off both roles flawlessly with no help.

“To be successful in either or both of these important roles, women *must* learn to delegate,” says Heisler. “You cannot be all things to all people, at least not for long. Either your health or your sanity is going to go if you try.”

Myth #4: You Have to Lose Who You Are to What You Do

Ever feel like you need to “check yourself at the door” to succeed? So do many other women, according to our panelists. “The biggest thing I see is that women think they have to be something other than just themselves,” says Conklin. Heisler makes the point that when you trade your values, beliefs, or management style for management’s preferences, it’s not just you who loses. The company loses as well when it becomes so narrowly focused that diverse approaches are ignored, or worse, forbidden.

“The happiest career stories I see are those in which the woman and her career match one another in both professional and personal attributes,” Heisler says. “The amount of energy many women spend in trying to be round pegs in square holes could be so much better spent in locating careers or alternative industries that value who they already are as people instead of trying to make them into something they are not.”

She recommends that instead of surrendering yourself, you should take the time to discover what you love, what makes you unique, and where to apply your intuitive skills and interests. “The more a woman knows and plays to her strengths, the less time and energy she will have to devote to pretending to be someone else and the more she can apply herself to the tasks at hand,” says Heisler. “While I would give the same advice to men, women need to hear it even more.”

Myth #5: If You Work Hard Enough, You’ll Get Noticed

Women are notorious worker bees—and hard work certainly can play a role in successful advancement efforts. But hard work doesn’t always pay off in a promotion. In fact, keeping your nose to the grindstone 24/7 can cause you to miss out on opportunities to do other things that could help your career, such as networking and staying in the political loop.

“The # 1 myth that *still* persists out there is the one that says, ‘if I just work hard enough’ or ‘if I just do a good enough job’...I’ll get noticed, promoted, more responsibilities, the big project, a bigger budget, etc,” says Cafasso. “Working harder doesn’t get you ahead. It’s working on the right things, cultivating the right relationships, and making sure those who can influence your career know about it.”

“We have to play the game, work the network, and understand what it takes to get ahead in our environment,” says Sheetz-Runkle. “Heads down, plugging away, day after day, night after night, will get us more long hours. On its own, it won’t get us ahead.”

Because many women assume that their talents will be self-evident, they may be reluctant to toot their own horn, adds Karen Mallia, associate professor at the University of South Carolina. “Studies show men over-estimate their talent and women under-promote themselves,” says Mallia. “You need to be your own brand, and make sure everyone inside and outside your organization is aware of who you are and what you are capable of doing.”

On a related note, Professor Cynthia Ingols, associate professor at Simmons School of Management, notes that men seem to understand intuitively or better the political dynamics of self-promotion. “This notion that if I do good work, everybody will recognize it and I’ll get rewarded, is something that women really believe in general,” says Ingols. “I think men are much better at understanding the political dynamics of how to get ahead, because they recognize organizational hierarchies. When people understand that dynamic better, then they understand the need to brag effectively, and in ways that people can hear.”

Related to the myth of “if I do good work, accolades will follow” is one that Amy Hillman, executive dean of Arizona State University’s W. P. Carey School of Business, identifies: that the right job or advancement opportunity will come along if you’re patient. “Don’t wait for opportunities, make them happen,” says Hillman. “The job market is extremely competitive right now. You have to make sure that you can wear many hats at a business. Thinking outside the box of your current position will help you advance throughout your career.”

Myth #6: Being Good Is Good Enough

At the same time that it’s important to self-promote, it’s also important that your achievements stand out from the increasingly competitive, noise-filled playing field. Mallia notes that it is especially important for Gen Y to understand that today, you have to be extraordinary to stand out.

“Everybody doesn’t get a trophy on real-world teams,” says Mallia. “Everybody doesn’t get hired. You have to strive to be the best—every day, in every way. Only the very best will survive and prosper.”

Myth #7: If You Don’t Do It Yourself, It Won’t be Done Right

Is this a familiar scenario? It’s 4:30PM on a Friday, and your team has work that needs to be completed before the day at the office can end. Junior members of the team offer to help you, but you decline, figuring you can finish the work faster and more efficiently yourself.

“This seems to be built in to the female DNA,” says Gwen Jewett, owner at Pilot Coaching, LLC. “We are natural multi-taskers, and will frequently take on something new without removing something else. Then we get bogged down, frustrated, tired, and impatient with the people around us who ‘don’t seem to do anything!’ You are then perceived as a whiner or a prima donna.”

As an alternative to this frustrating scenario, Jewett suggests focusing on the end result that you want to produce. “Make clear requests of people around you who can and are willing to help,” says Jewett. “Let go of the idea that getting help and support reduces your own success in any way.”

About Robin Madell



Robin Madell has spent over two decades as a corporate writer, journalist, and communications consultant on business, leadership, career, health, finance, technology, and public-interest issues. She is a contributing writer to U.S. News & World Report and serves as a copywriter, speechwriter, and ghostwriter for executives and entrepreneurs across diverse industries. She has served on the Board of Directors of the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association in New York and San Francisco. Robin is the author of *Surviving Your Thirties: Americans Talk About Life After 30* and co-author of *The Strong Principles: Career Success*.