

For Women, Perception Is Everything

To smash the glass ceiling, women can rely on their personal brand • BY BOUVIER WILLIAMS



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It's a distinct possibility the United States will make history by electing a woman to the Oval Office for the first time next year. Will this mean the glass ceiling will finally shatter? Hardly.

A 2015 analysis of S&P 500 companies conducted by nonprofit research firm Catalyst reveals women make up 4.6 percent of CEO jobs, though they constitute 45 percent of the workforce. The disparity is significant.

It's no secret that women often achieve successful outcomes on par with their male peers. But questions arise about the way these results are perceived. There always seem to be questions raised about women's effectiveness when they hold male-dominated roles.

According to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, most Americans believe that women register just as high as men on leadership traits such as intelligence, creativity and innovation. This same study also showed that 43 percent believe women are held back from top jobs because they are held to a higher standard than men.

Ron Andrews, vice president and head of human resources of U.S. businesses at Prudential Financial, said the tenor of the conversation can shift when women are discussed in a succession-planning process. There are often more questions raised regarding a woman's readiness than when a male colleague is under consideration.

"Male executives drill deep into her financial acumen, strategic thinking or ability to manage difficult situations," he said. "Of course, men are also vetted in these same areas, but leaders tend to fill in any skill/experiential gaps or blind spots with reference to the guy's potential for future leadership. The conversation about women is more grounded in past performance, demonstrated accomplishments, and punctuated by an attitude that says, 'Prove to me beyond a reasonable doubt that she is prepared to do the job.'"

To combat this mindset, women should look at themselves like any well-regarded corporate brand that requires active management. A personal brand is another way of thinking about reputation that can be as important a factor in career growth as the right development.

The key is learning how to make your brand live in key stakeholders' minds. Senior learning executives can be a great partner in these endeavors. They can assess the link between individual capabilities and performance outcomes, and identify resources to better position oneself before managers, colleagues and customers.

Women with a healthy personal brand can more easily influence how others perceive them. That brand can garner positive attention and set a female leader apart, giving her a competitive advantage. To build their brands, women need to be exposed to key decision-makers or those who influence decision-makers. There are several practices that can draw attention to one's personal brand.

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Raise visibility. Mentor others with potential through formal or informal mentoring relationships. For instance, impart knowledge and expertise as a teacher/facilitator for internal learning programs. Women should keep an eye out for developmental activities such as mentoring, cross-functional teams and stretch assignments that bring them to the attention of key leaders in the organization. Find ways to create and sustain new relationships.

Seek input and feedback. Women often come across as more confident and capable when they proactively seek feedback from those around them. Further, acting on that feedback makes them appear more inclusive in their approach.

Share resources and lessons learned. Women can add more value by connecting someone to a person, process or technology that will help them solve a problem. They might try to become the go-to person in the group who can recommend a consultant, job candidate or tool to get work done faster and with higher quality.

Remain relevant. Women should articulate how their role helps to execute business strategy, and stay abreast of important trends and emerging opportunities for the business. Invest time and money in professional development to keep skills fresh.

When women play an active role in managing their personal brand, it's a positive step that can drive their career aspirations forward. [CLO](#)