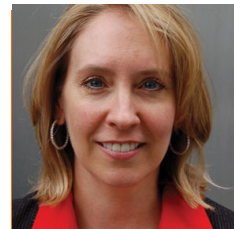


Cultivating Authentic Ambition

By Jennifer Allyn



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Earlier this month, the White House Project released a report benchmarking women's leadership in 10 different sectors. The good news is a majority of Americans (89%) are comfortable with women leaders. The bad news is women comprise only 18% of those leaders. Whether it is:

- ◆ Business (16%)
- ◆ Law (18%)
- ◆ Journalism (22%)
- ◆ Military (11%)

Women leaders have yet to achieve critical mass. The question is why and what will it take to have a breakthrough in those numbers?

In my opinion, it is going to take ambition. When organizations talk about diversity and talent management, the conversation about ambition is noticeably absent. One reason is that it is complicated. There are many things that influence our aspirations – family background, personality, talents and experience, among others – but gender also plays a major role.

Men are assumed to be ambitious until proven otherwise. In contrast, women still receive mixed messages about their style, their commitment to work and their ability to combine leadership with family. As a result, organizations need to be more gender intelligent when it comes to identifying and grooming female leaders.

In her book *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives*, Anna Fels writes about the social pressures that undermine women's career aspirations. According to Fels, ambition is composed of two key elements, the first of which is a desire for mastery. Over the last century, as women earned the rights and privileges that were once the domain of men, they demonstrated their commitment to mastery. But mastery of any task takes a long time, which makes recognition the second crucial ingredient: To sustain any ambition individuals need to be recognized, at frequent intervals, by a larger community.

While Americans love stories about people who succeed against all odds, the truth is leaders rise to the top with enormous help from a network of parents, teachers, mentors, peers and supervisors.

Recognition becomes a challenge for women because our expectations about femininity are not easily reconciled with our notions of decisive leadership. Or, as Anna Quindlen once wrote, we want women leaders to be "tough as nails and warm as toast."

Furthermore, ambition is regarded as a masculine trait; so many women are reluctant even to claim the term. During a panel discussion at my firm we asked the audience what they felt when they heard the word "ambitious" used to describe someone. Almost all the men (94%) had positive connotations, compared with only 57% of the women; and 24% of the women had negative connotations about the word.

Then there is the work and family dilemma. When men become parents their commitment to work is presumed to increase. Wanting to advance on behalf of the family is a central part of a breadwinner's role. As a result, fathers receive approval for sustaining their professional ambitions as they juggle family responsibilities. In contrast, women's careers are still viewed as

competing with their role as mothers. Suddenly the social feedback becomes mixed and working mothers have to justify their commitment to their careers and prove their worth as parents. That is why motherhood is a critical milestone where women evaluate, and often downgrade, their long-term ambitions in favor of short-term balance. Organizations have an important role to play in changing that dynamic. By providing flexible options and elongating career paths, women would be able to slow down without giving up their aspirations.

Sigmund Freud famously asked "What do women want?" Too often I have observed women wanting what they think they can have. And according to this benchmarking report, that is 18% of leadership positions.

Women, and the organizations they work for, should want more. To aim higher we need to reclaim the word "ambition," step up to leadership despite the challenges and help each other sustain our dreams by offering our peers and protégés the all-important recognition upon which their success depends.

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