

From Newcomer to Leader

By Selena Rezvani



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What you wish you knew sooner about the work world.

When I hear that women are graduating with the majority of Bachelors and advanced degrees, I get butterflies. Surely, the advantage of educational credentials will give the next generation of women leaders a running start, right? Top degrees are important and needed, but they are not enough. In order to truly move from newcomer to leader, there are a number of practices we need to engage in on the job. If you ask nearly any professional woman, she has a list of things she wishes she had learned sooner about the work world.

Here are the top six lessons intended for the newcomer, shared by the women I interviewed for my book, *The Next Generation of Women Leaders: What You Need to Lead But Won't Learn in Business School*.

Proactively Learn the Culture

So many people passively ignore the culture of their organizations and then wonder why their ideas are not embraced. Pay attention to how people at your firm like to be communicated with, where and how people get information, how successes and failures are handled – even the formality of dress. Doing so will help you package your message in a way that people can readily accept, thereby improving your chances of winning support.

Don't Qualify Your Ideas

When offering an opinion, give it affirmatively – knowing your ideas will not be accepted every single time. Never, ever qualify your ideas with phrases like, "This might be a silly question...", "I'm sorry if this is off-topic..." or "Someone may have already said this..." In business, be prepared for people to take you at your word; if you tell people your ideas are silly that is exactly how they will see them. A hallmark of a leader is standing confidently behind her opinions, rather than voicing her comments as questions or stirring up doubt...about *herself*.

Learn to Negotiate Now, Not Later

A budding leader will need to negotiate on the job often: for a vendor to come down on their prices, for an important stakeholder group to see value in a new initiative, and certainly for promotions and raises. Seek out trainings, books, advisors, and coaching on this art now and you will refer back to it over the length of your career.

Show your Entrepreneurial Side

One leader I interviewed advised, "We're all put in boxes within our jobs.... Make sure the lines on your box aren't too defined." Meaning, if you want to be considered for an incredible opportunity two departments over, do not promote the message that your boundaries are rigidly defined. Participate in cross-functional projects, volunteer to spearhead a corporate taskforce and take advantage of rotational programs. Become known by those other than just your boss, showing that you are open to growth opportunities in other areas.

Don't Underestimate Mentoring

While Gen Y is famous for not wanting undue oversight, mentors can collapse your learning curve, helping you quickly get where you want and need to go. Look for people with outstanding reputations and whom you have an organic connection with. Most of all – do not fall into the trap of looking to one person to fulfill all of your needs. Assemble a personal "board of directors" to advise you on all aspects of your career including image, technical skills, presentation, and contacts.

If You Can't, You Must

Unless you are in the business of building bridges or performing heart surgery, go ahead and take risks! In fact, the women executives I interviewed in my book said that they continually took risks before they felt ready for them. Consider what the organization could do to facilitate your success, if training could boost your confidence, or if your board of directors could support you. The important kernel is to take risks and accept stretch opportunities, not that you go it alone. Re-evaluate what you have been talking yourself out of pursuing on the job, and take a baby step toward it.

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