
IdeaWatch

New Research and Emerging Insights



IN THEORY

THE SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL FEMALE NETWORKERS

Four behaviors set them apart.

ONE OFT-CITED REASON WHY more female executives don't advance to top management jobs is their lack of access to informal organizational and industry networks. Some people blame unconscious bias: High-ranking men connect more easily with other men. Others cite professional and personal obligations, from office housekeeping to child-rearing,

that disproportionately fall to women, leaving them less time to develop professional relationships.

But some female leaders do establish strong networks—and they win greater influence and more-senior positions as a result. What are they doing differently?

A new study sheds light on their strategies. “I was talking with many women about how to improve their networks, the challenges they face, and what they and their organizations could do better, and I realized that all the studies on the issue were pretty old and narrow,” explains Inga Carboni, a professor at William & Mary’s Mason School of Business and the study’s lead author. “I couldn’t answer their questions.”

The researchers analyzed data collected from 16,500 men and women in more than 30 organizations across a range of industries over the past 15 years. Then they interviewed hundreds of female executives. This led them to identify four characteristics that distinguish the networking behaviors of more-successful women from those of their peers. In some cases those matched the behaviors of high-performing men; in others there were subtle but important differences.

When shaping their professional networks, top women were:

Efficient. Studies, including the new one, show that women generally absorb more collaborative demands in the workplace than their male peers do. But the female managers with the strongest networks “recognize that every ‘yes’ means a ‘no’ to something else,” says Babson College’s Rob Cross, one of Carboni’s coauthors. He notes that



one Silicon Valley executive he knows has adopted that idea as her mantra. Although these successful female networkers might feel an identity-driven desire and a stereotype-influenced pressure to help colleagues out and be a team player, they try to resist. They prune nonessential appointments from their calendars, deflect low-priority decisions and requests, run streamlined meetings, insist on efficient email norms, and set aside time for reflection and high-level thinking. At the same time, they make the most of their collaborative strengths and inclinations by working with others in a way that establishes or enhances key relationships and ups their visibility.

“At every level in organizations, women are more likely to be sought out for advice,” Carboni says. “And when asked about the downsides of saying no, every woman I interviewed said they’d feel bad.” But she emphasizes that the research is clear: The female executives who rise to the top are “more strategic and thoughtful” about how they spend their time. Organizations can do their part by tracking unseen collaborative

work, ensuring that it’s evenly spread among male and female employees, and pushing all leaders, but especially women, to unabashedly prioritize their most important tasks.

Nimble. The researchers’ data shows that most women’s relationships, particularly those with female peers, are stickier than men’s, growing stronger, more mutual, and more interwoven over time. Carboni and Cross note that this can occasionally be a positive—for example, an old contact might offer a new opportunity or employment prospect. But if you work in a dynamic organization that requires rapid adjustments to changing demands (and who doesn’t nowadays?), always relying on the same people can hurt your performance.

Successful female networks are more fluid. High-ranking women know when to deemphasize old connections in favor of new ones (whether by proactively cutting ties or by simply failing to maintain contact). For example, says Cross, “when you’re at an inflection point at work or are embarking on a new project, you want to think about your goals and who will help you reach




them—whether those goals are political (gaining early access to opinion leaders), developmental (supplementing skills gaps), innovation-oriented (searching for new insights), or related to best practices (finding people who know efficiencies).” He acknowledges that some women find this inauthentic, even Machiavellian, but notes that men interpret the same behavior as putting the work first. He says it’s OK to have a “tenure bell curve” in professional relationships. Women should, of course, maintain some long-known advisers. But they should consistently initiate new connections, and organizations can help them by instituting processes such as network reviews at the start of new assignments or during performance evaluations.

Boundary-spanning. The highest-ranking, best-networked women connect with people in a wide variety of functions, geographies, and business units. Again, less successful female networkers tend to shy away from the tactic because it feels uncomfortable or overly promotional. “We heard from women that they liked their own communities,” Carboni says, whereas spanning boundaries made them wary of “backlash” and “stressed out.” But that behavior is critical to accessing new information, leading innovation, and pursuing advancement, for both women and men. Cross suggests periodically considering the leaders in your organization and asking yourself, “Who isn’t in my network but should be?” He advises approaching them “not with ‘Here’s what I need’ but with ‘Could we grab a coffee and explore ways of working together?’” Companies including Ford

and Booz Allen Hamilton have tried to institutionalize the practice by setting up cross-functional groups of female high potentials who meet regularly with C-suite executives.

Energy-balanced. More than two decades’ worth of research shows, perhaps not surprisingly, that the highest performers are seen as the most energizing people in their networks—as the type of colleague who makes the work more engaging, which then drives better performance. But men and women are expected to bring different energy to relationships, and this is where effective female networkers set themselves apart from less successful women: They demonstrate both competence and warmth, both intelligence and emotional intelligence, as studies—the researchers’ and others—suggest they must to build trust. “The most successful women don’t downplay their knowledge, skills, and accomplishments; they show evidence that they can do things,” Cross says. “But they also use humor, presence, and small gestures to signal caring and positivity, and they employ listening skills to spur creative thinking among their colleagues.”

The researchers say they hope more women will adapt their networking behaviors in keeping with these four characteristics. They add that organizations have a big role to play too. “The goal is to embed these behaviors and practices so that they’re the norm for everybody,” Cross says. ☺ **HBR Reprint F1906A**

 **ABOUT THE RESEARCH** “How Successful Women Manage Their Networks,” by Inga Carboni et al. (working paper)

IN PRACTICE

“You’re Closer to Everyone Than You Think”

Julie Lodge-Jarrett has worked at Ford Motor Company for 21 years, holding positions around the world. Currently the chief talent officer, she leads an initiative to encourage colleagues to develop better networks among the company’s 73,000 salaried employees. She spoke with HBR about the special challenges female professionals face when trying to make connections. Edited excerpts follow.

As a female executive, how have you approached networking? During my career, I’ve often been the only woman in the room. In developing a network, I always made sure it was authentic and purposeful. I didn’t reach out to people because I thought they were important and I wanted them to know me. I tried to figure out whom I needed to know and why and set up meetings to pick their brains. When you approach it as a learner, people want to share their insights and experiences. Later, when I had more questions, I would ask those I’d forged a relationship with to connect me

with others. In a company this vast, it may seem hard to create a broad network. But it's degrees of separation; you're closer to everyone than you think.

Are there aspects with which you've struggled? I'm not good at saying no to collaborative requests. I always want to help. But one principle I've implemented for myself and across the organization is saying no so that you can say yes to something more important: constant prioritization. Also, in the past when I made a connection, it was hard for me to let it go. But my mom always told me, "You can have a relationship for a reason, a season, or a lifetime." I'm starting to take that to heart.

What are you really good at? Boundary spanning. A lot of that was just wanting to spend time with people who'd had different experiences, being curious, and feeling OK asking dumb questions. And I think I bring good energy to relationships. Most people who interact with me would probably describe me as positive or optimistic or can-do.

What research have you done on how your female peers at Ford have built networks? We did some work studying women who rose to leadership positions but chose to opt out. One reason was that they weren't enjoying their work experience because they felt isolated and disconnected. The women leaders who stayed and continued to be successful had developed their networks early on and usually

had a mentor or champion who helped them build those networks in an authentic way.

What have you done to help women at Ford become better networkers? We're trying group inclusion training, with men and women sharing their professional and personal experiences; we've found that to be much more effective

than online bias-prevention training. We've begun to connect all our professional women's groups across skill teams and geographies; now the Women in Finance chapter can interact with the Women in India group, and so on. We're looking at a program that will help our high-potential women by training them in the action steps that drive successful network development. And

we're increasing the dialogue between women and our senior leaders, the vast majority of whom are men. We have a "Mustang council" of key women who meet regularly to talk with Jim Hackett, our CEO. We want all our employees to expand their networks, not only internally but also beyond Ford, in the service of the company. We call it Raise Your Gaze. ☺



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