

How Women Rise

To succeed in a career, females need a support network, a voice and a plan. **By Davia Sills**



Of course you want mastery at work. But top jobs always require managing others—so just having expertise is not enough.

Be positive: Remember, your colleagues are likely to feel that a rising tide will lift all boats.

When it comes to gender equality at work, the official status is “it’s complicated.” As far as job opportunities and pay, men and women start out roughly the same; but as they climb the corporate ladder, women disappear at every rung, leaving only 22 percent of them holding senior vice president positions at Fortune 500 companies at the end of day. Yet women are stepping up. They are more educated, earning 60 percent of all undergraduate and master’s degrees. They are now spearheading social justice movements like Time’s Up and #MeToo. And they are willing and able to take on positions of authority in the workplace. So what is holding women back from achieving the level of power and responsibility they know they are capable of at work? The answer to these questions comes from leadership coach Sally Helgesen, author of seven books about women in the workplace, including the just-published *How Women Rise*. In the following interview, this sought-after coach and workplace advocate and strategist explores the factors that are limiting women’s career success and tells them how to push through.

How did you first decide to devote your career to women and leadership?

In the 1970s, I mostly worked as a journalist. In the ’80s, I was in corporate communications. It was clear to me that even the best companies I worked for had little idea of what the most talented and ambitious women could contribute as leaders. All the advice being given to women in those days—in both popular and academic books—was that if you wanted to be successful, you had to adapt to what you found and basically just copy the men. No one seemed to believe that one half of the human race coming into organizations and beginning to achieve influence and power was going to change our perceptions of what leadership should be. I didn’t buy it, because I saw that the women I worked with had a huge amount to contribute,

and it was just getting lost. So I decided to study some of America’s best women leaders and try to identify just what they brought to the table and why it was valuable.

In your most recent book, you collaborated with leadership coach Marshall Goldsmith. Can you talk a little about his work and its influence on you?

Marshall did a major study with his colleague Howard Morgan, drawing from a database of over 800,000 people. Marshall’s book *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* was based on that work and was brilliant in concept—he said the same behaviors that serve you well early in your career can become a problem as you seek to rise. But I didn’t feel the behaviors he called out were applicable to a lot of women I had worked with.

Can you give me an example of the behaviors men need to learn that would not serve women well?

He saw learning to apologize as an important asset. But that isn’t a problem for many women, who can barely enter a room without saying “I’m sorry.” He said strong leaders don’t keep talking about how great they are. Again, not much of a problem for most women, who are more likely to struggle to claim their achievements.

Did any aspect of his findings apply to women?

They found that people who make long-term, sustainable, positive change have one thing in common: They get others involved in their development. This insight helped inform the changes we suggest for serving women.

Contrasting the data from that huge study with your insights about women seems like a fascinating task.

Yes. I’d been a friend of Marshall’s and in a group he started in 1996 called the Learning Network, so I talked with him, and we decided to collaborate on our current book, *How Women Rise*.

WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Women still haven’t figured out how to do it all.

Working moms face a near-impossible challenge: how to be a dedicated employee and a good parent at the same time. It’s particularly difficult in the U.S., as Caitlyn Collins, a sociologist at Washington University in St. Louis, explains in her new book, *Making Motherhood Work*, because of the limited support women get here. Collins spent five years interviewing middle-class working mothers from Germany, Italy, Sweden and the U.S. to understand how women today handle the work-life conflict. Collins notes: “In Germany and Italy, mothers are required to leave work four to six weeks before childbirth.” However, many American women feel an expectation to take no maternity leave, if it’s even offered, and to immediately resume their usual workload after giving birth. Nor does the U.S. provide paid family leave or universal childcare, shunting the major responsibility onto mothers, even if they have full-time jobs. As a result of these work-life challenges, women often feel like they are failing in every area of their lives, disappointing bosses, spouses and children. They may quit or change jobs to accommodate their family’s needs, but they rarely get rid of the “mommy guilt” for not doing it all. Working women deserve improved social policies, says Collins, but until that day, they must rely on the knowledge that children are resilient and, even under pressure, able to respond to parental love.



Make sure to manage up, letting your bosses in on the progress you've made.

You focused, instead, on the specific behaviors that hold women back. What are they?

One that I see a lot of is expecting others to spontaneously notice and value your contributions rather than finding a way to bring attention to them yourself. When I ask women who identify with this behavior why they are reluctant to advocate for what they've done, I usually hear one of two responses. One is: "If I have to act like that jerk down the hall to get noticed around here, no, thank you." This sets up a false choice: Either you behave like the most obnoxious self-server in the organization or you just hold back and say nothing. The other response I hear is, "I believe if I do great work, people should notice." Well, they probably should, but in this world, they probably won't, because they are so busy with other things. The trouble with expecting to be noticed is that it sets you up for disappointment and can result in your feeling unseen and disengaged. To stay engaged, you need to share and get known for what you are doing. One trick I've found is to treat what you contribute simply as information that other people need to know. This helps get you out of the either/or thinking.

You've mentioned perfectionism as a problem for women at the top. Can you explain?

Perfectionism is extremely damaging at senior levels. With perfectionism, you create stress for yourself and for other people that will, in fact, get in your way. You've just got too much that you have to control; you've got to be able to let go a bit. I've watched any number of brilliant, accomplished and incredibly hard-working women fail to get the top slot, because they were perceived as being difficult to work for—demanding and perfectionistic. Because perfectionists are hard on themselves, they tend to be hard on other people, too, which creates a lot of stress in an organization. At senior levels, it becomes a liability. In 30 years of working in the field, I've yet to hear someone say, "I work for a perfectionistic boss, and I love it!"

You've also written about as damaging "the disease to please." What's that?

If you're always concerned about others liking you, you're going to have a difficult time holding other people to account for their performance and for what they need to learn in order to do a good job.

How do these habits factor into women's work-life balance?

You can't do everything perfectly when you're trying to do a lot. That quest for perfectionism can be problematic for women, and social media has upped the expectations there in terms of the perfect birthday party, the perfect family vacation, all that garbage. That really lets women in for feeling bad or like they have fallen short.

Do women compete with each other at work?

Competition is inherent in the nature of human organizations. Where it becomes problematic is when women feel like they are competitive with one another. Thirty years ago, people had a real scarcity mentality. These days, I see women quite interested in helping other women.

How can women better cope with sexism in the office?

The important thing about sexism is not worrying about the unconscious attitudes that form it, but being clear about setting boundaries for what behavior is permissible. I remember working with this pretty conservative major oil company a number of years ago, and the CEO had said, we are going to be holding our executives to account for inclusive behaviors. And one of their most senior guys, who was probably the most lucrative in terms of the work he brought in, said, "This is all BS; you judge

me on my results and my production." And the CEO said, "No, we can't send this message and keep you, so you're going to have to leave." That's what it takes. Once people are held to account, they change behavior pretty quickly.

What do female leaders do best?

Women benefit by being strategic about building relationships and leveraging those relationships to make the changes they want in their life and career. They can become mentors and resources for both men and women, help promote other women, and help them succeed.

7 SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIORS

When it comes to success, women can be their own worst enemy. In *How Women Rise*, the authors touch on some common mistakes career women make:

- 1** They seem to go out of their way to avoid taking credit for their hard work, as if there is something wrong with boasting.
 - 2** They expect their colleagues to automatically notice and appreciate their contribution, and they feel hurt when that doesn't happen.
 - 3** They want to feel comfortable in a new position before reaching out to people who could make good allies.
 - 4** They wind up staying in the same job too long, because they don't prioritize the big-picture view of their career.
 - 5** They minimize their presence, both physically and mentally, instead of holding their ground.
 - 6** They repress their feelings and honest reactions, because they've received feedback in the past that made them reluctant to seem too emotional.
 - 7** They tend to ruminate about their mistakes, churning up guilt and self-blame instead of learning from them and moving on.
- Fortunately, women have the power to change these self-sabotaging patterns. Author Sally Helgesen explains: "Once you acknowledge them, break them down, decide on contrary actions and get other people involved, you could really address these in a way that's surprisingly simple." Remember: ask for raises and promotions, step up to a challenge and seek another job if you find you've been left behind.



A woman with an eye on the corner office needs allies, mentors, sponsors and friends.



To be successful, refrain from apologizing, eliminate hedging and use language that is direct.

Be open and honest. If you suppress your feelings and natural reactions with co-workers, it may be hard to inspire much trust.

How have women's roles in the workplace changed over the years?

Things have changed hugely. I once worked in a company that had a line item budget for strip club visits, which were deemed the only way to entertain clients. Women went to silly sports lingo classes so that those who had no interest in football could nevertheless try to bond with male co-workers by discussing a game they didn't even care about. And yes, women were called girls and asked to fetch the coffee. And they were discouraged from letting anyone know they had a family. I remember a friend being warned to take the photo of her little girl off her desk because it would undermine her professional image. These things were routine, not the exception.

But I've watched how that has changed. Men are showing up in significant numbers at these women's leadership events. No longer do they need to be convinced that their organization needs to do a better job and be more astute in order to promote more women leaders. They agree with that, and that's a big change.

The thing that gives me the most heart and hope is that women are so much more confident about what they have to contribute. So much better able to articulate that. So much more willing to step up in their careers and feel that they deserve, as the result of hard work and skill development and savvy and expertise, to take on leadership roles.

What does the future hold for women and work?

Women are changing our understanding of what excellence in leadership looks like. More and more we have a picture of the desirable leader as being someone who's a good listener, someone who's empathic, someone who's good at motivating people by engaging their hearts. Now these leadership qualities have moved into the mainstream in businesses around the United States, and are increasingly accepted as desirable. That, to me, is one of the big underacknowledged gifts that women have given the workplace.

XXFACTOR ESSAY

The Woman of My Dreams

The business of jazz can be a boys' club. To keep your voice, you've got to toughen up and hold your head high. By Tameca J. Coleman

If I was a man with a horn they would let me in, pass me a Coors under the table, let me take a tug off their cigarettes. That's what I think as I sit out on the curb waiting for my boyfriend who has just gone in to the weekly jam. We came downtown together, and until this moment, I was excited. I'd get to sing with the best players in town. And I can sing. I can coo and skronk just as well as anyone.

We are both 20. My boyfriend checks with the doorman and they say I can't come in. "I'm just here for the jam," I say. No one seems to hear me. My boyfriend turns to tell me he'll be right out. He's just going to play on a couple of tunes. He'll check on me in a bit.

But he doesn't check on me. I keep hoping he'll come to the door smiling and wave me in. I wait hours. The sun starts setting, and it's getting cold. I'm not dressed warmly enough for this weather. I start walking home.

I keep the house during his summerlong tours and his numerous gigs, getting up early and working long hours so I can pay the rent.

There will be a long list of other instances of entries denied because of my gender. Like that one time someone dear to me said the only way I could be a singer in their band was if I was the band fluffer. Or that other time a musician I admired asked me to collaborate on some music, only to tell me he really only wanted to take me home.

I've let these instances affect me too much, right down to the point where I've nearly lost my voice. I live in a world where it is easier for you if you are or can become a man. Even when I'm walking down the street late at night, I have to modify my walk, puff up my chest and broaden my shoulders when I sense a possible danger. My head has to stay up. I must stand my ground and learn how to stand on my own.

This essay was inspired by an album title I wish I could have seen sooner: Meshell Ndegeocello's 2006 EP, *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams*. How do I puff up and still stay soft when I feel like I have to fight for everything I want or even need? Ndegeocello's album title is a strengthening mantra I keep carrying in my mind while I learn how.