



# Success Strategies for the Female Project Manager

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# White Paper

## Success Strategies for Female Project Leader

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### Introduction

There is ample evidence to suggest a labor shortage is on the horizon for the United States. Add this to the fact that surveys continue to show a project failure rate near 70%, and it becomes clear that businesses that fail to implement broad-based programs to attract, nurture and retain all of their human resources effective project managers will find it more difficult to accomplish their missions. The challenges are complicated by the continuing existence of the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is a concept that refers to barriers faced by women who attempt, or aspire, to attain senior positions (as well as higher salary levels) in corporations and other organizations. For the purpose of this article, the glass ceiling is discussed regarding women in non-traditional jobs, especially female project managers.

The negative consequences of the glass ceiling are many; first, it supports gender-biased compensation. Many studies, including those by the U.S., Department of Labor report a difference in the pay of man and women that hovers around the 20% mark. Secondly, negative attitudes about the ability of women to lead reduce the number of high profile projects and assignments offered to women thereby reducing opportunities to gain additional competencies and experience required to compete for the kinds of assignments that will close the pay gap. Women are the primary care-givers for children and the elderly. The scarcity of females in decision-making positions reduces the odds of those in power truly understanding the need for family-friendly, and work/life balance policies that support women, and increases their opportunities for advancement. This paper explores the attitudes and perceptions that prevent female projects to reach their full potential in their non-traditional profession. Strategies for helping females and companies eradicate these barriers.

### The “Glass Ceiling” in Project Management

The Wall Street Journal is credited with coining the term glass ceiling more than 20 years ago to define the organizational barriers that prevent women from achieving parity with their male counterparts at the highest levels of the corporate ladder. Many researchers have sought to understand the reasons for the disparity. Much of the investigation has focused on the top positions, and the results. However, In 1995, U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission which was authorized by the U.S. Department of Labor five years earlier defined glass ceiling as “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions.” The Commission concluded that the glass ceiling exists for women and other “minorities” and prevent unquantifiable numbers of qualified people from fairly competing for and holding top management and executive positions.

The glass ceiling as a metaphor for the conditions that prevent many women from reaching their full potential is recognized worldwide. It is widely accepted that ceilings exist in most workplaces. A recent study by Accenture, entitled “The Anatomy of the Glass Ceiling: Barriers to Women’s Professional Advancement,” surveyed 1,200 male and female executives in eight countries in North America, Europe and Asia: the United States, Canada, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Australia and the Philippines. Only 30 percent of female executives and 43 percent of male executives believed that women have the same opportunities as men in today’s workforce. This supports the continuing existence of the glass ceiling. These barriers manifest themselves in the forms of pay inequities, lack of family-friendly workplace policies and limited opportunities for advancement to decision-making positions. This not only limits the career opportunities for most women, but also, the companies for which they work are deprived of the benefits of a fully engaged workforce.

Women accounted for 51% of all workers in management, professional, and related occupations (U. S. Department of Labor) yet, the majority are employed in fields that are traditional females such as nursing, teaching and banking. The attitudes that keep women under-represented in decision-making positions persist in both the traditional and non-traditional (women less than 25% of the population) environments. Women in non-traditional environments as they seek entry and membership face different and greater challenges. It is argued that, because these cultures, such as project-based industries are inherently “masculine” in nature, a substantial increase of women entering the environment is not enough to change the culture.

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## **Women, Power and Politics**

The reasons for the disparity of power between women and men in the workplace are varied, and political. One of the most prevalent reasons is that women have been socialized to adopt a passive role in society in order to gain acceptance and respectability. This conditioning influences the attitudes women bring to the workplace and provides a foundation for negative perceptions of their management abilities to exist. The Catalyst Organization suggested that negative perceptions and stereotypes about women's management styles and abilities is the primary reason for the disparity between the genders in leadership and decision-making position (Catalyst Organization, 2005).

Every interaction and relationship in an organization involves an exercise of power. It is necessary to understand the implications of these interactions in order to gain and use power effectively. Kanter (1979), defines power as America's last dirty word. Its place in the understanding of organizational culture is primary. Power is often presented as a gendered concept in organizations since gender is one of the primary ways by which power is articulated. The mere mention of gender in organizations can imply unequal access and control, thereby making an inextricable link between power and gender. Men typically take the traditional path to power, join the right clubs, make connections with those already in power, then leverage those connections to become one of the power brokers. Research indicates that women often opt for a less well defined and uncertain path to power. Women typically demonstrate a greater reliance on interpersonal relationships, the rules of fairness and competency in the pursuit of power. This affiliation-oriented approach demonstrated by women is the result of socialization traditional low-status positions in organizations and society (Kanter, 1977).

Politically savvy women in organizations have learned to walk a fine line between appearing tough enough to lead, but not crossing the line to aggressiveness. Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, was called the most powerful businesswoman in America at the height of her career with the company. She capitalized on her political savvy and astuteness to get selected for the top position in the company, and to negotiate the merger with Compaq. So, why was she fired? Although the company was experiencing financial problems when the Board announced their decision to terminate her, so were many other companies whose CEOs were not fired and received large bonuses.

The heated debates about the reasons for her forced departure for HP continues, with issues about the impact of her gender and "style" on the board's decision fueling of the discussions. While the story of Ms. Fiorina demonstrates the dangers facing powerful women in organizations; politics sometimes allows for blatant displays of raw power by women. Research on the relationship between gender and organizational politics has yielded conflicting results. For example, Ferris and Kacmar (1992) found that gender of the respondent did not unequivocally predict the score on a measure of organizational politics while Ferris et al. (1996), found support for a significant gender effect.

## **Women as Agents of Change**

Resistance to change is one of the few things on which we can depend. Most of us resist change, even when the change may be in our best interest, because it involves taking risks and venturing into the unknown. It also involves trust, which is difficult for most people to do. Therefore we should not be surprised that the glass ceiling exists, and the change needed for female project managers to succeed will require strategy, courage and patience. The first substantial wave of women entering the workforce in the United States occurred after the Civil War. This was necessary to compensate for the estimated 600,000 men killed in the conflict (Leckie). These women faced a battle themselves as they entered the workforce; the belief that they did not belong in the labor force was prevalent, even by most of them. Many tried to unionize in order to combat the negative treatment and discrimination they faced. The Knights of Labor, formed in 1869, was the first union. Women entered the workforce amidst preconceived notions that they did not belong in the labor force. Women tried to unionize in an attempt to dispel the negative stereotypes facing female workers (Leckie). The Knights of Labor, formed in 1869, was the first to unionize women and African Americans on a national scale (Leckie).

The battles for equality fought by the first generation of female workers continue today. The barriers to true equal employment opportunities and the gaining of power for women such as employer biases, negative perceptions of women, and pay inequalities are still insurmountable for us of the female persuasion. The kind of leadership necessary to make the changes in organizations necessary for women to be perceived as equals requires that we reflect on and learn from the experiences of those who have faced the need to affect change in cultures before us. We must also use the wisdom of our own life and experiences reevaluate our stereotypes of others and are open to understanding information that contradicts what we "know" to be true.

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## Gender-less Leadership

Organizations face complex challenges that were unimaginable just a few years ago, and they will likely increase in scope and diversity. The pressures of new security requirements that are the fallout from September 11, 2001, managing the controls mandated by the Sarbaned-Oxley Act of 2002 and rapid globalization will be augmented by the pending retirement of the “baby-boom” generation. With one-fifth of American workers reaching retirement age by 2020, an estimated 25 million people are poised to leave the workforce. The mass exodus will not only create a shortage of workers to fill current jobs, but will create a brain drain that will be felt for decades. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimate put the shortfall at 2.3 million by 2014.

Organizations must excel at both planning and execution if they are to survive and compete; they must have vision, be flexible nimble and maximize *all* of their resources. Those that fail retain, develop and reward the contributions of their female employees will suffer tremendous loses. First, they will not benefit from the unique leadership perspective of the best female project managers. Secondly, their return on investment will be greatly reduced as project managers leave these companies for more supportive environments including entrepreneurial opportunities. The money spent on training and development will be lost to their competition. The difference in men’s versus women’s leadership styles is seen as particularly important in light of the trends (Oakley, 2000, Rosener, 1995).

Leadership has been described as the most studied and least understood behavioral process, and much of that study focuses on the differences between the ways males and females lead. Recent management studies conducted in industries as varied as high-tech, manufacturing and consumer services show that female leaders were rated by peers, direct reports and bosses, score higher than their male counterparts on a wide variety of measures. The areas rated included producing high-quality work, goal-setting and mentoring employees. This has led some to conclude that women are better suited to lead the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. Yet, the low number of women in senior management leadership positions indicates that these beliefs are not widely accepted. It is clear the prevailing perception about the role of gender in leadership-followership dynamics must be confronted and changed to destroy the roots of gender bias.

The battle over which gender makes the best leaders is taking the focus away from the real issue; leadership is a skill that can be learned, and organizations are experiencing a dearth of effective leaders. The high failure rates of projects and the current issues facing today’s organization do not allow for continuing debate. The best leadership qualities of both genders must be merged, taught and rewarded. Genderless leadership is possible and necessary. The leadership theory that combines the best identified traits of both female and male is defined in the theory of Third Possibility Leaders (*Regine & Lewin, 2003*). These female leaders possess those values deemed to be masculine in nature including being action oriented and analytical; but also strongly demonstrate strong feminine values and behaviors, such as nurturing, collaboration, and holistic thinking. These leaders are more effective than those who possess hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine leadership styles. Genderless-third possibility leaders possess the following traits:

- **Speaking and Paradoxical ways**—these leaders are consistently tough and empathic, flexible and orderly, patient and timely, diplomatic and candid, competitive and collaborative.
- **Community builders**—promote interactive leadership; create a strategy to bring people together, believing that organizations without weaving unravels into dysfunction. These leaders believe power is to be shared. It is power within—not power over.
- **Holistic thinkers**—are adept at building trust, and understand it to be a key element for creating a productive and creative culture. They see beyond the obvious and connect the dots between important issues.
- **Relational intelligence**—they hold themselves and others to high ethical standards, and believe the integrity of relationship is paramount. Third possibility leaders demonstrate relational intelligence by being sensitive to context, expert at clarifying issues, but willing to be confrontational and compassionate as necessary.

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## Projecting with Confidence: Who Gets Heard and Why?

Confidence is the expectation of a positive outcome. Our language skills reflect how we see ourselves and others. Weak language diminishes the contributions of an otherwise powerful leader. Many women hesitate to use strong language fearing it will make them appear pushy, or masculine. Strong confident speech does not make one pushy, it makes it possible to be heard and respected. The word communicate comes from the Latin word *Communis*, which means common. To communicate is to come together on a common ground of understanding. Despite its meaning, communication is difficult and it is easy to understand why messages go astray. The challenge for project managers is to continually improve her message generation skills. Research into the existence of gendered speech, has tended to concentrate on identifying so-called distinguishing features of male and female communication that fit into our stereotypes of the differences between men and women. Cultural factors such as country, region, or ethnic background influence how long a pause seems natural. Thus, slight differences, a few seconds of pause can impact who gets heard. Research into the existence of gendered speech has tended to concentrate on identifying so-called distinguishing features of male and female communication that fit into our stereotypes of the differences between men and women.

Excellent communicators, regardless of gender, must be likeable, comfortable with authority, and credible. It is a common belief that women often sacrifice credibility in search of likeability. It is common in business settings to hear women ask: may I ask a question, state that "this may not be a good idea, but," and respond with "I can't" when they should say "I will not." It is also common for women not to present good ideas because they are "not given" an opportunity to speak. These kinds of actions must be eradicated if women are to truly be heard and respected. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is among the women leaders on the international scene who has advised women to adopt the powerful modes of speaking associated with men (2 February, 1997, CBS television). She advises women to "learn to interrupt". This advice may not be the key to successful communication for all women, but all women can increase the effectiveness of their speech by exercising the following strategies:

- Speak up- do not wait for an invitation or permission, and interrupt if you must. Secretary Albright's approach has served her well. Female project managers must be able to control the direction of a discussion in order to consistently communicate effectively and project confidence when speaking.
- Make your point quickly and stay focused. Business speak is linear; be concise, direct and approachable.
- Speak loudly-make sure you can be heard; establish eye contact, and own your space.
- Never issue disclaimers; engage in demeaning yourself and avoid unwarranted apologies.

Speaking with confidence and authority reflects a comfort with power, and people listen when the powerful speaks. It is also important to remember that nonverbal communication is more powerful than verbal. The way we walk into a room, the clothes we wear and the ways we treat others all communicate our feelings about power and authority. Plan to be heard, and measure the results.

## Project You: Creating a Leadership Plan

Starting today, create your leadership career plan. Document your measurable, time-bound goals and objectives. Define your plan for success at the task level, and celebrate each milestone. You must find supportive sponsors and stakeholders to help you become the leader you want to be. The plan must be effectively communicated so that your supporters understand when and how to help you. Strategically request and accept projects with high visibility and value that expand your skills and allow you to demonstrate effective leadership. You need to know your worth and what you want to accomplish. Cultivate strong relationships with others at all levels in your organization; ask these people for feedback on your performance and act on their recommendations. Document every successful project completed and the positive impact your efforts had on the organization. Know your worth to the organization, and do not be afraid to make your needs known to decision-makers. Become aware of the less quantifiable criteria of leadership such as respectability, loyalty and power sharing. Success comes from planning, preparedness and practice. The steps below will help you execute your plan and stay focused on success:

- Define your price, know what your work is worth and negotiate for fair and equal compensation. Also, know what you're willing to pay. Are you willing to work long hours, weekend and holidays? Will you relocate?
- Solicit feedback, and accept criticism. You must stay strong physically and mentally so that you can use criticism as a development tool. Education is not cheap, but it is worth the price. There is no crying on project management, keep it at home where it belongs.
- Lead with integrity, and always act in an ethical manner. Focus on things that matters most. You must be open and honest, and encourage the same from your team. Believe in your self, and your team.

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- Be courageous, it is necessary to negotiate for the resources needed for your projects and your team. Negotiate from a position of power and credibility, not intimidation. Always strive to leave things better than you found them.
- Be comfortable with power, both personal and organizational. Genderless leaders understand the value of power and use it wisely.
- Do not try to be one of the boys. Learn the success strategies of leaders who combine the best leadership traits of both genders and strive to become the best project leader possible.
- Clarity of purpose and commitment are the most critical factors in your quest to become an effective project leader who can influence your organization, support your team and create a sustainable track record of success. Sustainability in the world of project management requires that you be competent. But, give up any notions you have of perfection. Leaders that add value to their organizations understand they do not always have to be the expert. They know how to ask the right questions, share information and surround themselves with smart and talented people.

Leaders with sustainability take time to reflect and focus. It is innovation, not speed that breeds success. The practice of an effective, sustainable leadership style will allow you to grow, find balance between your professional and personal life, add value to your organization and be respected by your teams as a competent, fair and flexible leader.

## Strategies for Project Organizations

Organizations that employ project managers must learn to recognize and appreciate gender differences as positive qualities that are assets for the business. Managers must be trained to recognize and respect the differences in the communications approaches of females and males. Most importantly, create and implement strategies cultural and structural biases. Examine organizational design, staffing and performance reward systems. Incorporate mentoring programs for women and hold managers accountable for initiatives by rewarding only those who successfully meet the goals of the strategy. The list below contains proven strategies for success:

- Create leadership networks that provide support and development opportunities for project leaders.
- Mentor future leaders. A strong mentoring program is critical to the success of the company's leadership development efforts. Every manager and executive should participate in a formal mentoring program.
- Balancing work and home life. Work/life issues tend to affect women more than men, ensure that business strategies allow a healthy balance.

Accountability, managers are responsible for driving the company's diversity efforts. All managers should attend diversity training. Efforts must be taken to ensure that the training is not viewed as just another program, but as a critical part of the strategic business plan.

## Summary

Negative perception and attitudes have been associated with the abilities of women since they first entered the workforce (Porterfield and Kleiner, 2005). An examination of past literature makes it clear that the traits associated with effective leadership were those commonly demonstrated by males (Bartram, 2005). It is understandable that the leadership traits commonly demonstrated by women would be viewed as inadequate in the workplace. This caused women to be viewed as ineffective and weak leaders, and created the conditions that led to the glass ceiling. New research and evidence had proven that women are effective at leading in both traditional and non-traditional environments. In order to meet the business challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations must develop strategies to support and develop all of its members, and women must have the courage to develop leadership skills that are genderless and have a proven record of success.

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# Consultant Biography

## **Pearl Maxwell, Ph.D. Principal Consultant**



Dr. Maxwell is a Principal Consultant at Advanced Management Services, Inc. (AMS), a full service management consultancy servicing an international client base.

Since 1989, Pearl has developed a successful career as an organizational development practitioner, professional trainer and keynote speaker. She possesses a unique skill that combines adult learning models, personal experiences and humor to engage organizations and create successful improvement efforts and productive learning sessions.

Dr. Maxwell is on the faculty of The University of Phoenix where she teaches courses in management, leadership, ethics and project management. She is also a lecturer at Boston University's School of Education and The University of Massachusetts Medical School. She is a registered educational provider for the Project Management Institute, and has created and delivered hundreds of training sessions in a variety of industries at all levels from frontline employees to senior executives.

Pearl has extensive experience working with process improvement and reengineering initiatives helping clients, such as SCC, Sprint, RehabCare, Symphony Health Services, to create functional business models for enhanced organizational productivity.

During her career with AT&T Corporation which span more than 20 years she held various management positions in operations, quality assurance and global project management. She also managed projects that created complex virtual telecommunications networks for AT&T's largest customers with both national and international scopes.

Dr. Maxwell earned a Ph. D. in organizational development from The Union Institute and University, a master's of education from Cambridge College, and a certificate in project management from Boston University. She is an AMS certified instructor. She is active in industry trade associations including the Project Management Institute, National Association of Female Executives and the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD).

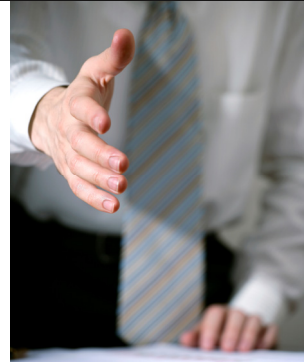
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