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Networking and Women Executives

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I. Abstract

In the business world, many would agree that networking is necessary for career advancement. Networking can include joining professional organizations, socializing outside of the office, and making or maintaining external contacts. For female business leaders, networking is essential to being a strong leader. Research shows that females, as a whole, do not have as appropriate or strong networks as their male counterparts. Other studies show that utilizing networking techniques is not as effective for women as it is for men. Currently, there are far fewer women in executive positions compared to men. Lack of female networking skills could be one cause of this disproportion. By interviewing nine women executives, I was able to study the methods in which women tended to network and evaluate their success in networking. I was also able to get their input on mistakes that women make in networking and their advice for building a successful network.

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III. Literature Review

The current publications about gender-significant issues in the business world include a great deal of literature about women leadership and networking styles. Some researchers found a correlation between women's networking styles and the gender gap and career outcomes. The literature states that women often demonstrate transformational leadership but may not have the networking skills needed to gain executive leadership positions.

Generically speaking, a network can be described as "a set of actors and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack thereof, between the actors" (Wang 2009). More specifically, networking behaviors can be defined as "individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career" (Forret and Dougherty 2004). Networking activities can be formal or informal and can include joining professional associations, seeking high profile assignments for more visibility, participating in social activities, and maintaining professional contacts (Forret and Dougherty 2004).

Overall, the primary purpose of networking is to develop social capital. According to Forret and Dougherty, social capital is a valuable resource that can be defined as "the structure of individuals' contact networks—the pattern of interconnection among the various people with whom each person is tied" (2004). Developing social capital should help ones' career advancement in terms of promotions, compensation, career satisfaction, and visibility.

For women, access to both formal and informal networks tends to be more difficult than for their men counterparts. According to Eagly and Engen, in the Fortune 500 women

only constitute 5% of corporate officer positions and only 1% of CEO positions (2003). Because of this incongruity, the literature sites an "old boy network" in some industries as a barrier to access of certain professional networks or social opportunities. According to Linehan and Scullion, more women are entering low-level managerial positions but they have a low rate of progression from these positions to senior management. Because of the dominance of men in these executive positions, they may want to exclude women from informal networking and mentorship to retain this dominance (2008).

Similarly, women tend to take on more familial responsibilities than men, which can add stress and conflict to their lives and leave them with less time for networking activities (Wang 2009). Women also tend to have a hard time breaking into male-operated networks such as a traditionally male-dominated organization or society. These so-called "old boy" organizations can be exclusive based not only on industry or profession, but also on gender (Wang 2009). Managers interviewed in a study by Linehan and Scullion talked about feeling excluded from "male bonding, which takes place after work hours, during sporting events, and in clubs and bars…." Some other female managers in this study said that they were hesitant to set up women's groups because they do not want to isolate themselves and restrict membership (2008).

Mentoring goes hand-in-hand with networking because they both involve developmental relationships and can lead to career development (Wang 2009). Linehan (2001) suggests that mentoring can be particularly useful at early stages of career development, while networking can be useful at all stages. In contrast to mentoring, the peer relationships developed through networking include "two-way helping" and often last

longer. Similar to a lack of networking skills, having a lack of mentors can hinder a woman's career development and upward mobility.

Research suggests that male mentors may be more likely to seek male rather than female mentees because they may feel more comfortable developing a personal relationship with them (Linehan and Scullion 2008). Linehan and Scullion go on to cite that cross-gender relationships may arouse some discomfort. Females may have a hard time approaching possible male mentors because it could be taken as a sexual advance. If women chose to seek out female mentors instead, there may be difficulty because there are few female senior managers in comparison to males (2008).

According to Eagly and Engen (2003), women tend to demonstrate transformational leadership more often than men. Transformational leadership is characterized by demonstrating enthusiasm and optimism while motivating employees and focusing on development and mentorship. On the other hand, some male managers will often show signs of laissez-faire leadership, which is characterized by "frequent absence and lack of involvement during critical junctures." This laissez-faire leadership style has proven to be less effective than the transformational leadership style and reward-based leadership that many women tend to display.

Even though women are often effective leaders through utilizing transformational leadership, they may be perceived as not having the appropriate qualities to be a great leader. By nature, women are perceived as "friendly, kind, and unselfish" but many people in the business world believe a great leader must be "assertive, masterful, and instrumentally competent" (Eagley and Engen 2003). Although women may have these leadership qualities as well, these are qualities that have traditionally been associated with

males. After breaking down these barriers, research suggests that women have to reach a higher standard to attain and remain in powerful leadership roles. Therefore, this perception of women's' leadership styles could be a cause of the incongruity between male and female senior managers.

Overall, research suggests that female managers who are not a part of a support network may have career disadvantages. Often, managers who have not had significant networking relationships will benefit more from being a part of a support network. The advantages of networking can include "exchanging information, collaboration, developing alliances, acquisition of tacit knowledge, visibility and support" (Linehan and Scullion 2008). Social networks are different for males and females and females often have to join formal organizations to begin to build their informal network (Wang 2009). Females who can prove their effectiveness as a leader while developing an adequate network will often be more successful in gaining top management or executive positions.

IV. Methodology

After reading the relevant literature, I have come up with some research questions that address the methods that women use to network and how adequate they feel their network is compared their male counterparts. Here is a list of these questions:

•*Do women executives spend less time and effort networking than men?*
•*What do women executives do to network?*
•*Is networking as effective for women as it is for men? If not, why?*
•*Does lack of networking affect a women executive's effectiveness as a leader?*

To find the answers to some of these research questions, I conducted 9 fifteen-minute interviews with women that have been successful in the business world. My sample includes 9 women that hold positions such as CEO, CFO, Senior Vice President, or Founder

of their respective companies. All the interview responses were transcribed either during or shortly after the interviews.

V. Interview Questions

Before conducting my interviews, I came up with a list of 10 questions to ask each woman executive. The list of my questions is as follows:

1) *What are some ways in which you network?*
2) *Is socializing outside of the office important to you? If so, what are ways that you socialize outside the office?*
3) *Do you golf?*
4) *Do you feel like there is an "old boys" network in your industry or in the business world in general?*
5) *What advice do you have for women starting their careers and trying to build their networks?*
6) *What mistakes do you see women making when it comes to networking?*
7) *Do you have a mentor or support system?*
8) *Are you a mentor to other women?*
9) *Do you use LinkedIn or any other social network to connect with your network?*
10) *What do you perceive as your strengths and weaknesses as a leader?*

Because of time constraints I was not able to ask all ten questions in every interview but I tried to address as many as possible. I chose this question set because I thought it would give me a clear picture of the modes with which women network, both formal and informal. I also thought that it would be useful to see what advice successful women in business would have for young professionals starting to build and develop their own network.

Based on their high positions, most of these women could be classified as effective leaders but I wanted to further evaluate their leadership styles by asking them what they perceive as their strengths and weaknesses as a leader. Through asking about an "old boys" network, I was able to distinguish if there were times that these women felt excluded by

men in their industry and if they could see that changing in the future. My interview question set was successful in getting the responses that I wanted and it prompted the women to talk about their own personal stories and situations.

VI. Interview Results

My first interview was with the SVP of Marketing for one of the largest weight loss product companies in the nation. This interviewee spoke a lot about being genuine in your interactions and forming personal relationships with others. She does not form these relationships simply because she wants to use people for career advancement. This SVP sometimes feels like there is an old boys network in her industry but they always try to include the women. For example, a social in her industry could include a golf outing for men, while the women enjoy a day in the spa. At night, they may all meet back up for dinner or a seminar.

In terms of online networking, this respondent thinks that LinkedIn was more useful in the early days after its inception because it was more exclusive. Many times, people do not say "meaningful things" in their postings. This respondent only uses other networking sites such Facebook for personal relationships, not business networking.

I was able to interview a woman who is the current Deputy Mayor of Knoxville and founded a woman-owned construction business. When asked about the ways in which she networks, this respondent talked about being involved in executive women groups here in the Knoxville area where the only purpose is networking with other women. She is currently trying to charter an organization called "Women President's Organization" here in Knoxville. This interviewee is working to create more opportunities for executive women to network because she stated that many women don't have the time to set aside to

network. One memorable quote from her interview is that women are trying to be "everything to everyone," meaning that they have a hard time saying no to opportunities or assignments that arise at work.

When asked if she golfed, this respondent said no, it is not her personality because it is too slow paced. She said she doesn't think that there is as much business conducted on the golf course as there used to be because people in general do not have enough free time on their hands. This Deputy Mayor said that instead of golf, "women tend to network over coffee, a glass of wine in the evening, or lunch." Women also have to be more conscientious about allocating time than men because many women have families to tend to.

I asked this respondent if she saw an "old boys" network in the business world and specifically the construction industry. She responded by saying that there is still some of that, but it is "dying off." She elaborated by saying that people tend to respect her because of the work she does, not her sex. The Deputy Mayor said:

> *In a city of Knoxville's size, you start recognizing other women who would be your peers and gravitate toward them. Men in this community have traditionally been better at organizing themselves through older organizations such as Rotary or Alliance Club, which have traditionally been men's groups.*

When asked about her advice for women starting their careers, this respondent said the following two things were important to remember:

1. *Be careful! Don't discount someone if you don't connect with them immediately.*
2. *It doesn't happen organically. Make an effort and make sure you are getting involved in your community. You can't sit back and expect people to drag you in. Getting involved in community organizations helps you learn about the community that you live and work in and get to know other like-mined people.*

The Deputy Mayor said that women make mistakes in networking because they sometimes back off and don't necessarily make the time that they need to network. She cited an example from the book <u>Lean In</u>, where women in a meeting automatically gravitated toward the back wall of the conference room and away from the table. She sees these mistakes being made fairly often and this book really opened her eyes. This respondent said a difficulty of being a woman in the business world is that, "If you push too hard, you end up being the bitch. You must be direct, assertive, and a leader." Overall, this respondent said, "women need to make time and support each other. The more opportunities we can create to get out there, the better."

I was able to do another interview with an Associate Dean for a business college who was familiar with the academic side of the business world. She said that networking is a secondary function for her and she doesn't do it consciously. Instead, she said, "I respect the network and let it build as I go about my work." This interviewee said that network and reputations build over time, and you must focus on quality work with mutual respect for everyone you encounter.

This respondent sees two types of networks in her life: social support networks and professional networks. In a social support network, women who are also pursuing careers and professions come together and talk about common challenges they may face and give each other advice. These women often have the same challenges of raising children and balancing work. In terms of mistakes that women make in networking, this respondent said that relying on your network for progression rather than actually producing at work was a big mistake. She also said that women worry about not being in touch with someone for a while and then asking for something, where men will just "go for it." Also, women tend to

be known for being "organizers, nurturers, facilitators, and peacemakers." Sometimes this could create a challenge for being seen as a peer. To conquer this challenge, women must make sure they are not always stepping up to take notes at a meeting or settle an argument.

When it comes to mentors, this interviewee has more male mentors than female because she considers many influential women in her life to be friends rather than mentors. In contrast to many other women, this respondent sees herself as a fairly unemotional person, which is both a strength and a weakness in the business world. She also tends to be decision oriented which is a good leadership quality but can sometimes lead her to make hasty decisions.

I was able to interview another woman who founded a local public relations firm. She said that she networks through attending hundreds of events every year with her firm and through some boards that she serves on. Socializing outside of the office is extremely important to her and she does this by taking people out to eat or attending charitable and civic events. She does not golf, but admits that it is a great networking tool and her husband is an avid golfer who actually plays with a Congressman every Sunday.

When asked her advice for young women building their network, this respondent said the following:

> *Pick some causes you are interested in and passionate about and get involved with these causes. If you get involved with an organization, eventually you will meet the right people and maybe be able to advance.*

One big mistake that women tend to make is realizing that you cannot automatically be at the top. This interviewee said, "You're not going to be chairman of the board just starting out and you've got to pay your dues."

In terms of an "old boys" network, this respondent said that there is one, but it is breaking down. A male-only organization that was founded in 1930 in this community recently admitted women voluntarily. Huge progress is being made in terms of gender equality in the business world. This interviewee perceives her strengths as a leader as being passionate, caring and a hard worker. On the other hand, she states that her weakness is being impatient.

Another one of my interviewees was a former executive at AT&T, which was formerly BellSouth Corp. When asked about the ways in which she networks, she said she is involved in all kinds of professional organizations and got involved early in her career. The more she got involved in the community, the more people she was able to meet. This respondent is an avid golfer and said the following:

> *Golf is a huge equalizer for men and women. You can get to know the people you work with, your boss, your clients, and your customers. Guys can go out and generate business through golfing while women are back in the office working. You've got to get out there and learn because having four hours of uninterrupted time with your client is huge, you don't get that.*

This responded is so passionate about teaching young women how to golf that she started an endowment at a university that allows MBA women students to get free golf lessons.

This business leader said that a huge mistake women make when it comes to networking is being held back because they want to be perfect. She said "women are afraid to fail, particularly on the golf course. Guys don't care how they play and don't worry about embarrassing themselves." This respondent emphasized that women can't be a perfect mom, golfer, and excellent on the job, "something's got to give but you need to try it and figure it out."

This interviewee cited that some of her strengths as a leader are "being able to work a room and strike up a conversation with people that you don't know." She also said that she can "sell her product" whether it be her golf program or accounting abilities. As for her weaknesses, this leader said, "following up can be hard because there is so much going on." She said that she plans to work on following up with her connections in a timely manner.

I was also able to interview a woman that founded a company to provide venture capital to women entrepreneurs. This woman said that women in general tend not to be as good at networking as men. She emphasized this point by saying that women are too busy in the office trying to prove themselves and don't make time for creating contacts. Another point that she brought up is that women are often hesitant to call up old contacts in their network, while men have little to no hesitation. When it comes to mentorship, this interviewee said that women need a sponsor at work and a mentor outside of work. Often, these will be two different people and the sponsor will most likely be someone holding a high position at your company.

In terms of leadership styles, this respondent said that women tend to run their businesses differently. She said that women often have a more holistic view of business and are charitable, meaning that they care about both their employees and their employees' families. These can be good leadership qualities but women leaders need to make sure they are still assertive and firm while being caring and charitable.

Another one of my interviewees is the CEO of a movie cinema company with the largest market share in the US. This interviewee said that she has never seen her gender as an obstacle in her career and, instead, sees it more as an advantage. When I asked this

respondent if she felt like there was an old boy's network in the business world she said the following:

> *I do, but I think it's changing. When I was promoted (to CEO), the Fortune 1000 had 29 female CEOs. You can tell by the numbers that there are still obstacles. Some of them are by choice because women chose to stay home with their families in a disproportionate number. It tends to be easier for males to reach a C-suit opportunity rather than females. Different industries tend to be better or worse.*

This respondent stated that it is natural for a man to gravitate toward another man but that females must be mindful of that and seek out those opportunities to network with men. She talked about a yearly leadership development program that goes on at her company. This CEO must ask her managers to nominate about 2-3 employees for the program. She said that usually the male managers tend to nominate other males because they spend time socializing with these men outside of work and simply forget about the females that also do great work. When this CEO brings up a female's name to these managers, they never argue with her about it and think that it is a good choice as well.

When it comes to networking and mentoring, this respondent has always been a go-getter by seeking out opportunities on her own. She said the following:

> *My career was always my responsibility. If I wanted to succeed and be promoted, I had to take responsibility for that. I needed to get the right mentor and develop expertise in other areas. Sometimes women are criticized for being less responsible and thinking that their future lays in their bosses hands. If you take ownership of your career and manage it accordingly, that always works.*

Similar to one of my previous interviews, this respondent also talked about women needing an advocate at work and a mentor outside of work. Even though it may be harder to form relationships with possible male mentors, women need to find creative ways to break the gender barriers.

I had the opportunity to interview another woman who founded a reputable HR consulting firm. She said that right now she networks mainly through keeping in touch with the contacts that she already has. She does this via the phone, e-mail, Linked In, and outings to lunch. This respondent said that she "prefers ear to ear if she can't be face to face," meaning that she feels more of a personal connection over the phone than through e-mail or social media.

This interviewee said she also networks through being involved in the local Chamber of Commerce and occasionally even writes the hand-written note. During her interview, this respondent said the following:

> *I think women are so conscientious about getting the work done, taking care of everyone and everything, that we tend to let networking slide.*

This interviewee does not golf, but she admitted that a lot of mentoring and networking goes on at the golf course. This respondent also admitted to there being an old boys network, especially in the auto industry where she worked for many years. Specifically when this respondent works with managers from Asia or the Middle East, she notices that they tend to have a different view of women's roles at the workplace.

When talking about mistakes that some women can make when it comes to networking, this respondent said the following:

> *There are some women who try to "play the game" and be like the guys. They are the worst to work for. The best thing women can do is be authentic and be yourself, but push yourself. All leaders have to be tough, just be respectful as well.*

This respondent also had some great advice for women that are just starting their careers and trying to build their network. She gave the following advice to me and other young women:

Relationships are really important. Be yourself and take time to get to know people. Ask people about themselves; every person has a story. Take advantage of social opportunities as much as you can. Support other women. I've seen a lot of women not very supportive of other women. To me, that's an insecurity. Don't be surprised however, if some women just don't seem interested in you and don't take the time to get to know you. To me, their single focus is proving themselves.

This interviewee also said that getting a "secure base" is crucial. "Secure bases," as she calls them, are people at work or in your industry who care about you and have your best interest at heart, similar to a mentor or sponsor. The most interesting part about this interview was that this respondent came to the realization that she needs to make time to do more networking and take more risks with her business by seeking out new clients through networking. Moreover, this respondent stated that her weaknesses as a leader include not taking enough risks, but her strengths include self-awareness and transparency.

My final interview was with the CEO and President of a powerful electricity, water, and wastewater management company in the Knoxville area. This respondent said that she has two different types of networking: professional and personal, which includes both formal and informal interactions. Through her involvement in the community, she was invited to join an unchartered, unofficial men's club that meets every Friday for lunch and has been around since 1938. She said this invitation is an "example that the world is changing. Men used to have their own clubs and women would have theirs."

When I asked this respondent for advice for young women starting their networks, she iterated the following:

You need to stand up for yourself, you need to be professional, you don't need to feel entitled to anything, and you don't need to have a chip on your shoulder. You will

earn your way because of your performance. You don't want to be treated any differently than a man, so don't act any differently than a man. Start looking for people who are honest and trustworthy, and pick one and over time, pick another and over time it just grows. Don't associate yourself with people who are negative.

This interviewee said that her advice would be the exact same for a man as it is for a woman. When asked about any mistakes that women make when it comes to networking, she said that women have to make sure that they don't leave when the "bell rings everyday." In order to be equal, women must be a little bit better and prove that they will work as hard as their men counterparts. For example, when she first came to her current company, the former CEO of the company walked into her office at about 7:30 PM one workday and said, "you're different, most women don't work late." This is a statement that has really stuck with her and helped her realize the importance of working hard, despite how busy one may be with their family and home-life.

This interviewee said that she has always seen being a woman as an advantage to her, especially working for a male-dominated company. Often, she will be pulled into a decision because the men will want a "women's perspective." Diversity initiatives have worked in her favor over the years and have helped her become successful when paired with her exceptional work. This respondent also says that she will always stand up for herself and never let anyone put her down or doubt her abilities simply because she is a woman.

VII. Analysis of Results

Through my interviews, I have been able pinpoint some common themes and methods that these women executives use to network. All the executives that I interviewed seemed to agree about the importance of networking in the business world. Some of the

women pursued active networking through formal organizations, while others preferred to network passively. When asked the ways in which they network, many women talked about formal organizations in the community and nationally that they are involved with. Many of the women implied that they were often too busy with work, various meetings, and their personal lives to have much leftover time for informal networking.

The women that talked about informal networking methods mentioned going out to lunch or dinner, drinks at night, or golfing. Only two women in my sample were golfers but they raved about the edge that golfing has given them in the male-dominated business world. Often it can be hard for women to form bonds with male colleagues because certain networking activities that males do could be seen as romantic advances if done between a man and a woman. By golfing, women can form relationships with male bosses, co-workers, and clients in an informal and platonic manner.

Another common theme that these women talked about is having both mentorship and sponsorship relationships. Mentors should be both men and women who you can confide in and can give you career advice and guidance. Sponsors should be someone at work who can vouch for you as well as help your career advance within your organization. Because it is often difficult to be one of the few women in a company or industry, it is important to form relationships with influential people who understand your situation and can be of assistance to you.

When I asked about mistakes that women make when it comes to networking, many women in my sample talked about some women being hesitant to reach out to others because of jealousy or a feeling of competitiveness. These executives in my sample said that this cold attitude is a mistake because it is extremely beneficial to have a social support

group with other successful women. Another mistake that some women make is not being assertive enough and not taking charge of their own careers. Women cannot wait around for mentors and networking opportunities to come to them. Instead, they have to get out of their comfort zones and actively pursue these opportunities.

Even though a woman executive must be assertive, she must be conscious not to try to put up a "tough" façade to demand respect. Women leaders have a lot of qualities that make them successful and unique, such as empathy and compassion. Therefore, women do not need to try to act like men to earn respect and career advancement opportunities. According to my sample, women must be assertive while staying true to their own personal leadership style.

Another major mistake that some women make when it comes to networking is being too afraid to fail. Many women do not golf because they are afraid of embarrassing themselves and not being good at the game. On the other hand, some men are not first-rate golfers, but they still get out there and give it their best shot, not being afraid of failure. Similar to this, many women are hesitant to accept promotional opportunities because they are afraid they do not possess the necessary skills to do the job. When given the same opportunities, men will tend to take advantage of them with the mentality that they will learn as they go.

Overall, it is hard to generalize the methods in which women network and the success of their networking styles because the women in my sample all gave completely different responses. Based on the majority of my responses, it seems as though women make more time for formal networking through community organizations or boards rather than informal networking. This is most likely because it is easier to schedule time for

formal meetings in one's calendar rather than to set time aside for informal socializing. This informal networking is something that women as a whole need to work on because it is an essential part of their career development.

On the other hand, a networking method that women successfully utilize is forming social support groups. Women tend to gravitate to other women in similar situations for guidance and advice. These support systems really motivate the women in my sample to achieve their full potential. Having other women that care about you and your career is helpful to face the male-dominated business world.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, women have come a long way in the business world compared to a few decades ago. After talking to nine successful women executives, it is evident that the old boy's network of the past is breaking down as women get included in more networking activities that were traditionally only for males. Even though there are still a disproportionate number of male executives compared to women executives, I can see this changing as women make their careers their top priority.

As a whole, women seem to make less time for networking than they should due to work and home-life commitments. During my interviews, some women even told me that this interview made them realize that they need to do more active networking. As the millennial generation enters the career world, I see networking becoming even more important and crucial because it is a buzzword that has been talked about during our educational years.

Getting to interview these nine women was extremely enlightening and it gave me some great foresight as I start my career in the business world. These women were all very

encouraging because they never saw being a woman as a disadvantage in their career. Instead of having a chip on their shoulder, these women took their career into their own hands and sought after opportunities for mentorship and networking. While beginning my own career, I will be mindful of mistakes that some women make and be conscious that I do not make these same mistakes.

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