

Grooming Women for the Top: Tips from Executive Coaches

By Sarah E. Needleman, CareerJournal.com

October 31, 2006 - Some women may be missing out on the executive coaching that equally experienced men get at work. A recent study shows that at 20% of companies offering such coaching women receive it less often than men, while women get more coaching than men at only 5% of firms that offer it.

"Even though the data indicate that most women get treated fairly when it comes to coaching, there's still a significant number of companies where women don't get equal access," says Deborah A. Felton, a director of consulting in New York for the Novations Group Inc., a global consulting and training firm in Boston. Novations conducted the study, based on an online poll of human-resource professionals with 334 respondents. Men and women receive executive coaching at the same rate at about 75% of companies that offer it, the study finds.

Senior management -- usually men -- typically chooses who receives coaching, often selecting up-and-comers to whom they relate best, according to Ms. Felton. "A 'mini me' thing happens," she says.

The lower rate suggests that the playing field may not be quite level for women seeking to advance in management. In a competitive work environment, coaching can help managers and professionals improve skills in such areas as communication and meeting business goals.

What are women managers missing out on? CareerJournal.com asked five executive coaches about what they help women clients with most. Here's what they said:

1. Getting heard.

Commanding attention at meetings among colleagues and higher-ups can be difficult for some women, says Kerri Halmi, an executive coach in Oakland, Calif.

A manager at a large West Coast aerospace company recently told her that in group meetings, "she couldn't get a word in edgewise," says Ms. Halmi. The other participants, often all men, regularly interrupted each other, which the manager considered impolite, she says. "She wanted to get promoted and felt like this was keeping her back," she says.

Ms. Halmi says she advised the manager to engage in the same behavior initially. Then "she could propose a ground rule of not interrupting," she says. Ms. Halmi also suggested that the manager tell the meetings' facilitator about wanting to contribute more to gain his support. Since then, the manager has been getting heard, she says.

Another way to boost your visibility when speaking is to stand up or sit upright, and use hand gestures, Ms. Halmi says. "Hold yourself up high and take up as much space as possible to appear bigger," she says.

Women who speak quickly and in a high-pitched voice also may have difficulty getting their message across, says Nancy Atwood, senior vice president at Lore International Institute, an executive-

coaching firm based in Durango, Colo. You'll get more notice if you slow it down, and swap your soprano for an alto. "It's a matter of executive presence," she says.

2. Looking and acting the part.

"Managers need to have a pressure-proof demeanor," says Dee Soder, founder and managing partner of the CEO Perspective Group, an executive-coaching and assessment firm based in New York. "You want to be like a swan, very calm on the surface, even though you're paddling like crazy underneath."

Fidgeting and other subtle behaviors, such as finger tapping, can detract from a person's authority, Dr. Soder says. One way to curb such habits may be to give yourself a small reminder, such as putting your watch on the opposite wrist you're accustomed to wearing it on. The change can serve as a subtle hint to be still, she says.

Caroline McNally says she made several style changes when seeking a promotion to the executive suite as a senior vice president with a large credit-card company in 2000. "They viewed me as a high-performer, but maybe not a star capable of getting to that next level," she says. "I wanted to tweak my approach so that they viewed me in a different light."

Advised by an executive coach to blend more in with top managers, Ms. McNally says she began wearing dark-colored suits and less flashy jewelry. She ditched her strappy handbag for one resembling a briefcase. Instead of folding her hands in her lap at meetings, she put them on the table, she says. Less than a year later, Ms. McNally, now 51, says she was promoted to executive vice president. She has since joined Pay By Touch, a technology company in San Francisco, in a similar role, she says.

3. Focusing on the big picture.

Some women tend to concentrate so much on getting the job done that they may neglect big-picture thinking, a critical part of a leader's job, says Tricia Scudder, founder and president of the Executive Coaching Group in New York. "You want to be able to point to where you made a difference, so that if you weren't in that job, it wouldn't have happened," she says.

Recruit a friend or trusted colleague to help ensure you make time to step back for perspective and a strategic vision for the organization, says Ms. Scudder. "Make a promise to them and say, 'I'll show you a draft of an idea by a certain deadline,' " she says. "Make a dinner date, so you have to show up with the goods."

Find time by handing off some tasks to others, says Maggie Craddock, an executive coach in New York. "Get savvy about where you can delegate," she says, and avoid over-assisting others. Some women, she says, "lose track of where their jobs end and other people's begin."