The Edge: Getting more women in the boardroom

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Last weekend, I had the opportunity to visit with a young executive woman from Atlanta regarding her career path. Since my own career started in the 80’s, I was interested in her views on business today, and in particular, women in business today. The woman I will call Debbie, explained that she had been fortunate in attending prestigious schools for both her undergraduate and Master’s degrees (which initially helped broaden the scope of her opportunities), but she continually had to prove herself as she moved up the ladder.

What startled me however, were her comments that while she loved her work, she was still the only woman in the Boardroom, and that she found the problem to be women themselves.

The women Debbie had encountered along her path had not been supportive or helpful in her career development.

According to Gender in Management: An International Journal, women today make up approximately 47 percent of the workforce and are still not represented proportionately in executive positions. While the number of women in boardrooms and executive positions has
increased, women are still entering the workforce into lower level positions and are attributed less authority and power than men.

Could it be true that women are less helpful to each other and even evaluate their female subordinates more harshly?

Research indicates that women are evaluated more harshly than men when they enter traditionally masculine-typed positions. Women are still held to a double-standard whereby when they take on roles that are not seen as a feminine-typed position they are seen as violating the feminine stereotype. If they choose to take on a more masculine approach to their position, they are often criticized for being too masculine. If they choose to use a more stereotypical feminine approach they are seen as too “soft” and ineffective.

So what is the solution to this never-ending problem?

When I was a young woman employed by a Fortune 100 company, the controller of my division imparted his words of wisdom to me (he was also my mentor). He told me that as I progressed through my career, to make sure that I got my portion of the pie; work hard, be ethical, and be aggressive, and not confrontational. He also said to share the pie with others. I have modeled my career from his words.

Having owned and operated four businesses, I believe the solution is recognizing your own talents as well as those of others. Surround yourself with those who have talents that enhance yours and empower others to use their talents to the benefit of the organization.

Women should not be threatened by other women. No-one can take away your knowledge or experiences. Success is a measure of how well you perform based on the standards set forth but standards are not in isolation, they are embedded within an organizational structure for others as well. If you assist others in obtaining their standards it is to the benefit of all. When you succeed, pay it forward.

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