The Edge: Women navigate tough roads to leadership roles

Lisa Steelman
Center for Organizational Effectiveness
September 15, 2014, 10:40 p.m. EST

Now, more than ever, women have gained access to high-level leadership positions.

Although there are a number of high-profile women who have done it, such as Hewlett-Packard CEO Meg Whitman, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi, women in powerful roles are still rare. In fact, as of July 2014 women currently hold only 4.8 percent of Fortune 500 CEO roles.

Women still confront a variety of challenges on their way to leadership positions.

Given the popularity of books on women’s leadership issues, women are clearly looking for ideas and advice. I’d like to offer a few tips for women who want to advance to higher level leadership positions, based on my experiences navigating the maze and managing multiple roles.
• First, authenticity and transparency matter. Women often feel out of place or inauthentic in traditionally masculine organizational settings and leadership positions. On the one hand, leaders are expected to be assertive, dominant and decisive. On the other hand, women are expected to be warm, empathic and communal. This creates the pervasive double bind women often experience as they progress in their career.

The best advice to deal with this double bind is within a range that is true to yourself, be decisive yet compassionate. Combine assertive task behavior with kindness and helpfulness. A woman who communicates in a highly competent but warm manner reduces doubts about her ability while also increasing her likability and influence.

• Second, you’ve got to be good, but just being good at your job isn’t enough. Highly successful women perform beyond expectations time and time again. This is how you build a track record that will move your career forward. Overperform and go beyond expectations in everything you do.

• Third, build good relationships with colleagues within and outside your organization. Join and participate in networks. You should have strong networks at all levels — higher, lower and lateral. Colleagues at all levels have much to offer that may only be revealed within the context of a trusting relationship.

People with strong networks comprised of women and men are more likely to rise to positions of authority. In addition, leaders also often credit their advancement in part to having a mentor or sponsor. I would not be where I am today without the sage advice and support of several mentors along the way.

And, once you achieve a position of authority, be sure to give back. Be a mentor to a promising young woman. Share your own stories and advice and be a source of support.

Finally, I firmly believe that the notion of a superwoman who has it all, all the time, is a detriment to women everywhere. I’ve often heard women say: “You can have it all, just not all at the same time.” This is problematic because it implies that if you feel you don’t “have it all” (and who does?), you have accepted having only half a life.

We need to change the conversation. Society needs to understand that everyone, women and men, need to manage multiple roles and responsibilities. Everyone needs to make decisions and trade-offs, and these decisions should be made within an individual’s personal value system. It’s not about having it all, it’s about having what is right for you.

There is no magic bullet to advancing to a leadership role or achieving career success, but mindfully integrating what works for you from these tips is a great start. Women will continue to
achieve leadership roles in their companies and organizations. And as they do, they will continue to change the narrative and culture and, ultimately, help to remove barriers for women coming after them.

Lisa Steelman is senior associate dean and director of the Center for Organizational Effectiveness at Florida Institute of Technology.