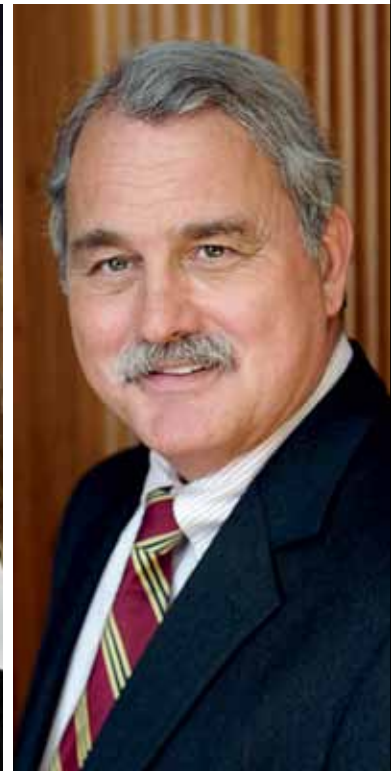


AMBITION: WOMEN POWERING UP

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Webster's Dictionary defines ambition as "an ardent desire for rank, fame and power."

That is not what senior executives and managing partners should be looking for in identifying future successors. Those who embrace this definition and use it as the lens through which to evaluate potential leaders are limiting, to an employer's disadvantage, its talent pool and leadership pipeline. However, if ambition is defined as "an ardent desire to lead and influence the actions of others," the pipeline opens, especially for women.



We recently participated in a conference that featured four executive women discussing women and leadership.

During the 90-minute panel discussion, there was no mention of ambition or power. When we raised these subjects at the end of the program, the panel and audience were silent.

How could these subjects not be addressed when the designated topic was women and leadership? In a comparable program discussing male leadership, would it be possible not to talk about ambition and power? What else would the men have discussed?

Once the women panelists pondered how ambition and power factored into their roles as leaders, their conclusions were simple: These pursuits were not relevant. When pressed, they attributed most of their success to good luck and happenstance. These explanations are consistent with the research.

According to Anna Fels, a psychiatrist who has written broadly about women in the workplace, ambition is essen-

tially a dirty word among women. Fels reports that mastery of a special skill and recognition from an appreciative audience are needed to cultivate ambition. Thus, the well-documented lack of recognition that women receive for their accomplishments is a significant contributor to their stalled progress.

Fels' research also finds that women tend to cede or deflect ambition for a number of reasons including societal views of femininity, which result in women being punished for exercising ambition. For these reasons and others, many women abandon their ambitions during childrearing or when the challenges in pursuing their professional goals become particularly great.

Complicating matters is that ambition is a prerequisite to power that needs to be consciously sought and developed. The constraints that women face, coupled with many women's discomfort with self-promotion or proudly accepting credit for their accomplishments, result in women trailing their male competitors to the top.

So perhaps it is time to change the conversation and redefine

what ambition should mean in light of what an inclusive, collaborative, and empowering work environment demands and needs. In fact, most male and female senior executives, general counsel, and managing partners today would more readily identify with being ambitious if it were defined as "an ardent desire to lead and influence the actions of others" rather than "an ardent desire for rank, fame and power."

What is at stake? A limited leadership pipeline devoid of talented women

The current prescription for ambition and power results in many lost opportunities for women and, in turn, their employers, who do not benefit from the transformative and performance-elevating leadership these women may bring to their organizations. For women approaching the upper echelons, they may not reach their full potential because they are fearful to articulate and pursue their higher aspirations. Mid- to senior-level women could support each other's ambition but their failure to be

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public is likely inhibiting their ability to do so. And, junior women suffer the most as they lose the opportunity to benefit from role models. How can junior women position themselves for leadership when no path has been communicated or demonstrated to them? Additionally, the silence inhibits women leaders from becoming a critical mass, perpetuating the isolation and failure of many women to progress to the higher levels.

What can employers do to stop women's silence about ambition and power?

CHANGE the rules of engagement by redefining the landscape so that ambition is thought of in terms of one who aspires to positions of leadership and influence—and not power in the conventional sense. It is no longer the stripes on the sleeve that matter—it is the ability to positively influence others through one's leadership, actions, and words.

IDENTIFY women with leadership potential early and ensure they have the proper exposure to influential clients and colleagues and the right assignments that will give them the experience needed to be elevated to the next level.

GROOM women leaders by placing them in influential leadership positions that give them the platform to exercise their ability to lead and develop a comfort level in this and other ambitious pursuits.

RECOGNIZE the successes of ambitious women leaders and make

their accomplishments public by encouraging women leaders to tell their stories.

PROFILE the paths of successful women and create a "leadership timeline" of the chronological steps they took and roles they played to get there.

Encourage women to **BUDDY UP** and promote each other's successes. The "independent" endorser lends

credibility and helps women who struggle with self-promotion or rightfully earned credit.

HOST open forums to discuss and debate ambition and power so women can have a safe place to air their reluctance and overcome it.

Develop a **SPONSORSHIP** program where high-potential women are aligned with senior sponsors who are willing and able to advocate for their next promotion, facilitate connections through senior leaders, and inform them about career opportunities.

PARTNER with outside organizations that can provide the opportunities for women to effectively develop their leadership skills.

Provide **NETWORKING** training and venues specific to women, enabling them to build the support and skills to leverage their contacts.

Create greater **TRANSPARENCY** and openness in the leadership pipeline, career development and compensation processes so that women clearly understand what's expected of them.

CELEBRATE ambitious mothers who have overcome work/life balance challenges as well as erroneous assumptions that seeking greater levels of professional responsibility and being a mother are inconsistent.

ENGAGE men in the process of supporting high-potential women and educate men about the business case of why their employer needs women to succeed.

Provide **EXECUTIVE COACHING** to high-potential women to enable them to set goals and develop a robust developmental plan. An effective executive coach will give them the support and individual attention to develop self-promotion skills, overcome fear of failure and risk-tak-

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ing, and gain comfort in exercising leadership skills and the power of persuasion.

SEEK recognition of your women leaders from outside organizations to celebrate them and promote their increased stature.

Provide **TRAINING** in the important skills that make up an ambitious and successful leader, including a focus on collaboration, competition, leadership, and teamwork.

CONVEY to women the many benefits that can be achieved through ambition and power, debunking the notion that these are dirty words to be avoided. Instead, demonstrate how ambition and power can be used positively:

- to provide service and give back;
- to gain independence—financial and otherwise;
- to create meaningful opportunities and security for one's family;
- to donate to meaningful causes and provide opportunities for others;
- to change policies that are detrimental to others; and,
- to enrich one's life through travel and diverse experiences.

It is not enough for employers to create a more supportive work environment for women to exercise their ambitions and positions of influence. Women also need to work individually and collectively with others to overcome the traditional obstacles they have faced. However, an employer's effort to create an infrastructure for women to thrive is an essential step to position women for success. This is in every employer's business interest. In today's competitive marketplace, employers can no longer afford to have half of their talent pool underutilized or not utilized at all. The time is now to facilitate in women an ardent desire to lead and influence the actions of others and provide an environment in which women are able to thrive and better contribute to the strength and success of their organizations. **D&B**

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