



## The “Vision Thing” – Critical to Accelerating Woman’s Careers

By Susan Bates



In today's economic environment, companies need great leaders. Yet lately much public conversation has focused on whether our economic crisis has been partly the result of too much "leadership testosterone," both on the trading floors and in the boardrooms of banks and investment firms. Would a more balanced male-female presence have made a difference in averting the current crisis?

Many, many experts agree that ideal corporate leadership teams and boards consist of a balance of women and men. Male and female traits, they insist, are essential to the success of an organization. Last year for example, in separate studies, Catalyst, an organization that supports expanded opportunities for women at work, as well as the venerable management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, have both concluded that companies with more female executives and directors perform better. For such reasons, women right now enjoy tremendous opportunities to move up to top jobs.

But the argument for more women isn't simply about personality traits that impact the culture of a company. Judy Rosener, a University of California (Irvine) professor emeritus, reports that brain scans prove that men and women actually think differently. In her research, Rosener found that a company with a mix of male and female leaders, with their differing attitudes regarding risk, collaboration and ambiguity, will typically outperform a competitor that relies only on the leadership of a single sex. Today of course the vast majority of companies are dominated by men, although Rosener says they wouldn't perform any better if they were dominated solely by women. Her point is that a balance is what companies need, with women bringing something to the table that companies absolutely need to thrive.

So it appears the likely way out of this economic turmoil could well include a better balance of men and women at the top. However, this doesn't mean that any and all women leaders will be capable of capitalizing on today's developing opportunities. Women still have to have the "right stuff." Women who develop and cultivate very specific skills will stand out and become top leaders in their organizations.

What "very specific skills" am I suggesting? How can you stand out if that's your goal? Start by reviewing your strengths and personal areas for development. Perhaps you're already good at motivating your team, inspiring people, fostering teamwork, encouraging creativity, building a collaborative atmosphere. These are all very valuable, and will help you because if you're this kind of leader, talented people will want to work for you and will do great work. They will overcome obstacles, accelerate results, get the job done. This will be key to both your success and the success of your company.

One very important skill you also need to focus on is articulating a vision for your organization. You won't get promoted to the top unless people ultimately see you as a visionary who can help chart a new course for the organization. In the January 2009 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, a 360-degree feedback study by Herminia Ibarra and Otilia Obodaru finds that female leaders are typically seen by all around them to be strong in such traits as tenacity and emotional intelligence. However, women seem to trail men in one important aspect: the ability to conceive and communicate clear "vision."

Thus to become CEO, a C-level executive or other top leader in your company, you need to be able to develop a talent for seeing and talking about the future, i.e., not just how things are but how things *could be*. This requires spending time developing a point of view, speaking not solely about tactical issues but strategic issues as well. You need to engage with your colleagues about the challenges faced by the whole company, a behavior that will require you to stretch and learn about areas outside your comfort zone of expertise. This will be accomplished by delving into all aspects of the company's business including getting yourself appointed to committees, panels and projects that provide exposure to a wide variety of corporate and industry challenges.

As an example, I once worked with a client ("Jane") who was a respected VP of technology in a large financial services organization, a woman who was widely respected by the firm's team of engineers, software developers and support staff. Yet when asked to join a cross-functional committee of her peers, Jane immediately became marginalized by the leader of the group who told their boss, "I don't know what she stands for. She doesn't belong here."

To correct this, we went to work first discussing her experiences with the organization and her views on challenging issues. After 20 years in the organization, Jane did have strong opinions about how to move the organization forward but just wasn't accustomed to expressing them. Initially she had felt intimidated by the group of extroverts in the cross-functional committee, folks who were *never* shy about broadcasting their own opinions. So we prepared and planned contributions to these meetings in the beginning, and then, as Jane learned how to think through a situation -- what was, what could be, and how to get there -- she eventually became a full and forceful participant. A mere year later, she was promoted!

Once you get comfortable speaking at a strategic level like this, you need to next make sure that you're inside those circles where you can be heard by your colleagues and superiors. Do what you must to become highly visible in your organization and industry. Visibility is a strategy that women often ignore but today they do so at their peril because, while dutifully working away like a good "doobie" knocking off the tasks at hand, a counterpart may be sitting in the conference room giving his or her opinion to colleagues in a way that is going to help him/her move up. So you too have to be out there, being both seen and heard. Don't be lulled into thinking that simply doing a good job and working your tail off is all there is!

A few years ago, for example, a prospective partner in a law firm came to us because she was, well, a great worker but apparently all but invisible to the firm's managing partner. Though on the radar because of her brains, she lacked personal power or charisma. Thus most people didn't see her as someone who could become a rainmaker for the firm. Realizing after working with us that visibility was vital to her career success, she began to get serious about taking on strategic roles, speaking at events, and contributing significant ideas to the firm's development. Today she is one of the best known, most highly regarded attorneys in her firm and her field as well.

But it's not just about getting involved and becoming invisible, it's about developing strong speaking skills as well. As a woman, it's vital you be clear, direct, compelling... and concise. Combine powerful ideas with a comfortable, natural, authentic style. As a good (and, one day, great) speaker, you'll be seen as a great leader too. You'll soon be asked to contribute, to serve on panels, to speak about important issues to employees, the board and other audiences. This is where you will make your name so that the people who count will begin to appreciate your strategic mind and view you as uniquely qualified for top roles.

Overall, here are some tips on how to achieve all of this, not just survive today's economic downturn but how to make a name for yourself, accelerate your career and get on the fast track:

- **Raise your visibility:** Visibility is power -- no matter what your role. When people know you and talk about you in a positive way, word gets around that you are a woman to watch! You can have the world's most brilliant ideas but if you don't make it a point to raise your profile then nobody will ever know.
- **Create a "Make-a-Name-Strategy":** The most effective way to make a name quickly is to give presentations to senior management, stakeholders and boards. Determine where the up-and-coming people in your industry are, where they're meeting, what they're doing, and how you can join them.
- **Make time for speaking and appearances:** Put events and practice time on your calendar and prepare like mad. Don't view the speaking role as an "after hours" activity but rather as part of your job and essential to your future. If you don't set aside time to prepare and practice, you may as well not do it because you won't shine. Get serious about it.
- **Put up your hand:** Take leadership positions, join committees, give speeches, do brown bag lunches, join professional organizations, get on the boards of non-profits. You'll also want to consider writing articles and books and doing media interviews. All of this gives you the aura of a leader and expert in your industry, and also helps you meet the people you need to know.
- **Speak up, speak well:** Delivering a great presentation is about substance and style. You need to master the podium, appearing confident and well prepared and at ease and in control. Speaking is not a natural-born skill, you learn by doing. So start early and spend a lot of time perfecting this at-first awkward, hard-to-master activity. One main reason that Caroline Kennedy lost public support so quickly in her quest for the US Senate in 2008 was a silly little vocal habit -- saying "you know" too much. In contrast, Sarah Palin almost became Vice President and Hillary Clinton almost became President in large part because both could speak smoothly and connect with voters. To become a polished, confident speaker, speak in public so often that you end up enjoying standing at the front of a room and connecting with an audience.
- **Find mentors and consult with them often:** You need savvy male and female mentors, people who support you, believe in you and are able and willing to help you navigate the challenges of corporate life. They will teach you the inside story of your company, help you recognize key players, teach you how to communicate with them, and help you get the visibility you need. Also, they'll help get you out speaking a lot, and in front of the right people.
- **Walk around the office and get to know everyone:** It's still true, unfortunately, that women tend to go into their offices, put their heads down and just work and work all day. We emerge only to

grab lunch from the frig or to depart at the end of the day. Break this natural hermit-like tendency by moving around, getting to know people, developing relationships . . . and joining in.

- **Dress for the job you want:** Nothing undermines a woman faster than wearing the wrong clothing. Often, in fact, the fashion industry is not your friend. Yet you can be very fashionable without succumbing to some of the mistakes that make men want to date you but not promote you. Find a wardrobe consultant or shop where in-store consultants understand the importance of "professional dress." Purchase high quality, high impact pieces that fit into your business, your industry and your lifestyle. Maintain your clothes, hairstyle and makeup in a way that ensures your non-verbal communication says "leader."
- **Take professional development seriously:** Women are still incredibly reluctant to spend the time and money in professional coaching and training. Still I have yet to come across a male executive who doesn't believe it's worth it to invest his budget and time in executive coaching. Get with it, get help, go to seminars, find a coach . . . accelerate your career! Executive coaching today is regarded as a sign you're on the fast-track, so you need the help of an outside professional who's on your side with no agenda.

The central message here is to take your career development seriously by seeking out opportunities that can move you forward and keep up your momentum. By expanding your visibility, articulating the "vision thing" and speaking clearly and powerfully before the right people, you'll move to the top. The choice is yours today, a choice that's new and, if you do it right, here to stay.

***About the author:***

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