

PowerTalk has been especially designed for women leaders who want to experience a Return on Investment (ROI) in their careers and life experiences and take the next leap. Each issue of PowerTalk focuses on key strategies that will increase your leadership effectiveness. Review the suggestions and jot down ways you can implement. Use these suggested strategies today to enhance your tool kit or even rewrite the script for your future. This issue, along with the October and December issues, will focus on *why smart capable women sometimes derail!*

It's Only Natural

“Doin’ What Comes Natur’ly” sang Annie Oakley in the 1946 musical *Annie Get Your Gun*. But while that may be good advice for simple folk, it’s not a winning strategy for highly educated women in leadership positions. In fact, “doing what comes naturally” is a common performance derailer. Yet, without even realizing it, many women rely on this strategy heavily—despite, or perhaps because of, impressive credentials and decades of experience.

Can you see yourself in one of the following three “natural” approaches?

1. The New Kid on the Block

You’re speeding ahead in a leadership role at a new institution, confident that the experience you gained in the same position at another university will guarantee effectiveness. You’re on track to success, specifically the one track that brought you to the finish line before. After all, what could be wrong with relying on proven strategies?

Several things. First of all, leadership requirements are not universal. While your content knowledge may transfer easily, the same is not necessarily true of less tangible elements such as interpersonal, motivational and influencing skills. Further, there may be significant differences between your new institution and the previous ones—culture, politics, the boss’ management style, the board’s communication preferences, role expectations and the like. Your new team, too, doesn’t really know you yet and may not trust you because you haven’t had the time to build credibility. All the while you’re forging ahead with new initiatives, neglecting to use your peripheral vision to see resistance and resentment building. You’re doing what seems natural and perfectly logical to you, but to those around you, your efforts may look very alien indeed.

2. The Laborer

You’ve moved up the career ladder from one management position to another and finally landed a senior leadership role. So naturally, you’re using your greatest strengths and established competencies to keep you on the road to success. What could possibly be wrong with that?

First of all, some of the strengths that are prerequisites for management positions actually become liabilities at the leadership level, particularly when over-utilized. One of these is the urge to get things done. You’ve got technical competencies or credentials in a particular discipline or

administrative field, and you know how things should be done. Being a perfectionist, you perform these tasks yourself to make sure they're done right. This has two serious consequences. One, it leaves you with no time to lead because you're too busy managing and executing. Two, it negatively affects your relationship with your team. They may perceive you as a micromanager or even feel intimidated by you because, after all, they could never live up to your standards. This creates an unproductive environment, a downward spiral of poor performance and ultimately turnover.

The more senior a position, the more the balance shifts from technical competencies and task execution to true leadership, which is accomplishing things through others. While it may be natural for you to manage and execute, you should be leading instead.

3. The Busy Bee

One of the most commonly over-utilized “success” strategies is multitasking. Women usually pride themselves on the ability to multitask, and they excel in management positions because of it. However, as they move into more senior roles, excessive multitasking becomes a weakness because it spreads your energy across multiple tasks and divides your attention among several priorities. It deprives you of the focus and concentration required to explore opportunities, develop strategies and think creatively.

In principle there is nothing wrong with multitasking. In fact, it's innate, natural human behavior. How else could anyone hold a leadership position while dealing with personal challenges such as aging parents or grown children who have moved back in? But if you're trying to develop a new fundraising initiative or think of creative ways to get buy-in from faculty on a new budget, you won't get anywhere if you're answering email, supervising clerical staff and writing reports at the same time.

If you think you're an accomplished multitasker who can get away with it, take note. A February 28, 2010 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (“Divided Attention”) cited multitasking research by Clifford I. Nass, a professor of psychology at Stanford University. According to Nass, heavy multitaskers are usually extremely confident of their abilities, but are actually worse at multitasking than most people. Nass has published a study which found that self-described multitaskers performed much worse on cognitive and memory tasks that involved distractions than did people who said they preferred to focus on single tasks. The fact is, leadership is not as simple as walking and chewing gum at the same time. Multitasking at this level doesn't make you more productive—it just makes you busier.

[Suggested quote in text box: “There is no expedient to which a man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking.” Sir Joshua Reynolds]

Unnatural Acts

Relying on one's strengths, over-utilizing multitasking skills, focusing on technical competencies and rolling success strategies forward from institution to institution are all natural ways of striving toward our goals. While not inherently wrong, they keep leaders from breaking out of

their comfort zones and reaching higher. So how do you escape the zone? The only way is to start doing things that will seem unnatural and uncomfortable at first. For example:

- Cut back on unrewarding activities to make time for relationship-building with key constituents 360 degrees around you. That includes your boss, the board if applicable, colleagues, peers and, very importantly, the people who will execute the strategies you set.
- When meeting with people, take the time to really listen to them. Don't slide into your seat breathless from the last conference and speed through the agenda on autopilot. Before you hand out assignments, ask for input. Take advice. Invite people out for coffee and find out how they're doing.
- Discover what's different about a new boss' expectations. Does he or she prefer a different communication style or frequency than your previous boss? Is he or she accustomed to different problem-solving approaches?
- If at a new institution, develop a comprehensive understanding of its strategic direction, culture and subcultures before forging ahead with change initiatives. It's going to slow you down, but at least your train won't derail.
- Appreciate the time, effort and attention it takes to *lead* versus *do*. Resist the urge to "just get it done." Understand how decision-making occurs on the new campus or in your new role, how shared problem-solving is defined and which key constituents expect to be involved. Take the time to plant "seeds" so that others get involved and own solutions.
- Empower your team. Ask questions and seek their counsel. Learn how to delegate and let go. Delegation provides professional development opportunities for your team members so they can support you better in the future.

Moving up in the leadership ranks is always about continuous learning, but it is just as much about unlearning old behaviors. There are no perfect leaders and everyone is a work in progress. So when it comes to making mistakes in learning and unlearning, remember that praise and constructive criticism are two sides of the same coin.

Sidebar: Practice a Little Self-reflection

Take some time this weekend and list:

- Examples of how you may be over-utilizing your strengths. What are some self-defeating behaviors you could unlearn? For example, do you seek to lay blame rather than admit mistakes freely? Do you have to be right all the time? Do you have a short attention span when people try to talk to you? Are you a perfectionist who does everything herself for fear of delegating?



- Ways in which you could grow as a leader. For example, could you benefit from learning to use more than one leadership style? Could you encourage healthy conflict rather than avoiding conflict among your team? Could you learn to ask more questions and seek advice before making a decision? Could you become a better storyteller who engages people and gets their buy-in?
- Two or three concrete action steps you can take tomorrow.