

Coaching plays an increasingly important role in grooming tomorrow's business leaders. But an internet survey by Equation Research of 3,100 senior HR and development executives, published in October by The Novations Group, suggests the playing field might not be level for all players. It found that women receive executive coaching at a lower rate than their male peers at one in every five companies offering it and at a higher rate at only one in 20.

Following is our own survey of coaches in Ayers' Organizational Effectiveness Consulting group about the issues on which they work with female executives most often.

Joe Tomaselli:

While it's common to virtually all coaching engagements, honing leadership skills is at the center of my coaching assignments with female executives. At the meta level, the issues are building relationships at higher levels; conducting oneself as a peer; achieving work-life balance; prioritizing; avoiding tactical involvement to focus on the more important issues facing the business; developing strategic thinking to facilitate organizational growth; dealing effectively with difficult situations and people and conflict management; and enhancing presentation skills.

Sue Howarth:

The coachable opportunities when working with women in organizations are primarily in building and maintaining a network of key stakeholders, increasing visibility and showcasing successes, and learning to navigate organizational politics with integrity. Many women are technical experts who are task-focused and outcome-driven. They frequently see visibility as a form of arrogance, networking as "nice to have" but not critical, and political savvy as a misuse of power. Coaching requires not only skill building but also reframing the concepts so that women see the significance of them in relation to their careers and believe they can implement the skills while staying true to their values.

Allen Hollander:

About a quarter of my coachees are female executives. A common denominator is that they are seen as "too aggressive" in their style of influence. In most cases, there is a need for awareness and skill development — as with many of my male clients — to learn how to influence appropriately while building or maintaining relationships.

Unfortunately, even with appropriate assertive behavior, a woman often gets labeled as a "b-tch" while a male manager exhibiting the same behavior often gets credited for being direct.

Sue Michener:

A common complaint I hear from women is that a male boss seems to have a more relaxed, friendly approach to male staff. This may make the woman feel as if she's less valued and doesn't have as strong a relationship with the boss. In fact, it can just be that the boss is more socially comfortable with other men. It doesn't mean she needs to be "one of the boys" to develop a stronger bond with the boss. Instead, using the Emotional Intelligence model, we work out ways the female staff member can communicate within the boss's comfort zone while maintaining her identity. Also, it's important to get performance feedback so that the boss's unease is not mistaken for a negative appraisal. Even without specific feedback, the coachee can compare her business results and assignments with those of male peers. If she compares well on those outcomes, her career should be on a good track.

Another area of concern for women is the tendency to have their development opportunities skewed too much toward training classes. I did a study in one organization comparing the frequency of activities on development plans for male vs. female high potentials. For females, attending a training course was listed 65 percent of the time and an operational assignment less than 10 percent. For males, it was 25 and 50 percent, respectively. Executive Committee members were shocked, and many development plans were rewritten as a result.

Michael Crystal:

Twelve years ago, when I coached my first woman who went on to become a member of the FORTUNE 50 Most Powerful Women in Business, her willingness to behave "like a man" was crucial to her success. My job was to provide her with the required skills. Today I find that women have created their own model, emphasizing their natural inclinations and attributes. To be successful, they no longer need to behave in ways that have to be learned. As a coach, I can focus on enhancing strengths. ♦

For more information about Ayers' coaching and other OEC services, contact Managing Director Joan Caruso at joan.caruso@ayers.com or 212.889.7788.