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2009 GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Paths to Power

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OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM/ ISSUE

Despite recent advancements for women in the workplace and in management roles, women still lag behind men in terms of holding senior management and executive positions. For example, Catalyst reports as of February 2009 that although women represent 50.6% of all professional management positions, only 3% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. There is much research and discussion about why women fail to reach these positions of power, usually pointing to gender stereotypes, work-life balance obstacles or lack of structural power, but there is little information on how women actually achieve positions of power.

Our research examines not *why* women struggle in achieving power, but at *how* people, both men and women, achieve positions of power in the workplace within the current paradigm of obstacles and constraints. Our objective was to identify the particular characteristics, actions, and tools that successfully move someone along the path to power and examine any differences along the path by gender and between the expectations and realities of achieving positions of power.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research methodology consisted of two components:

1. Online survey taken by MBA students about expectations and perceptions of their paths to power.
2. Qualitative in-depth interviews with 6 people in senior level positions, 3 men and 3 women, representing various industries to research the realities of achieving positions of power.

FINDINGS

From the survey, the most important characteristics recognized for achieving power were self-confidence, being a good communicator, and being influential or persuasive. The most important actions were demonstrating the ability to make important decisions and seeking allies/building a network. Males and females identified the same characteristics and actions required to achieve power when asked generally about power, but chose slightly different characteristics and actions when asked about the opposite gender. The realities and expectations of power were similar in the comparison of survey data to interviews, but interesting generational differences were identified.

IMPLICATIONS

Males and females have similar perceptions of how to achieve power, through demonstrating the characteristics and actions mentioned above. While the influence of gender stereotypes on power is diminishing, it still persists. In order for more women to achieve positions of power, they must be aware of exhibiting the characteristics and actions mentioned here. In addition, organizations and individuals should increase awareness and training around personality *and* gender perception management.