



Men, Women, and Power

Power! The mere word *power* elicits intense reactions, both positive and negative, along gender lines. Why do we even need to be considering this issue? It is not mere lip service to say that American business needs the best and brightest in our ranks. The benefits of diversity have been cited and proven to result in stronger, more creative, and more competitive companies. Yet women are leaving in record numbers to start their own businesses [as highlighted in the July/August 2005 issue of *AdvantEdge*].

There are many reasons that women leave to start their own businesses, certainly none of which I can fault them for, especially since I fall into that category myself. But if America is to be the strongest nation it can be, then we need to consider making our companies as female-friendly as possible. This is not only a benefit to women; it's a benefit to everyone. Perhaps if more companies became more female-friendly, then the women who left to start businesses would only be the individuals with a burning desire to do so. They wouldn't be leaving just because there were no organizations that meet their needs. Understanding the differences in how women and men see power is one more step in breaking down barriers that prevent all of us from our greatest successes.

A quick disclaimer here: All women are not the same; all men are not the same. The concepts suggested here indicate the ends of the spectrum. It is through understanding the poles that we can understand the differences and move toward the middle.

Ask men their reaction to the word *power*, and you will get mostly positive associations. Ask women their reaction to the word *power*, and you will get a very mixed answer. In workshops this question is often posed to my participants by having them complete the sentence, "Power is ..." three to five times. Often the words are as mixed as: *dangerous*, *ridiculous*, and *essential*. Part of the difference can be seen in the double bind. Most people accept the connection between masculinity and power, but there are some serious conflicts between femininity and power. In fact, the word *femininity* conjures a picture of a self-effacing and demure woman, for many. No surprise then that both men and women struggle with reconciling femininity and power. Perhaps what is needed is a move toward a new definition of *femininity* altogether. Some women may have to relinquish the notion of extreme femininity as a model for success in the workplace, because the characteristics fight each other too hard.

There is a reality that power is necessary to succeed. Regardless of the endeavor, without power, your undertaking is going to be an uphill battle. Pat Heim, Ph.D., defines it this way, **"Power is the ability to get things done."** This is a concept of power that the majority of women can embrace and in fact do embrace. When this reframing of the meaning of power is suggested to women who resist power in the workplace, they frequently respond far more positively.

Not only do many women struggle with the concept of power because of the conflict with femininity, but also because of the negative historical associations with power. Hitler, Attila the Hun, and Napoleon are often cited by women as examples of why they have negative feelings about power. Is it any wonder with these types of associations that women shy away from power?

It's vital that we assist women in seeing the value of power by choosing power-role models. Take a minute now and list every person you can think of (living or deceased) who had power and used it to a positive end. Names like Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and Eleanor Roosevelt often surface. Recognizing that these figures held power and created immense good as a result is often a "light-bulb moment" for many individuals.

The next step is choosing a powerrole model in the circle of acquaintances or

colleagues. Once a woman sees a woman who is succeeding and accomplishing positive outcomes due to her power, the leap is a little shorter. The essence of this transition lies in the essential belief for women that power exists not for the sake of power.

For most women, power is a means to an end. This is in distinct contrast to the belief that men have. Men, more often, see power as the end. Power exists to have power. To embrace power, women must see what good is to come of it. Of all the differences between the sexes regarding power, this stance is the most profound difference of all.

We'll continue to slam up against a brick wall about our differences regarding power as long as we expect people to exhibit similar power behavior. Let's identify some of the traditional male symbols of power:

- The corner office
- The largest office
- The office with the windows
- The biggest/tallest desk
- The best office furniture
- The biggest company car
- The key to the executive washroom
- The invitation to the executive dining room

Men often covet these symbols. They are signs to a man that he has achieved a position of power. He may flaunt these symbols to the men in his circle. He has finally gotten the plum. Consequently, men see these symbols as very valuable. When people see value for themselves, they usually assume that others see value in the same thing. Problem time! Most women have a very different attitude about the symbols of power. If you have been following closely, you know the reason why. For women, power is not the goal. Power is not the end. Power is a means to an end. Consequently, many women do not covet these symbols of power. They may appreciate some of them. They may be nice. Why? They may appreciate them because they are practical, even functional. Perhaps the best company car has a GPS system, so the woman feels safer in her car. The larger office makes it easier to have small meetings there more comfortably. The dining room has fewer people in it, so she saves time during lunch. If women can see a useful and practical end to these perks, they have some value.

However, it's not unusual for women to see these symbols as barriers more than anything else. One of the distinctive characteristics of women and power is their concept of sharing power. Women grow up in a world that emphasizes the importance of fairness, a flat playing field, consensus, and equality. These symbols or perks that mean power and success to men may mean breaking the rules for women. Not only may a woman be uncomfortable with these symbols because they break the rules of her world, but they separate her from the people she is leading. If a woman leads more often by consensus than directing or commanding, as many women do, then these symbols may be viewed as more of a hindrance than a help. You may find that instead of flaunting these perks or symbols of power, many women are embarrassed by them and actually hide them when they can. It's pretty tough to hide your office, however. So instead, you may hear women justifying and excusing why they need this large office, how it serves the entire department, etc., etc.

The bottom line is: **Traditional power symbols from the world of men often do not have the same effect for women.** Has your organization been using these perks as both incentives and rewards for your entire workplace? If you have a gender mix in your company, you may have a clue as to why women leave to go out on their own. The carrot that has been dangled in front of them doesn't look very juicy. Alas, it may look rotten. To hold on to the best and the brightest, to hold on to the value of gender diversity, it's time to look for rewards and incentives that women hold dear. Do you know what has meaning for them? Perhaps it's time to stop assuming and start asking. Conduct one-on-one interviews with female employees and do surveys to find the answers. It would make sense to ask what other companies are doing to successfully retain talented women. Check out the National Association of Female Executives annual listing of the Top 30 Companies for Executive Women. This list highlights the number of women at the CEO, director, and department head positions, etc. Additionally, check

out the section entitled "What We Like." Topping the list are: generous leave time, work/life balance programs, career management and leadership programs geared to individual aspirations, woman-friendly culture, and childcare/eldercare reimbursements.

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