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How Star Women Build Portable Skills

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Boris Groysberg

The Idea in Brief

A star performer in one company will shine in another, right? Wrong. When stars switch firms, their performance actually dims, along with their new company's market value, author Boris Groysberg argues. Everyone loses.

Except when the stars are women. According to Groysberg, talented women who switch firms maintain their stardom, and their new employer's share price holds steady. Groysberg provides two explanations for this discrepancy:

- Unlike men, high-performing women build their success on portable, external relationships--with clients and other outside contacts.
- Women considering job changes weigh more factors than men do, especially cultural fit, values, and managerial style.

These strategies enable women to transition more successfully to new companies. And that has crucial implications for all professionals. By understanding successful women's career strategies, women *and* men can strengthen their ability to shine in any setting.

The Idea in Practice

How Employees Can Shine in Any New Organization

Groysberg recommend these two strategies:

Strategy #1: Build an external network. Most male stars depend on the internal networks they cultivate. But women lack access to those crucial networks, for these reasons:

Uneasy in-house bonds. Women face less-than-wholehearted acceptance in male-dominated workplaces. They also avoid forging close relationships with men for fear of giving the appearance of impropriety.

Poor internal mentorship. Women receive inadequate access to internal mentors. Thus they miss out on a vital service mentoring provides: access to an internal network of relationships.

Neglectful colleagues. The locker-room and sports-bar cultures characterizing mostly male workforces prevent females from forging strong bonds with males.

To counter these barriers, star women cultivate relationships with external constituencies, such as customers and former mentors, that are not dependent on their current company. When they change jobs, the external relationships that promote their success are not affected.

Strategy #2: Scrutinize prospective employers. Unlike men, who focus largely on compensation, women weigh broader considerations when thinking about a job change, favoring work cultures that emphasize:

- Receptivity to female talent
- Openness to individual styles, personalities, and approaches to work
- Impartial performance measurement systems

Star women who move to employers that offer these features are more likely to succeed than the typical male star who changes companies.

How Organizations Can Foster Star Performers

By paying close attention to female stars' careers, organizations can do a better job of attracting top performers--female *and* male--who will continue to excel after they're hired.

Investment bank Lehman Brothers' equity research department encourages female analysts to participate in recruiting. The department also rigorously pursues gender-blind policies in every facet of its operations. These practices screen out men uncomfortable in a culture where women can thrive and men can learn from them. In addition, the department refuses to prescribe one "right" way to be an analyst. So people can incorporate aspects of their personal identity, including gender, as they see fit.

This approach propelled the department from 15th in the *Institutional Investor* rankings in 1987 to 7th in 1988 and 4th in 1989. And many female stars left other investment banks' research departments to join Lehman Brothers.

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Further Reading

HBR Article Collections

Hiring the Right Leaders

HBR Article Collection

May 2006

by Boris Groysberg, Andrew N. McLean, Nitin Nohria, Ashish Nanda, Claudio Fernandez-Araoz, Melvin Sorcher, and James Brant

This collection provides additional suggestions for ensuring that the stars you hire from outside stay brilliant in your company:

- In "Are Leaders Portable?" Groysberg, McLean, and Nohria recommend assessing the degree of similarity between your strategy, systems, and culture--and what newcomers would bring to the table. For example, if you need to drive top-line growth, a talented cost-cutter won't likely work out.
- In "The Risky Business of Hiring Stars," Groysberg, Nanda, and Nohria explain how to grow your stars--through training, mentoring, and assistance with work/life conflicts--rather than buy them.
- In "Hiring Without Firing," Fernandez-Araoz identifies ten mistakes executive-search committees make and proposes a rigorous process as an antidote.
- And in "Are You Picking the Right Leaders?" Sorcher and Brant define six executive skills (such as dynamic public speaking) that search committees tend to overvalue. The authors explain how to look beyond these skills to more important talents during interviews.

Required Reading for Executive Women--and the Companies Who Need Them, 2nd Edition

HBR Article Collection

September 2007

by Alice H. Eagly, Linda L. Carli, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, and Carolyn Buck Luce

The authors featured in this collection agree that many women possess skills that enable them to succeed in varied work environments. Three articles explain how companies can leverage those skills:

- In "Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership," Eagly and Carli advise companies to help talented women overcome barriers to advancement, including outright prejudice. For instance, encourage well-placed, widely esteemed individuals to mentor your high-potential women.
- In "Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All," Hewlett explains how organizations can enable top-performing women to get off conventional career ladders to handle family responsibilities and then get back on. Keys include reduced-hour jobs, careers that can be interrupted, and unpaid leaves.
- In "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success," Hewlett and Luce describe additional ways to ensure that talented female managers who must make work/family trade-offs can still advance into high-level leadership positions. Strategies include establishing "old girls" networks enabling women to build skills, contacts, and confidence.

About the Author

Boris Groysberg is an assistant professor at Harvard Business School in Boston.

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