

## Networking is a Sexually Unbiased Skill

Building beneficial relationships knows no gender boundaries. It is equally beneficial for men and women, and the process can be equally daunting or equally easy for members of either sex.

There are, however, some differences that impact the networker's bottom line. Male chauvinists and radical feminists agree on one thing: Women, probably by nature or because they are the bearers of children, are more nurturing and tend to be more cooperative, empathic and understanding in a non-biased manner. After all, they share their love unselfishly as they rear boys and girls.

Most women are natural networkers. They, their mothers and their grandmothers have been recommending recipes, hairdressers and skincare products across kitchen tables for generations. Where the challenge for some women arises is in the business arena. The increased emphasis on teaching relationship building is helping women become more confident and competent about transferring their skills to the workplace.

Some "older" women were taught by their mothers (who thought them to be positive qualities) to be seen and not heard, not to exploit their personal relationships or to "brag" about themselves.

Hopefully, fathers and mothers today are teaching their daughters that it is acceptable for women to be just as assertive as men, socially and in business, and, that as their daughters enter the business world, this issue will be largely non-existent.

As a reminder, assertive behavior is what all human beings strive for: to be concerned that the other person gets his/her needs met while you do the same. Passive behavior is when you are concerned only that the other person's gets his/her needs met while you don't put any emphasis on yours. Aggressive behavior is when you are concerned only about meeting your needs and pay little attention to the needs of the other person.

What does remain a challenge is that in business likes tend to want to work with likes, i.e. women with women and men with men. Because there are only a handful of women CEOs in the Fortune 500 companies, it's easy to understand why women may not have the same opportunities to build high-value business relationships. This will change only as more women rise to top jobs at major corporations and become more than token members of corporate and organizational boards of directors.

That's exactly what the ole boys' network was and in some cases still is: men at the top helping other men rise to the same levels. Women are not yet as privy to networking in these elite places so while their skills are top-notch, their results may be less impactful and powerful.

Women, however, are gaining in numbers what they lack in force. Because of the corporate glass ceilings (and, yes, they still exist), so many of them are starting businesses and becoming owners and presidents that they are beginning to gain clout through sheer numbers. This, in turn, adds clout to the relationships they are building. While they may not be managing the same number of people, they are learning important leadership skills.

Another positive force for women is the number of company-sponsored women's networks that are being formed within major corporations. Some of them, though, are still perfunctory.

A representative of a newly formed women's group at a Chicago professional services firm contacted me to present a program on relationship building. We agreed it would provide valuable skills for the women's professional development. When we started talking fees, she said there was no budget. Ironically, she continued to say how top management (all men) was so supportive of their initiative ... yet they wanted to get a speaker - a woman - to donate her time. It was even more pathetic that management wouldn't even agree to pay my travel expenses (simply gas mileage from a Chicago suburb)!

Perhaps, I am optimistic in stating how far women have come.

However, I am optimistic by nature, so I believe that by working together, men and women, we can help the process move forward positively ... and soon.

## About the Author

Lillian Bjorseth helps you build a new kind of wealth - social capital - by improving your business networking and communication skills. The Chicago Tribune calls her a networking expert, and the Association Forum of Chicagoland calls her the business networking authority. She's author of *Breakthrough Networking: Building Relationships That Last, 52 Ways To Break The Ice & Target Your Market, and Nothing Happens Until We*

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