

Women executives redefining what it takes to be a leader.

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The assumptions about what it takes to be a in today's business environment are changing. Women executives, no longer looking to "break the glass ceiling," are commanding leadership positions and writing their own rules, creating their own management style and redefining what it takes to get to the top in business. Although women hold almost half of the managerial and professional positions in the workplace, they account for only 3% of the top positions among Fortune 500 companies. But those numbers are bound to increase as more and more women discover they have what it takes to be a leader.

Esther Wachs Book, author of *Why the Best Man for the Job is a Woman: The Unique Qualities of Female Leadership*, studied and talked to female CEOs and identified attributes she believes are unique to women including:

- * women can sell their vision
- * aren't afraid to reinvent the rules
- * focus on achievement
- * show courage under fire
- * turn challenges into opportunities
- * are aware of customer preferences
- * in a high tech world, are "high touch"

Book's assertion that these qualities are found only in women executives is the source of some debate. It seems likely you could find successful male business leaders with these same characteristics. But perhaps more importantly they point to the fact that the ideal management style for today's business climate is going through an evolution. Traditional top-down hierarchical organizational structures, generally lead by men, are giving way to a more collaborative, team-oriented approach that emphasizes communication, networking and yes, balance. Today, company executives, whether female or male, not only need to keep their eye on bottom-line results, but must also be highly attuned to the needs, abilities and dynamics of employees. Business leaders must have the adaptability to manage a diverse global workforce in an ever-changing business environment.

As Senior Partner and Chief Financial Officer for J.D. Power and Associates, Maxine Pollack has broken through the ranks of a traditionally male-dominated world. She believes that the way women perform in the workplace is some times interpreted differently--for example, men are considered assertive while the same behavior would be labeled as aggressive in women. "Many of the women executives I have come in contact with are driven and self-critical to a point, but I'm not sure whether that is an infernal pressure or a reaction to external challenges," says Pollack. "Successful women seem to have a great sense of personal responsibility, tend to be very thorough and extremely efficient."

Leadership development expert Carol Gallagher who interviewed hundreds of women at the top of Fortune 1000 companies for her book *Going to the Top* believes women achieve in areas that they focus on and advises women to have a sense of humor, focus on the big picture, create alliances, help others be successful, be yourself and find advocates. Women are not only joining the executive ranks of for-profit businesses, but also emerging as powerful leaders of nonprofit organizations focused on building communities. Faye Washington, chief executive officer of the Greater YWCA of Los Angeles, says that women are not as much of a proven commodity in the business world and as a result, must work harder.

Companies are recognizing the contributions female executives offer in the workplace, but it seems employers still expect more from women in leadership roles. They need to be strong decision makers, but are valued for their ability to engineer consensus among team members. Women executives must also exhibit "softer" qualities such as a sense of humor and the "personal touch," yet are expected to be clear and effective communicators with the ability to motivate personnel and get things done. And, in most cases, women executives still run the home front creating a perpetual balancing act between work and family life. However, it is still an exciting and challenging time to be a woman in the workforce. The perception of what it takes to be an effective executive is changing as well as the needed management skills. Women are no longer focused on the "glass ceiling," but are creating their own paths to success.

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