



## Taking Control:

### Three Questions Women Executives Need to Ask Themselves

By Sara N. King

Not long ago, I had an intriguing conversation with several women executives at a professional services firm. They were all rising stars and knew how to get things done – and their bosses knew it, too. That’s why the firm’s senior management team asked these women to take on strategic roles as mentors and coaches to some of their colleagues. The women viewed this offer, rightly, as a good opportunity. They could develop new leadership skills, help co-workers mature and further cement their reputations as team players. So they did what women often do in such situations – they said yes.

It wasn’t long before they wished they hadn’t. They continued to carry full client loads, and now the additional strain of their coaching work left them swamped at the office. These professional demands cut into the already limited time they tried to reserve for their personal lives, which were jam-packed with family duties. How, they wanted to know, had they gotten themselves into this bind? And, more importantly, what could they do about it?

Women executives everywhere face similarly stark challenges – and it’s frankly why there aren’t many female executives. Research by McKinsey & Co. has found that little more than 10 percent of the members of governing bodies in the European Union are women. In the United States, hundreds of leading companies do not have even one woman among their top executives. This disparity comes with real costs – not only to women but to organizations and the marketplace.

*McKinsey Quarterly*, in a recent article titled “The business case for women,” shared in-depth research indicating that financial and organizational performance improves when companies have several women in senior roles. In a provocative piece for *Harvard Business Review* on “The Female Economy,” authors Michael J. Silverstein and Kate Sayre examine the enormous buying power of women worldwide – and how companies are not profiting nearly enough from it at least partly because they don’t have enough women in their senior ranks to advocate for the products and services women want.



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**My own extensive experience with and research on women executives over the past 25 years shows that they benefit greatly from asking themselves three crucial questions:**

**#1 What unique value do I bring to my organization?**

Successful companies know their value proposition – the qualities, from brand to products to service, that separate them unquestionably from the competition. When you're clear on the value you offer, you can be firm in the compensation (financial and otherwise) you expect in return. The women I spoke to at the professional services firm were not clear enough on this. Through their strong skill sets, they provided tremendous value to the firm already. But they didn't realize it and felt compelled to add more, even at the expense of their own well-being.

**#2 What is changing in my organization and how can I change with it?**

Women executives, for example, often bring strong interpersonal and teamwork skills to the table – and they are in more demand than ever. Networking equipment giant Cisco Systems has altered its entire management structure to reward collaboration across the organization, and many companies are following suit – creating another opportunity for executive women. It's important, once you've assessed your unique skill sets and contributions, to see how they fit into your company's overall direction. Chances are you have some skills that might be more valuable now than they were just a few years ago – or that you could work on developing if you don't have them already.

**#3 What steps am I taking to set boundaries at the office?**

Women executives often neglect to negotiate clear boundaries as their duties and influence increase. The net result is they pile more and more work on their plates without ever taking anything off. The women at the professional services firm saw many benefits in taking on the mentoring duties – and it's understandable why. The problem is that they didn't make enough room for it. They could have said, for example, "Yes, I'm happy to take on those responsibilities. But to devote the time that this work deserves, I'll need my client load reduced or additional staff added to my client accounts." Women are often afraid to negotiate because they fear they won't get what they want – and look like malcontents at the same time. But they would be surprised at the lengths to which companies will sometimes go to retain their women leaders.

It's of course impossible to boil the complex journeys of women executives down to a few key points or questions. Everyone's situation and circumstances are different, and they require a customized approach. But taking some time to think about these three questions can yield some insights – and put women executives on the path to having much greater control of their lives.



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