

Be strategic when advancing in science, technology

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By Gwen Acton, PhD

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There is an enormous need for science and technology companies to develop and retain talented women for senior leadership positions, yet women currently comprise only a small percentage of executives in these industries. Solutions to advancing more women to upper management include steps that women can take themselves to increase their chances of rising to senior leadership positions, as well as industry actions to improve women's ability to succeed.

Relationships

Networking is often cited as being one of the most critical factors to advancement in any profession, including science and technology. In their personal lives, women tend to have excellent networking skills and strong connections with others. To advance their careers in technical industries, however, women need to focus on meeting and communicating with other professionals within their field, especially those who are at higher levels than they are. Joining and volunteering for professional groups and associations, making individual appointments and attending networking events in science and technology can be helpful tools for networking.

Mentors

Studies show that having formal or informal mentors makes a tangible difference in the career success of women and minority scientists. Forming relationships with more senior mentors – male or female – who can provide personal assistance and guidance will increase the chances of promotion. Specifically, mentors can help foster new insights and perspectives, provide knowledge of other organizations and increase the success and productivity of mentees. Serving as a mentor to others can also provide valuable leadership and coaching skills.

Boards

Joining a board of directors at either a company or a nonprofit is another effective way for women to advance their careers. Serving on a board creates important connections with other high-ranking professionals, provides valuable insight into how companies operate and adds significant credibility.

Women currently comprise only 15 percent of board positions at large companies and a smaller percentage of smaller companies, yet research suggests that businesses are significantly more productive when there are more women on boards.

Senior management

Advancing to more senior management positions in science and technology requires women to successfully market their ideas and themselves to others. Steps women can

take to present themselves effectively include making sure to stay on track when delivering their message, including no more than two to three take-home points, and becoming confident by practicing their presentations and constantly getting feedback from people they admire. Women should be prepared with one-liner, two-liner, three-liner, etc., messaging for those quick moments of interaction by the water cooler that can make or break a deal, or a career.

Leadership

Leadership skills are critical for women to advance to senior positions in science and technology, and can be enhanced both through experience as well as training. Women should seek out explicit training on how to be better leaders and managers, so they are not reinventing the wheel in their own careers. In addition, practical leadership experience can be gained by taking on new responsibilities within the organization as well as by seeking leadership roles in volunteer activities outside the company, such as in professional organizations.

Organizational Savvy

Becoming organizationally savvy is a key dimension of leadership, and a critical skill in advancing up the corporate ladder. Although women in science and technology often misperceive this skill as being manipulative, in reality it involves building relationships and alliances to get things accomplished and move issues forward for the benefit of the organization. To be organizationally savvy, it is important for women to dissect the unwritten rules of the company, understand corporate structure and how it operates, and learn to navigate up, down and across the organization.

Communication

Communication skills are particularly important in the science and technology industries. Women need to be conversant in both the business and technical aspects of the field in order to rise to upper management.

Women, whether they are technically trained or come from a business background, can improve their prospects by emphasizing the big picture when making presentations, avoiding jargon and accommodating different learning and communications styles in their audience.

Company's role

Companies can also take steps to retain talented women. Flexibility in work schedules and career tracks often makes a critical difference in women being able to contribute fully at top levels. Objective, rather than subjective, measures of success also tend to benefit women if they eliminate bias. Research shows that adding more women to the company's board of directors impacts the future of women in its senior leadership. Organizations can also clearly communicate commitment to advancing women, as well as provide resources for managers and senior leaders to learn more about the benefits of diversity for their profitability. Finally, many science and technology companies have found that encouraging constituency groups helps support and provide opportunities for women.

Benefits

The rewards of having the most talented people, regardless of gender, rise to senior leadership positions in science and technology are numerous and tangible. Companies with more diversity are consistently more successful and are more profitable. Society in general benefits from improved science and technology. And, individuals are able to contribute at their full potential.

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