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Increasing future potential of women HR executives

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Abstract: Professor Caroline Cochran of the University of Minnesota studies more than 2,800 high-potential HR managers. Women received slightly higher ratings than did men with respect to managerial competence in their present positions. Men, however, received significantly higher ratings than did women with respect to perceived long-range potential. This research confirms other studies that show that gender stereotype plays more of a role in evaluating future potential than it does in evaluating current managerial performance.

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Full text: quick look at any human resources (HR) association will confirm that more women have elected careers in HR. As a general rule, female managers are more pessimistic about their promotability than their male counterparts. And there is a valid basis for this perception. Professor Caroline Cochran of the University of Minnesota studied more than 2,800 high-potential managers. Each of these managers filled out a questionnaire analyzing his or her perceptions of his or her own performance. These highpotential managers' supervisors were also asked to evaluate performance. Women received slightly higher ratings than did men with respect to managerial competence in their present positions. Men, however, received significantly higher ratings than did women with respect to perceived long-range potential. This research confirms other studies that show that gender stereotype plays more of a role in evaluating future potential than it does in evaluating current managerial performance. THE PROBLEM WITH "FUTURE POTENTIAL" EVALUATIONS Current performance evaluations and short-term performance improvement programs are designed to lend themselves to more visible measures. And because the measures are more visible, they are easier to discuss. It is in the area of future potential that women have problems. Talking about "future potential" often leads bosses to get into the area of untestable assumptions and unarticulated ideas. And they don't like to do that . . . in public. They sure do it in private! Another problem with "future potential" evaluations is that the nature of the HR function makes it difficult to come up with clear, "hard" numbers that are meaningful. It is a problem with all staff jobs. For example, it is common to say, "If you sell 10,000 additional wigits this year, we will consider you for an expanded territory." However, it is uncommon to say, "If you write 300 job descriptions this year, we will consider you as a candidate for Director of Compensation and Benefits." SELF-CONFIDENCE AND PROMOTABILITY FOR WOMEN HR EXECUTIVES Self-confidence plays a role in how bosses perceive longerterm promotability. But it plays a surprising role. Women's ratings of their own performance were generally in line with the ratings given them by superiors. In other words, women displayed realistic self-appraisal. Male managers' self-ratings were inflated relative to how they were actually perceived by superiors. Males thus come on "stronger" in discussing themselves. Perhaps this is simple male self-delusion at work. Perhaps it is a good example of how to play corporate politics. Whatever the reason, it seems to work for men. And women professionals are not doing it! Our Lincolnshire affiliate, Personnel Decisions International, studied 800 managers at one company. The majority of "promotions" in this company were really lateral moves when one closely evaluates job content. When one examines work and title changes where power or responsibility significantly moved upward, nearly 15 percent of male managers received real promotions. Women received only 9 percent of real promotions. Could it be that women are not likely to "rock the boat" when it comes to discussions about promotability? WHAT'S TO BE DONE? These studies suggest the following action strategies for women HR executives: Carefully scrutinize the 'future promotability' component of the performance

appraisal. Male managers are likely to insist on high ratings in this category, even if they don't deserve it. You should insist on high ratings as well! Insist on receiving the most glowing statement you can get, just as males do. Such insistence on your part establishes a tone that you have high expectations for promotion. Second, if your company is ever acquired, then you have a strong and consistent paper trail of superiors noting your high upward mobility potential. Develop more realistic "hurdies" for promotability. As we mentioned earlier, discussions about promotability are difficult because many of the boss's thoughts are based on untested and unarticulated attributions about you. For example, when a boss is pushed regarding promotability, if he or she mumbles, "Try to look at the big picture more often," then you know you are dealing with untestable attributions. Try to replace untestable attributions with testable attributions with realistic time frames. In the case of the "big picture," try to get the boss to be clear about the following: What is the definition of "big picture" thinking, and what are some examples of it in action? How long do I have to develop "big picture" thinking? How will you and I know that I have demonstrated "big picture" thinking? What resources do you recommend to help me get "big picture" thinking? If you and your boss cannot come to explicit agreement on these issues, then try to bring in a neutral and informed third party to help develop testable goals, realistic time frames, and concrete forms of assistance. YOUR TWO HATS Women HR executives reading this column wear two hats. At one level we are speaking to you as an individual about how to advance your career. But you also wear the hat of an HR professional. The basic steps we suggest are components of HR systems designed to help all employees achieve as high a level as they are capable of assuming. THE SQUEAKY WHEEL GETS GREASED This is a common phrase at one of our client companies. And it does make sense. Set high expectations for promotion and be clear about those expectations with your boss. Be clear and insistent that you expect to become a profit and loss (P&L) manager in the near term, and it might even happen! One of our friends insisted on following a career track that would move her out of an HR specialty track into P&L responsibility. They gave it to her. Ultimately, she became VP/General Manager for a Fortune 100 company! But even if they don't give you what you ask for, the fallback position that you realistically have to settle for might be better than the position you would have gotten had you simply played the quiet, good corporate soldier. There is another saying: "Cream ultimately rises to the top." In a chemical sense, it may be a true statement. In a political sense, women won't find it to be automatically true. AuthorAffiliation Laurence J. Stybel, EdD, and Maryanne Peabody are cofounders of Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire, a corporate-sponsored senior executive career consulting firm with headquarters in Boston. Key services include senior level retained search, outplacement, and behavioral turnarounds. They can be contacted at (781) 736-0900 or stybel@aol.com. They are sponsors of the Board of Directors Resource Center (the Web site is www.stybelpeabody.com). Maryanne Peabody is also comoderator of the Boston Human Resources Association VP Roundtable. Laurence Stybel is president-elect of the Boston Human Resources Association.

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