

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP



INTERVIEW BY DAVE JACKSON WITH MELANIE POLONOFSKY APRIL 20/11

Melanie Polonofsky is VP of HR for a major division of a large global corporation. We were impressed with her understanding of the development of leaders in large organizations; especially her insights into preparing women to lead. In this interview with Dave Jackson, Melanie talks about what men and women can do to put more women into the “C” suite.

DAVE: As an HR specialist in a large global organization have you noticed there are a small proportion of women to men in leadership positions? Why is this?

MELANIE: I think the change has been occurring slowly. It is only 30 years since Gloria Steinem spoke out about this major imbalance. Cultural change is slow. Eventually we will get there. But we’ve got to keep this conversation going. We need to appreciate the diversity of thought that the other gender brings to an executive meeting.

DAVE: What would you say to a young female manager who is trying to decide whether to aim for a place at the senior executive level of her company?

MELANIE: You have to want it badly enough; be willing to make the kind of trade offs it takes to get there. For example, it may mean moving to another part of the country or another country. Understanding what you want is the first step. I was just out of college, in my 20’s with my first child when I made up my mind to be CEO of a company. You have to understand what you want – what your hunger is. But you also have to make trade offs. In my 30’s I translated that into VP of HR. You have to make that decision before you are 35 because you don’t have the runway after that. Beware of security – which leads to complacency. To be a leader you have to be a risk taker.

DAVE: Some senior male executives express sincere frustration because they don’t know what to do to get more women into senior executive roles.

MELANIE: If men want to help women move up, they have to look at women executives’ potential. Men tend to look at a women’s past performance where men tend to look at a man’s potential. Senior executives should be aware of that difference in perception. We should be giving women more stretch assignments. But in doing that, they should be prepared to give them support.

The higher up the food chain you go, the less positive feedback you get. It’s ok to tell people when they screw up. But both men and women must have a higher proportion of positive feedback to develop.

DAVE: What can women do to enhance their chances of becoming a leader in their organization?

MELANIE: Women need to learn the language of business. They have to give up “I feel”. Remember they are running a business where decisions are based on facts and numbers. It’s ok to have feelings, but to make decisions you must base your arguments on facts – for example you must understand a P & L.

Networking is another skill young executives on the leadership path must learn. The key to networking is helping others. When someone asks if I can help them I say yes before they make the specific request. Don’t expect anything in return.

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Build your support network. Join professional organizations outside your company. Manage your own career. Things change. You have to have an extended network. This is another time trade offs come in. Are you going to stay at home or go to that professional meeting tonight where you might bump into a key member of your future network?

And part of network building is finding an unofficial mentor. By mid career, you should have found an unofficial mentor. Women have to take the first step in asking a senior executive they admire to be their mentor. Many women executives have difficulty making that request. But in fact, senior executives like to be asked. I had an unofficial female mentor who was the greatest influence in shaping my style of leadership.

DAVE: What would you say to a young woman who is conflicted about accepting a larger promotion because she has other commitments (e.g. a young family and a full time working partner)?

MELANIE: Start with what you want. Don't be tentative. People follow others who are clear about where they are going. Develop a vision and the confidence to express that vision. You have to develop the confidence you can handle anything. You have to understand the difference between "assertive" and "aggressive". For instance, in a conflict situation you have to learn to say "help me to understand your point of view". You have to learn to read body language. When you see a leader you think is good, emulate them. But don't be tentative. The words "leadership" and "tentative" do not belong in the same sentence.

DAVE: What changes would you make to help women who want to lead get that chance?

MELANIE: First: Be less tentative. Remove fear of failure from your thinking. People never do anything if they are afraid to fail. **Second:** Build confidence in yourself by using your network and a mentor. **Third:** Senior executives today must realize different people bring different perspectives which are needed to deal with accelerating change. Diversity is important. Gender is only one part of diversity. Embrace people who are different from you. Innovation is the key to everything in business today.

NOTE: Melanie would be willing to speak to anyone who would like to just talk or find out how to get specific help. If you would like to take her up on that generous offer, let us know and we will be happy to put you in touch with her.

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