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Striking the Self-Promotion Balance: Demonstrating your Value Without Being the Obnoxious One in the Room

Debbie Epstein Henry, Bliss Lawyers

By Debbie Epstein Henry^[1]

You know those people at the office meetings and cocktail parties who tell you how great they are. You remember those instances of people bragging and how off-putting it was. In fact, you are struck by how vivid those impressions are and how those moments stay with you. The idea of coming off that self-serving, arrogant or entitled is embarrassing to you. You've sworn to yourself to never be those people.



So why read an article on self-promotion? Perhaps because instinctively you know that it's important. Whether you are aspiring for a promotion, leadership opportunity, or to get credit for managing a team or client matter, self-promotion is a critical skill you need to hone. That's because self-promotion, when done effectively, is not about aggressively seeking credit for something you don't deserve and offending people along the way. It's about demonstrating your value and opening yourself up to opportunities without being transparent or manipulative. Bottom line is if you are not able to communicate your value, you run the risk of being overlooked.

Yet even if you are convinced that self-promotion is justified and necessary, it doesn't mean you are comfortable doing it. Many people are afraid to self-promote. They worry it is obvious and awkward. They don't want to be perceived as bragging. They may feel unworthy. Or, even if they know they have to do it, they may be too self-conscious to claim their contributions. Some worry that by self-promoting, they are demanding too much and it may be an imposition on others to enlist them for help. They also don't want to battle their colleagues for a position or recognition. Others worry they are not savvy enough to navigate the internal politics of self-promoting in their workplace or network.

Women, in particular, often think their accomplishments should speak for themselves. This belief, however, comes at a cost. "Success, it turns out, correlates just as closely with confidence as it does with competence."^[2] In other words, it's not enough to be good. Your projected confidence is just as important in how you are evaluated in the workplace as your actual competence and ability to deliver top notch work.

But even if you know that you need to more effectively convey your value, how do you get there? How do you strike that balance between demonstrating your contribution while not being that obnoxious person in the room? Here are the steps that should help:

1. **Be Great.** If you are going to self-promote, you want to be sure that you have a legitimate basis for doing so. It requires you to be indispensable to your colleagues and clients. It also is important that you understand your value and know how it will bring a significant benefit to others.
2. **Be Prepared.** Know your stuff cold. Be practiced and ready to communicate your value. Perfect an elevator speech. Be prepared to track your contributions and communicate them. If that is at an annual review, go to that review with your own agenda and punch list of what

you have done and what you hope to do next. But don't wait for an annual review because it will be too late. Regular communication and solicitation of feedback is critical in demonstrating your value. Pre-meetings help with preparation too. These informal, smaller meetings allow you to assess your colleagues' inclinations before you are in a larger group.

3. **Observe Others.** Knowing and reading your audience is critical to effective self-promotion. Study up on who will be in the room in advance. Assess commonalities and areas that may create tension to position your recommendations so they will be received in a favorable way. Evaluate what makes others' effective, what they do that would work for you and what you don't like and why. Access self-promoters who you think are effective, ask them directly what they do and how they cultivated their skill.
4. **Credit Others.** It is important to acknowledge others' contributions. An audience is more receptive to someone seeking self-recognition when that person acknowledges the expertise and contributions of others. Citing others' work is a way to do that and it should not matter if that person is a competitor. In fact, citing a competitor may demonstrate not only proper attribution but also a generous spirit and important prioritization to aspire to a larger goal or cause, beyond yourself. That said, you don't want to fawn or come off as disingenuous or someone who is seeking some sort of *quid pro quo* acknowledgement.
5. **Benefit Others.** If you have the ability to align your self-promotion for the benefit of your employer or another organization or individual, all the better. Forward your boss a congratulatory email from a client and accompany the email with a cover note indicating that you think now is the time to grow the relationship with the client. You will be seen by your boss as someone who is thinking about the larger goal of the company's success rather than simply sharing an accolade. Pair self-promotion with being a helpful resource. So, if you want the exposure to appear before a client and you can provide an expertise that is valuable to them, it will be an opportunity for you to self-promote as well as be a resource. Promote others where you can too. But, be sure these individuals are worthy of your praise because you are putting your reputation on the line in promoting them. Sometimes, promoting others will result in that person becoming what I call a "promotion buddy" who can in turn recommend you for opportunities as well. Promotion by others is often better received as more legitimate and not seemingly self-interested.
6. **Get Help.** Seek out sponsors and mentors who can help with your promotion. They may provide advice about how to self-promote effectively. If they know your work and your organization, they will be more helpful in enabling you to navigate the right tone and approach. If the people you seek out for advice are ones who can promote on your behalf, that is an added benefit. However, be careful not to ask for too much, especially when involving personal contacts for a business purpose. You need to be willing to tap into your personal network yet be sensitive to avoid any awkwardness if the business opportunity does not come to fruition.
7. **Own It.** An important part of self-promotion is simply taking credit where credit is due. Many people have trouble doing this and when they are acknowledged, they deflect the compliment or redirect it in some other

way. While it is gracious to acknowledge other contributors, it is also important to unapologetically say “thank you”. If you are in a setting where you are being recognized and the custom is for someone to share your accomplishments, follow protocol and allow that information to be shared. If you are asked to explain why you are suited for an opportunity, take a factual approach. Rather than say “I am a great leader”, provide an example, with demonstrated facts, of when you led a team successfully.

8. **Take Risk.** Self-promotion involves taking some professional risks. For example, you may have to be confrontational with a colleague who is diminishing your contribution or take a stand on an important project that is being sidelined. Evaluating whether it is appropriate to take these risks is often a separate process in and of itself.^[3] But when contemplating the risk in self-promotion, you must also consider the risk of inaction.
9. **Make the Ask.** Effective self-promotion may require making an ask of someone. As a junior person, maybe you will want to ask to shadow a senior leader you admire to gain learning and exposure. Asking often involves understanding the challenges a person or group is facing and determining how you can be helpful. Then it may involve offering yourself as a resource and in turn, self-promoting by being the one to address the need. Practice and role play before making an ask. An initial ask may need to be small and specific. Expect that your request and effort to self-promote may be declined. You will then need to learn how to ask again. Evaluate whether and when it is appropriate to make another ask and consider factors including new circumstances, passage of time, change in decision-makers, etc.
10. **Show Initiative.** Often the best way to self-promote is to stand out. This may involve volunteering for a project when no one else is raising their hand. Or, maybe it is preparing a presentation or punch list of recommendations when it's not expected or requested. Showing initiative may result in you becoming a point person in an area where you have been struggling to distinguish yourself or perhaps it will get you one-on-one exposure with a senior leader with whom you've been trying to establish a rapport.
11. **Pay Attention to the Details.** When you are self-promoting, just like any other form of communication, the delivery and how you convey your message is critical. You need to frame your request to maximize the likelihood of it being received positively. Be aware of your physical stance and be thoughtful about your tone. You want to convey a commanding presence but also one that is inviting and friendly. Make eye contact and demonstrate sincerity and directness. Be sure you have the right audience – decision-makers who can evaluate your desire to advance or seek a new opportunity. Also, ensure that you are in the right venue. Your audience should be comfortable and open to receiving your information. Consider the timing too. Make sure your audience has the time to reflect on the information you share.
12. **Understand You Will Mess Up.** You are not perfect and you will make mistakes in attempting to self-promote. You may even jeopardize a valuable relationship that you won't be able to reconcile. Recognize and apologize when you have gone too far. Be honest and show humility when you have over-stepped. Also, acknowledge shameless self-

promotion and self-interest. Solicit feedback on how you are doing in striking the self-promotion balance. This may take the form of anonymous written evaluations. If you have a small circle of trusted advisors who can provide candid feedback, seek it out.

- 13. Develop a Signature.** In the end, the best way to demonstrate your value is to be original. For some of you, that may mean telling stories. For others, it may be natural to use humor or self-deprecation. Ideally, you want to be likeable and fun. And, the bottom line is you want to be memorable and make it personal.

The goal of effective self-promotion is to master the elusive challenge of being a team player while seeking recognition for your role. If you are able to identify techniques that are unique to you that demonstrate your contribution, you will gain the recognition you both need and deserve.

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[2] Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, *The Confidence Gap*, *The Atlantic* (May 2014).

[3] See generally Deborah Epstein Henry, *Developing a Healthy Appetite for Risk in Your Career*, *Inside*, A publication of the Corporate Counsel Section of the New York State Bar Association (Fall 2016, Vol.34 No.2).

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Developing a Healthy Appetite for Risk in Your Career

By Deborah Epstein Henry

Introduction

It was 1993. I was a newlywed and in my third year of law school. One weekend, my husband, Gordon, and I were at our favorite New York City diner and I began seeing opaque spots, like the ones you see when a flash photograph is taken of you. It was a strange sensation and I began feeling increasingly out of sorts. We rushed back to our apartment. The spots intensified as did a feeling that my mind was racing and I could not keep track of my thoughts. Then came a *grand mal* seizure. Next thing I remember is hearing Gordon on the phone as I regained consciousness, asking my parents to meet us at the hospital.

The emergency room diagnosis was a brain tumor. But a couple of days later, we found a specialist and what he discovered was quite heartening. He said that while I had a lesion in the back of my brain, he thought it came from a rare parasite, *Cysticercosis*, typically found in Latin American countries. The parasite usually multiplies so that when a brain scan is done post-seizure, the brain looks like Swiss cheese. In my case, there was only one lesion. To be sure it was a parasite and not a brain tumor, he would need to operate. Five days after the seizure, I underwent brain surgery. My parents recount the magic moment post-surgery of seeing the brain surgeon jog down the hospital hall yelling, "It was a parasite!" My vision was blurry for about a month after the surgery and I took steroids and anti-seizure medication for a few months more, but I was told I would soon be as good as new.

Brain surgery as a 26-year-old, newly married law student changed my life. The emotional swing from breakfast at my favorite diner, to a seizure, to thinking I was going to die, to a bright prognosis five days later was overwhelming. But the seizure, the conflicting diagnoses, the brain surgery, and the experience of having family and friends rally around me not only made me grateful but also, it gave me an unusual perspective. It gave me confidence not to defer important choices and not to be as concerned with keeping all my options open. I felt inspired to start taking smart risks in my life by figuring out what was important to me and what would give me greater satisfaction. Had I not had this experience, I doubt I would have had my first child at age 27. I probably would have waited the two years to see if I could secure the partnership title at the law firm where I worked before electing to leave to start my consulting firm. Or maybe I would not have had the guts to start a consulting firm and leave law practice in the first place. And, then I doubt I would have had the wherewithal to co-found a second company five years ago. But when

faced with the prospect that life may end abruptly, time and choices never looked quite the same.

The likelihood of an American getting *Cysticercosis* is about one in 319,000. Pretty low odds. That is the reason why I tell you this story. I do not want you to wait for an experience like this to begin living your life. So, I ask you: 1. What is standing in your way of taking smart and calculated risks in your career?; 2. What are you risking by not taking these risks?; and 3. How do you gain the confidence to start taking the risks that will propel your career and your life?

Risk Parameters

Risk is often defined as a situation involving exposure to danger. However, risk means different things to different people. One person's risk is often another person's opportunity. People also seem to have different risk thresholds. Some gain more confidence to take risks as they age while others become more risk averse.

Some believe that risk taking is a financial luxury while others see risk as a necessity. When I ran an event focused on risk in New York with Chieh Huang, a corporate lawyer turned successful entrepreneur, he disagreed with the notion that risk-taking is a financial luxury. As the primary breadwinner in his family, he felt he still had the freedom and flexibility to take risks and was confident that if the risk he took did not work out, his skills would enable him to find something else to support his household. He also expressed, with humility, that he was not too proud to "flip burgers" and do whatever was necessary to support his family.

Many believe that gender plays a role in risk aversion. When women appear to be more risk averse, I believe it is for two related reasons. One is how they are raised. As Katty Kay and Claire Shipman report in their book, *The Confidence Code*,¹ girls are often raised to be "good girls" and follow the rules. They are then rewarded for their compliant behavior. I also see women less inclined to take risks because they have not historically been rewarded for going outside of the conventional path. In turn, women are often not expected to take risks and when they do, there is less societal and workplace support for their risk taking.

Whether or not you are supported for taking smart risks, risk-taking is important. *The Confidence Code* research and countless other studies increasingly support the value of risk taking and failure in order to gain greater confidence and success. Indeed, inaction (not taking a risk) can often be a bigger risk than taking the risk a person is contemplating. There are many who have regrets

about risks not taken, especially because often there is no subsequent opportunity to recover from failing to take the risk.

Some believe that the risks they are considering will enable them to have more passion in their career and gain greater happiness. And, some question whether happiness and passion are legitimate career motivators. I would argue that happiness and passion in your career are aspirations you should strive for but you need to balance these desires with finding career paths that are practical and viable. Often, it does not have to be one or the other.

Risk Reluctance

Despite the research that supports the idea that risk taking is critical to advancing a person's career forward, many people are still reluctant to take risks. Some of these individuals have taken risks that have not panned out and they are afraid to try again. For those who have gained success and status, they may become even more risk averse for fear of what they might lose. In asking hundreds of people about risk reluctance over the years, I have found that most attribute their reticence to a variety of factors including a fear of failure, rejection and competition as well as a lack of confidence or knowledge. Among these fears, the fear of failure is overwhelmingly the most common. Yet most would acknowledge that it is not healthy to build a life around fear.

Often, a triggering event like my brain surgery is a significant driver to push a person over his or her risk threshold. For others, it may be a natural course of events or transition due to a geographic move, marriage, maternity leave, graduation, retirement, etc. However, when there is no triggering event and no natural transition before you, the question becomes how do you develop the courage to take smart risks?

Courageous Risks

Over the years, I have learned valuable lessons that have helped me and others take strategic risks and, in turn, make a difference in our careers and our lives. What follows are highlights of these learnings:

- **Analyze the pros and cons of your choice.** Anticipating the possible setbacks and potential gains as well as the pros and cons of the risk you are contemplating is critical. In anticipating the setbacks, it is also helpful to think through contingency plans and potential strategies to effectively bounce back. By preparing in advance a recovery for a risk that may not ultimately be successful, you will gain the confidence to take the risk without allowing the pros and cons to paralyze you.
- **Consult with trusted advisors.** Lack of confidence and fear of exposure or embarrassment often pre-

vent us from sharing the risk we are considering, even with our trusted advisors. But, do not keep the risk you are contemplating a secret. If you keep it to yourself, you are unlikely to benefit from those around you who may help you critically think through the opportunities and challenges as well as identify and connect you with others who may help inform your decision. These trusted advisors you consult with should include people who know you personally and professionally so that they can assess both your professional aptitude as well as your social composition. Your trusted advisors can also help you anticipate the reactions that colleagues, friends and family may have and advise you on how to respond to their reactions.

- **Identify additional information or support needed.** You may ascertain additional information needed to make an informed decision. Or, you may realize that there are others with whom you should consult to reach the right decision. You may also identify others from whom it is important to gain support to maximize the likelihood of success in your risk-taking choice.
- **Consider the impact on others.** While you may think the risk you are contemplating is only about you, more often than not it becomes clear that others will also be impacted. It may be helpful to confer with these people to get their buy-in and support as well as their feedback on whether the choice you are considering is a good one.
- **Contemplate modifying the risk.** People will often pilot the risk they are considering by pursuing it on a volunteer basis, testing it out or doing it on the side before fully committing to it. If you can pursue your risk on a trial basis, it can help give you the confidence in your decision to pursue the risk more fully. It will also inform you whether the risk you are contemplating should be modified based on the information you have gleaned.
- **Anticipate the obstructers.** Anticipate what and who may stand in the way of your risk decision and why they may do so. Assess whether there is any legitimate basis for their discouragement and if such a basis exists, work to resolve those concerns. If you do not believe there is a legitimate basis for their concerns, see if you can convert these potential obstructers into allies. If not, then anticipate how you will best pursue your risk-taking without their support and whether you will need to take any additional steps to contain the damage from any possible attempts to thwart your efforts.
- **Make the ask.** Many are fearful of asking for help or asking for what they need. We are often good at nurturing relationships but we fall short of enlisting others or making that final request that will

make the difference. You can often overcome this hurdle by making small and specific asks or seeing if you can make your ask more of a give. If you are generous and helpful, the person receiving the request will likely be more receptive to wanting to help you.

- **Consider ways to build up your risk tolerance.** Determine if there are smaller risks that you can take or less intimidating venues to take these risks to help build up your confidence. More frequent risk taking may also help you develop a greater tolerance for disappointment. Assess whether the risk you are considering can be staged and paced to make the overall risk less intimidating and less damaging if it is not successful. Additionally, contemplate the worst case scenario of taking the risk you are considering and how you would overcome it. If the worst case scenario is something you can tolerate without much hardship, it may help you build up your risk tolerance.
- **Seek out risk-taker inspiration.** Ask others you know who have successfully taken risks about their thought process and how they went about taking the steps that they did to take a risk, as well as the impact of their risk-taking. Seek out books and articles, attend lectures and listen to talks and identify other resources that feature people whose risk-taking approaches and paths are inspirational to you. You may even undertake physical challenges yourself as a means to give you the confidence to take professional risks. For example, some report that after successfully completing a marathon or engaging in challenging ropes courses, white water rafting or other physical adventures, they are more confident in taking risks in their professional lives.
- **Evaluate prior risk-taking successes and experiences.** Look at your prior risk history and assess what factors you previously considered that helped you overcome your fear of taking risks. Consider whether your prior choices made sense and were helpful and what you can do differently or better to achieve a more favorable result. Analyze what has held you back the most in taking risks in the past and what your greatest fears are in taking the current risk you are considering.
- **Be thoughtful about how you frame prior risks.** Rather than see prior unsuccessful attempts as failures, see if you can learn from them and incorporate those lessons into your next effort. When I ran an event on risk with well-known restaurateur Alison Barshak, Founder of Absolutely Lobster® and former chef of Striped Bass and other esteemed restaurants, she relayed that she did not see the bankruptcies that her companies went through during her career as failures. While she

underscored that filing bankruptcy is not a decision to be taken lightly, she also knew that the filings were the best options at the time and they led her to make better choices and achieve greater successes in her future ventures.

- **Assess the best timing.** Your readiness to take a risk and the timing you choose may have a significant impact on your success. If there is no triggering event or natural transition that will motivate you to take a risk you have been contemplating, consider setting goals or targets that will institute a timeline for getting there.
- **Consider the risk of inaction.** Often what propels someone to take a risk is not as much the confidence to do so, but instead, the fear of not doing so. Indeed, the risk of inaction is, at times, greater than the risk of failure. So, it is important to evaluate not only the impact of the choice you are considering but also the impact if you do not make that choice.
- **Recognize it is normal to feel uncomfortable.** Taking risk involves stretching yourself, which is uncomfortable for many of us. By recognizing that pushing yourself out of your comfort zone is often an awkward and scary feeling, it may help you adjust to it more readily. The corollary to this discomfort is a fear that you are being reckless and have gone too far. However, in taking the steps outlined here, you can assure yourself that your decision has not been rash or thoughtless. Without feeling uncomfortable, you will not be able to dream bigger and learn more. Falling short of those efforts and aspirations will prevent you from achieving and pursuing all that is available to you.
- **Focus on resiliency and perseverance, not perfection.** Pursuing a risk that may have some challenges or results in you going in another direction does not mean that you have failed. Focusing on resiliency and perseverance and how to be agile and responsive to challenges and unanticipated scenarios is a healthy framework. Perfection is not a realistic or productive pursuit.
- **Go with your gut.** After all of your thoughtful analysis and consultation, you will need to make a decision. Big decisions are seldom neat and crystal clear. Do not get caught up in the lack of precision in your choice. Ultimately, you will have to go with your gut and a leap of faith that you will be able to confront the unanticipated challenges as you see them and embrace the obstacles as they come.

Conclusion

For nearly 20 years, I have seen that most people who are risk averse are fearful of losing what they have and being unable to get back to where they were if their risk-

taking is unsuccessful. However, people often discover that there is not as much finality in the risk they are considering as they initially thought. So the door that you thought you were closing is often still open, at least partially, and the surprise is that once you take the risk you are considering, you realize that the biggest thing preventing you from opening that door again is yourself.

I have found that a significant impetus for successful risk-takers is their appreciation of unanticipated and unintended benefits. That is, that one risk begets another opportunity. Successful risk takers understand that once they take a smart and calculated risk and it delivers a positive result, the outcome is often not one they expected and it subsequently led to more opportunities than they could have dreamed. After thorough analysis, weighing of options, consultation with others and additional contemplation, I hope you will ultimately be buoyed by the unknown rewards in your exciting journey ahead.

Endnote

1. Katty Kay & Claire Shipman, *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know* (2014).

Deborah Epstein Henry is an internationally recognized expert, consultant and public speaker on the legal workplace, women and work/life balance. She is a two-time ABA best-selling author of *Law & Reorder* and co-author of *Finding Bliss*. A former practicing litigator, Debbie is President of Flex-Time Lawyers, providing consulting, training and speaking services to law firms, companies and non-profits in the U.S., Canada and Europe. Her firm is well known for running with *Working Mother*, the Best Law Firms for Women initiative—a national survey to select the top 50 law firms for women and report on industry trends.

She received her B.A. in Psychology from Yale and her J.D. *cum laude* from Brooklyn Law School. Debbie served as a federal law clerk to the Honorable Jacob Mishler in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York. A native New Yorker, she lives in the Philadelphia suburbs with her husband and three sons.

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RESPONSIVE INITIATIVE: A Fresh Twist on Innovation

By Deborah Epstein Henry

Starting Two Businesses, Responsively

In 1999, I was a commercial litigator at a Philadelphia law firm and a mother of two, working reduced hours on a delayed partnership track. Despite the support from colleagues, I felt isolated and challenged by the prospect of thriving as a lawyer and playing an integral role in my kids' lives. When I spoke to other lawyer moms about these issues, they were equally dismayed. I occasionally had lunch with three colleagues, and I found it helpful to talk about our strategies, successes, and frustrations. I decided to do more with these occasional lunches, and I shared the idea with a colleague who encouraged me to do so.

According to Merriam-Webster, “responsive” means “reacting in a desired or positive way” or being “quick to react or respond,” while “initiative” is “the power or opportunity to do something before others do.”

I sent an email invite to six women lawyers who were working reduced hours at Philadelphia law firms. The email announced that I was starting a brown-bag lunch group for lawyers interested in work-life balance issues. I encouraged recipients to forward the invitation to anyone they thought might be interested. Within days, 150 lawyers emailed me back. Excited by the response, I felt I had struck a nerve. After running that first brown-bag lunch event in July 1999, I knew that this innocuous support group could be much more.

Soon to be named Flex-Time Lawyers, LLC, the organization became a network for lawyers to derive support and career guidance as well as find networking opportunities and a means for change. In January 2000, National Public Radio featured a Flex-Time Lawyers event and the response was viral. Within months, my inbox was inundated with “Dear Debbie” emails from lawyers around the country. Over the next decade, I stopped practicing law, created a New York chapter of Flex-Time Lawyers, started consulting and speaking on work-life and women’s issues, developed a national network of over 10,000 lawyers, and authored my first book.

In 2008, I reconnected with Garry Berger, who had worked with me as a summer associate 15 years prior at a large law firm in New York. Garry got in touch because he ran a virtual law firm and had learned of my Flex-Time Lawyers network. He relayed that his roster of corporate clients kept asking to borrow his firm’s lawyers, and he no longer had enough lawyers to lend. So, Garry and one of his colleagues, Suzie Scanlon Rabinowitz, asked me to help fill their “secondments,” where together we would lend out high-caliber lawyers from the Flex-Time Lawyers network on temporary engagements to clients through their virtual law firm. Thus was born Bliss Lawyers, an accessible bench of top lawyers ready to work for Fortune 500 companies in a full range of industry sectors in states across the country.

Responsive Initiative Defined

The evolutions of Flex-Time Lawyers and Bliss Lawyers have many commonalities. Neither involved an initial business plan or even a clear vision for a new company. Flex-Time Lawyers began as a small grassroots movement of stigmatized working moms at a time, 1999, when no



one was talking about work-life issues. Bliss Lawyers began so Garry wouldn't have to disappoint his corporate clients who needed flexible staffing help and a way to circumvent full-time headcount constraints.

While there was little premeditation in either of these businesses, they both relied on a strong responsive component. Once it was clear that there was a compelling unfulfilled interest in work-life issues in the legal profession, I knew to respond to those needs even if I didn't quite know how. And, when it became evident that Garry's clients had a need for lawyers to work differently to meet their legal needs, we knew to address the client needs even if we had not worked out the particulars of how best to do so.

"Responsive Initiative" is a concept I think needs coining as an oxymoron and a fresh twist on innovation. According to Merriam-Webster, "responsive" means "reacting in a desired or positive way" or being "quick to react or respond," while "initiative" is "the power or opportunity to do something before others do." Thus, combining these two concepts, Responsive Initiative is the ability to create something new by reacting faster and more effectively than anyone else in the marketplace to a force or thing that already exists and presents itself. This is contrary to the notion that something new must be original. Instead, Responsive Initiative teaches us that something new can merely be a different reaction to an existing gap that needs to be fulfilled.

The contrast in the terms "Responsive" and "Initiative" should be heartening to an intimidated entrepreneur, a reluctant leader, or a hesitant job seeker. So often, people stagnate because they are waiting for "the big idea," or

they are worried about making a fatal mistake and they don't want to make a decision until they feel 100 percent secure in it. This is regularly the case with individuals who want to start a business, lead an organization, find a job, or pursue countless other beginnings. Being paralyzed by seeking out the perfect solution, idea or path is quite common, and it can be crippling.

Responsive Initiative asks you to do something different. It asks that you pay attention to your surroundings, rather than discover them. It asks you to notice what people are seeking you out for and then figure out how to address the needs presented to you. And, if it is not readily apparent what need in the market you are meant to fill, it gives you the tools to find it.

Of course, Responsive Initiative is not meant to replace other types of discovery. There is still plenty of room for different ways that businesses, ideas, and careers originate and develop. Yet Responsive Initiative is a way for those who are otherwise missing or skirting an opportunity for fear that it's too intimidating to seize upon it. That said, Responsive Initiative is not magical. I don't want to oversimplify and suggest that you simply put your toe in the water and if a ripple results, you have a new business or a new way to lead or pursue a career. There are many steps in between.

The Importance of Homework

Research is key in determining if you have identified a gap in the market that is viable and needs to be filled. The research to make such determinations may take many forms. For Flex-Time Lawyers, once I realized there was a need for a network of lawyers seeking a resource

on work-life issues, I had to determine if that need was already being met. While I knew that competition often demonstrates a market need, I also didn't want to duplicate efforts. I remember someone relaying that the Philadelphia Bar Association had a "Lawyers at Home" Committee, so perhaps it was not necessary to start another organization with overlapping needs. However, "Lawyers at Home" was addressing a very different community: lawyers who had left the law. I knew it was precisely this difference, between lawyers who had left and lawyers who were trying to practice in an alternative way, which was driving the energy around Flex-Time Lawyers. My research otherwise involved speaking with the constituents. Every lawyer mother whom I spoke to seemed to be struggling with the same challenge of how to be successful in both realms—the home and the workplace—and no outlet seemed to be addressing this dual aspiration.

For Bliss Lawyers, the research involved speaking with the clients. While promoting my first book, I ran events around the country with high-profile general counsel. Regardless of industry or geography, these general counsel said the same thing: They were getting pressed to reduce their law firm budgets and do more work in their law departments, yet they were not getting authorization to increase their headcount. They were uncertain of their staffing needs, and they sought greater flexibility by accessing highly skilled lawyers in a temporary workforce. Rather than automatically hire outside law firms, these general counsel were beginning to turn to secondment firms to perform some of the

work of traditional law firms. These general counsel also expressed a frustration about having to pay for the real estate costs of their outside law firms, knowing that part of these law firms' high rates was due to their overhead (and the artwork on the walls). Hearing this feedback, Garry, Suzie, and I were affirmed in our purpose, and it propelled our work forward.

The Importance of Piloting

Identifying a market need and interest is one thing, but assessing whether there is a profitable business or a viable business strategy is another. Many business leaders and entrepreneurs make the mistake of launching without testing the concept or product or determining if they are the best source to fill the need in the market. Thus, piloting is essential. It not only ensures the viability of the service, market, product, or path but also assures that you have developed the expertise and resources, and you are the best one in the market to fulfill it.

For me, three years has been the magic timeframe to pilot a business, but the amount of time, of course, will vary depending on the nature of the business or initiative. With Flex-Time Lawyers, I ran events for three years pro bono before ever charging a fee. This brought a lot of value. It enabled me to determine whether the market need was real and assess its dimensions. It helped me discover whether I could charge for my services and how I could best be responsive to the constituent needs. The time also allowed me to develop an expertise and following before billing for services.

Piloting reduces the risk of failing and enables you to harness and hone instincts to ensure a readiness for market. At Bliss Lawyers, for three years, we lent out lawyers to Garry and Suzie's law firm clients before we formed a separate entity to run our secondment business. We knew we had identified a market need but those three years of piloting allowed us to see if we could be the ones to meet the demand better than others. In part, that came back to research. Competitors had already designed a successful model of lending out high-caliber lawyers to clients



for secondments. We liked that model and added to it by building our company on a virtual platform, instead of in a brick-and-mortar office, enabling us to bill our clients less while providing generous compensation and benefits packages to our lawyers. It was our way to ensure we were distinguishable and the best in meeting the market needs.

The Importance of Failure and Risk

Even with good research and effective piloting, it is difficult to avoid being stymied by fear. There are numerous strategies to help people overcome their fear of failure. Many of these strategies involve contemplating worst case scenarios and determining how to overcome them. Helpful strategies also involve contingency planning, goal setting, and consultation with others. In addition to these approaches, being resilient and willing to persevere and regularly put yourself out there is essential. And, rather than seeing your unsuccessful attempts as failures, see them as lessons and learnings to incorporate into your next effort.

In running Flex-Time Lawyers for 17 years, I can't count the number of initiatives that have failed. If I really let myself think about, it is embarrassing how many ideas I've thrown out to key contacts of mine only to see the momentum of those efforts extinguished. To reference baseball, batting .300 (and failing more than two-thirds of the time) means you are among the best batters in the league; and that is the message. Responsive Initiative is not about perfection. It is about doing your homework, piloting, harnessing, honing, and then launching.

Resulting Growth Opportunities

While facing your fears and taking risks are scary, the benefits may be ones you have never dreamed—which is what makes taking the risk worthwhile in the first place. What Responsive Initiative does is exemplify how one thing leads to another. Great opportunities are ones you will never discover unless you take the first step to try.

At Bliss Lawyers, lending out high-caliber temporary lawyers to our clients led to them asking to convert our lawyers into permanent employees of their companies. Temp-to-perm growth led to full-blown recruiting,

where clients asked for access to our talent pool for their permanent hires, not just their temporary needs. Law firms started to wonder if they should mirror their clients' model and similarly expand and contract their talent pools as needed; thus, the Bliss Lawyers law firm division was launched. These examples of growth and expansion are the organic results of opportunity. It is about not only taking risk, but also being agile and listening and responding to client and constituent needs as they ebb, flow, and grow.

The Value of Hybrid Growth

Although we have focused on the value of creating and responding to opportunities that present themselves in the marketplace, I am also a big fan of hybrid growth, i.e., building and improving upon the innovations of others.

In developing Bliss Lawyers, the goal was to be the first thriving business founded on merging two innovations pioneered by others—the secondment and the virtual firm. The importance of this approach goes beyond our goal of creating a more competitive business model and better choices for our clients and our lawyers. By developing a company that builds and improves upon the teachings of others, we hope to do our share to further market efficiency.

Listening and Acting

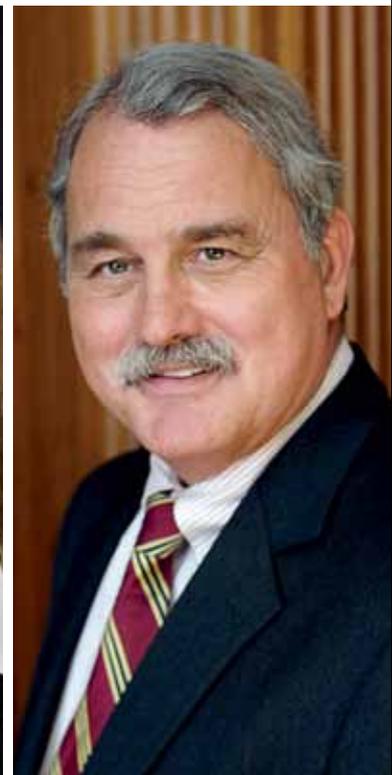
As an entrepreneur, leader, job seeker, or individual hoping to make an impact, it is not always clear what path to pursue. The opportunities and various directions that you consider may be daunting. In my own case, a lot of the decision-making was resolved by paying close attention to not only the vagaries of the market but also what others kept on seeking me out to do. This is where Responsive Initiative, again, can be a guide. Being responsive reminds us to listen and pay attention to what is around us. So often, individuals act without proper reflection. Listening is essential. Yet being responsive, alone, is not enough, it must be coupled with action. Initiative gives us the impetus to take action and respond to the challenges we observe. In addition to listening and acting, a dose of humor and humility will go a long way to helping you build both your business and your career. ●

AMBITION: WOMEN POWERING UP

BY THOMAS L. SAGER
AND DEBORAH EPSTEIN HENRY

Webster's Dictionary defines ambition as "an ardent desire for rank, fame and power."

That is not what senior executives and managing partners should be looking for in identifying future successors. Those who embrace this definition and use it as the lens through which to evaluate potential leaders are limiting, to an employer's disadvantage, its talent pool and leadership pipeline. However, if ambition is defined as "an ardent desire to lead and influence the actions of others," the pipeline opens, especially for women.



We recently participated in a conference that featured four executive women discussing women and leadership.

During the 90-minute panel discussion, there was no mention of ambition or power. When we raised these subjects at the end of the program, the panel and audience were silent.

How could these subjects not be addressed when the designated topic was women and leadership? In a comparable program discussing male leadership, would it be possible not to talk about ambition and power? What else would the men have discussed?

Once the women panelists pondered how ambition and power factored into their roles as leaders, their conclusions were simple: These pursuits were not relevant. When pressed, they attributed most of their success to good luck and happenstance. These explanations are consistent with the research.

According to Anna Fels, a psychiatrist who has written broadly about women in the workplace, ambition is essen-

tially a dirty word among women. Fels reports that mastery of a special skill and recognition from an appreciative audience are needed to cultivate ambition. Thus, the well-documented lack of recognition that women receive for their accomplishments is a significant contributor to their stalled progress.

Fels' research also finds that women tend to cede or deflect ambition for a number of reasons including societal views of femininity, which result in women being punished for exercising ambition. For these reasons and others, many women abandon their ambitions during childrearing or when the challenges in pursuing their professional goals become particularly great.

Complicating matters is that ambition is a prerequisite to power that needs to be consciously sought and developed. The constraints that women face, coupled with many women's discomfort with self-promotion or proudly accepting credit for their accomplishments, result in women trailing their male competitors to the top.

So perhaps it is time to change the conversation and redefine

what ambition should mean in light of what an inclusive, collaborative, and empowering work environment demands and needs. In fact, most male and female senior executives, general counsel, and managing partners today would more readily identify with being ambitious if it were defined as "an ardent desire to lead and influence the actions of others" rather than "an ardent desire for rank, fame and power."

What is at stake? A limited leadership pipeline devoid of talented women

The current prescription for ambition and power results in many lost opportunities for women and, in turn, their employers, who do not benefit from the transformative and performance-elevating leadership these women may bring to their organizations. For women approaching the upper echelons, they may not reach their full potential because they are fearful to articulate and pursue their higher aspirations. Mid- to senior-level women could support each other's ambition but their failure to be

The constraints that women face, coupled with many women's discomfort with self-promotion or proudly accepting credit for their accomplishments, result in women trailing their male competitors at the top.

public is likely inhibiting their ability to do so. And, junior women suffer the most as they lose the opportunity to benefit from role models. How can junior women position themselves for leadership when no path has been communicated or demonstrated to them? Additionally, the silence inhibits women leaders from becoming a critical mass, perpetuating the isolation and failure of many women to progress to the higher levels.

What can employers do to stop women's silence about ambition and power?

CHANGE the rules of engagement by redefining the landscape so that ambition is thought of in terms of one who aspires to positions of leadership and influence—and not power in the conventional sense. It is no longer the stripes on the sleeve that matter—it is the ability to positively influence others through one's leadership, actions, and words.

IDENTIFY women with leadership potential early and ensure they have the proper exposure to influential clients and colleagues and the right assignments that will give them the experience needed to be elevated to the next level.

GROOM women leaders by placing them in influential leadership positions that give them the platform to exercise their ability to lead and develop a comfort level in this and other ambitious pursuits.

RECOGNIZE the successes of ambitious women leaders and make

their accomplishments public by encouraging women leaders to tell their stories.

PROFILE the paths of successful women and create a "leadership timeline" of the chronological steps they took and roles they played to get there.

Encourage women to **BUDDY UP** and promote each other's successes. The "independent" endorser lends

credibility and helps women who struggle with self-promotion or rightfully earned credit.

HOST open forums to discuss and debate ambition and power so women can have a safe place to air their reluctance and overcome it.

Develop a **SPONSORSHIP** program where high-potential women are aligned with senior sponsors who are willing and able to advocate for their next promotion, facilitate connections through senior leaders, and inform them about career opportunities.

PARTNER with outside organizations that can provide the opportunities for women to effectively develop their leadership skills.

Provide **NETWORKING** training and venues specific to women, enabling them to build the support and skills to leverage their contacts.

Create greater **TRANSPARENCY** and openness in the leadership pipeline, career development and compensation processes so that women clearly understand what's expected of them.

CELEBRATE ambitious mothers who have overcome work/life balance challenges as well as erroneous assumptions that seeking greater levels of professional responsibility and being a mother are inconsistent.

ENGAGE men in the process of supporting high-potential women and educate men about the business case of why their employer needs women to succeed.

Provide **EXECUTIVE COACHING** to high-potential women to enable them to set goals and develop a robust developmental plan. An effective executive coach will give them the support and individual attention to develop self-promotion skills, overcome fear of failure and risk-tak-

In today's competitive marketplace, employers can no longer afford to have half of their talent pool underutilized or not utilized at all.

ing, and gain comfort in exercising leadership skills and the power of persuasion.

SEEK recognition of your women leaders from outside organizations to celebrate them and promote their increased stature.

Provide **TRAINING** in the important skills that make up an ambitious and successful leader, including a focus on collaboration, competition, leadership, and teamwork.

CONVEY to women the many benefits that can be achieved through ambition and power, debunking the notion that these are dirty words to be avoided. Instead, demonstrate how ambition and power can be used positively:

- to provide service and give back;
- to gain independence—financial and otherwise;
- to create meaningful opportunities and security for one's family;
- to donate to meaningful causes and provide opportunities for others;
- to change policies that are detrimental to others; and,
- to enrich one's life through travel and diverse experiences.

It is not enough for employers to create a more supportive work environment for women to exercise their ambitions and positions of influence. Women also need to work individually and collectively with others to overcome the traditional obstacles they have faced. However, an employer's effort to create an infrastructure for women to thrive is an essential step to position women for success. This is in every employer's business interest. In today's competitive marketplace, employers can no longer afford to have half of their talent pool underutilized or not utilized at all. The time is now to facilitate in women an ardent desire to lead and influence the actions of others and provide an environment in which women are able to thrive and better contribute to the strength and success of their organizations. **D&B**

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