4 Tips for Aspiring Women Business Owners

Reaping deserved financial rewards requires shaking off corporate gender bias.

October 11, 2019 5 min read

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The recent publication of *Forbes'* "America's Most Innovative Leaders" list, in which there was just one female executive featured, sparked backlash online and off. Yet, many women weren't the least bit surprised. Despite decades of corporate diversity efforts, change has come slowly. Women still hold just 25 percent of five critical C-suite positions in the nation's 1,000 largest corporations, and the problem persists far beyond that.

The drop-off of women in leadership starts with the first promotion to management, where a woman is 18 percent less likely to be promoted to manager than a man. By the time you reach the senior vice president level, only 22 percent are women. Of those, just 21 percent hold positions responsible for driving revenue — the kind of roles that typically get tapped for the C-suite.

You don't need to tell women this. Every day they walk through the doors of their offices, the ripple effect of this reality shapes their daily experience, all the way down to the thermostat settings. The fact that so little has changed is a big reason why women are exiting corporations in droves, with more women than ever starting their own companies and coming back into the boardrooms as business owners and consultants.

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As someone who spent years navigating corporate America in male-dominated industries like defense and energy, these statistics reflect my own reasons for venturing out on my own and starting The Corporate Agent, a firm that helps small businesses and self-employed experts land corporate clients. What I wasn't expecting, however, was just how tough it can be for women to shake off the gender bias aftereffect when starting a business. That's why shifting this mindset became an important part of the work we do to help women business owners reach their greatest potential.

For those who are thinking of starting their own business or have started down this path, here are four essential tips we share with our clients.

1.Know your worth.

It's no secret women earn less than men in the workforce. Unfortunately, this disparity carries over into entrepreneurship, where women business owners earn 28 percent less than their male peers. In our experience, this sometimes stems from women using their former corporate salary as a starting point for deciding what to charge. However, your professional rates should be determined based on the business value you deliver to your clients.

Start by putting a dollar figure on the problem you help companies solve, and don't overcomplicate it. Look for an obvious metric, such as lost sales or how much of people's time (and thus salaries) is being wasted by dealing with the problem. Next, determine what kind of dent you can realistically make in the problem. From there, you typically want to aim for providing clients with a five-to12-times return on their investment to work with you, depending on your field.

2. Recognize old hierarchies no longer apply.

Another aftereffect of the corporate world is the deep-rooted power of job titles, which can shape your perception of who you have “permission” to reach out to when prospecting and building relationships. Yet as the CEO of your own company, those rules no longer apply. In fact, it’s incumbent upon you to speak directly with top executives. because that’s who your company is ultimately responsible for delivering results to. If talking to executives feels uncomfortable, a fast way to shift your uneasiness is by attending industry events. After a few rubber-chicken lunches seated next to top leaders, those titles won’t seem as intimidating.

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3. Have a red velvet rope.

A tried-and-true rule of building a business is to “grow where you’re planted.” In other words: Start with the industry or type of work where you have the most experience. However, after a negative corporate experience, many women turn as far away from their career track as possible, leaving a lot of their hard-earned expertise on the table. But you don’t have to throw the baby out with the bath water, especially because as a corporate service provider, you hold the ultimate power.

Just like a bouncer working the door at an A-list nightclub, it’s entirely your choice as to which prospects you let walk through your red velvet rope. That means you never have to take on a toxic organization or decision maker as your client, and you can set firm boundaries from the get go.

4. Don’t bury the lead.

While working inside of corporate, it can sometimes be helpful for women to present their ideas, promote their successes and ask for what they want in a nuanced way, so they aren’t perceived as difficult, demanding or boastful. But when stepping out on their own, I frequently find women being far too modest and failing to vocalize their biggest successes, case studies or calls to fame. Know this: Everything you’ve done in your professional career counts toward the business you’re building now. And when a corporate decision maker is putting his, her or their reputation on the line to buy from you, it’s no time to beat around the bush about your track record of results. To receive the financial compensation you and your firm deserves, you have to put your strongest credentials on the table from the word hello.

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