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How small changes create big differences for women

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By **Jill Flynn, Kathryn Heath, and Mary Davis Holt**, special for CNN
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Jill Flynn, Kathryn Heath, and Mary Davis Holt are principals of Flynn Heath Holt Leadership. They've coached and trained over 5,000 professional women and interviewed over 1,700 people to find out how women can be more successful at top levels. They authored Break Your Own Rules: How to Change the Patterns of Thinking that Block Women's Paths to Power. They are at FlynnHeathHolt.com and

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

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- Career momentum for women is about changing our everyday thinking and behaviors
- Too many women let their careers happen to them rather than putting themselves in the driver's seat
- Your career is a business that needs a business plan

Career momentum for women is not about adding job skills but about changing our everyday thinking and behaviors. From our decade of coaching, training and interviewing professionals, we've found that women need to rethink the conversations they are having in their heads, and tell themselves a new story.

Our research indicates the following adjustments that can make a big difference for women in terms of getting promoted:

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1. Take center stage: In our interviews we heard that women focus too much of their attention on other people's needs -- serving clients and nurturing teams. This leaves precious little time and energy to take the steps required to thrive professionally. The instinct to help others succeed can work against women by keeping them from focusing on their own career goals. The result is that too many women let their careers happen to them rather than putting themselves in the driver's seat. We tell women to dial back their nurturing impulse at work and invest in themselves and their career strategy. Your career is a business that needs a business plan.

2. Proceed until apprehended: In our coaching sessions we've worked with countless women who are exceptionally collaborative leaders. They like to be liked, but the desire for consensus can slow them down. In order to succeed, women need to retain that core strength of collaboration while at the same time acting unilaterally to make things happen. They need to quit asking for permission and instead demonstrate behaviors that exhibit confidence. In terms of success, remaining behind the scenes -- instead of pursuing bold ideas that you believe in -- is a liability.

3. Project personal power: Our research indicates that many women who are motivated to move into leadership positions are nonetheless ambivalent about projecting power. Modesty and self-deprecation tend to come more naturally. We've seen women act downright apologetic in the face of success -- as if it doesn't suit them or they don't deserve it. To project power, women need to pay attention to small details such as their non-verbal messaging. Stance, eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expressions all send a message to others about confidence. In addition, women need to take credit for their many accomplishments. One sure way to get passed over for a promotion is by remaining silent and allowing others to take credit for your success.

4. Be politically savvy: Many women are disappointed when their hard work and long hours don't pay-off in terms of career advancement. They dislike politics and try to remain above the fray. Yet, being politically savvy entails building relationships, achieving consensus and networking -- women are great at these things. We

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coach women to build their careers as if they are running for office: articulate a perspective, create a platform, line up sponsors, put together a coalition -- and then do it over and over again as their agenda changes.

5. Play to win: We've heard over and over again in our interviews that women need to break out of their comfort zones and take risks. Putting themselves out there means getting comfortable with the risk of failure. It may seem safer to let someone at a higher pay grade take the big chances, but it is the high-stakes decisions that offer the best opportunities to establish leadership credibility.

6. Have a both/and perspective: One phrase that has crept into dozens of our coaching files over the years is the notion of having it all. It's no coincidence that many of the women who are trying to have it all are also the ones getting burned out. There's no single way to succeed, but avoiding black and white thinking -- and remaining flexible -- can help. Because constant change is the norm today, dealing with ambiguity has become a skill that all of us (not only women) need to master.

As Marshall Goldsmith has said, what got you here won't get you there. The truth is that the majority of high-performing women don't need to make major changes in order to succeed. Small adjustments in how they think will have a big impact on their everyday behaviors and lead to continued career momentum.

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