



## About Me floridatoday.com

(from the *Florida Today* website – article appeared in *About Me – A Magazine for Women*)

### **Assert yourself in the workplace**

May 10, 2004

Executive coaches help women present, defend ideas without taking criticism personally

*BY KATHY HAGOOD  
FOR FLORIDA TODAY*

Some Brevard County businesswomen who watched the NBC TV series "The Apprentice" were disappointed to see what happened when the top-performing women's team was split up.

"The women became subservient, taking on the lesser roles. They didn't argue forcefully enough to head the projects and they didn't assertively explain the reasons for actions that led to mistakes," said Kathleen Rich-New, president of The Executive Woman's Coach in Cape Canaveral. Rich-New has coached executives in top corporations, including Apple Computer, Nortel and Silicon Graphics.

Area businesswomen added they thought "The Apprentice" was illustrative of what often happens in the workplace.

"When you feel frustrated in the workplace, the first thing to do is look in the mirror and figure out your role in what's going on," Rich-New said. "Oftentimes, you just need to make some minor adjustments in your behavior to become more successful."

"The women on the show did themselves in," said Patti Driver, past president of the local chapter of the American Business Women's Association. "It was so unnecessary."

Rich-New, Driver and others noted the women's team cooperated on their tasks and outperformed the men at the beginning of the series.

The women's team was then split up to bolster the ranks of the shrinking men's team. That's when the tables turned. When the women joined the men's team they became less assertive and let the men take the lead.

"It goes back to the tendency of women to focus more on relationships than tasks in the workplace. But the bottom line is that you have a job to do and you're rated on how well you

perform," said Rich-New, who holds a MBA and a master's degree in international human resources.

Lack of assertiveness often holds back women in the workplace in many respects, from the tendency not to speak up in meetings to spending too much time helping co-workers, she said.

"When you're so busy doing other people favors that you don't get your own work done, it's a problem," Rich-New said.

Focusing on being assertive can help women move forward in a male-dominated business-management culture.

A critical skill is being able to present business ideas clearly and succinctly in a way that's easily understood and to defend the ideas with strength without taking questions and criticisms personally, said Gail Schuneman, president and chief operating officer for Palm Bay Community Hospital.

Schuneman began at the hospital as a physical therapist and rose through the ranks. She earned her master's degree along the way.

"When you clearly know what you're talking about and your vision fits within the vision of your organization, people listen, especially after you've produced results," Schuneman said.

While results are critical, producing them in a professional manner is essential, Driver said.

"A big mistake the women on 'The Apprentice' made was to try to use their sex appeal to complete their tasks and gain the advantage. That's unprofessional and always reflects poorly on a woman," Driver said.

Debbie Bradley, a certified public accountant and director with Hoyman, Dobson & Co. in Melbourne, who has trained with Rich-New, was dismayed to see the women try to use their sexuality to their advantage.

"That's not the way to get things done in the business world. Women who do that get a certain reputation. It may work for them in the short run, but they aren't going to gain the respect they'll need to boost their career in the long run," Bradley said.

It's also a mistake to cry in a business setting. It puts men off, she said.

"Men have set the rules in the business world and we have to learn to follow them if we want to succeed," she said.

Bradley said what she has seen work in her career has been her knowledge and dedication. That and having the confidence to ask her superiors what she needed to do to move up in the company.

"If you don't ask, they don't think you're interested," Bradley said. "Men have more of a

tendency to seek promotions. Women too often wait to be approached and are disappointed when they aren't."

Keeping that in mind, Rich-New and other successful businesswomen warn women to be careful what they wish for in the business world. The farther a woman moves up the corporate ladder, the more of her time she has to sacrifice.

"I work 10- to 12-hour days during the week and work on the weekend as well. And I may be called on anytime 24-7," Schuneman said. "But it's what I love doing and my children are grown, so it's not a problem."

## *10 tips to become more effective in meetings*

**Kathleen Rich-New, The Executive Woman's Coach**

1. Take a seat at the table and pull out your own chair. You show your confidence by sitting at the table like the others. If you allow a colleague to pull out your chair, you may become "the little woman."
2. Speak up and be specific. You are on trial until you show them the value you add. You were hired to help the organization be more successful, and they expect you to tell them what you think.
3. If introducing a new idea, gather support in advance. No surprises in the boardroom. Others can help you improve your concepts and identify key factors you need to address.
4. Develop your executive presence. Learn how to enter a room and connect with everyone in it. Women too often enter a room and stand back or sit down and watch the men shake hands and connect with each other. Learn how to do it too.
5. Be prepared to ask questions. Do your research in advance. Many times, women will sit there and let others ask questions and shake their heads. If you don't speak up, why are you there?
6. Challenge assumptions you don't think are accurate. You may be the only one who can see the blind spot in their thinking. As a woman, you have a different set of skills and references. Use them.
7. Disagree with ideas, not with people. Women typically hate conflict and will avoid it at all costs. Be prepared to have others challenge what you say. It is not personal; it is about creating a better outcome. You can respond to disagreements by saying, "Interesting point" or "Perhaps you are right," then consider their idea.
8. Leave your purse in your desk drawer, car or briefcase. Don't fidget or put on lipstick.

9. State it with confidence. Ask your question or make your statement, but don't preface it with excuses, background information, apologies or qualifiers. Don't apologize for what you cannot control, such as, "I am sorry the traffic was bad." Don't ask permission, as in "May I ask a question?" Women overuse conditional language like "maybe" and "perhaps," which makes you sound doubtful.

10. Make sure your voice is clear and loud enough to be heard. Don't end your statements with the inflection of a question. A rising pitch makes you sound unsure of yourself or as though you are seeking approval. Under pressure, women often increase the pitch of their voice and are perceived as hysterical. Ask for feedback from trusted associates.

## Resources

- **The Executive Woman's Coach.** Call Kathleen Rich-New at 452-7308, e-mail [KRN@executivewomanscoach.com](mailto:KRN@executivewomanscoach.com) or go to [www.executivewomanscoach.com](http://www.executivewomanscoach.com)
- The American Business Women's Association offers mentoring and support to women trying to build confidence. Contact Joan Wickline at 242-8478 or go to [www.abwa.org](http://www.abwa.org)

Copyright © 2004 FLORIDA TODAY.

[floridatoday.com](http://floridatoday.com)