

MANAGEMENT

Are Women Better Corporate Entrepreneurs?

The re-emergence of corporate entrepreneurship has sparked interest in whether women fit this role best – although they don't call themselves corporate entrepreneurs or recognize themselves as such.

Unfortunately there's not only a lack of research to confirm or deny this premise of women's being "better than," but an absence of generally studying corporate entrepreneurship as well.

Corporate entrepreneurs are the in-house counterparts of classic entrepreneurs: They build new revenue-generating products and services and sometimes whole new business entities *within and with the permission* of their organizations.

Corporate entrepreneurs understand their companies' overall goals; they know where the corporate boundaries are unyielding and where they can flex. They are passionate about creating new opportunities that fit the business strategy, and they can ably marshal and energize resources to create those opportunities.

As a rule, corporate entrepreneurs are skilled individuals who are interested in working for something greater than themselves; making a difference usually matters more than climbing the corporate ladder. They are willing to live with ambiguity and are ready to deal with policies, procedures, management systems and measurements that may not always support their efforts. They



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regularly cope with resistance, isolation and lack of peer support. They bump up against entrenched bureaucracy and may have to break existing rules to get things done.

All this sounds like the very traits attributed to successful women leaders – comfortable with ambiguity, collective learning, diversity and self-directed teamwork. This is not the "glass ceiling" discussion, however. Business leaders need to look at the underutilized entrepreneurial talent in their midst to stem the talent drain that is steadily robbing their companies of whatever entrepreneurial edge they have had. The dot.com boom took away some of the most capable corporate entrepreneurs. And today, there is a notable exodus of highly skilled women managers who are leaving to set up successful businesses of their own.

As well, business leaders need to look again at the organizational models that best support the team-

based, cross-functional, relationship-driven environments that are key to corporate entrepreneurship and the fact that these are environments where women consistently excel.

Entrepreneurial talent must be identified and tapped in order to drive growth through innovation. Indeed, little progress has been made in developing a theory of corporate entrepreneurship. The topic is not included in most of the models or frameworks that have been developed to guide managerial practice. There also is limited understanding of the types of corporate cultures in which corporate entrepreneurship flourishes. Those knowledge gaps must be closed.

Until corporate entrepreneurship has been fully researched, there's no true defense for the argument that women make better corporate entrepreneurs. It may not be until many women step forward to tell their stories that there will be an incontrovertible body of empirical evidence. But the questions are well worth asking – and the need for corporate entrepreneurship won't be any the less whatever the answers. Isn't it time to take a closer look?

Susan Foley is managing partner of Strategic Advantage Consulting, a firm focused on business growth. You can participate in her survey by answering the question, "Do you think women make better corporate entrepreneurs?" and e-mailing your response to susan@strategicadvantageconsulting.com.