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Some Senior Executives Play By Different Rules

By Adrian Savage
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There's a different set of rules and behaviors at the top of corporations. I call it the golf culture. It's an abrupt and invisible change from the meritocracy that dominates all lower corporate levels. Admission to the senior-executive ranks typically depends on a combination of power and politics. Membership is predominantly male and the conventions are male-oriented. They often extend beyond the office to social and athletic activities such as golf.

Women are the most visible victims of the golf culture, because deeply ingrained attitudes at lower levels tie them more closely to notions of merit as the only fair basis for judging performance. Some women promoted to the executive suite struggle with the unannounced change in culture and become quickly marginalized and barred from real influence.

To reach the top, executives must conform to the new rules -- even though they're rarely explained or acknowledged. The rules are so important to the way top teams function that they block or eliminate even highly talented men and women who can't conform. This is the real glass ceiling.

The first step to adapting to this new culture is to understand its rules.

Start by realizing that at the senior level, the context of your job changes from internal to external. When you're rising in an organization, you probably aren't dealing with people outside your company who can have a significant impact on its long-term direction. Yet the most important tasks at the top ranks are dealing with these external forces. These include financiers, stockholders, analysts, lobbyists, trade bodies, governments or major competitors. Top executives spend much of their time on external and often private relations that can affect the company's future, especially in large corporations.

Dealing with powerful external forces changes your outlook and your relationship to the organization. When you speak with external audiences on behalf of the company, your colleagues want to know they can trust you to represent their and the organization's best interests.

This requires different skills from those used to rise in the lower and middle levels. At lower levels, where meritocracy rules, you develop primarily functional and personal skills. When you reach the top, everyone has these skills. To stand out, you need excellent presentation skills and

the ability to interact effectively with senior executives from other companies and organizations. And, in the same way that you must make your own senior colleagues trust you, you need to make external senior executives feel you're trustworthy as well.

Another difference at the senior ranks is that top executives rarely make big decisions on their own. Many managers reach a senior level after having had the freedom to make decisions independently. Don't assume you can make more decisions independently at the top. Here the decision-making atmosphere is collegial. Once you enter the senior ranks, making key decisions independently will embarrass your colleagues and the chief executive officer.

CEOs detest surprises because they look as though they don't know what's going on. Embarrassing other top executives in front of insiders is ill-advised. With outsiders, it's unforgivable. Executives adapting to golf-culture rules must make sure that everyone in the senior-executive ranks is consulted on all significant decisions. Action is taken only when each is comfortable with what's going to happen and the party line is established.

You'll need to practice collective responsibility and accountability. Don't break ranks with the top team in public. The rule of collective responsibility binds everyone to supporting decisions publicly, even if you disagree vehemently in private. You can see it coming with the Hewlett-Packard Co./Compaq Computer Corp. merger: The losers will have to go because both sides have committed the unforgivable sin of showing major differences in public. The only thing that depresses the share price faster than public dissent among the top team members is going public on creative accounting.

Much of the interaction in organizations is based on swapping assets, so you'll need to learn to trade.

As you climb the ladder, one of the key assets you trade is knowledge. This is typical of a meritocracy where people are valued for their skill and expertise.

In the golf culture everyone is skilled, so you trade a new valuable commodity: influence. Consider one of the most crucial tests: budgeting. One way top execs establish themselves is by getting their budgets approved. You're a winner if yours comes through untouched. If your budget is chopped, you become a loser in the eyes of your colleagues and subordinates. This can destroy much of your credibility. Subordinates rely on the boss to get budgets that translate into more spending power, better raises and wider opportunities. Lose in the budget race, and you lose their respect and probably their best work.

CEOs and other senior executives have enormous powers of patronage. It's pretty much the strongest power they have. Their ability to hand out rewards -- stock options, better terms and contracts, more influence, public recognition or status -- binds people to them. Use patronage to reward up and coming, influential people inside and outside the organization. You can confer prestige by choosing who will speak for the company on TV, creating special projects or inviting people to join you at charity events.

The impact of welcoming a rising star to the top table for an evening isn't to be underestimated.

Patronage helps you to secure a network of loyal supporters. Eventually you'll build an entourage

to deliver the ideas and work that keep you in your top position.

It Isn't Personal, It's Business

Whether or not we like it, there are differences between what men and women discuss in social settings. Women tend to discuss emotional areas men find embarrassing -- such as family and personal issues.

This tendency to be personal feeds into chauvinistic male prejudices about women's abilities to be tough enough to succeed in the executive suite. Most men have learned to keep the conversation focused on the task at hand: helping the organization to succeed. It's what the golf culture expects. Sports is the only acceptable alternative.

That leads to my final word of guidance. Some people get on ethical high horses and say the golf culture shouldn't exist. It's a small step from wishing it didn't exist to deciding you won't respond to it. As soon as you do that, you're in trouble. Don't set yourself up as judge and jury. People don't warm to self-righteous lectures about the unpleasantness of some parts of their world.

It's easy to poke fun at the golf culture and see it as Neanderthal. You might dislike parts or all of this culture and want to dislodge it. If so, work to change it -- but while you're doing that, accept the reality that the golf culture is the way to operate at the top.

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