



Excerpt from *Her Place at the Table*

Negotiating for Critical Support

Intelligence pays off. The more you know about the business and political challenges of a role, the more confident you can be about making it work for you and the organization.

Unfortunately, this optimism is not always universally shared. In any competitive environment, there remains

abundant room for skepticism. Not everyone in an organization will be willing to give you the benefit of the doubt or suspend judgment until you have a chance to prove yourself.

And in that uneasy period before performance—the proof—kicks in, the scrutiny can be intense. In fact, 68 percent of the senior women we surveyed at a professional conference believed that their success was *not* presumed when they took on prominent roles. Their experience showed them that their leadership skills and abilities were likely to be more closely scrutinized than those of their male colleagues. Under the microscope, constantly tested and then retested, they placed a high premium on proving themselves. Only then could their expectations about success be realized.

What is remarkable about the results of this informal poll is that one-third of the women did not expect the scrutiny. Unprepared, they may not have recognized how important first impressions can be. Nor would they have been in a position to appreciate how their ability to perform could be undermined or their authority to lead questioned. In failing to anticipate the scrutiny ahead, they may have passed up opportunities to negotiate the breathing room they needed or the backing that would channel the testing in productive directions.

One of the women was candid in her appraisal: "After three months, I want people to say Ann is okay." Such endorsement cannot be taken for granted. You need help in making it a reality. And that help starts at the top. In drilling deep, you engaged key stakeholders to probe their commitment to the task at hand and their confidence in your ability to handle it. That commitment and that confidence need to be mobilized in order to influence others in the organization.

Leaders are constantly measured and constantly tested when they take on new assignments or expanded roles. They are expected to produce, but to deliver results they have to be in a position to make that performance possible. This situation creates something of a paradox for new leaders. In order to lead, they first have to be perceived to have the authority to lead...

In today's rapidly changing environments, new assignments are rarely a perfect fit. New roles clearly build on past accomplishments. But they also create challenges for the future. As others assess an appointment, they can focus on achievements...or they can concentrate on the gaps and what is missing. You may have some experiences that are exactly on target. Maybe you have managed several large technology projects and heading up the unit seems a logical next step. Sure, you delivered discrete projects on budget and on schedule. But others in the organization may question whether you have the technical expertise or the financial background necessary to lead the enterprise.

Because the fit between person and role is seldom perfect, the take on that fit will always be subject to conflicting evaluations...All leaders are subject to scrutiny, but... the testing that women experience can be especially focused and intense. It is here that backing from key leaders is crucial. Whether key backers are countering faulty rationales for an appointment or just putting their credibility behind their choice, they are an invaluable resource. But such backing is never a given; it must be negotiated, and certain conditions can make those negotiations more or less of a challenge. When

relationships go back a long time, a new leader can usually count on the backing of senior people. The top executive in a large manufacturing company summed up the situation up well:

When I put folks in a leadership position, I don't let them fail. I know them; I've mentored them and given them opportunities to prove themselves over the years.

This executive's confidence in his appointments grew out of the rapport he had established with up-and-coming managers. Because his relationships with male managers tended to be on a stronger footing than those he maintained with the company's female managers, he had less hesitation in putting men in leadership positions and backing those decisions. For the women, the situation was more complicated. He did not know them so well—their relationships were more recent and more tentative. Before making those appointments, he needed additional convincing; in his mind, there was still some testing to be done. This executive had not even a scintilla of bias against women. In fact, he actively championed their participation at the highest ranks in the company. But the women could not automatically count on his support; they had work to do to negotiate for his backing...

They needed to:

- *Work out expectations*
- *Secure strategic responsibilities*
- *Have key leaders make the case*
- *Seed storytelling opportunities*

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