

Gender

Research: How Women Can Build High-Status Networks

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Summary. Despite the potential career benefits of building high-status networks, research has long shown that women face greater obstacles in establishing these networks compared to men. The authors' research, published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, not only... [more](#)

In the context of career advancement, the notion that “It’s not *what* you know, but *who* you know” holds some truth. However, for many women, this concept presents unique challenges. Despite the potential career benefits of building high-status

connections within an organization, research has long shown that women face greater obstacles in establishing such connections compared to men. Our research, published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, offers new insights into this persistent challenge, and we share some of those insights in this article.

We collected data on 42 global pharmaceutical corporations over a 25-year period, tracing the networks of thousands of men and women as they progressed in their careers.

While our empirical focus is on the largest global pharmaceutical corporations, our arguments and findings are likely to generalize broadly to most global knowledge-based organizations. We chose to focus on the largest global pharmaceutical corporations for three reasons. First, they are important players in the global knowledge economy. Second, women have equal or better academic qualifications in the disciplines most sought after by pharmaceutical companies, but often lack equal professional connections that are so badly needed to succeed in the fast-changing life science industry. Third, data quality in this context is high.

Examining which networking strategies worked best for men and which worked best for women revealed striking patterns that challenge conventional wisdom.

Face Time with Leaders Benefits Men More Than Women

In the conventional wisdom of career growth, getting “face time” with senior leaders is often touted as a golden rule for building a high-profile network. However, we found this advice may not hold the same weight for men and women. While there is no doubt that getting face time with high-status leaders is instrumental to forming high-profile networks, our research shows that men are far more likely than women to benefit from it.

Compared to men, women who had the opportunity to interact face-to-face with a senior leader were 40% less likely to form a tie with that leader. Why is this?

There is a pervasive, culturally encoded reliance on assertiveness and self-confidence as proxies for competence in face-to-face interactions. These traits, traditionally associated with masculine behavior, become the yardsticks for measuring potential and performance. Such gendered perceptions of competence inadvertently create barriers for women, who may exhibit these traits differently or who may even be penalized for displaying them, thus hindering their ability to gain the recognition they rightfully deserve.

For example, where men may casually boast about the successful deals they closed during a hallway conversation with a senior leader, women may be less inclined to do so. The result is that, over time, these seemingly off-the-cuff chats can influence senior leaders to form competence perceptions that are skewed, leading to an underrepresentation of women in their professional circle.

To demonstrate this point, consider the following scenario: Priya, a seasoned software engineer in a tech firm, presents a complex software solution in a high-stakes meeting organized by a senior leader. Her delivery is clear, her data is impeccably researched, and her conclusions are sound. Yet, the senior leader seems more responsive to her male colleague, Mark, who interjects with bold claims and brash confidence about the solution's potential for success. For Mark, interacting face-to-face with the senior leader is an admission ticket to the leader's high-status network. For Priya, not so. Why? Because despite Priya's comprehensive presentation, it is Mark who likely leaves a lasting impression on the senior leader. His assertive interjections and confident demeanor align with the leader's unspoken criteria for

competence and potential. As a result, when the senior leader contemplates candidates for upcoming high-profile projects, it is Mark's face that comes to mind, not Priya's.

You might think, "Couldn't women overcome this disadvantage by behaving more masculine, by showcasing their competence with the same self-confidence and assertiveness Mark showed?" Not really. Women who aspire to build high-status networks face a double-bind: If they behave like Priya — articulate, composed, yet somewhat soft-spoken — they might not get taken seriously by the higher-ups; if they lean into a more masculine style, they risk being tagged as pushy.

What, then, can women do to build high-status networks?

Leverage the Power of Shared Connections

While our data shows that men benefit more than women from face-to-face interactions with high-profile colleagues, it also offers a silver lining for women. We found that women are about one-third more likely than men to form high-status connections via a third-party tie.

Third-party ties serve as bridges, connecting individuals to a high-status network that might otherwise remain out of reach. Such ties help both men and women forge valuable professional connections. But why are third-party ties especially beneficial for women? Because they are not mere connections; they are endorsements, character references, and amplifiers of capability. They carry the implicit approval and trust of the mutual contact.

When a respected colleague introduces a woman to a high-status individual, that introduction comes with a subtext of credibility. It signals to the high-status connection that the woman has already been vetted and deemed competent by someone they

trust. This endorsement can be a critical factor in gaining access to circles that might otherwise remain closed off due to conscious or unconscious biases.

Consider Laura, a manager working in a product development division, who has an impressive performance history. Despite her attempts, she struggled to forge a trust-based connection with the organization's CTO — a highly respected, high-status player of pivotal importance for Laura's career progression.

Laura's breakthrough happened when she worked on a project with Carlos, a director with a longstanding tenure at the company. Carlos had collaborated with the CTO on various successful projects and was one of their most trusted contacts. Having the CTO's ear, Carlos spoke highly of Laura on several occasions, sharing his favorable opinion of her work. One afternoon, Carlos arranged a Zoom meeting, inviting both Laura and the CTO to discuss upcoming product development projects and the CTO's strategic tech initiatives. During this meeting, Laura presented a compelling pitch for a new product feature that aligned seamlessly with the CTO's vision for digital transformation.

Impressed by her insight and encouraged by Carlos's endorsement of her capabilities, the CTO began to see Laura in a new light. Following this encounter, Carlos invited Laura to join a cross-departmental task force he was spearheading, effectively bringing her into his trusted circle.

Third-party ties allow women to be seen through the prism of their strengths and competencies rather than through a lens clouded by societal preconceptions. They provide a platform from which a woman's distinct strengths can be effectively showcased. So, how can women form third-party ties?

Research suggests that women are better than men at mapping informal networks. Yet, they often do not leverage that skill to build career-enhancing networks. One strategy that women can explore is to think differently about these relationships. For example, focus on goals that transcend professional advancement (the benefits that those ties will bring to a team) or view these ties not as means to an end (career promotion) but as an end itself (as authentic, trust-based relationships between people who care for and support each other).

Now, let's turn to the question of what *an organization* can do to help talented women gain access to high-status networks.

Create Network Sponsor Programs

A number of articles and studies have shown the benefits of well-designed “network sponsor” programs — organizational initiatives that aim to help women forge a deep, trust-based relationship with someone who has already earned the trust of relevant, high-status leaders. Sponsorship in this context, as opposed to mentorship, involves actively advocating for the advancement of women, opening doors for them, and using their established connections to high-status players to create opportunities for someone else's career growth. While evidence suggests that network sponsor programs are beneficial, it is not well understood *how they should be designed* to maximize impact.

Our research revealed the following four tips that can help organizations design effective network sponsor programs:

1. Aim for sponsors with intermediate-status positions. Network sponsor programs often recruit very high-profile members in the hope that they will help women progress, thanks to their influence and extensive network. Our analyses, however, indicate that the most impactful network sponsors are seldom found at the pinnacle of the status hierarchy. Rather, they typically occupy a mid-level status, positioned between the manager being

sponsored and the organization's top-tier individuals. This placement allows them to serve effectively as a credible intermediary between both parties.

2. Target long-tenured female network sponsors. A commonly heard notion is that senior women are more likely to aid junior female colleagues, making them excellent network sponsors. Our data offers a more nuanced perspective. In general, we find that female network sponsors are *less* beneficial to female junior colleagues than male ones. This is likely due to what some scholars have called the “favoritism threat,” or the often ungrounded suspicion that senior women may endorse junior female colleagues, not because they are the best for the job but because they are women. However, our data also highlights a notable exception: When female network sponsors have a long organizational tenure, they make for great network sponsors who truly boost junior women's chances of getting into the high-status networks. Thanks to their social capital and credibility within the organization, long-tenured female network sponsors have the ear of high-status players as well as a keen understanding of how female juniors can bring their A game. They have the potential to make a huge impact in network sponsor programs.

3. Leverage the “female triplet” effect. Another mark of an effective network sponsor program is what we dubbed the “female triplet” effect — an all-female chain linking a junior colleague, a network sponsor, and a high-status colleague. Female triplets are enormously effective because they showcase a rare combination of influence and power on the one hand, and a deep, first-hand understanding of the challenges faced by talented junior women on the other. How can organizations leverage the female triplet effect? By pairing junior women with a female network sponsor who, in turn, is trusted by a senior woman.

4. Combine local contact with global reach. Whenever possible, network sponsor programs should pair junior women with network sponsors working in the same geographic location.

Junior women benefit greatly from getting face time with their network sponsor, especially when their status differential is smaller (see the first tip above). And network sponsors can be very effective in supporting junior women even if their high-status contacts are located remotely. In these situations, network sponsor programs offer an additional advantage for junior women — they can act as a springboard to gain access to *global* high-status networks that extend well beyond the junior’s local environment.

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Our research not only underscores what we know about the unique challenges women face in building high-status networks; it also offers a strategic roadmap for overcoming these challenges. By understanding and leveraging the power of shared social connections, women as individuals can navigate around systemic biases and forge valuable professional ties that propel their careers forward. For organizations committed to gender equality, our study provides a clear directive: Invest in building network sponsor programs that recognize and use the distinct pathways through which women can achieve high-status connections.

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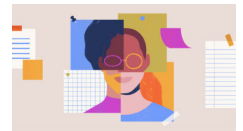
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