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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a model that guides women in practicing key attitudes and behaviors that will help them to succeed in our new economy. It focuses on today's critical workplace competencies while encouraging a rich and textured personal life. It responds to four challenges that women need to pay attention to: acknowledging and capitalizing on their personal resilience; creating opportunities to demonstrate their skills; shaping a personal life that is alive and nourishing; and continuing to move toward healthy, long-term career and life success. The model uses 4 themes and 10 strengths to address these challenges, all of which are described in the paper. It also includes some guided questions that career development practitioners may find useful in career-focused discussions with their female clients. (MKA)

Helping Women Shape a Career Path and a Life that Works

by

Caitlin P. Williams

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Helping Women Shape a Career Path and a Life that Works*

ERIC/CASS
PUBLICATION

Caitlin P. Williams, Ph.D.

Women already have what it takes to succeed in today's workplace. Most of us accept that as a "given" these days. Open a business publication like *Harvard Business Review*, *Business Week* or *Fast Company* magazine and chances are good that you'll see some savvy businesswoman profiled for her role in moving her organization ahead. Scan a research publication devoted to gender, leadership or organizational psychology, and you're likely to see some study highlighting how women's skills and traits give them an edge in today's global workplace.

But, such reports don't mean women have "arrived" and can simply enjoy the ride from this point forward. New challenges and complexities require women to shift their career advancement strategy if they want to continue to move ahead in healthy, life-affirming ways. Instead of focusing on concerns that were important in the last century's workplace, women need to pay attention to four key challenges in today's workplace. These challenges include: (1) acknowledging and capitalizing on their personal resilience, (2) creating opportunities to demonstrate their skills, (3) shaping a personal life that is alive and nourishing, and (4) continuing to move toward a vision of their best and brightest self. By giving equal attention to these four challenges women can move toward healthy, long-term career and life success.

As career development practitioners, we can help the women we work with to develop a new strategy to meet these challenges by encouraging them to focus on the attitudes and behaviors that lead to success in our new economy.

From extensive research, interviews and focused discussions with groups of women across a wide spectrum, I've developed and refined a model that guides women in practicing these key attitudes and behaviors. The model focuses on today's critical workplace competencies while encouraging a rich and textured personal life. It responds to the four challenges outlined above through four Themes and ten Strengths that help women move forward in positive, healthy ways. Career strategies for women in this brand new century require giving equal attention to personal and professional development. This kind of integration, rather than skillful compartmentalizing, is the hallmark of today's successful women.

The following section highlights the model and gives a definition of each of the four Themes and the ten Strengths**. It also includes some guided questions that career development practitioners may find useful in career focused discussions with their female clients.

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Theme One: Inner Resilience

Core Strengths that enable a woman to see herself as worthy of regard and capable of shaping her life in the way that she desires.

Successful women like and trust themselves. They also know what they want their lives to look like – and these abilities help them manage today’s workplace with its constant uncertainty, ever-higher expectations, and seemingly endless possibilities. Skill in Inner Resilience helps women shape their lives, step forward and handle whatever opportunity or challenge their workplace offers them. Theme One includes:

Strength #1: Confidence: Feelings of self-esteem and belief in one’s ability to succeed in job and career-related tasks

Yesterday’s challenge for women often focused on achieving the self esteem and confidence necessary to get into the line of work they wanted. But today’s “confidence challenge” centers more on a woman’s ability to believe and trust in herself enough to take on more visible positions and higher risk assignments.

Ask the women you work with: What do you admire and like about yourself? How can you use these positive feelings to help you take on some new career opportunity or challenge?

Strength #2: Self Reliance: Sense of inner direction and trust in oneself

Remember when Control was considered one of the keys to success? The rules of the new workplace have changed that perspective. Today’s lightning-fast, de-jobbed, “you’re-on-your-own” workplace calls for new skills, and fighting for control is no longer an appropriate response. Helping women learn to rely on themselves and their own resources is what’s called for right now.

Ask: Describe a time you had to rely on yourself to get you through a tough situation. What did you learn about yourself from the experience? How can you apply this learning to your career growth?

Strength 3: Planfulness and Initiative: Developing an open-ended plan and taking action to move toward a desired future

While it’s useful today to know what the hot jobs are and which hot companies are hiring, it’s more important to know how to shape a career path that reflects one’s passions, goals and unique life circumstances. That’s the essence of Planfulness.

But Planfulness is only half the equation. The other half is Initiative – taking one’s personal vision, goals, skill set and open-ended plan – to step forward and make that plan a reality. The challenge for women today is choosing when, where and how best to step forward and demonstrate Initiative.

Ask: Have you taken the time to imagine a vision of what you'd like your career and personal life to look like?

As your clients consider opportunities to demonstrate Initiative, ask: *Will stepping forward in this particular way move you along the career path you've envisioned for yourself? Is this activity the best use of your energy, time and talent right now?*

Theme 2: Career Enhancement

Career-building Strengths that enable a woman to flourish in her professional life

To thrive in today's workplace, women must: know what's most important in their professions; understand what their organization values are; be able to see multiple perspectives, and know how to build strong relationships. They need these skills to be able to take full advantage of today's best opportunities. Theme Two includes:

Strength 4: Knowledge, Skills and Learning: Demonstrated expertise and a commitment to professional development

The knowledge economy that's fueling today's workplace demands that workers constantly remain on the cutting edge. Women who want to succeed must demonstrate that they possess the right knowledge and skills, and they must nurture the capacity for lifelong learning.

Ask: Do you know what it takes to be on the cutting edge in your organization? In your field? How close are you to that edge right now?

Strength 5: Interpersonal Competence: Ease in relating to others and the ability to nurture and maintain relationships over time

Success in today's workplace rests on relationships; and what used to be called "soft skills" are, in fact, critical to a company's bottom line. Workers must relate to a whole range of people, including teammates, project managers, customers and suppliers who often come from a different geographic location, different cultural group and different generation, as well.

Beyond interpersonal skills, women also need to focus on maintaining and nurturing relationships that will help them continue to grow professionally. Women's challenge today involves choosing strategic networking and mentoring options that work for their busy lives and provide opportunities for ongoing support and advancement.

Ask: If you already have strength in relationship-building skills, are you capitalizing on these abilities? If you don't, what are you doing to improve your relational skills?

Are you connected to meaningful networking and mentoring groups? If you are, do you contribute as well as ask for what you need? If you aren't, how can you identify the right kinds of opportunities that fit for your life right now?

Strength 6: Flexibility and Savvy: “Change-able” with a practical understanding of the dynamics of an organization and the ability to effectively present and position oneself and one’s work within it

Flexibility is key to handling change, the password of every organization today. And while many women are skilled at being flexible in their personal lives, they don’t always know how best to capitalize on these strengths in their professional lives. Savvy, the other half of this strength, focuses on the ability to ‘fit’ into a job setting, work well within the unspoken norms of an organization’s culture and attend to the surrounding political climate.

Women’s challenges in this area today are learning to practice Flexibility within limits and getting more knowledgeable about the inner workings of their organization.

Ask: How much do you know about the way work actually gets done in your organization? How skilled are you at using this information to shape the way you position yourself and your work?

Theme 3: Quality of Life

Nurturing Strengths that enable a woman to thrive in all aspects of her life

Far too many women still seem caught up in the race to do it all and be it all. But trying to hold on to a Superwoman mentality is an old strategy left over from the last century. We need to communicate to women that career and personal success is a long-term effort, based on shaping a life that works both personally and professionally. Unless a woman gives as much attention to the quality of her life as she does to the quantity of work she completes, she won’t have the energy to give her best effort to the key assignments she’s worked so hard to get. Theme Three includes:

Strength 7: Balance: The ability to lead one’s life with attention to wholeness and harmony

Though research shows that creativity, innovation and stamina all require an ongoing sense of balance, many women still consider it a luxury. We need to encourage women to put balance back at the center of their lives by helping them focus on moving toward a life that really matters to them.

Ask: Tell me what you most value – what friendships, places, causes and pursuits enrich your life. How can you begin to move closer to a life that’s based on what you say you value?

Strength 8: Coping and Self-Care: The ability to use self-nurturing strategies to maintain health and well-being at work and in one’s personal life

Coping and Self-Care is another Strength likely to fall by the wayside. As a first step, we can encourage women to use coping strategies like stress and time management, selective use of technology and attention to nutrition. But we need to go a step further and encourage Self-Care.

Time and effort devoted to nourishing, self-care behaviors results in increased health and more satisfaction in one's life. Self-care is not a luxury, it's a thrival strategy for succeeding across all the dimension of one's life.

Ask: *What strategies are you using on a regular basis to take good care of yourself?*

Theme 4: The Big Picture

Capstone Strengths that enable a woman to position herself for future success

The future is brightest for women who can lead from their strengths and envision a future rich in possibilities. Theme Four includes:

Strength 9: Awareness of Opportunities: Alert to opportunities and able to capitalize on them

Though there's been an explosion in the number of opportunities available to women today, not all women are aware of the full range of their choices. This is particularly true for women who have been in one position a long time and are seeking a new job and for those re-entering the workplace. Shaping a career today must begin with an awareness of the full range of opportunities available.

Ask: *Let's talk about different possibilities you can explore to move forward in your career.*

Strength 10: Creativity and Leadership: The ability to see oneself as a leader with the skills, talent and insight to successfully move oneself and one's organization into the future

This Strength represents the newest area of challenge and opportunity for women. Never before have women had the preparation, the skill set, the experience and the opportunity to make such a difference. And never before has their contribution been so needed. We must support women's full expression of their talents as well as their determination to make a valuable contribution in today's workplace.

Ask: *What leadership opportunities would let you best demonstrate your strengths and passions?*

* * * * *

Working women today are well positioned to capitalize on their skills and talents. But their future success depends to a large extent on their ability to give equal time and attention to wholeness in their lives. Our task, as career development professionals, is to guide and support them in making wise life and career choices and to help them shape a path that reflects and integrates the many dimensions of their lives.

This section contains specific information on how to use and contribute to the world's largest educational database. Both using and contributing to ERIC and ERIC/CASS can greatly benefit counselors, educators, workforce development personnel, and others providing career development services.

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Summarized from *Myths and Realities about ERIC* by Robert M. Stonehill, an ERIC Digest (EDO-IR-92) developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources at Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, June 1992.

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AN INVITATION TO SUBMIT DOCUMENTS TO ERIC/CASS

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