



DIVERSITY Q

Taking It to the Next Level

A leading career expert offers advice for female career development and advancement

IN HER LATEST BOOK, *CAREER GPS: Strategies for Women Navigating the New Corporate Landscape* (Amistad; \$25.99), Ella L.J. Edmondson Bell, Ph.D., founder and president of ASCENT-Leading Multicultural Women to the Top, offers techniques for all women aspiring to advance their careers in corporate America. “When the recession clears out, the opportunities are going to be vast and we need to prepare multicultural women to succeed,” says Bell, who is also an associate professor of business administration at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. Bell explains that this time of economic uncertainty is the time for women to create a strategic career vision for themselves that includes flexibility, authenticity, and support.

You mention in the book the importance of self-awareness as a key leadership skill set. Why is it so critical?

Self-awareness is one of the first stepping-stones of being a successful leader. As a leader, you need to be clear about who you are and what you bring to the table. If you’re not clear about what I call the good, the bad, and the ugly, you’re like a handkerchief in the wind. For multicultural women, we often

leave our race, gender, and culture at the doorstep. You have to understand what you bring to the table is valued and important whether you’re black, Hispanic, or Asian—what I call your spice, that’s your special ingredient, and companies are beginning to appreciate different spices at the table. Self-awareness is also connected to authenticity. People have to know that you’re being real, that you’re honest, and that they can trust you in order for them to give their all to work hard for you.

You can only be authentic if you’re being true to yourself. Too often I see women say, “I want to be CEO.” If you want to be in the executive suite, that is a corporate lifestyle. The question is are you comfortable with a corporate lifestyle, which means living in a certain neighborhood or networking with colleagues beyond work hours. You have to be a strategic visionary and your intimate partner needs to be a part of that. Too often, younger women get excited by the golden handcuffs—I’m going to make X amount of money, I’m going to have the title and status. Women need to think before they jump into a career path about what’s required of that career path. You have to make time to be strategic.

Why are the first 90 days on the job the most important?

That’s when they are watching you. You can really stand out and everything around you stands out. When you first enter a new job, it’s important to do a little work in figuring out the workplace. You want to be clear about the culture, the key players, and the informal networks because they will make or break you. That’s through observation and asking a lot of questions.

You also want to be very clear about your first assignment and the resources you need to deliver that assignment. It’s important to say to your manager, “How do you see this assignment looking at the end? What’s the objective here?” You want to make your boss an ally. Too often, women of color want to go in and do it all by ourselves. You’ve got to go in with an attitude that I know my information, I know my material, and I come with a strong skill set. You need positive buzz.

How do you develop organic mentoring relationships?

Mentorship is a developmental relationship. It’s a dance. It’s like any other kind of relationship; you have to get to know someone. The mentor shares his or her wisdom and knowledge. You share your perception of what’s happening in your company from your level. Look for mentors around you. You need allies, colleagues, and peers. Mentors are supposed to support you. That support is circular, not linear.

You must also have a sponsor, someone who can open doors to new opportunities. Usually a sponsor has heard about you via your mentor and the buzz about you. The sponsor has power. It’s a relationship constellation.

—Annya M. Lott