

NBC News

# Seven Common Pitfalls Female Executives Face

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August 18, 2014



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As the CEO and founder of her own business consultancy, [Barbara Annis](#) has spent nearly three decades helping businesses worldwide understand that having women at the table is not just about issuing press releases and meeting quotas set by H.R., but is a bottom-line, business imperative.

A pioneer in the field of [gender intelligence](#), Annis operates from a place of blame-free inclusiveness, using brain science to help men and women understand why it is that they think so differently and the value of those differences.

As part of her work, Annis, who is also Chair Emeritus of the Women's Leadership Board at Harvard Kennedy School, commissioned a 2011 study of 2,000 female executives globally.

"There were a lot of studies out there on women and leadership, but there were no studies that I could find asking women who had broken through the glass ceiling -- who were actually running things -- what pitfalls they had to overcome," says Annis.

"So, I asked two questions: What were the pitfalls that you fell into that you really had to work to get out of? And what were the pitfalls that you, by design, avoided? These seven themes emerged and what was fascinating to me, and what surprised me, was that, around the world, the themes were very similar."

Here, Annis expands on what those themes are, discusses the "loyalty trap" women can fall into, and explains why women often find themselves replaying situations that happened at the office over and over in their minds.

### **Pitfall 1: "*Don't Make Bold Requests.*"**

**Many women would say they resist doing so because they fear how it will be perceived. Can you talk about that?**

The bold request is often a Catch 22 for women. Women take leadership programs or executive coaching and they're told: be bold, speak up, make the unreasonable request; and then they actually go and do that, and they get penalized. I remember myself, at Sony, I went through executive coaching, and I said, "OK, great. What can I do more of at Sony?" So, I made a bold request to my boss, and he turned to me and said, "Hold it! You're getting too big for your britches!" This was a long time ago, and that was the language that was used back then, but there is that Catch 22: I'm being encouraged to make the request, and then I'm being perceived as too pushy or too aggressive.

The other nuance around bold requests is the internal dialogue women have with themselves. I'll use Oprah as an example; years ago she was quoted as saying that she had these brilliant ideas but then she spent the rest of the time talking herself out of them. This is female rumination: we'll have a great idea, and then we'll say, "Oh, I don't know. Should I ask? Will it fly?"

**How then can women make the bold request so that it's well received?**

It's about how you frame your request. So, if you frame it in a way that makes it all about you, it can land as you just wanting something or complaining. But if you frame it in a way that presents it as a win for the company, or for your boss, the listening changes, because

then it's not about "you" or "me," it's about "we," together. Sometimes it's about framing it as, "I've had this brilliant idea, and I've done my homework, and I think we will have a huge win and it will fit within our strategic priorities," so that you're enrolling the listener into the possibility. And women are so skilled at that -- enrolling and facilitating -- so it's not a matter of learning a new skill, because we have that skill already, it's innate, it's just about practicing it in this context.

## **Pitfall 2: "Avoid being self-promotional."**

### **Many women are uncomfortable with self-promoting because it feels like bragging.**

The key here is "too self-promotional," because women can state their achievements, but they don't want to do it all the time. I often see how men introduce themselves versus how women introduce themselves. Men will say, "I am this...I achieved that..." They give their elevator pitch. Do men sometimes overdo that? Yes. But women underdo it.

Even in interviews, I see women assume that their resume, which they work really hard on, speaks for itself, and that they don't have to elaborate on things. They focus on relating and building the relationship in the interview, versus building on what they've said in that resume. And women tend not to speak in terms of "I," it's something that we just don't like to say; we will say "we."

The way to really get through this pitfall is remember that you are part of a team, obviously, but also remember that your success matters; be proud of your achievements. You don't have to dwell on it, but just speak it.

**It's an interesting balance, because in terms of bold requests, it's about putting the request in the context of the betterment of the team, but here it's about owning your work and your success.**

Exactly. When you look at top talent women and top talent men, I still see that men get identified and promoted based on their potential; and women get promoted based on what they've done. So, this is not just about blowing your own horn, it's about you being known for your achievements.

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So you have to get comfortable doing it. In the beginning, I had to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, because it wasn't something that came naturally for me. And I still have moments when I ask myself, "Am I over promoting?" But I do it anyway.

### **Pitfall 3: “*Are harder on our ourselves, more ambivalent.*”**

**Where does this instinct to self-scrutinize come from? Many women will find themselves replaying a conversation they’ve had at the office over and over in their minds.**

This brings us to the hardwiring of the brain. There is a part of the brain called the anterior cortex, which is larger in women. And what it does is it tends to weigh options and worries more -- it also increases collaboration, by the way. Women tend to feed worry more, and it’s called female rumination; that’s what psychologists call it.

I was doing a session on Wall Street and there was this brilliant woman who, when we went through the brain science, instantly said, “Oh, that’s so me! I still think about what my boss told me 18 years ago when he said I couldn’t be a top executive in technology.”

So, that’s what we do, not only because our anterior cortex is larger, but because we’re more connected in the memory center of our brain, so we remember all these things very naturally.

So we need some tools to be able to stop that. And I have the same thing; just last night I woke up at three in the morning worrying about something and I had to say to myself, “Why am I going there? Let it go.” So I kind of developed this mantra called, “Thank you, mind, for sharing.” Because I do get triggered that way, and it just doesn’t serve me; it’s tiring. Now, there are certain things, obviously, that you should be worrying about, but most of the memory stuff that you can’t change, that’s in the past; it’s not worth it.

### **Pitfall 4: “*Think if we work hard enough, we’ll be noticed.*”**

**A lot of women feel frustration on this one, because they feel they work tirelessly and then it’s not recognized. Why do women deal with this dynamic so often?**

We fall into this loyalty trap. Women get fiercely loyal to the company, to the boss, and it creates this thing of, “I’m just going to put my head down and do the work, and if I work long enough and hard enough, I’ll get noticed.” And you won’t. You may become indispensable and invisible, but you will not be noticed. I often find that women have this battle fatigue: “I have given it everything I’ve got, and yet I’m not recognized.” And being recognized can be simple things -- it doesn’t have to be a huge bonus at the end of the year -- and often that’s a big ah-ha! moment for men, because men will say, “Well, if it isn’t broken, why do I need to say anything?” There’s this assumption that they don’t have to be appreciative because you’re just doing your job; when that sense of being valued, and appreciated and recognized is really important.

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So in terms of solutions, obviously it has a little bit to do with self-promotion, and saying, "Look at what I did," but it's also that you need to think about your ongoing career plan, so you get out of this pattern of being indispensable and invisible.

#### **Pitfall 5: "*Tend to take on grunt work, versus high profile.*"**

**Is that because women take on what's left after men take the best assignments, or because women are not putting themselves forward?**

It's actually both. First of all, we need to make the distinction between management projects and leadership projects. Women will often take on additional projects that go beyond their job description, but they end up being the doers versus the leaders on it. It could be something as simple as a company planning a conference for clients, and the women will go, "OK great, we'll come up with a plan, we'll get the sponsors," and they'll become the doers of it but they're not leading it or being on the stage as a leader in front of it. So, when you take on new projects, ask yourself: "Is this going to be yet another doing/management project? Or is this going to be a leadership project?" And make sure that if you choose to take a project on, that it is a leadership one that puts you on the front line.

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The other piece of this is women see so much of what needs to get done, that we do pick up the leftovers, because we see that if we don't pick them up, then it isn't going to happen. So, it's really making sure that you practice exquisite care for yourself as you move through your career.

#### **Pitfall 6: "*Forget the importance of strategic networking.*"**

**This might surprise people because women are excellent communicators and very good at building social groups. Can you expand on this?**

So, it's not that women forget the importance of networking. We're natural networkers and we're brilliant at it. We also build long-term networks; we don't just network to close the deal. It's the strategic part of this that I'm honing in on here. Often, when I'm doing keynotes or conferences, I see that women will gravitate to who they relate to, but they don't look at the room strategically and think, "Who are the three people here I need to meet?" That's part of the bold request too, because we think, "Oh, I can't just go up to the CEO and say who I am." Yes, you can.

**Pitfall 7: “Avoid staying the course when resolving challenging negotiations.”**

**Is this because women are natural consensus-builders who instinctively seek amicable resolution, or because women are conflict averse?**

Let me give you an example. I spent the day with eight women CEOs and we went through the pitfalls, and they got stuck on this one. Seven out of the eight women said, “That’s me.” And then they said, “Why can’t we just change the discourse and collaborate, versus this win-lose stuff?” They’re talking about working with the board and the executive team. So, I asked them, “Do you fold? Do you give in?” And they said yes. There were two women in particular who I was focusing on, and I said, “Why don’t you try to stay the course for three months; link it to the big vision, stay the course, and see what happens.” And I got emails from both of them saying, “Thank you for that. It was exactly what I needed to do.” We love to negotiate in a win-win way, in a collaborative way: being transparent about things, communicating it out, achieving consensus, and there’s good stuff in there, but often we bump up against this highly alpha male debate thing of raised voices and rolling eyes, and all that stuff.

Women are brilliant negotiators, but they tend to do it in a different way that takes the sting out of it. Women actually outscore men when they are negotiating for others, but they score less than men when they negotiate for themselves. So again, we know how to do it; we have the skill to do it, and when it comes to others, we are through-the-roof successful. We tend to live in a world of “We,” and being other oriented so if we’re negotiating for others, it’s, “Let me at it!”

*This interview has been edited.*