



LEARNING LIFE AT THE

Management strategies from
women who've been there—and flourished.

by Aimee Lee Ball

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IN THE FIRST THURSDAY OF every month, a group of businesswomen gather in a New York City restaurant where, over grilled salmon and berries sa-bayon, they talk about the pleasures and perils of success. The group has been meeting for some time now, and the conversation is mostly high-spirited and self-confident—the sort of shoptalk one would expect from women in \$800 suits handling \$30 million budgets. They exchange success stories and follow the minidramas of one another's offices the way other women might follow soap operas. They revel in the evolution of one recalcitrant man who once swore he'd never turn over his ad campaign to anyone in a skirt and now champions the woman who's increased his revenues by 20 percent. They celebrate the ingenious way one woman "flipped" the jobs of two bored and disgruntled employees—just got them to switch work lives—creating two enthusiastic "new" workers. They exchange phone numbers for reliable airport limousines and share their tricks for doing triage with their mail.

For most of these women, success came suddenly and presented them with a world of unexpected challenges, way beyond the continued good health of their business. It meant learning how to delegate effectively, how to communicate, and how to manage much more than a specific product or project. It meant tending to the emotional needs of a diverse staff and making a personal adjust-



Success for Margie Goldsmith means directing her own video/film and distribution company—MG Productions.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BENNO FRIEDMAN

TO LOVE

TOP

ment from *getting* permission to *giving* permission. This, for the most part, is uncharted territory. And so, when the group is joined by a rookie—a woman who has just made a quantum leap from middle management to the executive ranks, or from working for someone else to starting her own shop—it recognizes a familiar face. It's a face with a look of angst because it's just fired someone for the first time. Or it's a face with a look of frozen fear because it has to make a speech in front of 500 people at the end of the week. "You wouldn't believe how many times we've seen those faces," says one member of the group; "and the first time is in the mirror."

Life is tricky at the top. And now that there are numerous examples of women who have achieved the highest levels of professional success, it is painfully obvious that—just like men—some of them wear the mantle well and some wear it askew. Everyone knows a story of some woman who was admired and respected as a member of the team, only to become the boss and manage to antagonize and alienate the entire staff with Leona Helmsley-like behavior.

YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN NOW

"Sudden and new success is scary," says Marjorie Hansen Shaevitz, director of the Institute for Family and Work Relationships in La Jolla, California, and author of *The Superwoman Syndrome*. "There are a lot of unknowns: 'What will people think? Can I do



it?' Success can feel really uncomfortable. Women traditionally build networks, and when we surpass them, there's a tendency to feel very, very alone—there's almost a sense of betrayal." In business, Hansen Shaevitz continues, the person who makes the most money or who is the most technically skilled typically is rewarded with a leadership position. But the higher up you go, the more interpersonal skills you need—skills that are never coded in a syllabus handed over to new management. As one woman says, "You can be cheerfully productive in your own personal snowball, but that's not too effective as the boss."

"I got my job by default: I was a top performer, not a manager," confides Mary Mulherne, senior vice president for sales and marketing in the corporate-trust division at Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company in New York. "I learned how to manage suc-

Anne Bryant confidently oversees the 1,800 chapters of the American Association of University Women.

cess through failure—making mistakes with people. It's easier for people to tell you what they want to do than for you to tell them what you want them to do. But I'm responsible for getting a certain amount of money into this institution, and the people working here sometimes forget that. I'm not here to entertain the staff. I don't mix business and pleasure—I never go for drinks, and I don't have family pictures on my desk. I've hired people I dislike if I can see their talents. But I also had to realize that not everyone is as driven as I am, and I can't push people the way I push myself. If someone has made her goals, what difference does it make if she comes in at 11 AM?"



**DELEGATE,
DELEGATE,
DELEGATE**

When Gina Husby became senior vice president of specialized sales and services for the Bank of America in San Francisco, she had a list of 15 Business Commandments that range from "Reasonable is better than right" to "If I'm there, I take the call"—all designed to make her open and accessible to her staff of 1,000. But because there are only 24 hours in the day and she occasionally stops to eat or sleep, she also learned how to work smarter, not harder, which, she says, can be summed up in the word "delegate": moving from a centralized-management environment to a decentralized one.

"I operate on a trust cycle: Only tell me the bad stuff," Husby says. "I don't want to know how you're spending your time. I trust you to get the job done. The number of direct reports I have is manageable—I get information back that gives me a level of comfort." Husby hopes that after an initial, wary getting-to-know-you period ("I'm Italian," she says. "Waving my arms does not mean I'm mad"), there is a reciprocity of support with her staff that permits anybody to say anything to anybody else.

Creating an environment for success—the success of her company, her staff and herself—is a simple issue for Pamela Field, vice president of marketing for Gryphon Development, which creates and develops fragrances and toiletries for The Limited, the retail chain based in Columbus, Ohio. "The deal I have with people is that they are adults and they don't give me any surprises," she says. "If they screw up, I take the blame—it's the Joan of Arc school of management. They don't want to lose that security, and they don't screw up too often. But you have

When Juanita Costa joined IDS Financial Services, her new responsibilities included guest shots on CNN.

to be secure enough to let everyone be a star—you must believe that you are not diminished by having terrific people work for you."

Field has developed a system for building a strong team that goes from hiring to firing. Interviews include plenty of open-ended questions without Yes or No answers, and she always makes the job sound much worse than it is. ("I say, 'Things will get crazy and you will want to kill me.'") If someone is not working up to expectation and Field has to issue a final warning, she is specific and definitive. ("There's no gray area. Nobody leaves that meeting thinking, Well, maybe if I tried this or that...") And if someone has to go, she often assumes some of the culpability for what's gone wrong and leaves the person with dignity intact. ("I always say, 'I've probably failed you in some way,' or 'There must be a better spot for you to use your talents.'")

**KEEPING
IN TOUCH WITH
YOUR STAFF**

Sometimes, with sudden success, there is a less-than-thrilling reception awaiting the new boss—anything from a wait-and-see attitude to a widespread "What's *she* doing here?" Nancy Evans was sensitive to that issue when she made an almost meteoric rise from author of a book called *How to Get Happily Published* to president and publisher of Doubleday Books, with an interim stop as editor of its Book of the Month Club. "When you're going to a new company," she

says, "common sense tells you to listen, ask questions, don't change everything. People need to get to know you. One of my editors later told me, 'We knew it was going to work out when you came to the first meeting and kept your mouth shut.'" Evans quickly established ways for her staff to stay in touch: "People know I keep copies of everything. If too much time goes by, I send back my copy with 'What's happening?' scrawled on top. And I started scheduling some meetings outside the office so we can sort of get away from it all and take stock—even if it's just to say, 'Look, we need another photocopying machine on the 18th floor.'"

When Anita Hersh became the only female partner at Lister Butler, a corporate-and brand-identity consulting firm in New York, she found herself more involved with the aspects of people management that have to do with personal lives impinging on the workplace, like a divorce or death in the family that affects performance. "It falls to me to say, 'I empathize, but this organization needs your commitment as an employee. How can we make this work?' I can't be mother, priest or therapist, and I have to set objectives with an individual in terms of a time frame: 'I know you can't walk in a new person tomorrow, but you're expected to come up to speed by such and such a date.'"

A boss must handle all sorts of "soft" issues that have nothing to do with whatever widgets the company makes—everything from office romances to takeover terror. As president and CEO of the USA network, Kay Koplovitz has had to deal with situations involving drug use and sexual harassment. In both cases, she knew when to reach out to experts. "You get someone drug counseling, keep it confidential, and don't damage the reputation of the individual or the company," she says. "This is not a social-welfare agency, but everyone deserves a second chance." When an employee in one of her regional offices brought a harassment suit against a male colleague, Koplovitz did get the whole group involved, bringing in legal experts to inform everyone about the parameters of harassment in the eyes of the law so they didn't feel vulnerable and guarded about friendly office relationships.

**MAKING
TECHNOLOGY
WORK FOR YOU**

It is, no doubt, helpful to have a layperson's degree in psychology when you're the boss, but Margie Goldsmith found there were plenty of new technical skills necessary—the iceberg below the surface of a new position. When she became founder and president of a full-service video/film and distribution company, MG Productions in New York, she hired a tutor to drag her kicking and screaming into the computer age—one who

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would make house calls and who wouldn't charge cancellation fees when she had last-minute schedule craziness—and learned to let down her defenses about new technology. “Now I can do a shorter phone call followed by a longer fax,” she says. “A machine functions as an additional employee—another brain, another pair of hands.”

Goldsmith got an accountant who didn't laugh when she admitted she didn't know what “in the black” and “in the red” meant, implementing her own theory of selective stupidity: “It's important to figure out who it's OK to look stupid in front of,” she says—“never your clients, and never your staff.” She hired only the best; she knew another company whose answering service always picked up on the first ring, and that's who she got, even though it cost twice as much as some others. “When you're responsible for the budget,” she says, “you're always walking a fine line: You try not to make expensive mistakes, but you figure out where to spend money in order to make money. I spend twice as much as I should on overhead for my office, but it's an excellent dog-and-pony show for my company.”

COMMUNICATION COUNTS

There's a consensus among successful executives that the most important aspect of management is communication—making expectations clear, making people feel important, making sure the staff knows that the boss's eyes and ears are open. “My least favorite thing is when someone stops me and says, ‘What did you think of my last proposal?’” says Katherine Hudson, vice president and director of corporate-information systems at Eastman Kodak in Rochester, New York. “I've got 2,000 people working for me! Do you say, ‘Get on my calendar,’ or do you stop? If you can make someone feel you are truly focused on what he's doing—like holding all calls when he's in your office—the power you unleash in your organization is enormous.” Hudson says an important executive skill is “zapping”—bouncing from one subject to another with the rapid-fire succession of a TV remote control—and she cannot remember how she lived before Post-it notes. Stroking is a priority, too: Recently the company had an “It's a Jungle Out There Day,” during which the executives served bananas to the staff. “It's a way of saying, ‘We appreciate you, and we're willing to look a little crazy to show it.’”

Some people exert power by withholding information—they think they're stronger when they know something no one else knows. This is not a theory endorsed by Ellen Rudnick, president of Baxter Management Services Division, a consulting and software company in Chicago that helps hospitals manage their costs. “Poor communications creates problems,” she says, “and I

try to be sure I'm part of the solution, not part of the problem.” Rudnick's explicit message is, “There's nothing you can't tell me. If we can't correct it, we can diffuse it. But if you lie to me, you're outta here.” She writes and circulates the monthly *President's Letter*—reporting on the signing up of new customers, financial results, human-resources issues—as a shorthand way of keeping people informed. “And whenever there's a meeting, I include anybody who's involved—that way I get exposure to several different levels in my organization.”

The boss, however benevolent, often is viewed as omnipotent—a mixed blessing, to some new executives. “You have to be careful about giving an opinion, because it's viewed as law,” says Anne Bryant, executive director of the American Association of University Women. Three years ago Bryant became the equivalent of a CEO for a nonprofit company that promotes equity and opportunity for women and girls, and she found some way to diffuse her overwhelming responsibility. Her organization has 1,800 national chapters and a staff of 100 at its base in Washington, DC, but Bryant deliberately did not pick a deputy. “I have eight department heads,” she explains, “and I rotate who's in charge when I'm away. I call in every day, but I try to force them to make decisions. That way the finance person has to learn about membership.” She broadens her own base of knowledge by turning to people outside her organization, but she's learned to be wary of so-called experts. Once she hired a firm for a project that suggested the use of telemarketing. Her instinct was, sophisticated people won't respond to what amounts to nuisance telephone requests, but she went along with the firm's suggestion. Her instinct was right: “The technique created a lot of ill will. I learned not to be persuaded by articulate and compelling ‘experts.’”

WORKING IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Whether testifying before Congress for day-care legislation or speaking to school groups about latchkey children, Bryant quickly had to learn the most effective way to address the public: She makes phone calls to five people who are going to be in the audience. “I ask them, ‘What's your experience in the organization, what's your most important concern right now?’—things like that. You get five instant allies. If you want some kind of participation, they will be brave enough to raise their hands, and that's what you need for a speech: momentum. It's not insecure to ask them privately for feedback afterward. You have to ask questions that give you hard answers.”

With sudden success comes the implication that a wider world is out there observing you—you are on display in more ways

than one. Juanita Costa found that out when she left New York for Minneapolis to run a limited partnership that pools investment money at IDS Financial Services. IDS fosters good management: It has a “leadership development” program for executives, and Costa has a mandate to find her own replacement, thus legitimizing the role of mentor. But nobody told her how to appear on television. When one of her new responsibilities turned out to be guest appearances on CNN as a financial expert, she had to learn a new skill fast. Costa's advice is, Practice in front of your mirror or your mother until you get it right, and find a friend who has a video camera so that you know how you look and sound.

She also spent two weeks shopping for an appropriate business wardrobe—what she calls a designer look with corporate concessions. Her choices reflect the conservative world of finance: a preponderance of subdued colors, with an occasional flashier red or turquoise in a longer length—“just to let them know there's a woman in the room.” The emphasis is on beautifully tailored natural fabrics and substantial jewelry. (Read *expensive*.) “You've got to gulp and go make those purchases,” she says. “You want a certain look in the cut and drape of the clothes, and that look is not available inexpensively. The look is fairly formal—sometimes I go home and change my clothes before going out to dinner. But I see clothes as costumes, and a certain seriousness of dress allows me to get the business done, to be immediately accepted.”

Even though no one sees her when she talks on the telephone, Costa pays attention to her style—friendly but efficient and authoritative; no schmoozing. “The voice is an instrument of power,” confirms Ann Hunt, an executive-search consultant and partner of Korn/Ferry in New York. “You'd be amazed how many women have little-girl voices and giggles on the phone. It's quite distracting. You have to develop a continuity of message.”

The trickiest part of sudden success may have nothing to do with conveying a new image or learning a new skill. It's more internal. “There's a mental shift,” explains Anne Bryant, “from performing at your best for someone else's approval to motivating other people and dispensing your approval.” Women who no longer are climbing the ladder of success have to find rewards from new sources—enjoying the role of role model, perhaps, or participating in community activities that enhance the name and reputation of the company. That was the key for Ellen Rudnick. “This organization that I now lead is what's going to keep me successful,” she says. “If my team does well, I do well. It's a win-win situation.” ■

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