



The Judy Project

HOW ARE FEMALE EXECUTIVES
FIGHTING NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES?
BY SUPPORTING ONE ANOTHER



The Heidi/Howard case study says it all. The study describes the work of a powerful, prudent and well-connected venture capitalist in Silicon Valley. When MBA students are presented with Heidi, they routinely characterize her as ruthless, cruel and self-centred. Rename her Howard, though, and things change: Both male and female MBA students give Howard top marks as a savvy star-maker — even though Heidi and Howard are identical but for their names. “That’s why a program like the Judy Project is necessary, because women still face those stereotypes,” says Elizabeth Tropea, 44, Montreal-based vice-president of consumer experience for Bell Canada, who learned about Heidi and Howard when she participated in the one-week leadership forum.

Tropea is one of 120 or so female execs from across Canada who have participated in the Judy Project since this innovative program was launched in 2003. What stereotypes is it fighting? Act like a woman, and people think you can’t lead. Act like a leader, and people think you’re a bitch. You’d think we’d be past those views by now, after almost half a century of women’s whole-scale participation in the workforce. But we’re not: Last year, a U.S. and European study of more than 1,200 senior executives’ perceptions of men and women leaders by Catalyst (a non-profit research organization focused on women and business) found that both men and women are overwhelmingly tougher on women leaders than they are on men in similar positions. Women leaders are viewed as either too tough or too soft, but never “just right.” They face higher standards than men and are rewarded with less. Even those women viewed as competent leaders can’t win — being viewed as a good leader generally goes hand in hand with being disliked, and

BY KIM PITTAWAY

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being liked means being viewed as not having leadership qualities. Male leaders, on the other hand, are more likely to be viewed by men and women as both competent and likeable.

It's enough to make a gal want to cry with frustration – or to figure out a way to change things.

JUDY ELDER LIKELY would have opted for plan B: Do something to change the situation. Elder reached the top ranks of Microsoft Canada, IBM Canada, Ogilvy One and the Canadian Marketing Association, and was a mentor to many women, known for urging colleagues to be proud of their ambitions. When she died of a progressive blood disease at age 47 in 2002, friends worked with the University of Toronto Rotman School of Management to create a program that would honour Elder's legacy. Thus the Judy Project was born. It's geared to women identified by their companies as having "corner office" potential. These companies pay a one-time minimum \$25,000 sponsorship fee to join the program and then another \$7,500 for each participant they send to the annual five-day residential session at the 114-acre Kingbridge Centre just outside Toronto.

Obviously, the Judy Project is an exclusive club; alumna members include Denise Pickett, 42, recently promoted to CEO of American Express Canada. Pickett is one of the first alumna to make it to that coveted corner office, but many others have spoken of the positive impact of the program on their careers, says Beatrix Dart, a professor of strategic management and the executive director for the initiatives for women in business at the Rotman School. The program's key? "This isn't about ghettoizing women," says Dart in her Swiss-accented English as she leans across a meeting table in her own

sunny corner office at the downtown U of T campus. Instead, she says, it's about creating an atmosphere where women can honestly share the challenges they face and equip themselves with the tools to advance.

"We know that in some faculties women make up half of the population, and that they make up the majority of university bachelor's and master's graduates, about half of the Canadian labour force and about a third of management. But they're not making it to the level of senior leaders," says Dart. She ticks more numbers off on her fingers as she makes her case, quoting Catalyst's 2006 Canadian census of women corporate officers and top earners in the Financial Post top 500 corporations (FP500): Women make up only 15 per cent of FP500 corporate officer positions, only 12 per cent of board directors and only 4.2 per cent of CEOs. And given the slow rate of improvement in these numbers, it will take five generations for women to fill just one-quarter of corporate officer positions, never mind reach gender balance. "What's happening as they move up the career ladder?" asks Dart.

Conventional wisdom says women are opting out: choosing family over work, entrepreneurship over the corporate rat race. But Deborah Gillis, the Canadian vice-president of Catalyst, says that explanation doesn't hold. "We've done studies asking men and women about their ambitions, and women are just as ambitious as men in wanting to reach that corner office," she says over the phone, on the move between meetings on a Friday afternoon. "It's not that they don't want it, it's that other factors continue to hold them back. They tell us they lack role models, they're excluded from informal networks and they face gender stereotypes that men don't face."

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And that's not just a problem for the women themselves, says Gillis, it's bad for corporations. The numbers bear her out: Two Catalyst studies of U.S. Fortune 500 companies found that those with multiple women at the senior corporate officer level outperformed those with fewer women at that level by as much as 36 per cent. The numbers were even more dramatic when it came to women on corporate boards of directors: Those with the highest female representation delivered 53 per cent more return on equity than those with fewer women. Corporations that fail to promote women are falling behind in the marketplace —

“When someone says, ‘You’d be good at that,’ you can look at it and say, ‘Yes, but will I be awesome at it?’”

where women influence 80 per cent of all purchase decisions — possibly because women's insights aren't being heard or valued at senior levels.

So how does the Judy Project address those issues? Dart says it focuses on three key themes: how participants “create visibility for themselves,” how they can expand and make use of their networks, and how they can set clear career goals and strategize on how to reach them. “I’m talking in broad generalizations,” Dart says, acknowledging the irony of trying to fight stereotypes by resorting to them to explain gender differences in the workplace, “but women typically are more passive about their career ambitions than men are.” We’re less comfortable blowing our own horns, more likely to wait to

be offered a plum assignment than to ask for it. Gillis calls it “good student syndrome” — believing that if women just do their homework, eventually the professor will give them an A.

Bell Canada's Tropea points to one Judy Project exercise as particularly powerful in helping her define her goals and her personal “brand.” Participants were asked to think back to three times in their personal or professional lives “where you were just awesome, where you did something well enough that you said, ‘Darn it, I’m great at this,’” she explains. Then participants were asked to reflect on what exactly it was in those situations that had taken them from being good to being great. As Tropea reflected on her own experiences, she realized that she was at her best when she tapped into her people skills: building teams, communicating with others and making things happen. “You pull your brand identity out of that,” she says, “and identifying that helps you make better career choices as you move forward. When someone says, ‘Jeez, you’d be good at this project or that task,’ you can look at it and say, ‘Yes, but will I be awesome at it?’”

The exercise helped Tropea recognize how much she enjoyed sharing knowledge with those around her, and inspired her to share what she had learned through the Judy Project with women inside Bell. She’s since given speeches to hundreds of employees, as well as working directly with a dozen or so women as an in-house mentor. “There have been instances where brilliant young women, who’ve completed their MBAs or extensive work experiences, want to know the secret to becoming a vice-president,” says Tropea, “and when I ask them what’s your brand and who’s in your network, they look at me like a deer in the head- ▶

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lights.” They’ve done their homework — their formal education — but haven’t necessarily picked up the informal skills that will help them get ahead.

Networking was something that Judy Project participant Pam Dinsmore, vice-president of broadband and video distribution with Rogers Communications, thought she’d get high marks for when she went through the program last year. “I thought the fact that I know a lot of people would mean that I’d rate highly on the networking analysis,” says the 49-year-old. “But I realized that my network really is not great. It’s really dense, filled with people who are all in the same industry, who all know each other. I hadn’t reached out beyond that to people in other industries and roles who might challenge me in different ways or mentor me in different ways.”

Tropea laughs when she explains the difference she’s come to understand in how men and women think about their networks. “Guys have no qualms about calling Bob’s cousin’s uncle to borrow the tool they need to

get a job done,” she says. “They’re focused on the transaction. As women, we’re more focused on the relationship, so we worry about making the call: If I call her, do I have to be her friend? Will I have to spend time talking to her? What if I don’t like her, and then I owe her? And while we’re worrying, he’s already used his network to get the tool and moved on to the next transaction.”

Of course, the Judy Project itself contributes to participants’ network development: Women connect with the 20 to 25 participants in their own sessions (as well as with past alumnae at periodic alumnae events), they meet guest speaker CEOs during their residency, and some stay connected with a core group of six to eight participants either informally or through the formation of “personal advisory boards.”

Dinsmore’s group meets quarterly, and already it’s helped improve her self-described dense network. “They are women I wouldn’t otherwise know and businesses I wouldn’t otherwise connect with,” she says.

It’s all great — if you’re fortunate enough to work for a company that’s willing to ante up the \$25,000 sponsorship fee plus registration costs. But as Dart and the program founders look to the future, they’re also adding new programs: the Emerging Leaders Program (aimed at middle managers) and the Women in Law Program (geared, as the title suggests, to lawyers). On the horizon: programs for female business immigrants who are underemployed in Canada, and sessions for women who are considering returning to work after taking time out. All are priced on a participation rather than sponsorship basis. You might call it an ambitious plan to extend their network — but then, that’s something Judy Elder would likely applaud. **M**



HELPING HANDS

WHAT ADVICE DOES THE JUDY PROJECT’S BEATRIX DART HAVE FOR WOMEN AS THEY CLIMB THE CORPORATE LADDER?

- **Don’t be shy** about creating and expanding your network. Look for connections outside your company and your specific job or area of expertise. “It can be a lifesaver.”
- **Speak up.** “Don’t be afraid to ask for the assignments and opportunities you want.”
- **Invest** in further education. “Identify your skill gaps and take the steps to learn more.”



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