

# Do women dumb down?

By: Veronica Cool ⌚ June 14, 2015



COOL TIPS

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Recently, I heard remarks from Christopher Simmons, retired KPMG chief diversity officer, addressing diversity and women, in particular. He noticed a trend: Out of each high school graduating class, women made up 6 or more of the top 10 slots. Yet only 24 percent of Fortune 500 firms have female CEOs ... and the participation in the ranks of management remains abysmally low.

Prompting the question asked by Mr. Simmons: "Do women dumb down after high school?" Of course, we don't lose our minds or intelligence! Personally, I can attest that, no, we don't dumb down. Rather, we get derailed, distracted and re-directed. Access and resources, or lack thereof, have influenced success and professional advancement for decades.

Existing preconceptions on gender roles influence hiring and promotion decisions. Women's careers are impacted by births, family and caring for elderly relatives. This often creates a world of rigidity, where only option A or B apply when in reality, we can create much more flexibility. And senior leaders, managing partners and decision makers can SUPPORT & ENCOURAGE the needed flexibility to retain and advance women.

Study after study supports that — regardless of gender — every leader, employee and student can benefit tremendously from a mentor. Women struggle with wooing mentors, and the right mentor at that, one who will serve as a sponsor and grant access. We need to leverage our collective influence, and our inherent ability to nurture to promote one another.

I witnessed these traits during a recent gathering. A highly accomplished retired professor hosted a lovely lunch in her home to introduce her friends to an innovative after-school tutoring and mentoring program. Adelante Latina was created by Leonor Blum, a retired teacher originally from Argentina, who developed a grass-roots program to ensure Latino high school students graduate and proceed into college. Without tutors, mentors and access to school administrators, the program won't scale easily.

One by one, each of the 20 guests provided encouraging suggestions, including resources and solutions to scale this effort into a sustainable program with very positive ramifications. In a recent conversation, Paulette Lundy, human resources vice president for Chesapeake Employers Insurance Company, shared the positive impacts of mentoring.

"I believe in the philosophy of 'return on investments.' I have spent a great part of my career coaching women toward their career aspirations or to the next level. My investment in them was returned when I met Tina Corner through Network2000, an organization that champions women leaders and is committed to increase the influence of women leaders. Tina, founder of LXCouncil, Inc., became my mentor and we have remained friends since then.

"During my mentoring time, Tina shared her sound guidance. I am a better person and professional because of that experience. Because of our encounter, I take every opportunity to champion myself, my achievements and my future as well as that of other women; we must ensure that we continue the positive trend of nurturing our mutual growth and ensure that no woman is left behind!"

At the other end of the spectrum are women-owned businesses, which have increased dramatically over the last two decades. According to the State-Owned Business Report, the rate of increase is a staggering 68 percent since 1997, with more than 9.1 million women-owned businesses operating in 2014, up from 8.6 million in 2013. This surging growth, which has doubled in three years, has generated nearly \$1.5 trillion in revenues.

Yet, despite this growth, women-owned businesses don't scale at the same rate as male-owned enterprises. Instead of interpreting hundreds of studies to understand the root cause, I prefer to fix it — by leveraging some of the resources listed below.

Women need access to more effective resources, such as ATHENA Powerlink, a national program hosted locally in Baltimore by PNC Bank. It guides women business owners to achieve tangible goals by providing them with access to a panel of business advisers. Each advisory panel is hand-selected, based upon each woman business owner's individual needs. These volunteer panelists serve as mentors for a 12-month period at no charge to the owner and, ultimately, strive to help the woman business owner achieve growth and profitability.

Presently, the Baltimore program is seeking applicants for the next cadre of participants. Which woman-owned business in your network could benefit from this intensive support?

Additionally, women-owned companies should consider becoming certified, whether through public or private programs. Among available certifications are the federal government SBA 8(a) certification; the Maryland State MDOT MBE/DBE/WBE certifications; and city/county specific certifications. Also consider SUPPLIER DIVERSITY, or contracting with the private sector (think of BGE or Wells Fargo). Private-sector certifications, such as WBENC or National Minority Supplier Development Council, can significantly grow revenues for women-owned firms.

These certifications or labels provide validation that in fact the business is owned and operated by a woman or minority. There are multiple set-aside opportunities that level the

playing field and permit the woman-owned business to compete for contracts against a smaller pool of bidders.

Women and women-owned businesses are here to stay; this is not an epiphany. SCALING & GROWING SUSTAINABLY is the priority.

Women, in every role, from student, employee, leader and entrepreneur, need to leverage their connections and influence and to seek mentors and sponsors to catapult their growth and debunk the dumbing-down myth. While, simultaneously, leaders — both men AND women — need to intentionally support the connections to drive sustainable growth.

Till next time, amigos.

*\*This article was originally posted on The Daily Record.*

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