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OUR VISION

We have a dream. It is a big vision . . . it is a leap . . . and it is audacious: we want to see women make up at least 30 percent of the top leadership positions in corporate America within the next ten years. We believe that 30 percent will be a tipping point. When 30 percent of corporate leaders are women, the goals and direction of corporate America will change. The Old Rules will be shattered. America's corporations will be better led, and everyone will benefit.

This is the vision we're pushing toward each and every day. This book is the culmination of what we've learned over the last decade spent coaching thousands of women executives. It debunks the faulty assumptions that limit many of you as women, and it introduces a new set of rules to help you adopt thoughts and actions that are conducive to power. Using research we've conducted over a multiyear period and the patterns we've identified through coaching high-potential women, we'll tell you how to improve your odds of success at the highest levels of leadership by thinking differently and breaking your own rules.

We have a way to go before our vision becomes a reality. Despite the positive impact women leaders have on corporate performance,¹ very few of us hold the top slots in major organizations. As of now, there are just thirteen women CEOs steering Fortune 500

companies.² That translates to less than a lowly 3 percent—and the number hasn't risen in recent years. For each new woman who enters Fortune's list, another falls off. This is a kick in the gut, considering that women not only outnumber men as a percentage of the total workforce but also earn more undergraduate and graduate degrees than men.³

And then there is the matter of take-home pay. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women's wages came in at about 79 percent of men's in 2008. We won't dispute that there has been some progress made in recent decades, but the wage gap still exists, and it's significant.⁴

In an age when more women are taking over power positions in global politics, poor representation in the business sector and the lack of equity are surprising. Something's very wrong here. Some of this is certainly gender bias; that much we know. If you believe that human nature dictates that senior leaders hire people who are like themselves, then you will figure that men open the gate for other men, and women don't rise through the ranks as easily. We also have stereotypes to contend with, which cast doubts on women's leadership style and even our competitive drive.

These interrelated realities persist despite the fact that they are proven to be bad for business. Research published by Deloitte, for example, argues that companies with women leaders perform better.⁵ The report points to a higher return on equity and higher return on sales for companies with more women board directors.⁶ Another study that tracked fifteen hundred U.S. companies from 1992 to 2006 found a direct positive correlation between the number of senior women managers and financial performance, including market value of the firm, sales growth, and return on equity.⁷ After all, what better way to be sure that your products and services reflect the true needs of female consumers and decision makers—with all that purchasing power—than by having adequate female representation at the top of your corporation?

One study out of Pepperdine University, conducted over a nineteen-year period, determined that those firms with a higher number of women executives outperformed their competitors on key financial measures, including profitability and return on assets.⁸ Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founder and president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, corroborates these findings: “The fewer female managers a company has, the greater drop in its share price since January 2008. The facts couldn’t be clearer: smart women equal stronger companies.”⁹

Studies also indicate that having women in the boardroom improves corporate governance. According to The Conference Board of Canada, boards with more women tend to pay greater attention to audit and risk oversight, and they take into account the needs of more categories of stakeholders.¹⁰

Despite the proven benefits women leaders bring to organizations, the challenges we face remain numerous and complex. In a landmark 2007 study, Catalyst found that because women are held to a masculine standard of leadership, we are left with unfavorable options no matter how we perform as leaders. This double bind can undermine our opportunities. In other words, when we are perceived as failing to exhibit certain traditionally male leadership traits, we are considered to be incompetent; but when we do exhibit those traits, we are looked upon as unfeminine.¹¹

It’s time we nipped all of this in the bud. There are other avenues to consider—ones that are actually within our control and can make a difference right now.

What We Believe

Behavioral psychology tells us that the way humans think and the corresponding decisions they make are not always in their own best self-interest. In our coaching engagements, we use what we’ve

learned about how successful women executives think—and we help our female clients put that thinking to work to level the playing field for all of us.

Technical knowledge in one's field is essential, and leadership skills are crucial. However, we have found that for women who are at midcareer or near the top, building career momentum is not a matter of adding skills. It is about determining what's keeping you where you are and figuring out how you might be getting in your own way.

We believe that for women to rise to the highest ranks in business, we need to unwind some of our traditional thinking and break our own rules. We have to rethink the conversations we are having in our heads and tell ourselves a new story. We will review many of these old thinking patterns throughout this book—getting to their root cause and suggesting new ways of thinking that will work better. You can bet that Andrea Jung, CEO of Avon, and Indra Nooyi, CEO of PepsiCo, are not using outdated mental models and thinking themselves out of power.

We all have thoughts and beliefs that limit our potential. Some of these beliefs come from our individual experiences; they take hold over the years. *I'm not good at taking credit. I'm much better working behind the scenes. I'm lucky to have this job—any job.* Others are a result of the gender stereotypes that are all around us. They creep into our heads over time. *It's my job to nurture everyone else before I take care of my own needs. I am selfish and self-centered if I choose to "indulge" my ambition.* Still others are simply erroneous conventional wisdom. *I can have it all without compromise. I'm a failure if I can't make it look easy. That's a job for someone else—not for me.*

We get in our own way when we buy into limiting beliefs. But we don't have to continue repeating the same patterns. We have it within our power to change our own thinking and therefore change

our future. We can nurture the beliefs that will sustain us and help us grow. As women, we have been taught as children, in school, and on the job to behave in certain ways. In contrast, our research and years of experience coaching women executives on the rise tell us that what we really need to do to succeed at the highest levels in business is to *think differently*. The New Rules in this book will help you do just that.

Research and Experience

When the three of us began our corporate careers in the 1980s, we believed that it was a matter of ten years before women would gain parity with men at all levels. It turns out that we were naive—very naive. Over the years, we did exactly what you are doing. We worked hard, became self-confident, achieved notable success, and gained the respect of our colleagues. Yes, we each experienced setbacks. We wondered many times what was really going on and why the world of business was hard to decipher, often disappointing, and sometimes downright unfair. But, like you, we pushed ahead. We managed hundreds of people, oversaw multimillion-dollar budgets, and executed mergers and reorganizations. On the way to the executive suite, we figured out some things that helped us become successful senior leaders. After twenty-year careers, each of us left our corporate job and began our second act. We decided to use what we learned to help other women succeed.

Over the past decade, we've coached and trained over five thousand professional women across America, mostly mid- and upper-level managers in large, hierarchical companies. As a part of that process, we use surveys and interviews to assess our clients' current level of leadership effectiveness and pinpoint high-leverage areas where behavior change will have a positive impact.

The specific findings on which this book is based and the corresponding advice we deliver were born not just from years of firsthand business experience but also from our research conducted over a decade. Our consulting approach is evidence based. In the course of our work, we've interviewed more than seventeen hundred executives to find out how they thought women could be more successful and get promoted. We use a standard set of interview questions, and we code concepts and common answers in order to uncover the consistencies and trends; these form the basis of our approach and the guidance in this book. Furthermore, we've surveyed thirty-five hundred people, including the managers, subordinates, and colleagues who work with each of the women we coach. We use what they tell us about how a woman is effective or ineffective to assess how an individual woman's understanding of her own behavior matches what other people perceive to be true about her.

The themes in this book are a summary of what all our interviews, surveys, and coaching sessions have taught us. There were a few surprises and a lot of themes we would have predicted. Overall, there were several strong threads that led us to our conclusions.

Throughout this book, you'll read stories about the women we coach, but you'll also hear our own stories and what we've learned through our firsthand business experience. In addition, we've interviewed eight well-known female executives—current and former CEOs and senior leaders—who graciously offered unvarnished insights and stories. These interviews have been conducted specifically for this book.

We are passionate about equipping women leaders for success. The ideas in this book have resonated with the women we coach, and we've been able to see firsthand the impact they have had on the confidence and overall success of our longtime clients. Our research has caused us to have a distinctive point of view about how people

change, and the foundation of our perspective is that success is dictated by the thinking that drives our actions.

Our Red-Suit Vision

In our leadership development programs, we encourage women to be very clear about their personal career visions and to become visionary, inspirational leaders for their own corporations. We're going to practice what we preach and share more about the big vision we have for Flynn Heath Holt Leadership.

We mentioned our dream: women in at least 30 percent of the top leadership positions in corporate America. Now we want to paint a picture for you of what that would look like, because we believe that a picture will inspire you as it has us.

Picture a boardroom. There are typically eight to twelve people on a board these days, so let's assume there are ten at this table. We know that today 17 percent of all corporate board members are women. Imagine there is one woman at this table—you. You are wearing a red suit. The other nine people at the table are men, and they are wearing their gray suits.

When we change the number to 30 percent women at the top, there will be three red suits at that table. Imagine how differently you would feel if you had two other red suits at the table with you. We can assure you, having sat at that corporate board table ourselves, that it is very different when you are the only red suit as opposed to when there are other women whose voices are heard along with your own.

Now let's look at Fortune 500 CEOs. There are thirteen female CEOs serving right now, so there are thirteen red suits out of five hundred. Imagine a ballroom with five hundred people sitting in

fifty rows of ten people each. The front row is all red suits, and there are three women in the second row; the rest are all gray suits. Now imagine that 30 percent of the CEOs are women. There will be fifteen rows of women in red suits, and the other thirty-five rows will be all men in gray suits. Now the room is very different.

Finally, go with us to an arena where we have taken all of the top corporate leaders in America. Right now, one end would be in red. Women on one end, that's it. The rest—both sides and the other end—are men in gray. When we get to our 30 percent goal, *one whole side* will be red suits, and the rest will be gray. We hope you can envision what we are talking about and what a big change this would be. Not only will the business environment for women be altered dramatically, but the entire discussion at the top of corporate America would change completely.

Now imagine that your red suit gives you the confidence and courage to become a powerful executive. This book will help you put on that suit every day and go out there to pursue your own *big vision*. Maybe it is to be CEO of your corporation. Maybe it is to run a division of your company. Maybe it is to serve on a corporate board. Whatever your big vision is, we want to help you get there. We want to help you break your own rules—the ones that are holding you back. This book will give you insight into your own thinking and behavior. It will help you begin to make your personal career vision come true. If you do that, you'll make our big vision real as well.

This Book

We'll start in Chapter Two by examining the Old Rules that hold us back. We'll introduce and describe each Old Rule, explore a

little about where it comes from, and mention why it is problematic for women.

Chapters Three through Eight go into greater detail and contain a few consistent elements:

Stories. We work with real women every day who, like you, are building their careers and breaking through barriers in their professional and personal lives. The most successful clients we've worked with, including many who have gone on to lead business units and divisions, have experienced challenges and setbacks along the way. We've presented true accounts, some of which are composites, to demonstrate the common issues so many of us face and how to move past these obstacles to become much stronger and more focused on success. We will also include stories and advice from some of the most successful and savvy women running businesses today.

The Old Rules. The first part of each chapter will tackle one of the old-school notions that our research and experience have identified as a rule that should be broken. We'll identify the origin and impact of each Old Rule, also exploring several related subjects, and lay the groundwork for better thinking and a mind-set that is focused on advancement.

The New Rules. The second part of each chapter presents a New Rule. Our emphasis here is on actionable and practical advice that will make it easier for you to envision putting the New Rule into practice. This is the guidance that we use every day in our coaching sessions. As always, we've kept it real—with practical and specific tips you can use immediately.

The final chapter brings all of our advice together and presents a general call to action. We challenge you to close ranks and work

together to continue to carve out your own careers and to identify opportunities that are attractive and accessible to women. We believe that to achieve our goal of 30 percent at the top, women must come together in solidarity to propel each other forward.

So put on your red suit and start your journey by examining the Old Rules that are holding you back from success.

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