



## Female- Friendly Work Environments: Identifying and Fostering Favorable Cultures for Women Executives

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How do women executives assess whether a company they are considering a position with is “female- friendly?” That is, does it provide the same opportunities to women as to men, and is it supportive of the work- life balance issues that are particularly important to many women professionals. The CIO Executive Council asked that question of members of its Executive Women in IT group. Though not comprehensive, this checklist provides starting points for identifying female- friendly environments when moving into a new position or company, and for fostering a more female- friendly environment from within an organization.

### \_\_\_ Look at the number of female leaders in all levels of management

"You have to look at the org chart and see where women are positioned," says Jeri Dunn, who recently joined Bacardi- Martini B.V. as vice president and CIO after several years as CIO at Tyson Foods. How many women are at or in line for the top jobs is an important indication of an organization's commitment to inclusion. When she was interviewing at Bacardi, the CEO acknowledged that the company does not have as many women at the executive level as it should, so she pushed to find out what the company was doing about that. The answer was putting in place a pipeline so that more women would be moving up through the company. This helped Dunn make the decision to accept the position.

A lack of women at the very top should not automatically be classified as a bad sign, but pay attention to the number of women in leadership positions throughout the organization. That will be a more realistic metric for how women are treated in and by management, says Twila Day, CIO of SYSCO Corp. When she started at the company, she was the first woman in IT management, the first woman IT director and then the first woman IT officer. Her success there shows that “sometimes you need to give it a try, even if it looks like the deck is stacked against you,” she says.

### \_\_\_ Listen to how everyone talks about gender and roles

When Mandeep Maini moved to Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts Inc., the difference between that environment and that of her previous employer, a manufacturing company, was immediately apparent. First, the number of women in senior positions throughout Blue Cross, including on the board, far exceeded the case at the manufacturer. Another evident difference was how the people around her spoke about fellow employees. It wasn't until she came to Blue Cross that Maini realized how uncomfortable remarks made at her former company had made her feel. Seemingly insignificant comments can add up; not only those about co- workers, but also how male colleagues speak about their wives and friends. The contrast was stark at Blue Cross and Blue Shield, where “people are judged as people, not on gender,” she says.

At FedEx, Beth Galetti, CIO and vice president of Information Technology, EMEA, hasn't ever experienced any trouble moving up through the ranks as a woman. She has, however, encountered mixed reactions to the fact that her husband stays at home with their children. That is still considered somewhat taboo, she says. But “there is no such thing as a normal or typical family anymore,” and she has found comfort in talking with other women in similar situations about how they can foster a better attitude among all employees.

## \_\_\_ Maintain a high- confidence environment

Whether or not an organization is overtly female- friendly, women often lose confidence when they start to hit a wall beyond which it seems impossible to advance. They worry whether they fit, if they're able to do the job. It's important to remember that you were hired for a reason, says Rebecca Rhoads, vice president and CIO at Raytheon. "Don't take anything for granted, but also don't ever lose confidence," she says.

A critical first step in bolstering confidence is to perform your own assessment when you first move into a job. Make sure you understand exactly why you're being brought into the position, beyond the obvious needs expressed by executives during the interview. For example, determine for yourself whether the CEO is looking for someone who can help lead a companywide turnaround in performance, or for someone who can advance new initiatives while maintaining an overall stable IT group.

The next step is to gather together a team that compliments your skills, so that when your boss expects something that you know isn't your strength, you can rely on the people around you to fill the gaps, Rhoads says. This will help you get the job done, and will set a successful example for other women in the company and for any doubters.

In addition to holding onto your own confidence, though, you need to foster an environment where women throughout the organization know they have support when they experience doubts. It is important to demonstrate a belief that hurdles to advancement are not actually walls, Day says. "Until I get to the point that I know a door has been closed completely, I'm not stepping back." Patience has to be a factor when it comes to moving into the small number of top positions, but you should never stop pushing to advance or pushing others to believe that they can.

## \_\_\_ Create networks in the company

Creating networks can bolster your own position and establish good practices for other women to follow. This should be a goal from the start, Rhoads says, so that you are not left scrambling to create support when the need suddenly becomes urgent.

Day has made a point of always volunteering for any new project or initiative at SYSCO, partly for visibility, but also to expand her own knowledge of how the business works by getting out of the circles she normally travels. A side benefit of that involvement has been forming relationships with people on the business side whom she wouldn't have otherwise encountered.

Maini works a lot with younger women within Blue Cross through the company's mentoring program, a full- fledged offering from the human resources department for everyone in the organization. SYSCO also has an internal mentoring program for all employees, through which Day started a networking initiative specifically for women. **The program brings together groups of women who have to be nominated in order to participate. The groups are kept small, to ensure that there is significant interaction. The mentoring tends to emphasize advice on how to manage careers and work ethic for moving up in the company.**

- Diane Frank, Content Development Specialist, CIO Executive Council



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