



Career Management Column as published in Leadership and Management Books, L&MB - [Rita Balian Allen](#), Author of *Personal Branding and Marketing Yourself*

“Developing Women Leaders ”

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As we approach the end of another year, it's a good time for organizations to assess their investment in staff, management and leadership development opportunities for the purpose of strengthening and retaining internal talent as well as to enhance business performance. Making development a priority and a strategic imperative for growth is a key differentiator for success. It is also a good time for all of us to assess our own personal development and set goals for the coming year. Goal setting has become a ritual that I exercise every December on both a personal and professional basis. Planning for the upcoming year not only empowers us to accomplish our goals but makes us more accountable to do so effectively.

One specific area of development for which there is growing need and demand is for women in leadership. Not only do women make up 50% of the workforce today¹, there are more women in positions of leadership as well as more women with advanced degrees. As women go through a variety of effective leadership development programs that enable them to build their leadership capabilities and equip them with necessary skills and competencies, at times there are additional needs that are fundamental for women to succeed that go beyond the leadership classroom. At the core, it requires a strong sense of self and confidence to see our value,

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Women in the Workforce Report, December 2014

leverage it and articulate it in order to achieve our goals and aspirations. It also may require bold thinking and breaking of societal norms, standards and/or expectations to unleash utmost potential sometimes unrealized or untapped.

A few years ago as I was interviewed for an article, the writer asked me what advice I would give to women today. My answer was... trust yourself, I mean really trust yourself - your judgment, your capabilities, your instincts and your dreams. Don't short change yourself or minimize your talents, accomplishments and decisions. Take some risks - what's the worst that can happen? Get rid of the guilt and learn to gracefully say no, when necessary and yes, when desired. Lastly, I would say it's really important to take care of yourself emotionally. Our well being and our balance comes from inside first and if we know our emotional self at the core, that truly makes all the difference in how we are present and fulfilled. Find your passion and allow yourself to experience the things that make you whole both professionally and personally. Enjoy the journey every step of the way! It's essential for women to raise your voice and raise your visibility, and not apologize for doing so!

In fact, there is much research indicating growing changes in the way society and women approach their careers. One of my colleagues, **Jodi Detjen, Professor of Management at Suffolk University and Co-Author of The Orange Line: A Woman's Guide to Integrating Career, Family and Life** conducted a lengthy study that uniquely addresses the underlying barriers women face as they build a successful career. Based on her extensive research, Jodi highlights some of her findings:

1) Biases and Assumptions

Women struggle to implement the advice above because they seek to change the behavior without changing the underlying reasons why they avoid risk, aren't confident, or choose to put their needs second.

Many women struggle because they have internalized cultural biases about what it means to be a woman. This view of the world is the cumulative result of generations of cultural socialization. It is difficult for women to see themselves outside of this context. And it is based upon a set of widely accepted assumptions that guide how women "should" live and what women "should" believe. For example, three biases are:

- ***Women don't feel entitled to pursue a career as the primary purpose of their lives.*** Further, if they wanted a substantial career, many expect they will need to sacrifice having a family or a personal life.

- ***Everything I do needs to be perfect.*** Women spend 252 more hours a year “looking good” v. men.² We wait until we are 100% ready for a role while men wait until they are 60% ready.³ We perfect the report, the slides deck, our words and focus on the minutia rather than the impact.
- ***I don't really need more money.*** Women negotiate for themselves when given permission.⁴ Both men and women that work for female managers are paid less.⁵ Women struggle to ask for what they need and to get the resources to support them.

As you can see and likely have experienced either in yourself or with your employees, these internalized assumptions are quite limiting. They present the world as either/or: either I follow these “rules” or I am not good enough. It’s a negatively reinforcing, vicious cycle.

2) Shifting Our Mindset

The good news is that there is a way out. The way out is to shift our mindset. We can notice these assumptions and think differently about them. What do I mean?

- Let’s take the first assumption: My career doesn’t matter as much. If we reframe that to *my career matters and your career matters*. As an operating premise for our choices, it changes everything. What we’ve seen is that women start thinking more seriously about their next step, understanding that impact means they can take on a higher-level role, and they can do less with more results.
- The second assumption becomes *I am good enough as I am*. It turns into prioritizing what matters. Letting go of the lower level activities enables more strategic thinking. For example, one woman stopped doing a percentage of the monthly reports and found that no one noticed. She just reduced her to-do list by half.
- We reframe the third assumption to *I am paid what I’m worth*. Women who have reframed this ask for money, they ask for the raise and the title. One

² Deborah Spar, *Wonder Women: Sex, Power and the Quest for Perfection*, 2013

³ Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, The Confidence Gap, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2014

⁴ Andreas Leibbrandt and John List. National Bureau of Economic Research. November 2012.

⁵ Sameer Srivastava, *Agents of Change or Cogs in the Machine*. August 2014.

woman who was negotiating a promotion realized that her male peers were making more and had a bigger title. She negotiated for both of these and then also negotiated a way out to a larger role in two years if she was successful.

3) Taking Action

What do you notice about these examples? When we start to see how insidious these assumptions are in our daily decisions, just noticing reduces their power.

We then take action – we reframe the assumption and follow it with conscious action.

As a result, we open up possibilities, feel less guilty and end up having more space and energy.

Ask Rita: Do you have a career question and/or a career story to share? Email your questions or stories to rita@ritaballenassociates.com

Rita Balian Allen is the president of Rita B. Allen Associates, a career management firm specializing in executive coaching, leadership development, management training and career development. She is a lecturer at Boston-area universities, a sought-after speaker and presenter, the author of numerous articles, blogs and the newly released book, *"Personal Branding and Marketing Yourself: The Three Ps Marketing Technique as a Guide to Career Empowerment"*. Rita was voted one of the top ten executive coaches by the Boston Women's Business Journal .