

EMPOWERING WOMEN TOWARD EXCELLENCE

"What are the qualities of an empowered woman?" In my career, I have spent time talking with a number of outstanding women to find the answer to this powerful question. I have talked to artists, corporate executives, lawyers, civic leaders, entrepreneurs, housewives, professors, athletic directors, technology leaders, accountants, retailers, mothers, and other wise women. In business, women are often pushed to follow the rules that define a good businessMAN. It is good advice for men, but the shoe doesn't always fit for women. The following facets of empowerment are the results of my quest on what makes not just a good business woman, but what leads to being an empowered woman—at home and at work.

When reading through the attributes described below, abandon your vision of the Superwoman syndrome. None of the women had a score of ten on all these qualities and all of them agreed that it is wise to put aside the myth of "doing it all." It hadn't worked for them. Instead focus on the facets of empowerment you can celebrate as having accomplished. "Yes, I am good at that!" For the facets of empowerment you need to improve, pick one that will give you the most return for your investment of time and energy to enhance it. We are all unique in the strengths and qualities we possess. Always be who you are, and never try to be someone you're not.

The Facets of Empowerment:

Authenticity - knowing who you are and who you are not; in other words, be yourself. Empowered women know what they are not good at and don't put themselves in stress' way by taking on responsibilities that require them to work on their weak side. Not that you shouldn't grow and learn to cope with things you don't prefer, but if you don't like detail and aren't good at it, don't sign up to be a detail person on a project unless the reward for all that stress is excellent.

Risk taking - using your knowledge, experience, and competence, always pushing that envelope of comfort so that you are growing. This doesn't mean taking up sky diving but it does mean speaking up, using your knowledge and skills when and, where needed, and constantly pushing your competencies to higher standards. One thing women are more likely to do than men is not accept a job because they don't have all the skills. Take the job and learn the skills as you go; that is what men do. Fake it 'til you make it! Ask for help in the areas you need to learn. That's what mentors and coaches are for.

Vision - having a personal vision, something vital to you. See what it is and what it could be and then work toward creating the reality of your vision. One of my protégés had a vision to make a difference in protecting the cultures of the minorities her company marketed to. She began with "baby steps," as she called them. Getting her college degree, volunteering in the marketing department and when she had the qualifications and the experience she applied for the marketing job she wanted. She got it! Now she sells her company's products in South America and protects the cultures she is marketing to. All along the way, her vision held her on course.

Health - using your energy wisely, maintaining basically good health but also having the reserves to heal. Knowing how to boost, extend and protect your physical energy while you avoid those things that drain your energy. Not getting caught in unnecessary emotional battles or rescuing all who apply for help. When you understand who you are, you will understand the core of your essence.

Humor - being able to approach life with a light heart. Laugh at yourself and at life. When we are too serious it stifles our creativity and drains our energy. Women are especially good at using humor to ease situations and level the playing field for those around us. When we are laughing or are able to see the funny side of life, we have power.

Harmony - bringing your many roles into harmony (not balance) so you are able to create your own song. Play at least four "notes" per day. Work, family, athletics and spirituality are four examples of notes to play. You must pick your own. If you go for balance you have an impossible task as the world always turns things upside down and you lose control. Kids get sick the day you have to be at a meeting. The big business deal falls through when your husband's boss is coming to dinner. This is life. So focus on having a variety of meaningful activities each day. If you are just a work and family person, you will not only drain your own resources, you will be a bore. Take care of yourself, it isn't selfish, it's vital!

Receptivity - having an open mind and suspending judgment long enough to learn other people's viewpoints and values will expand your own horizons. Being a good listener and showing empathy for other people is hard work but it is very empowering, to both you and others. You don't have to agree with them nor do you have to fix them. What's necessary is respect, understanding and an effort to work with people's differences.

Accountability - taking responsibility for your life by setting your own course. Responsible means "able to respond," it doesn't mean blame. Empowered women do not see themselves as victims. Your career and your job performance need to be firmly in your hands, so when things happen

you have options and networks to land the next job. You want to be proactive about the important aspects of your life. Knights in shining armor and fairy godmothers make for good reading, but lousy reality. Abandon the notion – it's a fairy tale.

Contentment - experiencing love and joy in your everyday life, not counting your blessings, but living them. A friend I have is often late to meetings and I know why. She picks routes to meetings that go through the parks. She even stops and just drinks in the view. How often do you put aside things that are important to you to please others? Take time to protect the "parks" in your life.

Graciousness - being comfortable to be around, and allowing others to be themselves. Ask yourself, "What do others have to do to be around me?" Better yet, ask others. Think of people you like being around, some are easy because they are like you, but others seem to be easy for most people to be around. Why? Because they are interested in others and are clear about their own boundaries. You know where they stand and so do they, and unless it is relevant they don't push their way on you. Be firm, be strong willed, but the majority of the time, "be pleasant" as our Mothers would say.

Alignment - aligning your thoughts, feelings, actions, and values. When these essential qualities are aligned there is tremendous power as well as authenticity. Picture in your mind three blocks neatly stacked. The top block is your head, the middle block your heart, and the bottom block is your feet. When your head, heart and feet all line up, you are a pillar of strength. But when one of these blocks is not lined up, the whole thing falls down.

Communication - communicating well with others, not just in words but in your tone of voice and body language. Remember words only account for seven percent of communication. One way to get a good image of how you come across is to put a mirror near your phone and watch yourself. When you are communicating well the words match up with the body and how you look. Try it! It really does work!

Versatility - working effectively with men and women and being able to create appropriate and productive alliances. This one is tough. Knowing the "cultural difference" between men and women is the key to working effectively with both. How much do you know and do you use that knowledge to lead meetings, make speeches and build relationships? The golden rule really has been replaced by the platinum rule, "Do unto others as they would want done unto them." All well and good, but you first have to know what that is!