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## Still Lingerin — After All These Years

Despite the fact that women hold 50 percent of middle management jobs, leadership roles still elude us. Why? After all, more collaborative organizational structures are "in" and archaic "command and control" hierarchies are "out". That shift was expected to greatly advantage women — but it hasn't. So what's the problem?

The paperback version of [Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success](#) was published on October 5, 2011, six years after the hardcover first offered women in leadership roles practical advice about what they needed to negotiate in order to get and hold onto leadership roles.

A lot has changed in the intervening time — Carly Fiorina has abandoned business for politics. Ann Richards, former governor of Texas, who'd endorsed the book, died in 2006. Hillary Clinton ran for President. And, Sarah Palin, who's not endorsed the book, resigned as governor of Alaska.

But a good deal hasn't changed — questions about women and their suitability for leadership roles still dog women and their employers. What makes it even more complicated is that most of the time we aren't even aware that these questions are in play:

### 1. **Is she a good fit for the role?**

Traditionally, professions have been considered either "pink" or "blue" — nurses and elementary school teachers are typical of the former and investment bankers and leaders of all kinds, the latter.

Women who want leadership roles must proactively negotiate for them. They must make it clear they're interested in climbing the ladder, and work with the organization to define a role that fits as well as how it will be assessed.

Organizations that wish to leverage the diverse talent women bring to executive leadership positions must clearly communicate that vision, examine and revise legacy management practices that are out of alignment as well as hold people accountable for results. Organizational change takes serious and committed leadership.

### 2. **Can she be both a woman and a leader?**

There's no doubt that women must walk a "thin pink line" at work — too "assertive" and they're considered "aggressive", or even a word that doesn't begin with "a". Too collaborative and they're perceived as weak and ineffectual.

Although we expect our leaders to take charge, women who do are often the target of backlash.

But women who are able to connect their interests to the organization's needs are less likely to be get trapped in the double bind. Framing requests in a way that highlights how others will benefit is a negotiation skill successful women use often.

From an organizational point of view, it is worth noting that numbers matter — the more women in leadership roles, the less pronounced the double bind. This makes sense because the more people are exposed to the continuum of female leadership styles, the less likely they are to expect all women to behave the same way.

**3. Has she demonstrated leadership capacity?**

Here the question goes to demonstrating credibility — just how much success has she had in the past? Yet it's often harder for women to prove success for a number of reasons. The first is that they may not get the leadership credit they deserve when they use "softer" leadership skills and a more subtle approach, a way of coping with the double bind discussed above. Another factor is that the glass cliff research shows that women are asked to take on more turnaround situations than men are. Because things are in trouble already, it's inherently more difficult for women to make lemonade out of the lemons they're dealing with. And still other research shows that women are evaluated more harshly than men in the workplace.

Women need to proactively negotiate to make the value they bring visible to those who are judging their performance in a way that is both authentic and culturally compatible.

And organizations must ensure that formal performance evaluation systems and succession planning processes contain appropriate checks and balances and that managers are trained to be sensitive to their own unconscious biases that can undermine the organization's commitment to advancing women.

**4. Will her personal life get in the way?**

Although the 24/7 expectations of the modern workplace put both men and women in a position that makes work-life balance daunting, because women more often provide care to children and other family members, they are even more disaffected. And women who take advantage of company policies that allow flex-time and other alternate work arrangements can be punished for doing so.

Women must negotiate solutions that work for themselves, their families and their organizations.

Employers must protect their investment in talent by taking the long view — over-worked and constantly stressed workers burn out and leave organizations, or, even worse, they stay in place, producing less and less worthy work.

As women continue to gain power- as purchasers and shareholders, welcoming women to the leadership ranks is not only the right thing to do, it's a smart business strategy. Those that succeed will face up to the lingering questions that remain about the role of women in executive leadership and respond to them unequivocally, once and for all.

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