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A VIEW FROM THE TOP: AN INTERVIEW WITH RENEE WEST

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Renee West knows success. As the first female president of a Strip resort (she became president and COO of Excalibur in 2002), she serves as a role model for women in business. I recently sat down with West to get her perspective on what makes women successful. Below follow some of her ideas for both women and men about how to make it to the top.

1. BEWARE THE MYTH OF THE GLASS CEILING

Does the glass ceiling really still exist? Despite being a rare female leader in a male-dominated field, West isn't so sure. In fact, she says, women who worry too much about such obstacles can actually hold themselves back. "A woman who is focused on the fact that she may not get ahead because she's a woman will not get ahead because of that mindset." In other words, seeing oneself as constantly disadvantaged can be a disadvantage in itself. Women – and leaders in general – are much more powerful when they move ahead with full confidence in their ability to succeed.

2. OBSERVE YOUR SURROUNDINGS

How do you learn what it takes to make it to the top? West's answer: observe the people around you. "I watch people whom I consider to be successful. How do they interact? What activities are they involved in? How do they present in a meeting? How do they communicate? What is the power in the room, and what makes these people powerful?" Watching and asking questions like these makes any environment a classroom. It's a technique anyone can use to develop a powerful leadership style.

3. GET CONNECTED

Networking is often touted as a key to getting ahead. But for West, getting to know people is more about the quality than the quantity of relationships. She suggests "getting into rapport" with successful people.

This may be more difficult-and also more important-for women. “I believe one of the things that holds women back is they don’t have access to the informal relationships that men do. It’s a numbers game. There are more men in leadership, and they tend to form those relationships with people who are most like them.” That can make it difficult for women to find themselves in the inner circle.

4. TAKE RISKS

Becoming a top leader takes courage. West encourages people to take personal risks, no matter how unprepared they may feel. For her, taking risks means “being willing to step up and have the confidence to move into a position they might not think they’re ready for.” Constant stretching helps people move ahead.

5. USE YOUR STRENGTHS

Discussions about women in leadership often focus on what women lack. But women have some unique traits of their own that may actually enhance their leadership potential. For instance, West points out that, “Women can be vulnerable, whereas men often feel like they have to be more in control. Women can use their softer side to their advantage and create a positive team dynamic as a result.”

Other traditionally female characteristics include a spirit of collaboration and willingness to admit a lack of knowledge – traits that are compelling to others and can build up a leader’s success.

Overall, West’s view on women in leadership is this: women would do well to believe in their ability to succeed and use their strengths to their advantage. “Enough women have been successful that a lot of those old stigmas have melted away,” she says, adding, “There has never been a better time to step into a leadership role in business than today.”



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