

The background features a collage of torn, aged paper pieces. A large white semi-circle is positioned on the left side. Several pieces of paper have handwritten numbers in blue ink: a '3' on a piece in the upper right, a '4' on a piece in the lower left, and a '10' on a piece in the lower right. The title text is overlaid on this background.

# The Six Rules Women Must Break in Order to Succeed

Jill Flynn, Kathryn Heath  
and Mary Davis Holt



**We have a dream.** It is a big vision, a leap... and it is audacious. We want to see women make up at least 30 percent of the leaders at the top levels of corporate America within the next 10 years. We believe that 30 percent will be a tipping point. If (when) that happens, the goals and direction of corporate America will change. The old rules will be shattered, America's corporations will be better lead, and everyone will benefit.

It has been proven time and again that companies with women leaders perform better, but we have a ways to go before our vision becomes a reality. Despite the positive impact women leaders have on corporate performance, very few of us hold the top slots in major organizations. The gender gap persists—despite that fact that it is bad for business.

It is time that we took control and nipped this in the bud. We can't change the world overnight, but there are ways we can make a difference—right now.

# What We Believe

Our research and many years of experience coaching women executives on the rise tells us that in order to succeed at the highest levels in business, women must *think differently*.

We all have thoughts that limit our potential. Some of these beliefs come from our individual experiences; they take hold over the years. *"I'm not good at taking credit. I'm much better working behind the scenes. I'm lucky to have this job."* Other beliefs are a result of the gender stereotypes that are all around us. They creep into our heads over time. *"It's my job to nurture everyone else before I take care of my own needs. I am selfish and self-centered if I choose to indulge my ambition."* Still others are simply erroneous conventional wisdom. *"I can have it all without compromise. I'm a failure if I can't make it look easy."*

We get in our own way when we buy into these limiting beliefs. But it does not have to be that way. We can nurture the beliefs that will sustain us and help us grow. To rise to the highest ranks in business, women need to unwind some of the traditional thinking that holds us back. We need to rethink the conversations we are having in our heads and tell ourselves a new story. We need to break our own rules.

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# The Six New Rules

## 1 | Take Center Stage (*Don't* Focus on Everyone Else)

In our work, we've found that many of the smartest women around the table focus too much of their attention on other people's needs. They leave no time or energy to help *themselves* thrive professionally and personally. Helping others plays directly into our nurturing instincts, but this inclination can work against us by keeping us from focusing on our own career goals. The result is that too many of us let our careers "happen to us" rather than putting ourselves in the driver's seat.

*The old rules say: I must take care of everyone else; my needs come last; it's not okay to ask for help; I'm a great number two; I don't belong on center stage.*

Give yourself permission to break these rules. Loosen up your nurturing impulse, and invest in yourself and your career. Nurture yourself. Here's how:

**Have a plan.** Focus on your career goals. Start by getting a handle on what your ambitions actually are and put them on paper. You don't have to show them to anyone, but get them down in black and white.

**Get out of the weeds.** Delegate to your staff at work. Outsource most of your household tasks at home. Do only what is strategic for your clients and for your family. Take time to refuel. In order to take center stage in our careers, we need to learn how to manage our energy effectively. So be ruthless in managing your calendar.



**Get famous for something.** Whatever your passion or expertise entails, being the best (and best known) for something is one of the fastest ways to gain access to the center stage. Being a go-to person comes with career benefits including recognition, distinction and confidence.

**Seek out role models.** Successful executive women are in short supply compared to their male counterparts, but if you look, you'll find that they are out there. Start within your own network of acquaintances and expand out from there. Read biographies and articles about accomplished women in business and government. Find out who the most successful women are in your own community. Google them, and learn more about their stories.

**Practice taking center stage.** Watch your mentor in action. Rehearse your presentation skills. Look for opportunities to make presentations, lead meetings and head up key initiatives. In other words, take center stage by moving out of your comfort zone on a regular basis.

## 2 | Proceed Until Apprehended (*Don't* Seek Approval)

We've worked with countless women executives who are exceptionally collaborative leaders. They like to be liked, but their desire for consensus and buy-in slows them down. In order to succeed, women need to retain their core strengths, while at the same time acting decisively to make things happen.

*The old rules say: Being liked is more important than being promoted; ambition is selfish; I must ask for permission; I'm afraid they'll say "no."*

Give yourself permission to break these rules. Here's how to change your thinking in order to proceed on your own authority and do so effectively and with confidence:

**Don't ask for permission.** Assert yourself. There are plenty of instances in life when proper protocol entails obeying the rules. However, there are many *other* times when you need to give yourself the green light to proceed. Being bold and resolute takes practice. The best way to add assertiveness to your repertoire is by looking for opportunities to flex your muscles.

**Be a dissenter (occasionally).** Being assertive means being comfortable delivering bad news or expressing an opposing position. It's acceptable to be a dissenter or play devil's advocate as long as you have the ammunition to make a good case. You want others to know that you have a unique point-of-view.

**Make things happen.** Most of us are not naturally visionary leaders who can easily drive change. But, as the women in our coaching sessions learn, these are skills that you can hone. If you want to be viewed as senior leader material, you need to demonstrate that you can inspire others and make change happen. So step out of your comfort zone and rise to the challenge.

**Fake it 'til you make it.** Confidence comes with experience, so take a deep breath and put on your game face.

### 3 | Project Personal Power (*Don't* Be Excessively Modest)

Many women who are motivated to move into leadership positions are nonetheless ambivalent about projecting power. Modesty and self-deprecation come more naturally. We've seen women act downright apologetic in the face of success—as if it doesn't suit them or they don't deserve it.

*The old rules say: I feel ambivalent about power; be modest; I feel like an imposter; I don't know how to act powerful.*

Give yourself permission to break these rules. Here's how to adjust your thinking and dial-up your comfort level in order to feel at home in a position of power and authority:

**Exude poise, confidence and power.** To exude poise, confidence and power, pay close attention to your verbals and non-verbals. Stance, eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expressions all send a message to others about how confident we are.

**Take credit for your hard work.** One sure way to get passed over for a promotion is by remaining silent about your accomplishments and allowing others to take credit. Never assume that your boss knows the results you have achieved. Get your message out there.

**Don't confide your insecurities.** Instead, start from a position of strength by exhibiting confidence. Grace under pressure is not the easiest thing to achieve. We like to tell our clients to think of a swan gliding across the water. Majestic and graceful above the water, but chaotic underneath—peddling its feet fast and furiously to keep forward momentum. It's fine to feel the chaos but best to display an outward calm.

**Look for opportunities to practice your power skills.** Changing our natural ways of behaving can be a challenge. It requires a lot of practice and feedback. However, learning how to project personal power is a must if we want to succeed at senior levels.

## 4 | Be Politically Savvy (*Don't* Expect Hard Work to Be Enough)

Many women are disappointed when their hard work and long hours don't seem to pay-off in terms of career advancement. But working harder is not the key to getting promoted, and it's certainly not going to deliver the life you want.



*The old rules say: Playing politics is sleazy; I've never been good at office politics; it's possible to opt out of the political game at work; hard work is enough to get me noticed and promoted; business should be a meritocracy.*

Give yourself permission to break these rules. When women in our workshops tell us they need remedial work on office politics, we ask them to reflect upon the non-business parts of their lives: managing a family, chairing a non-profit board, interacting with doctors and care providers, making elder care decisions, interacting with teachers and advocating on behalf of children.

Being politically savvy is all about building relationships, achieving consensus and networking. Most women are great at these things! Here's how to put your natural strengths to work for you:

**Know how decisions are made and by whom.** Being “in-the-know” makes office politics much easier to navigate. In any company, information is power. Get to know the informal networks in your office and who controls the flow of information. Learn to read between the lines. Make sure you “hang out” informally with colleagues and superiors. You never know what you will find out!

**Think of politics as running for office.** Build a platform, line up sponsors, build coalitions and count your votes. We coach women to realize that at a certain point, they need to campaign for the next position. It is naïve to believe that you will be selected for high-level jobs without making your career aspirations transparent and building support for yourself.

**Realize that you can't opt out of office politics.** Consider political savvy as just another skill that you need to hone and master. If you're not sure how to crack your company code, identify someone who seems especially comfortable building coalitions and is well networked within your company, and pick their brain to find out how they approach it.

## 5 | Play to Win (*Don't* Play It Safe)

If you want to set yourself apart, you have to play to win. This includes making yourself visible and taking the lead in high-stakes situations. Selling and negotiation skills are one part of the equation. Putting yourself out there also means getting comfortable with risk and the possibility of failure. Many of the women we work with seem to lack confidence in their ability to deliver—even after they've proven themselves countless times.

*The old rules say: I like my safe and comfortable role; I don't like sales; I shrink to fit; I let others take the lead; I don't take risks because I might fail.*

Give yourself permission to break these rules. Here's how to think differently in order to become more comfortable living with risk:

*We need to rethink the conversations we are having in our heads and tell ourselves a new story. We need to break our own rules.*

**Reinvent yourself.** Remember that a comfortable job may not be as “safe” as it seems. If you're not feeling challenged, chances are you're not really firing on all cylinders. So set your sights on another opportunity, and have a vision for the change you want to make. Knowing what your next goal is will not only focus you, but it will also help you to articulate the steps that will get you there.

**Learn to like sales.** Women who can sell are powerful. Without the ability to sell—yourself, your ideas, your company—it's almost impossible to rise high in the ranks of most organizations. Comfortable or not, sales skills are worth developing. As the consensus builders, the nurturers of relationships, the well-networked passionate persuaders, women have all of the skills they need to bring in clients, revenue and major deals.

**Take some risks.** It may seem safer to let someone at a higher pay grade take the big risks, but often it is the big picture decisions that offer the best opportunities to establish your credibility as a leader. Leave your trapeze by preparing your mind, having a vision, leaving room for improvisation, and trying not to over-think things.

**Learn from your failures.** The important feature of failure is the ability to learn from it—the ability to pick yourself up and start again. Great leaders instill this value in their people, because failures can make you smarter. Unless you are a surgeon or pilot, failure can be a positive.

## 6 | It's Both/And (*Don't* Fall Into Extreme Thinking)

Black and white thinking does not lead to career success or personal satisfaction. Because complexity and constant change are everywhere in our world, dealing with ambiguity has become a primary leadership trait that women need to master. One phrase that has crept into dozens of our coaching files over the years is the notion of having it all. It's no coincidence that many of the women who are trying to have it all are also the ones who are most disappointed and frustrated.

*The old rules say: I'm prone to negative/irrational thinking; everything is black and white; success means doing it all; if things don't go my way, I'll opt out.*

Give yourself permission to break these rules. Here's how to avoid extreme thinking:



**See the big picture.** There's no one right way to succeed, but refusing to be flexible is a sure way to fail. The both/and ideal requires us to turn our backs on negative thinking. Positive Psychology (Martin Seligman) and Integrative Thinking (an approach pioneered by Roger Martin) offer clues on how to break away from inflexible thinking and learn to be an optimist.

**Don't make hasty decisions.** One extreme response to an over-burdened career is to opt out altogether. Before making this momentous move, revisit your career plan, and consult with your personal support system—peers, mentors, and sponsors.

**Be an entrepreneur.** Being able to adapt to adversity and thrive in ambiguous, uncertain situations has become a primary career survival skill. Change, as they say, is the new normal. Yet, the paradox is that employees, in most organizations, are ill-equipped to deal with uncertainty. Consider yourself an internal entrepreneur, and look at your career as if you are the CEO of “You, Inc.”

**Take some time out to reflect on a regular basis.** Do whatever helps you to recharge and refocus. Allowing yourself to reserve this little bit of personal space will help you clear your mind for strategic thinking.

*The old rules will be shattered, America's corporations will be better lead, and everyone will benefit.*

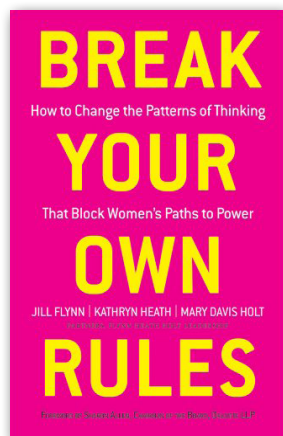
# The Bottom Line

We've mentioned our big dream: We want to see at least 30 percent women leaders at the top levels of corporate America within the next 10 years. We believe that 30 percent will be a tipping point for change—a change that will be positive not just for women, but for everyone.

Ann Moore, the Chairman of Time, Inc., put it this way: “Business is better with women in it. We add real value in terms of results and in terms of our leadership style. Women have a different definition of success. The corporate model doesn't always satisfy us, so we drop out or go into small business. In some ways that's too bad, because big business will be better when we have more women leaders.”

Let's review what we know: We're good for the bottom line. Companies with more women serving as senior leaders have a higher return on equity. Women are natural consensus builders and emotionally intelligent collaborators—we're well-suited for the emerging, less hierarchical workplace of the future. Our gains in educational attainment have significantly outpaced those of men. We have higher graduation rates at all academic levels, and more women than men earn college degrees. Finally, we have tremendous spending power.

**It's a no-brainer. Break your own rules. It will be good for you. It will be good for your career. It will be good for business. ♣**



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Jill Flynn, Kathryn Heath, and Mary Davis Holt** are nationally recognized experts on women's leadership and co-authors of *Break Your Own Rules: How to Change the Patterns of Thinking that Block Women's Paths to Power* (Jossey-Bass; September 13, 2011). Each has commanded senior-level positions in Fortune 100 companies, and each has experienced the hurdles that still face executive women today. Now, as principals of Flynn Heath Holt Leadership (FHHL), they partner with Fortune 500 companies to customize and implement research-driven development programs that put women into top positions. Join the conversation at [FlynnHeathHolt.com](http://FlynnHeathHolt.com) and on [Twitter](#).

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