



HOW TO UNLOCK OPPORTUNITIES BY BEING MORE VISIBLE

Tips to increase your visibility

1. Make sure you know your manager's KPIs. How are they measured? What matters most to them? How can you actively assist? Learn more about how to influence!
2. Build a dynamic network but remember it's not just about numbers of people. Build trust and rapport by doing things for others, so that they will feel more inclined to help you too. Be reliable, consistent and trustworthy.
3. Use every opportunity to connect with others. For those not born with an extraverted personality, it can be useful at any function to imagine all these people are guests in your own home. Of course, you would speak to them! Of course, you would seek to make a warm personal connection!
4. Use those small talk opportunities at the margins of meetings (the start and the close) productively. Get to know colleagues a little more personally. Share something personal yourself. All this 'oils the wheels'.
5. Prepare well for all meetings you attend. Be ready to make a well-argued but succinct contribution on at least one agenda item. Become visible!

The need for self promotion

A recent UGM coaching client vented her feelings to us in the following terms, "It's always been Anglo-Celt males at the top of this company – and at the top of the company I was in before. They all know each other. They even play golf together and drink together on Fridays after work. It's like a club. Round here, the only way to get into senior management is to know people already in the 'senior management club'. But how can you get to know them when you're invisible!"

Men too can find this hard!

UGM research and that of others supports our client's experience. Visibility does emerge as a critical factor determining success in every field. Visibility and networking interact in powerful and dynamic ways, since it's crucial to be seen as capable and committed. But our data prove that this isn't just a challenge identified by women. Many men can also find the requirement to self promote quite stressful, even distasteful.

Take this comment, for example, from a male executive in a computer company, "I've had to learn how to write reports in a way that promotes my expertise but it makes me feel a bit uncomfortable actually." Or this remark from a male engineer interviewed as part of another study, "My experience with this company has been more like you have to go and tell them, 'I've done this well. I've done that well,' and say outright 'Look here!' But I'm not that kind of person."

Female socialisation can make this hard

Nevertheless, there's little doubt that women can feel themselves to be in a slightly different situation. In addition to any distaste or discomfort they may feel based on personal preference, female socialisation tends to contradict self-promotion (especially in non-Anglo cultures) and this, in turn, can be reinforced by stereotypes of women as supporters or nurturers. For these reasons, we've found that the behaviours judged as 'pushy' in a woman can be seen as acceptable signs of commitment and ambition in a man. In study after study, many women state that they believe hard work and their own merit will get them the promotion they deserve!

Commitment as a 'secret code'

Our own work and that of counterparts in Europe highlights the importance of being seen to be committed to the organisation and one's own career development – raising the key question 'what does commitment look like to senior managers?'

No gender differences are found in the belief that it's a manager's duty to pick up the signals of commitment from their staff. One quarter of the

women interviewed (but only one tenth of the men) said they would *not* specifically tell their manager that they were committed – they would let the quality of their work speak for them. Then the researchers pushed the women and men to identify the strategies they employed to increase their visibility.

The female managers focused on building better relationships with a wide cross section of people. While the males did that too, they also said they focused their main attention on delivering their senior manager's goals. Overall, the male meanings of commitment were found to be more similar to senior management's views than the approaches adopted by the women in the study.

But rather than use such findings to build a case for yet more 'remedial' training of women seeking to break through into senior ranks, it's more useful to consider the system-wide implications for all who manage diverse staff. Commitment can come in different packages! Not everyone – for reasons of gender, culture or personality – feels at ease using assertive impression management tactics to increase their visibility. Part of being a leader today is the capacity to respond to others' signals, recognise talent, reward ability and encourage leadership in all its versions.

Pros and cons of women only networks

One way of increasing visibility can be through active involvement in a network of professional business contacts. Barriers can be broken down, false assumptions corrected and encouragement received. But even here women (and other groups) can feel excluded at times. Research highlights that building the right 'cultural capital' reflects the extent to which people can access business critical informal networks which may themselves be gendered.

Exclusion from influential male networks hits hard at women's promotion prospects by restricting their knowledge of what's going on. The solution may not be those informal, highly personal, women only networks which many organisations promote. Yes, they can provide contacts, role models and a forum for discussing common problems. But, at the end of the day, a vital element of getting ahead is effective interaction between women and men. So it's essential to form strategic alliances with both other women *and with men*. This helps to confront bias and outmoded stereotypes, paving the way for real change across the organisation.

In this context, well-designed mentoring programs can positively interact with networking efforts to assist the career development of women and others who find themselves on the margins. For this reason, mentoring is a topic UGM explores in a number of briefings!