

Reaching the Top: Eight Challenge-Busters that will Lead You to Success in a Male-Dominated Industries

By Roxanne Rivera

Being a successful businesswoman is no easy task. Things get even more challenging when you decide to make your bid for success in a male-dominated industry. Yes, excelling in an MDI presents its own set of challenges, but as I know from firsthand experience, they can be overcome. It just takes a little more planning and determination on your part. And when you do reach success—when you have gained the respect of the men in your industry—you'll find that no feeling is more rewarding.

The challenges of working in a male-dominated industry are obvious. Will you be passed over for promotions because you are a woman? Will your male colleagues ignore you and brush off your ideas? Will you be paid less than the men? The good news is you can ensure that these questions are answered with a resounding *no* if you go into situations armed with knowledge and with the right attitude. Here are eight challenge-busting insights that will help lead you to a successful career in a male-dominated industry:

Learn to use your intuition. Although both men and women have a “feminine side,” and thus have the ability to be intuitive, I believe women are able to get in touch with those feelings more readily than men. It's important that you use that skill to your advantage. You may feel that you should avoid intuition because it is perceived as a “woman” thing. But intuition is knowledge—powerful knowledge. It is the little voice that speaks to you that comes from all the lessons you've learned over the years, your innate insight, and the perspective you've gained from the ups and downs of your career.

Strike a happy medium between being in control of your feelings and being perceived as a b-i-t-c-h. The way men see it, there is a very fine line between a woman being assertive and calling it like she sees it and being a bitch. It's unfortunate, but the double standard does exist. Men are thought of as being assertive, insightful, intelligent, probing, and hard-hitting, and women with the same qualities are instantly labeled with the B-word. When you are working as a woman in an MDI, you must learn that you can't always care what the men in your industry think of you. You simply have to do what it takes to get the job done. When you start attaining success, the men in your industry will grow to respect you.

Learn to compartmentalize (Put it in a box). Men have the distinct ability to compartmentalize. What this means is that they are able to focus on the task at hand

without letting emotions interrupt. Women are generally multitaskers, and it used to boggle my mind watching a man operate as though he were wearing blinders. I have come to believe, however, that the ability to compartmentalize can be a great benefit to women working in an MDI. If you are ever involved in a confrontation that is threatening to push you over the edge and that could result in lashing out or bursting into tears, try to separate the words from the task. Put your feelings in their own compartment and close the lid on it. You can come back and re-open the box, just not at that time. Compartmentalizing can help you stay a strong, professional woman while at work. It allows you to focus on the problem at hand without letting your emotions get in the way.

Start using straight talk. Men like straight answers. They don't want to have to try to figure out what you mean when you're talking with them. They want your meaning to be obvious. If you want to survive and thrive in a male-dominated industry, you'll figure this out from the get go. Men do not like to beat around the bush. Always remember to say what you mean and you'll be off to a good start with the men in your industry.

Learn to like men. Chances are if you've chosen to work in a male-dominated industry you already have some affinity for working with men. If you don't, you'd better learn to like them, because you will not succeed otherwise. It won't take you long to find something you like. For example, I like men's brutal honesty and ability to be direct. I know that when I ask a man a question in the workplace, I am going to get a straight answer. Men (at least most of them) simply are not wired to be anything but direct and honest. The more you interact with men and learn how to create productive relationships with them, the more you'll grow to love working in male-dominated industries.

Work smarter. Early in my construction career, I used to feel overwhelmed at how hard I had to work in order to be thought of as even half as smart as my male counterparts. I observed men and how they worked and decided that along with working harder, I had to *work smarter* than they did. I had to come up with ways to do what they did, only better. You'll find your own ways to work smarter than your male colleagues, but here are a few I picked up. I learned to pick my battles, research projects and colleagues carefully, put more time into preparation, set time limits for working on projects, and to be more "emotionally" intelligent than my male counterparts.

Learn to prioritize. To reach the top and be happy once you get there you have to balance your life. And finding the right balance is all about prioritizing what is most important to you. The first step is to determine the five most important things in your life and then list them in order of their importance. (I've always found that this too is easier said than done!) Having your Top Five will help when it comes time to say "No" to activities that don't fall under any of the areas on your list. The list will help you save yourself from rushing from activity to activity without ever being able to enjoy a single one. Setting your priorities early on in your career will help you stay on track, and you can always modify your list as your personal, social, and work lives change.

Be an instigator of change. As a woman in a male-dominated industry, one of your goals no doubt is to move up the ladder and be as successful as you can be. Another goal

I think all women in MDIs should have on their list is to help change the industry so that it is more accessible for the females who come after you. This may mean that you participate in politics, join advisory boards, or become a mentor. Being an instigator of change is all about taking responsibility for ourselves as women. Change is not just going to happen; we have to *make* it happen. The more dedicated we are to changing our industries for the better, the more accepting the men in our industries will be of women.

These eight challenge-busters can't guarantee your success in a male-dominated industry, but chances are if you have the will and determination to carry them all out, you will be well on your way to success. Your path won't be an easy one, but it will be paved with achievements along the way that will turn you into a respected businesswoman. You'll become the gold standard for the women in your industry—and I think that's a fantastic legacy to leave your sisters!