



HOW WOMEN RISE

**HELPING WOMEN CHANGE
THE BEHAVIORS
THAT GET IN THEIR WAY**

Sally Helgesen and Marshall Goldsmith

What holds talented women back from reaching their full potential? Why do women often find themselves stuck?

In our new book, we examine the common behaviors that get in the way of successful women as they seek to rise in their careers and organizations. Our insights and examples are drawn from our combined six decades of experience working with women leaders, and women who aspire to be leaders, all over the world. Our central premise is that the behaviors that may work early in women's careers can hold them back as they move to higher levels.

The insight comes from Marshall's classic bestseller, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. In that book, Marshall described behaviors and habits that get in the way of successful people—men and women—based on his experience as the world's number one ranked leadership coach.

But while many of the behaviors in that book are gender neutral, others are far more typical of men on their way up. This is not surprising given that Marshall's CEO-heavy client base tends to skew male.

So while many of the behaviors in *What Got You Here* apply to both men and women, certain habits that cause men to stumble don't apply to many women.

For example:

- Instead of talking endlessly about how great they are, as some successful men do, women tend to underplay their achievements.
- Instead of always needing to be right, women are more likely to be undermined by a desire to please or the need to be perfect.
- And rather than refusing to express regret, women often can't stop apologizing—even for things that aren't their fault.

Different workplace cultures fit different people. Moreover, different cultures fit different organizations. There is no one single right culture.

It's not surprising that many of the behaviors that hold men and women back would be different. After all, women often have very different experiences at work. And experience shapes habits and responses.

Familiar habits and responses may feel intrinsic, like part of who you are. But they are not you; they are you on autopilot. Bringing them to conscious awareness is the first step on the path to effective behavioral change.

Why focus on behaviors instead on of the cultural and structural factors that hold women back? Isn't that just a way of blaming women?

Not at all. We are acutely aware that cultural and structural restraints still keep many women stuck, despite decades of admittedly uneven progress. But our focus in this book is on what lies within women's control, what women themselves can change.

That's because, while working to change the culture is important and can be transformative, it's a long process that depends on outside factors. By contrast, trying to make small subtle shifts in one's own behavior is the surest way to dramatically increase the likelihood of being able to chart a more powerful career path.

So our purpose is not to blame women who haven't reached their full potential but rather to offer useful tools to help women better their situation. The methods we outline have been proven to work for women at every level and at every point in their career.

Some might object that focusing on women's behaviors risks stereotyping both women and men. After all, why should gender play a role in shaping workplace behaviors? Without diving into conversations about nature or nurture, we believe that gender is often (not always!)

significant because, as noted, women and men often have very different experiences, both at work and in life. And these experiences shape their behaviors.

Our work has convinced us that, if women better understand what gets in their way, they can make a few simple behavioral tweaks that will propel their rise. This will be good for women, good for their organizations, good for their families and communities— and good for the world.

The timing for this book could not be better. Women are using their voices as never before. They are calling out harassment. They are shining a light on the outrage of pay inequity. We intend *How Women Rise* to be a resource in helping these efforts to be more effective.

Why Women Resist Change

Resistance is a powerful force, a demon that holds all of us back from making changes we know would improve the quality of our lives. Our neural systems are designed to favor the path of least resistance, the path that uses the least energy, the path we've created by our prior thoughts and actions. When we repeat actions or behaviors, we establish neural pathways that become our default mode of operating. We then invent rationales for why we behave as we do, which further entrenches these habits.

Successful people are often particularly skilled at coming up with reasons for continuing workplace behaviors that in fact no longer serve them. In *What Got You Here*, Marshall showed how their resistance is often rooted in what he calls the success delusion—the belief that because you've been successful, not only do you not need to change, you probably should not change. Because if you do, you might lose your advantage.

In working with male clients, Marshall finds that resistance often takes the initial form of anger: blaming others, and especially any messenger who dares to suggest that a certain behavior might be problematic. By contrast, in working with women, we both find that resistance is most likely to take the form of hurt, resentment, even shame.

This has advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, it can make women far more open to change because they are more willing to consider how they might have contributed to the situation in which they find themselves.

The downside is that women are more likely to get stuck in a cycle of self-blame, which can be paralyzing and lead to depression. Yet so long as women avoid feeling paralyzed or discouraged for too long, they can harness the discomfort they feel into action.

Deliberately cultivate your culture and build your brand from the same foundation: an overarching purpose and a single set of core values.

A Few Classic Habits That Keep Women Stuck

In our book we identify 12 specific habits or behaviors that in our observation are most likely to get in women's way. Many of them overlap with one another but three behaviors are very common and might be called foundational. Let's examine each of these in turn.

Habit 1: Reluctance to Claim Your Achievements

When surveying a range of female leaders in partnership firms, Sally asked what they believed women at the associate level were best at. The answer was nearly unanimous: doing high quality work. They were also consistent when asked what they believed their female associates were worst at: getting recognized for their achievements.

As a result of this survey, Sally routinely asks participants in her women's leadership programs if they feel they are skilled at drawing attention to their contributions. A majority usually report that they are not. When queried about why they struggle to claim their achievements, participants typically offer one of two responses: "If I have to act like that jerk down the hall to get noticed, I'd rather be ignored." Or, "If I do great work, I believe people should notice."

The problem with the first response is that it indicates an either/or way of thinking: either you exemplify the worst aspects of a given behavior or you behave in an entirely opposite manner. Either/or thinking sees no possibility of a middle ground, no graceful way, for example, to bring attention to the quality of your work without becoming obnoxious and self-serving. It can therefore be used to justify a reluctance to do so.

The expectation that “If I do an outstanding job, people should notice” is also problematical. It might be effective in an ideal world, where people are sensitive to what everyone around them is doing. But it’s unrealistic in a workplace where distraction has become the norm, the press of work is constant and attention spans, especially at senior levels, are notoriously short. In such an environment, simply hoping to be noticed is not only ineffective, it deprives the organization of needed information, which can ultimately disadvantage a woman’s team or boss.

Habit 3: Overvaluing Expertise

We often work with women who assume that becoming expert at their current job is the surest path to success. As a result, they focus their efforts on mastering every detail rather than cultivating the relationships they need to assure success and position them for what they want to do next. The result of not balancing expertise with building connections is usually less visibility, less support, and a lot more work.

A woman’s heroic efforts to master every detail of her job usually has two primary effects. First, it demonstrates that she is perfect for the job she already has, which undermines her long-term interests. Second, the expertise she develops may make her indispensable to her boss, who will quite logically want to keep her where she is.

It’s not surprising that women should strive so hard to demonstrate expertise. Many have had to excel in order to prove that they deserve a seat at the table, particularly if they find themselves in a career, sector or company with relatively few women. They may have had to overcome the skepticism of a boss who is accustomed to male direct reports, or the resentment of a male colleague who doesn’t like the idea of a female peer. Women in such situations often try to earn respect by becoming super-contributors. This can help them gain respect, but it doesn’t position them for jobs where the expertise they’ve developed is insufficient and connections hold the real key to advancement.

Overvaluing expertise can also hold women back when they are looking for a job. Research from PWC recently found that only 17% of female respondents said they would put themselves forward for a promotion if they didn't believe they had the proven skills to take it on. This reflects what we've heard from search firms for decades, that women's job applications often include a caveat along the lines of, "I haven't actually done this specific work before so I'm not sure if I'm ready." By contrast, men will confidently assert they are ready for a position that requires skills they have not yet developed. Women's hesitation often results in a less qualified man being chosen because his belief in his own value carries him along.

Habit 8: The Perfection Trap

In our experience, women are especially vulnerable to the perfection trap, the belief that they will succeed if they do their job perfectly and never mess anything up. This expectation seems to lie at the root of the tendency many women have to give themselves a hard time. After all, who can measure up to such a standard? But the result is often that even high-achieving women tend to take failures deeply to heart, get tangled up in self-blame, and stew over mistakes instead of moving on.

If you want to offer a unique customer experience ... then you must embrace unique core values.

The fear of making mistakes is of course compounded by the fact that woman's mistakes are often viewed more critically than men's. Especially at high levels or in heavily male cultures, women's errors may be seized on as proof that women in general can't make the grade, which can affect how other women in the company are viewed. This compounds the guilt many women feel when they make a mistake.

The process is intensified with minority women. In the United States, African Americans often feel the burden of carrying the expectations of their entire community on their shoulders, as do immigrants from Latin American and Asian cultures. For these women, learning to let go of the desire to be perfect is especially urgent because the potential for guilt is even higher.

Perfectionists usually struggle with delegation. It stands to reason that people with punishingly high standards would find it hard to simply let others do their jobs. But because monitoring other people's efforts is time-consuming and fraught, perfectionists often decide that it's easier and quicker to do everything themselves.

As a result, many end up loading extra tasks onto their already-too-full plates, adding an additional level of stress. Yet the willingness to delegate becomes ever more important at higher levels. Attempting to micro-manage others, or on occasion even doing their jobs for them, is in fact a perfect recipe for being eaten alive.

Perfectionists also tend to avoid risk, which becomes a serious detriment as one moves to higher levels. Risk-taking requires being open to failure. And while risk must be thoughtfully assessed, the outcome is never assured or entirely within one's control. Perfectionism, by contrast, keeps the focus on what can be controlled. This narrowing of horizons demonstrates insecurity instead of the confidence in the future that being an effective leader requires.

Changing Habits

In *How Women Rise* we share a range of techniques that readers can use to make measurable behavioral change. These have been drawn from decades of experience and have worked for people at every level. The basic template for change we outline is:

1. Start with one thing

Making sustainable and lasting change requires focus. Not just momentary “let’s do it” enthusiasm, but the willingness to make a sustained and consistent effort over time. This is best achieved by identifying one behavior (or even one part of one behavior), and working on it until you see evidence of progress. That’s because making small changes, and repeating them until they become habitual, is more likely to yield long-term results than trying to become a brand-new person all at once.

2. Don’t do it alone

It’s difficult to change a habit. But it’s almost impossible to change it alone. Why? Because as humans, we all have built-in forgetters. When we find ourselves in a familiar or triggering situation, we tend to default to our habitual response.

Coaches serve as disruptors by helping people see their engrained responses. Not everyone who reads *How Women Rise* has access to a coach, but anyone can enlist a colleague, friend, boss or direct report in their effort to make positive behavioral changes. It costs nothing, lessens the likelihood of defaulting to autopilot and chips away at the demon of resistance. It also greatly strengthens a person’s network support. In the book, we offer dozens of techniques for enlisting such allies.

3. Let go of judgment

Marshall notes that, in his experience, “Women are usually viewed as better leaders than men. Yet they tend to be much more self-critical.” Similarly, Sally sees in her work that women can be prone to rumination, chewing over even minor mistakes they have made and feeling bad as a consequence.

We therefore offer a range of exercises that can help women move beyond the trap of judgment and write a more positive script for themselves. These techniques include reframing, feed-forward, substituting to-don't for to-do lists, leaving it at the stream and practicing “Oh Well.”

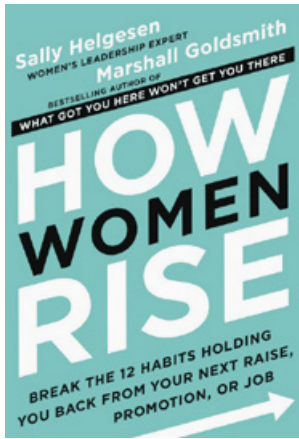
A Final Word

It's important to remember that every self-limiting behavior is rooted in a strength. For example, the reluctance to claim your achievements is rooted in genuine modesty and a generous willingness to acknowledge the achievements of others. Overvaluing expertise is rooted in a healthy respect for the skills a job requires and the willingness to work hard to master them. Perfectionism is rooted in the desire not to disappoint others along with a commitment to making the world a better place.

These are good things, gifts that women bring to the world. And they have usually played a role in contributing to women's success. So it's important for women to celebrate the skills, talents, attitudes, and behaviors that have gotten them to where they are. Even as they work to change those habits that won't get them where they want to go. 📖



Info



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About the authors

Sally Helgesen's work is widely regarded as the gold standard when it comes to women's leadership. Since the publication of *The Female Advantage* in 1990 (still in print), she has written five more books in the field and speaks to audiences all around the world about these issues. Marshall Goldsmith is America's preeminent executive coach.

Marshall's *What Got You Here* and *Triggers* are both ranked by Amazon in the Top 100 Best Books of all time in the leadership and success category. *What Got You Here*, *Triggers*, and *MOJO* were all *New York Times* best-sellers and *Triggers* hit #1 on *The Wall Street Journal's* best-seller list and was chosen by Amazon as the Best Business Book of the year when it was published in 2015. *What Got You Here* won the Harold Longman Award for the Best Business Book of the year.



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