

# Can self-promotion ever be nice?

By Alison Maitland

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Attitudes to self-promotion have changed a lot in the generation since I started work. When I was growing up, modesty was a desirable quality, especially for women, and boasting was frowned upon. Today, everyone has to have a social media profile and a “personal brand” to stand out in a crowded and competitive market that suffers from a short attention span.

I'm sure many people share my unease about self-promotion. However, as maintaining a profile is so important, it's useful to learn ways of doing so without jeopardising self-respect or the respect of others.

A new book, *The Politics of Promotion: How High-Achieving Women Get Ahead and Stay Ahead*, addresses this challenge with some good solutions. Author Bonnie Marcus is an American businesswoman who worked her way up to CEO level before starting her own **business\***, coaching women for success. She knows a lot about self-promotion, and her Twitter handle is @selfpromote. Don't be put off: she has plenty of advice about how to do this nicely!

Bonnie reframes politics, networking and self-promotion as necessary leadership skills that can achieve all-round benefits when exercised thoughtfully. She shares tips from her own and other female leaders' experience, including mutual promotion, success journals and how to build a “power network”.

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She starts from the premise that most organisations believe they are meritocracies when they are not. People are often promoted for reasons other than just performance. Hard work and results are not usually enough: they have to be noticed by those with influence. And because large organisations are cumbersome and difficult to navigate, you can't assume people will know how well you are doing. You have to join up the dots for them.

Sharon Allen, cited in the book, learned this the hard way as a manager at Deloitte when several close colleagues were promoted and she wasn't. She went to speak to her boss about all the things she had accomplished and was told: "You didn't let me know". After that, she made sure people did know. She rose to chair the board of Deloitte US.

In Bonnie's view, you should see politics as a normal part of work and be strategic about it. This starts with finding out who your allies and foes are in the organization, who supports the advancement of women, and who doesn't. Look around and see which managers have women on their teams and which don't. The former will be potential allies or sponsors, and you should build relationships with them. The latter should be treated with caution. I don't think that means they should be avoided, as they could be a critical part of your constituency – they might even turn into allies, with persuasion or time. But they might also block you.

It's also important, when mapping who your allies are, not to become overly reliant on a single mentor or sponsor who might quit or be ousted. I've seen highly capable women edged out of organizations for this reason.

The next thing is that politics doesn't have to be all about you. Played positively, it can be about promoting what you and your team have accomplished together, for the good of the business. Women often feel more comfortable sharing credit like this than talking about their personal triumphs.

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that she put others before self.”

One female manager is described in the book as having been “incredible” at politics. “The great thing about this leader was that she put others before self. She didn't care who got credit for her ideas but that they got support, [were] funded and moved forward.”

Here politics and leadership coincide. The manager won followers because of the way she encouraged and supported her team. Finding ways to help someone else achieve their goals, whether that person is your boss or a member of your team, can enhance your value and reputation in the organisation.

Bonnie also tackles our tendency to focus on shortcomings rather than achievements, which can undermine our ability to promote ourselves. She advocates:

- Keeping a “success journal” where you write every day about things you did well. This helps to switch your default thinking to positive, she says.
- Setting up monthly meetings with a group of like-minded women to share successes and agree to promote them around the organization. You don't have to blow your own trumpet if others are doing it for you.

Even highly successful and savvy women don't always stay ahead, however. The book cites Sallie Krawcheck, former chief financial officer of Citigroup, who joined Bank of America to turn around its wealth management businesses, only to lose her job in a restructuring. “Unhappily, my implicit bet that the parent company culture was one I could navigate effectively was incorrect,” she wrote in a [blog post](#)\*\*.

Progressive companies know they must adapt culture and behaviour if they are to get more women into leadership and keep them there. But many organizations lack transparency about what is involved in decision-making, and women are still often viewed and judged differently from men. Until genuine meritocracy becomes the norm, women will be greatly helped in navigating the traps and blind alleys of organizational life by the advice that Bonnie offers.

## References

\*Bonnie Marcus: <http://womenssuccesscoaching.com>

\*\* <http://qz.com/138512/sallie-krawcheck-what-i-learned-when-i-got-ousted-from-bank-of-america>

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