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IT’S OFFICIAL: QUALITY BEATS QUANTITY (FOR WOMEN, ANYWAY)

Attention Ambitious, Achievement-Oriented Women in Business: if you want to attain a high-ranking position the best gift you can give yourself is a small cadre of highly supportive women that you communicate with often.

A new study by the University of Notre Dame and Northwestern University has found that more than three-quarters of high ranking women have a “female dominated” inner circle and they frequently check in with those women.

Turns out, according to the study, that the gender makeup and communication patterns of a woman’s network (not its size) are a major predictor of her professional success. Think quality over quantity. For men, however, the same study revealed that the size of a man’s network is a major predictor of his likelihood of reaching a senior leadership role.

The study researched 700 graduates of a top-ranked business school, evaluating their job titles against their professional networks. When evaluating those networks, the study followed three specific criteria: the overall size of the network, the gender makeup of the network and the proportion of strong network ties (i.e. people you communicate with often) versus weak network ties (i.e. people you know but rarely communicate with). Researchers discovered that women with a small, predominantly female inner circle attained positions 2.5 times higher than their female counterparts who had bigger networks and a male-dominant inner circle.

While a bigger network will give you greater exposure to opportunity and access to intelligence, the study found that there’s a certain type of information women need to glean from their networks in order to attain positions of power. What is this information? Gender specific intelligence that offers practical tips on how to thrive in a male-dominated job market... which continues to be virtually any senior-level job market.

The study further suggests that much of the conventional wisdom offered to women related to networking is ineffective. According to this research, women don’t need to build a big network, but men do. Women would be far better off cultivating close relationships with other ambitious, supportive women... and intentionally nurturing those relationships.

This research will be music to the ears of many high performing, ambitious women who feel so drained at the end of the workday that the idea of extending the office hours to attend a networking event feels torturous.

The research also gives credence to a growing chorus of women who are skeptical of the inherent value of attending awards dinners, fundraisers, and other networking events that offer lots of opportunity to shake hands, but little chance to have meaningful conversations.

Of course, this is just one study, pitted against a wealth of advice that urges everyone—men and women—to invest time and resources in building a broad network. Therefore, the discerning woman would do well to invest at least some time in traditional network-building activities. Cue the wine and cheese.

The place to invest more time, however, is in finding those high performing women who will uplift you, and investing the time and energy in nurturing career-transforming relationships with them.

In my opinion, the study confirms what so many women inherently know: behind every strong woman is a group of other strong women. And equally as important—the strategies that serve men well in business aren’t necessarily the strategies that serve us.

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FEEDBACK

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