

Some Practical Advice for Women Engineers and Architects: 3 things YOU can do starting now to help yourself succeed

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I care deeply about the advancement of women in the workforce. In corporate America there are now (only) 36 women who head Fortune 500 companies. Although this number is dismal, 36 is better than 24, the number last year. There is a similar pipeline of women in Architecture and Engineering, which parallels that in corporate America in general. Large numbers of women enter the profession, but that number diminishes as the rank increases, leaving much fewer women at the top.

There are many important issues that need to change at the societal and institutional level to achieve gender equality. A fascinating report from the World Economic Forum suggests that it will take 100 years to achieve gender parity. Yes, we need legislature that supports women's rights. Yes – we need institutions to put into place policies that promote and supports working families (both men and women). *But what can each of us do now to propel ourselves forward?*

I believe that we can all begin to take some small actionable steps to help ourselves succeed. Based on many interactions with working women executives, my involvement in numerous leadership forums as both a participant and a speaker, and, of course from numerous discussions with friends and colleagues, I am going to offer three suggestions that can help you take the first steps now.

These are:

1. Learn to say No to the things that you don't want to do
2. Make it a practice to share your accomplishments and communicate your value
3. Invest in self-care to reflect, recharge and rejuvenate.

1. Learn how to say No effectively: “No” is a complete sentence. It is a sentence that we need to use more often, despite how hard it is to say. As social beings, we all want to be liked and to fit in. We want to be seen as cooperative and a team player. So when someone makes a request of you, you feel the social pressure to say Yes, because it is the nice thing to do. Research shows that women are more likely to say Yes to workplace requests. But saying Yes to a lot of things often distracts you from what your main work is. I encourage you to think of your career in terms of chapters. Each chapter has different

goals and different metrics of success. Think about the chapter you are in. Think about what you want to and have to achieve in this chapter to move onto the next one. Those are your priorities. If you get asked to do things that are not going to move you forward to your next chapter, then you should say No to them.

In my work on empowered refusal, I suggest that when a refusal stems from a person's values and priorities, the other party is more accepting of the "No" response. In other words, when you say No based on your values and priorities, you come across as more determined and communicate your No with greater conviction.

Saying No to the things you don't want to do also leaves you open to pursue the opportunities that you do care about. Time is a very valuable resource; spend it wisely on the things that matter to you. Say No to everything else.

2. Make it a practice to share your accomplishments and communicate your value: Women shy away from "bragging". I argue that it is not bragging, if you actually did the things you talk about. Unfortunately, many of us believe that if we are good, people will notice what we do and reward us for it. The truth of the matter is that most people are too busy worrying about what they need to do to pay attention to what you are doing. I recommend the book by Peggy Klaus: "Brag! The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn without Blowing It". If you are on an important committee and are doing some important work that benefits your organization, take credit for your input. If you received some recognition either formally (an award) or informally (a compliment from a client) make sure that you add it to your CV, share it with your colleagues, even post it on your preferred social media outlet - LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. Remember - if you have done it, it is not bragging. It is communicating your value.
3. Invest in Self-Care: We are not machines, although we often expect ourselves to be. Recognizing when you need to stop and rest is critical to long-term success. When I mean self-care, it means doing what it takes to look after yourself. I do not mean long vacations, days at the spa or relaxing on the beach (although those sound fun)! I mean take the time to do things that you love, that make you feel good. In some recently published work, my co-authors and I found that simple pleasures can buffer small annoyances. There are many daily hassles we experience in our jobs and at work so we need to infuse our lives with small and simple pleasures to help us tide over these pains. It starts with reflecting on what gives you joy and making a point to embrace these moments of pleasure. It could be savoring your first sip of coffee in the morning, while feeling grateful for the new day. It could be walking in the park with your child. It could be watching a movie or an episode of your favorite show without an ounce of guilt. It could be cooking, meditating, reading, sewing, scrapbooking, exercising (yoga, running, Zumba), hanging out with a friend....as long as it is something that gives you

joy that energizes you and makes you feel good. We need to feel good to be at our creative and energetic best.

Most people's response to this recommendation is "I don't have the time". My response to them is two-fold: 1. The philosophical response: We all have the time to do the things we think are important and want to do. Make self-care a priority. 2. The pragmatic response: Use your fringe time. Fringe time is the short time between things. I found the book Fringe Hours (by Jessica Turner) really helpful in this regard. When you have 10 minutes for the next meeting, should you check your phone or mindlessly browse Facebook? Use that fringe time for self-care. You can do a walking meditation while walking to that meeting across campus. You can step outside for a brief walk after lunch. You can stop by your favorite bookstore to simply browse through books in between running errands. You can buy yourself a bunch of flowers. You refresh your diffuser with new oil and enjoy the wafting scent while you work. Bottomline: I believe that self-care does not require huge amounts of time, it just requires regular doing. It is the oxygen mask that keeps us happy and productive.

To learn more strategies and ways to advance yourself in your career, please consider taking the Bauer Women in Leadership Program (<https://www.bauer.uh.edu/executive-education/open/women-in-leadership.php>). We have designed this program especially to help you advance in your careers and achieve professional success!