

Positioning yourself: Overcoming gender bias in business

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Changing your approach can help give women business owners new ways to break the bias and position themselves for success.

According to the [U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Business Survey](#), there are currently more than 1.24 million women-owned firms (meaning companies that employ others) in the U.S., a number that has steadily increased over the past 20 years. While that growth is encouraging, surveys also have shown that one reason women start their own businesses is the gender discrimination and inequality they have faced in corporate environments. Even as entrepreneurs, women may face similar challenges within the business community when trying to find business partners, investors, and customers.

This is not news to the many women who have experienced gender bias firsthand, including Tracey Gillespie, National Director Business Advisory Services for Wells Fargo Wealth & Investment Management. At a previous company, she wondered why she was not chosen for a corporate project team despite having the knowledge and experience required for the work. When she asked a trusted male colleague for perspective, he said, "I hate to tell you this, but nobody wanted to have a girl on their team." Gillespie says that pivotal moment has shaped how she's positioned herself for success since, either in a corporate setting or as an entrepreneur herself.

“One practice that I have exercised for navigating and overcoming bias in business comes from creating key networks based on your needs and goals,” says Gillespie. “By establishing relevant networks, women can build different types of ‘capital’ through each and position themselves in their industry.”

Here, she recommends three kinds of capital women entrepreneurs can build to help break through the gender bias.

Personal capital: Network with peers to help you grow

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Personal capital is based in your confidence in your ability to bring your product or knowledge to the business community, and your ability to engender confidence in others.

“Whether you’re communicating with partners, investors, or customers, they don’t know what you know,” Gillespie warns. “You have to tell your story confidently and help new contacts answer ‘yes’ to the question ‘Does she seem like somebody else I know who has done this successfully?’”

This can be challenging to achieve, Gillespie says, so it helps to learn from others’ experiences. When she started her own business advisory firm, for example, she joined a networking group of women business owners to learn how they talked about their businesses. Listening to their elevator speeches helped her build her own compelling way to communicate the value of her business and gave her the confidence to speak to others about her vision.

Social capital: Gather your advisors

The best advisors bring ideas and connections that can help your business. These aren’t far-flung outsiders; instead, this group can start with your attorney, CPA, business coach, and financial advisor.

Seek diversity in your advisor team. “Women have a tendency to build that network with a high reliance on other women, which can be a two-edged sword,” Gillespie says. “Women also need to build those networks with male professionals because they bring a different perspective and have a different experience.”

To foster all these advisor-advisee relationships, Gillespie says, focus on clarity and honesty. Gillespie points to how beneficial it was to have a male colleague who was willing to share the truth with her about why she wasn’t chosen for that team 20 years ago. “Gather connections who are willing to tell you the truth even if you don’t want to hear it,” she says. “And listen objectively to the perceptions they share with you.”

Financial capital: Endorsements matter — as do your partners

The amount of venture capital funds flowing into new enterprises is remarkable. “I recently read that since 2011, women-founded firms have never received more than 2.7% of annual venture capital investments. In fact, out of the \$330 billion invested in 2021,” Gillespie says, “only 2% of those dollars went to women-owned businesses, a drop from 2.2% in 2020.”¹

Gillespie says that knowing this disparity exists in the venture community can help women business owners go on the offensive. “Endorsements matter. And nurturing your network to develop connections to other leaders who will endorse you and your business can be the key to securing venture financing.”

At the same time, Gillespie says, women business owners need to focus on finding venture partners who fit their goals. She recently met with one owner who had successfully grown and sold one business, and who was seeking venture funding for a second business. The first venture capitalists she spoke with questioned her ability to run a startup given that she had just had a child.

“Her response was brilliant,” Gillespie says. “She said, ‘I don’t want an investor who brings that bias to the table. I don’t want to spend my energy fighting that.’ Her mindset was that she was selectively offering an opportunity to invest in her business, versus selling equity in the company to any investor. Although everyone’s money is green, some investors bring more value to the table than others,” Gillespie noted.

Resources that can help

Strong relationships and connections can be a major part of breaking the bias that still exists in business. Talk to your advisor about how Wells Fargo Business Owner Advisory can help. Gillespie also recommends exploring the resources available with these two national groups:

- The National Association of Women Business Owners, which has chapters in most major cities
- Vistage, a membership-based organization that helps business owners network with CEOs and business coaches

1. Columbia Business School – the Eugene Lang Entrepreneurship Center, “The Illusion of Venture Capital for Women Founders,” Forbes, June 21, 2022

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