

THE ART & SCIENCE OF POWER

In the spring of 2014, Northwestern Mutual surveyed more than 1,500 men and women across the U.S. about their interpretations of success. The Elements of Success study yielded one startling statistic: While a majority of women who participated in the survey said they were happy in their lives, just one quarter of women characterized their lives as being successful. The study also revealed women are significantly more likely than men to believe they have not yet achieved success in terms of their career

They are surprising results, given that women are making noteworthy inroads in the workplace. Consider the following statistics:

- In the U.S., women now hold more than 50 percent of the professional jobs and 35 percent of the managerial roles.¹
- The number of working women who hold a college degree has tripled over the past 40 years.²
- Today, women in the U.S. account for almost 60 percent of college graduates.³
- Women earn more than a third of all MBAs.⁴

So why don't more women feel successful in their careers? One possible explanation may be tied to power. Power is seen as an important component of leadership, and the effective use of power is seen as critical to the success of executives. Yet women are often uncomfortable with—and conflicted by—the use of power. For many, "power" holds a negative connotation.

Joann M. Eisenhart, Ph.D., senior vice president for human resources, facilities and philanthropy at Northwestern Mutual, studied the topic in her doctoral dissertation, *The Meaning and Use of Power among Female Corporate Leaders*. Her research focused on how female corporate leaders describe and use power. Twenty women from eight Fortune 1000 companies were interviewed for the study. The women were senior-level leaders, mainly mid-career, and ranged in age from 35 to 54.

One of the most notable insights from the interviews was that a number of women had a visceral reaction to the word "power" because they thought of it as *having power over someone or something*. When Eisenhart asked them about their 'influence,' however, they had no difficulty in describing ways they had used that attribute effectively.⁵

The participants also described power in a multifaceted way. The model of power that emerged from their descriptions included a definition of power and where it comes from:

- Power is the ability to get what I want done, the ability to influence a situation or a person, and the ability to decide what to do.
- Power comes from position, expertise and credibility, relationships, personal qualities, and empowering others.

The research explored these five sources of power, particularly how women defined them, used them, and felt about using them. A summary of the study participants' responses follows.

By examining the results of the research, Eisenhart hopes women leaders will develop strategies to be more effective and successful in the workplace.

Power Source #1: Position Power

Position power is the assumed authority granted by virtue of a person's title or role within the organization. There is a certain amount of power and influence that comes with any position.

In Eisenhart's research, *almost half of the women said they did not feel good about using power related to their position*, suggesting they may be resistant to the use of forms of power that could be perceived as coercive or "power over."

Among those who did view the use of position power as a positive, one woman noted that power granted by title brings clarity. "It's a hierarchy, so it's very clear, you know ... who has the decision, at least in the kind of job I have. So people aren't looking around the room thinking, 'Gee. I wonder who really has the power here.' I mean everybody knows, so it's easy in that regard for me to say, 'This is what we need to have happen, and it is what I expect.'"

In addition to the position power granted by a title, some roles have position power because they involve activities of high importance to the company. For example, one woman described her former internal auditor role as having power in the corporation due to the compliance role it played, especially since the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Law that requires rigid financial controls. Another woman talked about the power that she felt she has as the chief legal counsel for the organization, due to the importance of managing the legal risks of the business. In each of these cases, the particular role in the organization imparts power to the individual based upon specific responsibilities as well as outside legal or regulatory parameters.

Those who felt comfortable using position power made a point of saying they felt it was okay only when it was for the good of the company or the individual or when it was done in a respectful manner. Others admitted the use of power would be more compelling if people followed their lead because of the power of their vision, so that they understand what to do rather than have to be told. One woman specifically noted, "People are ... more likely to raise a banner for you if they feel like they have joined the cause as opposed to being told they have to."

While almost half the women in the study did not necessarily feel good about the use of power related to position, *almost all of them felt positive about their use of power **not** related to position*, such as power derived from their expertise and credibility, from relationships they've developed, from their personal qualities, or from their ability to empower others.

" One of my personal goals is to shift the thinking on position power. I don't want people to do something just because I'm the boss; I don't want to be treated in a certain way only because of my title. Instead, I want to earn someone's respect through my actions and how I treat them, not just because they respect the position I'm in. "

– Jo Eisenhart

Power Source #2: Expertise and Credibility

This source of power can be derived from having expertise in a given field or by demonstrating a track record of delivery—through which the individual has gained trust and credibility in an organization.

In Eisenhart's study, approximately *three quarters of the women interviewed suggested that their ability to influence a situation comes at least partly from their demonstrated expertise and credibility.*

One woman, when asked how she was able to influence a situation with a cross-functional team, mentioned her expertise in human resources: "I think a big confidence in my abilities, my background, is my knowledge of human resources. And knowing that we had the one guy coming in to be the head for engineering, we had the other guy coming in because he's a really good project director, and I was there because I am a really great HR person."

Another woman described her recent move from the information technology department to the operations department, in which she did not have functional expertise but brought a track record of delivery. "I'm bartering on a lot of previous credibility ... I'm going to the organization from an IT role. What the hell do I know about the business? But I feel confident enough, and clearly our chairman and CEO feel confident enough, of putting me in this role where I come in with the power and say, 'You know what, I know we can do things differently.'"

A third woman commented that her ability to influence a situation comes from her reputation. "I have a lot of credibility as a person who is smart and who thinks strategically and carefully." And yet another woman went so far as to say, "Your organizational credibility has everything to do with your ability to influence."

" My approach to the use of power is typically through expertise and credibility and is reinforced through relationships. I need to know my craft, my industry, and I expect that of everyone; people shouldn't respect me just because of my title. When I joined Northwestern Mutual, my goal was to get to know people and help them understand a different vision for where we're trying to take my department. I rested on the confidence that I know how human resources can help deliver business results. "

– Jo Eisenhart

WHAT TYPE OF INFLUENCER ARE YOU?



**3 OUT OF 4
WOMEN**
REPORT
INFLUENCING
SITUATIONS VIA
EXPERTISE &
CREDIBILITY

Source: The Meaning and Use of Power Among Female Corporate Leaders, Joann M. Eisenhart Ph.D, 2006

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Power Source #3: Relationships

Women judge themselves to be highly successful in building relationships, according to the Northwestern Mutual Elements of Success study. Not surprisingly, relationships also factored in Eisenhart's interviews with women about power; *nearly half of the women said that having relationships is an important part of how they are able to influence others.*

One woman attributed her ability to be powerful to a long-standing relationship with her boss. "First and foremost, from my perspective, was the fact that I had personally a good relationship with—and the trust of—the person that I reported to. I'd worked with him for about a year and a half before the first reorganization, but he had known me for three or four years prior to that. And I'd known him before that—so kind of a long-term building relationship. There was a lot of trust between the two of us, and I think that's primarily one of the reasons I think that I had a pretty powerful voice."

Another woman highlighted the importance of relationships in terms of her ability to influence, and she said, "Being a woman affects the way I approach things. I guess every woman doesn't approach it the same way. I do think it is true, however, that the whole idea of building relationships, building bonds, etc., comes more naturally to women."

Yet a third woman added, "I like to build relationships before I get put into situations where I need to use the influence."

" My preference is to work collaboratively rather than hierarchically and to use relationships built on mutual respect to move forward, rather than relying on organizational hierarchy. "

– Jo Eisenhart

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 **Northwestern Mutual®**

Power Source #4: Personal Qualities

In Eisenhart's study, *power and being powerful was attributed to personal qualities by over half of the women.*

"Will people follow you? Do you have 'the presence'? Are you fair and equitable?" said one woman. "Leadership in the sense of the military: good to your troops, part of a team, all for the same goals, I'm not going to leave you. There is a lot of power that comes from within your own organization due to this."

When asked about personal qualities, a second woman described a situation in which a man who worked for her acknowledged her personal power by asking, "Can you teach me how to have the impact that you have when you walk in? You just walk in, and you know people are listening to you. Can you teach me how to have that kind of impact?"

A third woman described personal power by saying that power "also has to do with a little bit of charisma." Another believes she derives power from her personal attributes. "Standing up for what I believe, being decisive, strong-minded; my personal attributes are powerful. That is what I am much more comfortable with."

" Women can use power for the good of others in whatever way makes sense for them. Each of us has a unique power and the ability to do something different ... and we shouldn't shy away from it. It's important not to self-limit. The key is to figure out how to use your power in a way that's authentic to yourself. "

– Jo Eisenhart

Power Source #5: Empowering Others

Several women brought the concept of empowerment into their descriptions of power. While they did not explicitly define power as empowerment, per se, women used examples of power that focused on giving their power away. And by doing this, they were able to increase their own sense of power.

"What I tell everybody in every level of the organization is that I work for you. I'm the boss, you work for me, but I work for you," said one woman. "And my job, with the title I have and the influence I have, is to get all the obstacles out of your way, give you the tools you need so you get the job done."

A second woman added, "I took the fact that I was now completely empowered and turned it all back to them, saying, 'You're in charge, guys.' And to me, that's hugely more powerful because then it's magnified through the group as opposed to always residing in me."

One woman compared her use of empowerment in the workplace to her philosophy of raising her son. "I'm here as an assistant. I don't own his life. What happens then is that he, my son, or this group, or whatever, would start to look at me as owning it and being responsible for it. ... I don't need to be in charge. I don't need to be seen as powerful. I want that to flow from me through to them. And to me, that's hugely more powerful because then it's magnified through the group as opposed to always residing in me."

" While several women in my study mentioned the concept of empowerment, I was surprised that it was not more prevalent. To me, it suggests that women in leadership roles have developed a multifaceted view of power in which empowerment is not necessarily the primary approach. "

– Jo Eisenhart

The bottom line? For women, power is multidimensional

In Eisenhart's research, all of the women mentioned more than one source of power. More specifically, approximately one-third of the women mentioned two sources of power, another one-third mentioned three, roughly a quarter mentioned four, and a few mentioned all five. The fact that all of the women described what power is and where it comes from, and the majority of the women mentioned more than one source of power, indicates the multidimensional nature of power that emerged from the study, which revealed:

- Power is the ability to get what I want done, the ability to influence a situation or a person, and the ability to decide what to do.
- Power comes from position, expertise and credibility, relationships, personal qualities, and empowering others.

Women view their success as multidimensional, too

Eisenhart's research concluded that women tend to view power as part of a complex, interconnected world. It is not surprising. Women also tend to define their success in complex ways. The 2014 Northwestern Mutual Elements of Success study found that women define their success holistically, incorporating elements such as friendship, health, happiness, financial security, and values into their assessment of their own success. In the study, the top 10 aspects of personal success for women are:

1. Being happy/emotionally happy (84%)
2. Having enough money to pay the bills (79%)
3. Being healthy (79%)
4. Owning a home (61%)
5. Having close friendships (61%)
6. Having enough money to do the things I love, such as travel (60%)
7. Freedom to do what I want when I want (57%)
8. Living a life that's consistent with my belief system (55%)
9. Enjoying what I do for a living (55%)
10. Being physically fit and active (54%)

Use Power Positively to Achieve Success

In many ways, power and success are naturally connected; if one has success, she's deemed powerful. If one has power, she's deemed successful. And although women view both power and success in multifaceted ways, Eisenhart suggests women harness their unique power to create opportunities for greater success by:

- Understanding their sources of power.
- Not fearing power.
- Making power positive.

Ultimately, Eisenhart encourages women to experiment with the use of their power. Experimentation became routine for Eisenhart when she began her career as a chemist. And although she no longer works in a laboratory, Jo is still a scientist at heart. The scientific method—asking a question, gathering information, forming and testing a hypothesis, collecting and reviewing data, then drawing a conclusion—still figures prominently in her mindset and her approach to problem solving. In experimenting with the use of power, Eisenhart suggests women ask themselves:

- Which type of power is best for me and my style?
- How do I feel about using different types of power?
- How do the people I admire use power, and how can I learn from their example?

By answering these questions, women will have a better understanding of the art and science of power, and they will use their power to become more effective leaders and achieve greater success.

" I've come to realize that the graceful use of power—including the power afforded by leadership positions like mine—is essential for success. I'm experimenting with using power in ways that are consistent with my values, and I encourage other women to do the same. "

– Jo Eisenhart

Joann M. Eisenhart, Ph.D.

Joann (Jo) Eisenhart is senior vice president for human resources at Northwestern Mutual. In this role, she leads the human resources, facilities and philanthropy function, which includes the Human Resources, Facility Operations, and Strategic Philanthropy and Community Relations departments.

Prior to joining Northwestern Mutual in 2011, Eisenhart was senior vice president for human resources at Pfizer Inc. From 1985 to 2001, Eisenhart worked at the Rohm & Haas Company, where she spent eight years in human resources and organizational effectiveness and eight years as a research scientist in the Polymers division.

Eisenhart holds a doctorate in human and organizational development from the Fielding Graduate Institute, where her dissertation research focused on the topic of women, leadership, and power in large corporations. She also holds a doctorate in inorganic chemistry from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Illinois–Urbana.

Eisenhart is on the Board of Advisors for the Northwestern Mutual Granum Center for Financial Security, the Board of Advisors for the University Wisconsin–Madison Department of Chemistry, and the Board of Directors for the American Red Cross of Southeastern Wisconsin.

¹² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Women in the Labor Force: A Databook, retrieved 6-10-2014 from <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook-2012.pdf>

³ National Center for Education Statistics, retrieved 6-10-2014 from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>

⁴ Catalyst, Statistical Overview of Women in the Workplace, The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, unpublished data (2011), retrieved 6-10-2014 from <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/statistical-overview-women-workplace>

⁵ Joann Eisenhart, "The Meaning and User of Power Among Female Corporate Leaders" (Ph.D. diss., Fielding Graduate University, 2006)