

## **The Ole Boy Network Still Has Teeth** **by Lillian Bjorseth**

I'm not a sexist, and I'm not a bra-burning feminist. I am a realist. That's why I can say that the ole boy network still unequivocally affects relationship building in the corporate hallowed halls ... not so much in the entrepreneurial ranks.

Building beneficial relationships knows no gender boundaries. It is equally beneficial for men and women, and the process can be equally daunting or equally easy for members of either sex.

Male chauvinists and radical feminists agree on one thing: Women, probably by nature or because they are the bearers of children, are more nurturing and tend to be more cooperative, empathic and understanding in a non-biased manner. After all, they share their love unselfishly as they give birth to and rear boys and girls.

Most women are natural networkers and intuitively better at it than men. They, their mothers and their grandmothers have been recommending recipes, hairdressers and skincare products across kitchen tables for generations. Where the challenge for many women arises is in the business arena. The increased emphasis on teaching relationship building is helping women become more confident and competent about transferring their skills to the workplace.

Some "older" women were taught by their mothers (who thought them to be positive qualities) to be seen and not heard, not to exploit their personal relationships or to "brag" about themselves. Hopefully, parents today are teaching their daughters that it is acceptable for women to be just as assertive as men, socially and in business, and that as their daughters become mothers this issue will be largely non-existent.

There is another major challenge, however, that needs to be overcome. I left the Fortune 100 environment almost 20 years ago; yet some of the tales I hear women share today take me back in a flash.

In business likes tend to want to work with likes, i.e. women with women and men with men. Because there are only a handful of women CEOs in the Fortune 500 companies, it's easy to understand why women may not have the same opportunities to build high-value business relationships. This will only change as more women rise to top jobs at major corporations and become more than token members of corporate and organizational boards of directors.

That's exactly what the ole boys' network was and in some cases still is: men at the top helping other men rise to the same levels. Women are not yet as privy to networking in these elite places so while their skills are top-notch, their results may be less powerful and have less impact.

Women, however, are gaining in numbers what they lack in force. Because of the corporate glass ceilings (they still exist!), so many of them are starting businesses and becoming owners and presidents that they are beginning to gain clout through sheer numbers. This, in turn, adds clout to the relationships they are building. While they may not be managing the same number of people individually, in aggregate they are managing as many or more people than their corporate counterparts. They are learning important leadership skills as they grow their businesses and become involved in civic, professional and community organizations.



Lillian D. Bjorseth  
President  
2221 Ridgewood Rd.  
Lisle, IL 60532

630-983-5308  
630-983-5312 (fax)

[www.duoforce.com](http://www.duoforce.com)  
[lillian@duoforce.com](mailto:lillian@duoforce.com)

Another encouraging sign is the number of company-sponsored women's networks that are being formed within major corporations. Some of them, though, are still perfunctory.

*A representative of a newly formed women's group at a Chicago accounting firm contacted me to present a program on relationship building. We agreed it would provide valuable skills for the women's professional development. When we started talking fees, she said there was no budget. Ironically, she continued to state how top management (all men) was so supportive of their initiative ... yet they wanted to get a speaker - a woman - to donate her time. It was even more pathetic that management wouldn't even agree to pay my travel expenses (from a Chicago suburb)!*

Perhaps, I am optimistic in stating how far women have come!

Time will tell. You, as men and women reading this article, can greatly help the process move forward positively.

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**Lillian Bjorseth helps you build a new kind of wealth – social capital – by improving your networking and communication skills. She's a highly sought-after speaker, trainer, skills coach and author. [lilianspeaks@duoforce.com](mailto:lilianspeaks@duoforce.com), [www.duoforce.com](http://www.duoforce.com), 630-983-5308**



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President  
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Lisle, IL 60532

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[lillian@duoforce.com](mailto:lillian@duoforce.com)