

How Successful Women Sustain Career Momentum

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Summary. The authors, executive coaches for women leaders, wanted to understand why some women are able to sustain and maintain career momentum, despite the systemic, structural problems women — and especially women of color — face in the workplace.... [more](#)

Jackie began her career as a scientist doing drug discovery. After a few years, she realized she wanted to work on the strategy side of the business. But every time she tried to make the shift, she was turned down.

“I kept hearing, ‘You’re just a chemist,’” she recalled. The same thing happened when she applied for external roles that would expand her marketing or business experience. No one could see past her current expertise. She felt stuck.

Jackie was facing a problem that many women face in their careers: feeling like she had lost momentum.

As executive coaches for women leaders, we wanted to understand why some women are able to sustain and maintain career momentum, despite the systemic, structural problems women — and especially women of color — face in the workplace.

We interviewed 37 women in senior leadership roles (senior director, vice president, senior vice president, C-suite) whose experiences spanned more than 75 corporations. Of the women we spoke to 25% were Black leaders, 75% were white.

We asked these leaders to describe pivotal moments that helped them maintain career momentum. Analyzing these moments helped us understand the key traits that helped them persevere when they felt stuck. Though the women we spoke with had varied backgrounds, interests, personalities, and careers, they employed at least two of the three following behaviors to sustain momentum during these pivotal moments.

1. A focused drive

Call it tenacity, sheer determination, or persistence. When they faced setbacks, these women told stories of tapping into their inner mettle that helped them situate short-term difficulties in the context of their higher goals.

For example, Lydia never wavered in her goal to be CEO of an investment company. She saw every career opportunity as a way to build momentum towards her goal. “I had a variety of experiences that helped me develop and get to know all parts of the business, from HR to technology, operations, administration,

sales and marketing,” she said. “I moved to the retirement business and then from banking to insurance. It is important to package yourself for the role you want.”

2. An incessant desire to learn

These women showed more than the capacity to learn, they were motivated to seek out opportunities that provided new experiences, challenges, and knowledge.

For example, Mary, now president and CEO of a public company, began as an attorney. She agreed to run regulatory affairs, then moved into director of finance, where she says she started from scratch. “I enlisted analysts several levels below me, saying, ‘Take me down the 101 — Finance 101.’” She asked the right questions, cross-examined the data, called the shots, and watched stocks soar.

Mara is former CEO of a large medical district that includes 560 acres of medical research facilities. “I didn’t know anything about real estate,” she told us. “I didn’t know how to transform an organization. But I did know health care and how to pull teams of experts together and manage toward a goal.”

3. An agile mindset

The women we spoke with all demonstrated flexible thinking, including the ability to quickly assess a situation and determine a path forward. When it came to their own careers, they reinvented themselves or transformed the projects they were working on.

“Jen” was a vice president before she was 30, and doors kept opening until she was such an excellent chief administrative officer (CAO) that no one could see her as a CFO — she was passed over twice in two companies for the job. After discussing with a trusted advisor, she decided she needed to recast her work, success, and reputation into a new way of seeing her as a CFO. So she moved once more, helped build this next company’s financial customers, worked with the product team to prioritize features,

sold to other CAOs, and ran the business in Europe. These broad successes secured her move to CFO and president of a global corporation. This is what it means to have an agile mindset. It is about being versatile and open to new options and ways of getting to a goal.

Tellingly, all of the Black women we spoke with shared all three behaviors. They also described feeling alone in their respective professional worlds and having to rely on friends, family, and community outside of their professional circles to help them keep their momentum going. The Black interviewees also mentioned patience, double binds, pressures to do well to help others in their community, and the perceived pressure that their failure would reflect on their families, as well as their personal and professional Black communities.

Resetting Your Career Momentum

Most of the women we spoke with pivoted, moved sideways, gathered more experience, or moved to smaller companies at some point in their career in order to maintain momentum or to create it when they were stuck. Seventy percent of the women we spoke with pivoted twice or more in order to pick up momentum. Within the 27% of women who remained with the same company, more than half described geographical moves, entire field changes within a multinational company, or agile maneuvering to survive acquisitions.

When making a decision to pivot, the women we spoke with recommended the following strategies:

Let your career goals guide you. If you're offered an opportunity to move into a role outside the bounds of your current subject matter expertise or you're encouraged to take a lateral move to learn new areas of the business or acquire new skills, make sure your decision is grounded in your ultimate career goals.

Have epic clarity on your personal brand. Eighty-three percent of the women we interviewed said that clarity of purpose and brand management was crucial in regaining their momentum. If you want to make a change, you have to know what your reputation is and why people should call you. Conduct a little brand research on yourself. Is your reputation what you want it to be? What do they say about you when you are not in the room?

Look for every opportunity to learn. Knowledge is power. Be intentional about identifying what you need to learn, whether it's a new product, a new automation tool, competitive information, or a new market, and how you will learn it. You want people to recognize that even if you don't currently know a topic, you're a learner and will pick it up quickly.

Jackie, the chemist who wanted to move into strategy work, decided to shift industry and roles entirely and joined an independent brewery. She made it her job to learn every aspect of the business, and she began to redefine her brand as an experienced, innovative leader. After several years and a few moves from sales to consulting, she returned to pharmaceuticals as a senior director, eventually reaching a C-level role. "I was transparent with my leadership, and I put my aspirations on the radar."

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WE

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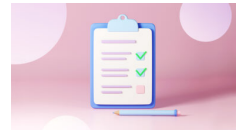
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