

Women-Only Executive Development

"We offer participants an intense learning experience in an all-female, cross-industry setting, in which individuals are exposed to a diverse and gifted faculty and have the chance to network, share, mentor, and learn from their peers. Our approach blends academic rigor, action learning, and intense discussion of real-world issues in a setting where women also build bonds of trust, mutual respect, common experience, and personal friendship that can last for years."

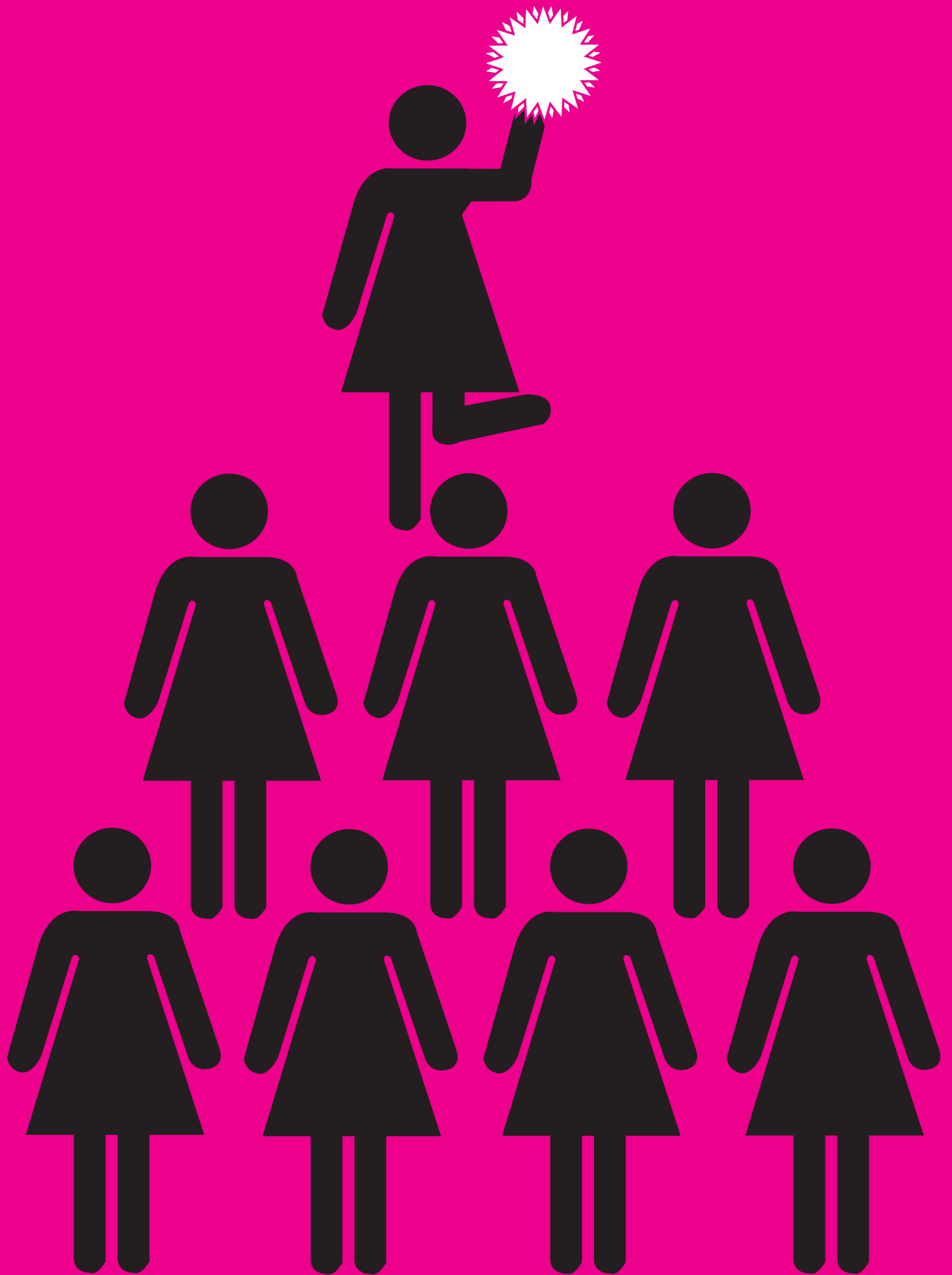
Barbara Reinhold
Director
Executive Education for Women
Smith College

Has your company ever considered designing a leadership development program exclusively for female managers and executives? What's the business case for offering such a program? Would you design it to be similar to, or qualitatively different from, mixed-gender leadership development programs? And how might a women-only program be integrated effectively with other, more traditional executive development programs that your company sponsors or supports?

Answering questions like those is all in a day's work for Barbara Reinhold, director of Executive Education for Women at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. At Smith, Reinhold presides over a portfolio of women-only executive education programs and services designed with fast-track, high-potential women managers and executives in mind. She and her associate, Iris Marchaj, also consult widely to companies that want to custom design their own program offerings for women executives.

A business case
for female-only
programs.
Smith College
leads the way.

By Richard Koonce



According to Reinhold, an educational psychologist and author of two books on career strategies, there are a number of reasons that companies stand to benefit from offering or sponsoring women-only executive education programs.

Confidential environment

Women are among the ranks of emerging leaders in all organizations: business, academia, the media, the nonprofit world, government, and the arts, notes Reinhold. “Our research tells us that regardless of where they work, women often come to their jobs and leadership roles with common experiences, concerns, issues, and beliefs. Sometimes, they lack good female role models, experience isolation in their jobs, or feel their needs aren’t addressed as participants in more traditional, male-oriented leadership development programs.”

For those reasons, Reinhold says that creating places where women can learn with their professional peers in all-female settings builds special bonds of connection and trust. It also encourages risk-taking and collaborative group learning, much of which occurs as the result of women connecting with each other around shared experiences.

“Women who’ve gone through our programs tell us that being in an all-female executive setting affords unique opportunities for candor and self-disclosure, unlike those in mixed-gender programs,” says Marchaj.

Handpicked faculty

To give its executive development offerings a unique competitive edge, Smith handpicks faculty for its leadership development programs each year—based on input from individual course attendees and sponsoring companies. In addition to drawing on the skills of world-class business school instructors, such as Vijay Govindarajan (an expert on global strategic planning) from Dartmouth’s Amos

Tuck School of Management and finance professor Larry Selden (an expert on shareholder value and customer relationship management) from Columbia, Smith also retains health and wellness experts, as well as specialists in conflict management, marketing, change management, and intercultural competence. It encourages “journaling,” exercise sessions, and reflection time for participants. In an unusual twist, the program employs the services of Stamford, Connecticut symphony conductor Roger Nierenberg to run a unique leadership development seminar designed to illustrate the similarities between conducting a symphony orchestra and leading an effective management team. “Conducting an orchestra and managing a team both require the ability to align people for a common purpose, manage group performance, and motivate individuals to perform to their fullest potential,” says Reinhold.

Collaborative, not competitive

Tammi Flannery, a technical manager for Kodak in Rochester, New York, and graduate of the Smith consortium, says the atmosphere created by instructors and the consortium participants made for a learning experience that was collaborative in nature, not competitive. “I’m a scientist, a chemist by training, and I’m very at ease working in a mixed-gender environment and learning in one, too,” she says. “But a mixed-gender environment is competitive and usually based on a competitive male model of learning.” It has been said and written by others, such as Deborah Tannen, that men often speak as authorities on specific subjects when discussing their experience with a particular business problem or issue.

At Smith, Flannery found the learning based not on competitive interaction with instructors and other participants, but on “mutual sharing and support” shown by the consortium’s 50 or so participants over the two-week program. One way this

collaborative learning is borne out is during question-and-answer sessions that follow the modules. An instructor might have allocated 15 minutes for Q&A, Flannery says, but often attendees wanted to extend the Q&A to ask questions of instructors and other participants. “That probably frustrated the instructors to some extent,” Flannery notes. But, she adds, it did allow participants to thoroughly process their experiences with given business or workplace problems, and to articulate how specific course content they’d just been exposed to would help them be better managers.

Flannery says her experience in the Smith consortium reinforced her belief that women tend to be relationship-oriented with each other when they’re involved in learning in a group setting. “I felt all the women in my class worked with one another to help everyone learn from their class experience,” she says. “People were very inclusive of one another and respectful of people’s different learning styles and goals.”

Johanna Chanin, an assistant vice president at The Chubb Group of Insurance Companies in Washington, D.C., is another graduate of the Smith consortium. Like Flannery, she thinks that the sharing of personal and professional experiences with her classmates—especially in the kick-off days of the program—helped facilitate and accelerate her learning because it quickly created bonds of trust among all of the participants.

“Women can’t help but have experiences in common based on their gender. In a same-sex learning environment, there’s opportunity for these experiences to surface,” says Chanin. When they do, they invariably create a context for powerful and personal learning by everyone present, she says. As people listen to each other in classroom discussions and mingle during informal social events, “they are able to say to someone else, ‘I’ve had that same experience at work’ or ‘I know

what you mean. The same thing happened to me when I had to lead a team of people doing something like that.' You might not see that kind of openness in a mixed-gender program."

B-school curriculum

Though graduates of Smith's consortium program often speak highly of the personal connections they make, they hasten to add that there's nothing "touchy-feely" about the curriculum. It includes a robust mix of course modules dealing with a range of topics, including global strategic planning, change management, marketing, financial analysis, and strategic relationship management. "The curriculum from the outset [is] substantive and the level of instruction quite high—what you'd expect from a high-level business school," says Chanin.

Common ground

Chanin says attending the Smith consortium reinforced for her what she knows intuitively that many women bring to business that's not likely to be emphasized in mixed-gender programs. "Women tend to take a holistic view of business and life," she says. "I won't say men don't do that. But I do think that, in general, women are more likely to view business as existing in the context of a larger world—and, for most of us, in the context of larger lives." Women are also more consensus-oriented, she says. Thus, Smith's collaborative approach to executive learning works well with women who are inclined to look for common ground with others in a learning situation (and at work) more than men might.

"Women do look for common ground with others, be it at work or in a learning

situation, and that's one reason women stand to benefit so much from participating in a female-only leadership development program like Smith's," says Valery Newman, a public affairs consultant who specializes in women's leadership issues and who helps corporations develop customized leadership development programs for women.

Newman says that because Smith's approach to women's executive education is based on collaborative learning, it meshes well with the communications styles and temperaments of most women whose management and leadership approaches tend to be more inclusive and less hierarchical than those of many men. "Women do communicate differently than men do," says Newman. "When men connect and communicate with one another, they tend to establish their cre-

The Smith College Approach to Women's Executive Development

At Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, the focus isn't just on teaching world-class leadership, management, and strategic and technical competencies, but also on self-actualization, lifelong learning, and helping women increase their self-awareness and efficacy as business leaders. Smith currently offers three types of leadership development programs, each targeted at women with different leadership development needs and priorities or designed with the unique business, organizational, or strategic needs of a sponsoring corporation in mind.

The Smith College Consortium is Smith's flagship executive development program. Each year, it brings together 50 to 60 high-potential, fast-track women (typically director level) from such companies as AT&T, JPMorgan Chase, Chubb and Son, Eastman Kodak Company, Johnson & Johnson, and MetLife for two weeks of strategic learning on leadership, business strategy, corporate finance, relationship management, global marketing and branding, and intercultural competence. This two-week program is held each July on campus.

The Smith Tuck Global Leaders Program is tailored to the needs of senior women executives (typically corporate VPs) poised to

take on leadership and executive responsibilities at the highest levels in their organizations. It's designed to be of particular value to women who hold or are preparing to assume assignments in global business environments. The program is a collaborative venture of Smith College and the Amos Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth. This annual, weeklong program is conducted each June at the Tuck School in Hanover, New Hampshire.

Custom programs for corporations on a consultative basis use the expertise of faculty from leading business schools and consulting firms in the program design process. Typically, these programs are targeted for a company's mid-level managers and emerging leaders. The programs are developed in conjunction with a company's HR department, senior executives, internal consultants, and others.

From Specialist to Strategist: Business Excellence for Women in Science, Technology, and Engineering, now in development, will be geared toward providing women with five to 10 years of work experience with the tools to become successful managers, team leaders, and executives in science and technology-oriented companies. Initial program delivery is anticipated in July 2005.

➤ www.smith.edu/execed

dentials before working with each other,” she says. “Women, on the other hand, look for common ground and the ways in which their common work experiences bond them together.”

Reinhold says that though Smith’s leadership development programs focus on providing graduates with world-class leadership, management, financial, and technical competencies—just as traditional business school programs do—what truly sets Smith’s programs apart is their focus on helping women learn, grow, and develop across their entire lifespan.

“We take a holistic approach to executive learning that stresses the growth of authenticity, self-confidence, personal empowerment, and emotional intelligence in women leaders,” she says, “so they can bring their unique and personal qualities as women to the companies they lead, the teams they manage, and the business initiatives and projects they’re responsible for in their organizations.”

Reinhold says Smith’s approach to leadership development helps women “leverage the dynamics of gender, communication, and intercultural competence” to become successful global leaders in their organizations. Thus, Smith’s programs focus on helping women embrace a full range of leadership styles in managing others. They build on what Reinhold sees as women’s innate ability to be inclusive of others in organizational settings, and they emphasize the importance of women mentoring other women and senior women taking responsibility for developing women leaders at other levels.

Reinhold points to a compelling business case for companies to develop strong cadres of women business leaders at all levels. “Women frequently have the innate skill and capacity to see, value, and embrace differences in others. In the current global business environment, such leadership intelligence is critical—not just in aligning diverse populations of employees around your business goals,

but also in reaching out to a growing number of global markets for your company’s products and services.”

Common issues

Newman believes a female-only environment provides a setting in which women can talk with each other in ways men can’t fully understand—especially when it comes to discussing issues women face in advancing their careers, managing life-work balance, dealing with family responsibilities, and breaking through the glass ceiling, which Newman notes is still there only higher than in years past. “It’s easier for women to understand women’s needs and issues than for most men to do so,” she says. Women know what it’s like to be a woman working in a large organization where the culture is still predominantly “white and male.” Many men don’t understand that, Newman says. Similarly, “Women are likely to be more sensitive [than men] to one another’s personal circumstances—say, if a woman has to leave work early because of the kids’ soccer game.”

Naturally, men also deal with issues of work-life balance, family duties, and advancement but perhaps not in exactly the same way.

Newman also thinks that female-only leadership development programs provide a unique networking opportunity for female managers and executives. “Many times, because of family responsibilities, it’s tough for a woman to do the weekend golf outing or to stay after work for drinks with a colleague as her male peer might do.”

Flannery agrees that being in an all-female professional environment provides unique opportunities to learn and network with other professional women. “Women don’t do as good a job in developing personal networks as men do,” she thinks. “But I came away from my experience at Smith with a great network of women I knew I could call on in the fu-

ture if and when I needed to for help with job _____ and career issues or solving a work problem.”

The whole person

What else makes Smith’s approach to women’s executive development unique? Newman feels strongly that by emphasizing the development of the whole person, Smith’s approach is psychologically healthy. “A program like Smith’s provides women with things they may not realize they need or are lacking, such as the opportunity to take time for oneself or make authentic and personal connections with other people in a professional arena.”

Pam Blalock, a vice president with MetLife Insurance, based in Boston, Massachusetts, who attended Smith’s two-week Consortium for Women Managers in the summer of 2003, says the two-week duration of the Smith program gave her a unique period of time—not just to soak up a lot of good business information and knowledge, but also to take time for herself away from the stress and distractions of work and family. “When you’re there for two weeks, you really engage and get to know people,” she says. Blalock attended the consortium just as she began a new job. Thus, portions of the program that deal with customer segmentation, leadership, and profitability modeling were especially beneficial to her. At the same time, instructors asked participants to take time to reflect on their challenges, careers, and lives. To Blalock, that was the first time she recalls ever having focused so much time on her own development. “Balancing work, life, and family have always been a challenge for me. The Smith program gave me an excellent opportunity to look at the issue of balance in ways I hadn’t done before. The two weeks I spent at Smith were really a special gift to me from MetLife and Smith.”

Blalock also liked the diversity of

the women who went through the consortium with her. “We had a nice mix of women from all over the world—single and married with or without children. The program gave each of us, I think, ample opportunities to examine our life issues and to deal with them in thoughtful and healthy ways.”

Take-aways

Participants say they come away from the Smith consortium program experience with an enhanced awareness of how to use a variety of communications styles in the workplace. Johanna Chanin of Chubb, for example, notes that “the most important thing we learned in terms of communications is that there’s a time and place at work for different communications styles. There’s a time to be conciliatory, a time to be team-oriented, and times to be directive and decisive in determining a course of action.” She adds that this part of the curriculum was especially valuable to her and has applicability for how she manages “up and down” in her organization.

Kodak’s Flannery came away from the program with an enhanced appreciation of what it takes to manage an effective team. She says the use of a symphony orchestra to demonstrate the power of teamwork was a particularly powerful exercise for her and her classmates. “For purposes of this exercise, we actually sat amidst members of the orchestra,” she says. “Roger Nierenberg, the instructor, was amazing in his ability to correlate the conducting of an orchestra with the management of a team inside a company. By alternately conducting the orchestra and then letting it conduct itself, he demonstrated in both visual and auditory ways the importance of teamwork and what happens when a team is clicking and when it isn’t clicking. More than anything else, he demonstrated how important the role of the leader is in directing a team—any kind of team—to perform at optimal levels.” The exercise, says Flannery, was

“one of those learning experiences I know will stay with me the rest of my life.”

Smith’s approach to leadership development has won enthusiastic raves from a large number of women executives who have attended its programs in recent years—from companies such as AT&T, Chubb Insurance, JPMorgan Chase, MetLife, and Kodak.

“I was very impressed with the caliber of women attending the program,” says MetLife’s Blalock. “The representation of companies, the diversity of individuals in the group, and the fact that you had the opportunity to network with people both inside and outside your industry were excellent benefits of the program for me,” she says. Blalock adds that the presence of only women in the program led to candor in discussions of business issues and career concerns that she wouldn’t expect to find in a mixed-gender program. “I think women tend to communicate more openly [than men do],” she says. “And in our case, that helped everyone share their challenges and have relevant discussions.”

Flannery came away from her experience at Smith tremendously impressed with the quality of instruction in such subjects as global marketing, brand building, business negotiations, and finance—and with the tone and atmosphere established in the program the first day. “From day 1, there was a lot of sharing by everyone present about themselves. People talked about their personal experiences on the job and the ways they’d handled different kinds of problems and challenges,” she says.

Should you?

“Clearly, there are a lot of good executive development programs out there,” says Smith’s Reinhold. “I’d never say that ours is the only program a female executive should attend.” She does think Smith’s approach is different. “We focus on providing participants with cutting-edge business competencies and on helping

busy, successful female managers and executives take time for themselves away from the stresses of job, relationships, or family to examine their careers, where they’re going, and to become more self-aware of the choices they’re making in their lives.” Doing that in an all-female setting has been shown to create an intense breakthrough learning opportunity time and again, notes Reinhold.

Michele Vitti, an executive coach with Camden Consulting Group, a career coaching and leadership development firm in Boston, agrees that a female-only executive development experience can be valuable for many women executives today—be they new MBAs or senior women executives with a wealth of business experience. Vitti is most enthusiastic about how the female-only model of executive education can be used to help women excel in the increasingly global business environment and as they take on enterprise-wide or cross-process job responsibilities. “A woman who has been highly successful as a line manager or a subject matter expert obviously needs to expand her leadership skills as she moves up the career ladder to assume greater and greater organizational responsibilities,” says Vitti. “Female-only executive training programs can be highly beneficial to such women because they provide a confidential environment in which women can candidly discuss both personal concerns and organizational challenges in ways they wouldn’t feel comfortable doing in a mixed-gender program.”

Echoing Newman, Vitti also believes female-only leadership development programs provide a unique place for up-and-coming female managers and executives to find critical female role models that they might not have in their own organization. “Such role models are still rare for women in business,” says Vitti. “Men have traditionally been able to find role models quite readily, but women executives obviously need them as well for

purposes of advancing in their careers, identifying their developmental needs, networking, getting critical feedback and support, and gaining access to the kinds of professional experiences that will help boost the trajectory of their careers.”

Reinhold agrees: “On most assessments of ability and effectiveness, women perform equally well or better than men. Questions about women’s competence to do what in year’s past was considered a man’s job have largely gone away.”

Women managers and executives still face unique challenges, notes Reinhold. They still have to deal with “boys’ clubs” and “glass ceilings.” They also face cultural challenges in their organizations and need easier access to female mentors or personal networks through which to get the early bead on emerging job opportunities in other organizations or industries. “Our goal,” says Reinhold, “is to help women become fully actualized both at work and in their personal lives. A women-only leadership development program can be an important learning ground for today’s successful professional woman—giving her access to role models, resources, ideas, knowledge, and contacts that will help her grow and advance along whatever career path she chooses.” **TD**

Richard Koonce is president of Richard Koonce Productions Inc., an HR consulting and strategic communications consulting firm based in Northampton, Massachusetts. Koonce is the author or co-author of four books on leadership, change, and business management; rhkoonce@aol.com or 413.584.5728.