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How To Navigate A Boys' Club Culture

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6-7 minutes

I've been writing for some time about the unique barriers women face when pursuing their careers. Corporate culture is often less accessible to women for very clear historical reasons: the modern workplace was built around the assumption of a nuclear family with a working father and a stay-at-home mom, and for as much as our society has changed, that model is *still* assumed in workplaces across America. The result is a culture that excludes all but a specific type of employee and isn't actually good for anyone (in which the only way to excel is to work all hours because the employee presumably has a wife at home keeping the fire lit and the kids fed).

Boys' clubs are toxic social networks that depend on exclusivity and access for their power.

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Beyond that though, beyond the expectations that model lets companies maintain, there is also another, though not entirely unrelated, kind of obstacle for women in the workplace: the formation of what we call boys' clubs. You know the ones I mean: those informal social networks of male friendships. They're a death knell for women wherever we encounter them; they promote from within and provide networking and professional mentoring opportunities that are simply not available to anyone who isn't a part of them. And since so many are also havens for toxicity, relying on a degree of sexist humor and objectification for their camaraderie, women are rarely admitted.

Which means knowing how to navigate a boys' club culture is vital for any woman working in a professional environment.

Boys' clubs function because they offer a valuable asset: solidarity. It's the old version of a high school clique, and like all cliques, their worth is entirely dependent on how they can control access. Everything they offer in the way of professional advancement – mentorship, support, promotion – is dependent on that access, which the boys' club doles out and revokes capriciously. That means it's not something you can control. And while you could do the work to ingratiate yourself to the network – start following sports,

for example, if that's not a hobby of yours, to more easily relate – I think it's better to beat them at their own game.

Power is a funny thing; it derives its legitimacy from group recognition and sustains itself by the threat of exclusion. So the best way around it isn't to participate in the power structures it creates – the systems of selection, obeisance, and reward – but to go around them and create your own.

This is certainly easier said than done and requires support from the company's female leadership such as it exists. But if you can enlist the right members of management or executive teams, you can begin structuring *your own* "girls' club," so to speak, that provides women with our own professional opportunities. It's a very deliberate action, and while it might feel a little forced or artificial, remember, boys' clubs don't exist by accident either. They are power structures that were constructed to ensure a certain kind of person rises to the top: someone who is "one of them." That means women require open alternatives that also promote, so to speak, from within.

Part of what makes boys' clubs so exclusive is how they choose to operate: within traditionally male spaces like country clubs, golf courses, sports events, and even saunas and strip clubs, places where women are generally not likely to be invited. Someone will identify a potential recruit and invite them out for a round of golf, for example, where they discuss the employee's future and the opportunities they can help them access (there's that pesky word again: access). But female employees, however, are as a class just as deserving of mentorship, sponsorship, and opportunity as their male counterparts; so it's vital to do the work of creating those support networks that can provide them.

It's important to note that, while support from leadership is ideal, it's not required; women can *and must* build these alternative systems with or without leadership's involvement. They'll just take longer to bear fruit. That could mean everything from a brunch group to movie nights to, well, *anything* where coworkers can socialize, connect, and find opportunities to give each other a leg up; one member, for example, might know about an opening on a project another member might be a good fit for, and may be able to introduce her to the relevant members of management. Or perhaps members can collaborate to create their own projects outside normal structures, which, if successful, can create promotion opportunities.

The numbers bear this up; women are simply **far more likely** to be promoted by women than other men. That's due to the existence of these sorts of networks as much as by inherent bias; but creating our own networks, women can put people in power who will offer those promotions from within, narrowing the promotion disparity and creating long-term material change alongside short-term benefit.

It's not a simple fix; it takes time, planning, and buy-in. And closed networks can quickly become as toxic and cliquy as any boys' club, so it's important to keep a focus on subverting that. But it's a power structure that we *need* to begin creating for ourselves, because the alternative is either to reify and support their existence by playing along or

to be shut out entirely. Neither is a good outcome. But by building our own systems and our own structures, we can get around them entirely. And that's good for everyone.

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