

BY CHERYL BIRON

8 Keys to Success in a Male-Dominated Industry



et's face it: trucking is a male-dominated industry. But so what? Women can still be as successful in trucking as we have been in medicine and law, also male-dominated industries in the past.

1. WOMEN CAN ACHIEVE ANYTHING WE SET OUR MINDS TO.

My parents raised me to believe I could do anything I wanted with my life, and I truly have believed it, all my life. So when I entered all these male-dominated environments, it never occurred to me that I couldn't achieve anything I wanted to achieve. Building that confidence and belief in ourselves as women is key to making it in a male-dominated industry. I work very hard to instill that belief both in my daughter and my son, as well as the young women I mentor. Believing in ourselves is the first key to success in any endeavor.

As an African-American woman, I have often been the only woman or minority in the room. I did a summer internship on a trading floor at Merrill Lynch at age 19, and then worked in investment banking when I finished my BS degree at Cornell University. When I left Merrill to pursue my MBA at The Wharton School, I think the male:female ratio was 80:20, and very similar for minorities. So I had to learn how to thrive in male-dominated environments. I don't recall ever feeling it was a particular struggle, it just was what it was.

Then in 2005, I bought a trucking company with my husband/business partner, Louis Biron. Although it was another male-dominated industry, it didn't faze me. As the face of the company, I was responsible for getting out there and generating new business, while Louis did what he does best, the operational side and writing our software, Stratebo, to run the most efficient back office. I did encounter many more men than women in our industry. And now it was my own company, so I had to make it successful. Over the years I have identified eight keys to success in a male-dominated industry, and I'd like to share them with you:



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2. WE CAN LEVERAGE OUR STRENGTHS AND DO THINGS OUR WAY.

Some people think we have to act more like men to be successful. I believe that instead, we should leverage our strengths and develop a leadership style that comes naturally to us. Many women are great at being better listeners, being more organized, and having stronger interpersonal skills than our male counterparts. In our industry, freight agents, for example, need these skills to successfully service their shippers. I have seen many women flourish in this role because we build strong relationships, really understand what our shippers need, and deliver what we promise. Sometimes we need to be tough, and we can be great at that, too, but we don't always have to be. Empathy and compassion for stressed out carriers and shippers can go a long way to building strong relationships. So leveraging our strengths our way can truly help us succeed in any industry.

3. SOMETIMES BEING FEMALE CAN BE AN ADVANTAGE.

I have found that in networking meetings, if a woman confidently walks into a room full of men with her head held high and introduces herself to a group, she is very well-received. If we don't take the initiative and join in, we will most likely be overlooked. But if we join in as equals, we will be treated as equals. Oftentimes men are more interested in speaking to a woman than another man who's just like them. I have also observed some of our female agents succeed in talking an upset driver down by taking a calm and respectful approach and getting a positive outcome vs. entering into a pissing contest like some (not all) of the guys out there do. Being treated differently as a female can have its upsides.

4. KNOWLEDGE IS POWER. ALL THIS BEING SAID, IT'S NOT ALL ROSY.

Women do still need to demonstrate that we have the same or more knowledge than our male counterparts. This is true of minorities as well. In both cases, we often have to be better, smarter, stronger, and faster to get the same opportunities as our male counterparts. It's not fair, but it is what it is, so if we do so with style and grace it helps us achieve our goals. Complaining about it does not really get anyone anywhere, especially in our industry. And once that knowledge is demonstrated, our male colleagues forget we are women and just work with us on getting the job done.

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5. HAVE A THICK SKIN.

One of the most important keys to succeeding in a male environment is having a thick skin and never letting them see us sweat (or cry). Men can argue about things that are work-related in the office and then go out for a drink at the end of the day like nothing happened. Sometimes as women, we take things personally when we would be better served by letting it just roll off our backs like water and remaining stoic. Getting visibly upset in the office can ruin your professional credibility. Sometimes even mentally singing a song, repeating an affirmation or chanting a mantra when you feel your stress reaction bubbling to the surface can help you remain calm. Stay focused on the job at hand, then vent about it later to a friend.

6. BE READY AND EAGER TO PARTICIPATE IN TRADITIONALLY MALE ACTIVITIES.

Business relationships are often built outside of work hours. That is where the guys get to know one another better as people. Learning how to play golf or being willing to go out for a few beers after work might not be your first choice of activities, but you can learn more about your colleagues, and it can be a lot of fun. In my investment banking days, we'd go to the South Street Seaport on Fridays after work. Since I was the young intern, my male colleagues would send me to the bar with money to get the beers, thinking as a young woman in a sea of men, I would be served more quickly. I did not mind. For me it was more about bonding with my co-workers so they would get to know me better as well. They were also very protective of me and never let anyone bother me. And during working hours they would teach me about what they did on the trading floor, because I established a good rapport, demonstrated my small bit of knowledge about moving average trading models, and had a sense of humor. Today, I continue to jump right in and participate. Even though my golf game is still not that great, my male colleagues still encourage me to join them. It definitely pays off, and is a lot of fun!

7. WHERE WE CAN LEARN FROM A MALE APPROACH.

As women, we can't be afraid to self-promote, as our male counterparts have no problem singing their own praises. Studies have shown our male counterparts are better at negotiating higher salaries when starting new jobs, asking for raises and promotions, and even applying for positions in general. When looking at applying or a new position, women may not apply if we don't have all five of the qualifying criteria, whereas men quite often apply if they only have two or three of the five...and end up getting the job. Also, there can be times when women are less forceful when encountering a conflict at work. After reading a book that touched upon this subject, my friend and I often say, "What would a guy do in this situation?" We have successfully become more direct in getting what we want by learning from a male approach.

8. SUPPORT OUR FELLOW WOMEN.

I may be dating myself a bit, but when I was coming along in the corporate world, women didn't try to help one another as much as we do nowadays. It could be that I was working for Baby Boomers who thought we should pay our dues since they had it hard before us. Many of them had to forego having a family, while we Generation-X women want to and can have it all! Looking back at my corporate days, I don't remember women supporting women as much as we do now. I am a strong believer in helping other people in general, and especially in helping other women achieve their goals. Both women and men have helped me along the way, so my particular interest in helping younger women, female peers, and other entrepreneurs both female and male is my way of paying it forward.

These days it can be an advantage being a woman in a male-dominated industry! We are determined, strong, knowledgeable, and willing and able to learn. We just need to believe in ourselves and support our fellow women, so we can ride on the road to success together! ■



Cheryl Biron is President and CEO of One Horn Transportation in Wayne, N.J. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree from Cornell University and her MBA at The Wharton School.



"BOTH WOMEN AND MEN HAVE HELPED ME ALONG THE WAY, SO MY PARTICULAR INTEREST IN HELPING YOUNGER WOMEN, FEMALE PEERS, AND OTHER ENTREPRENEURS BOTH FEMALE AND MALE IS MY WAY OF PAYING IT FORWARD."