Leadership starts with an ambition: an ambition to achieve a goal in a profession or an organization; an ambition to pursue lifelong learning; or an ambition to develop yourself and other people. Talent and a willingness to learn the necessary skills channel your ambition. Personal characteristics, such as perseverance and the ability to deal effectively with setbacks, determine if you will stay on course or drop out when the unexpected happens. In this chapter a model is introduced as a guideline for successful strategic career planning from operational manager to business leader.

3.1 The myth of meritocracy

From analysis of the frequently asked questions on which this book is based (see Chapter 1), a pattern emerges that gives insight into the reasons why many women often do not get the promotions they deserve or the positions they set out to achieve.

At the start of our career most of us assume that a good performance will more or less automatically lead to promotion and interesting functions. Women more so than men seem to be raised with the belief that meritocracy prevails and that you will be rewarded fairly for your efforts and achievements.\(^1\) The fact that large numbers of highly competent women with consistent excellent performance do not reach positions of power indicates that other components of leadership alongside performance might determine one’s career success.

Successful women on the Silk Road to the Top do not rely exclusively on their excellent performance (Performance) while discharging their responsibilities. They strategically use the other crucial components of leadership, which are the ability to build and exercise influence through networking (Power) and the creation of a professional image through effective
self-promotion (*Promotion*). Successful female leaders know how to devote attention to these three components in their leadership journey from junior to middle to senior to top management positions.

The workings of the pattern of power, performance, and promotion are often discovered (too) late in a career, when one of the components has received insufficient attention and the career stops or deviates from its original track. Because building power networks and a good reputation both take considerable effort and time, a shortage in one of these components is neither easily nor quickly repaired.

### 3.2 Focus on doing and details

In the beginning of our career at junior level we focus our attention on the correct execution of the tasks assigned to us in line with our job description (performance-related activities). We strive to carry out our tasks efficiently, with an eye for detail, in order to reach our goals. How well we perform these tasks defines how our performance will be judged by our superiors. A straightforward example is the sales target of a sales representative to recruit 5 new clients every month and render personalized service to 20 existing clients, selling 10 of them extra services.

At junior level it is essential to acquire crucial knowledge and management skills. The focus is on education, training, and gaining experience for the execution of the role, such as overall company knowledge, and specialist product and market expertise. In this process perfectionism and attention to detail are prevalent. Unsatisfactory performance can be addressed through extra specialist training and on-the-job training. For example, if an individual fails to meet sales targets due to insufficient communication skills, toward clients or the organization, specific training can help that individual to improve his or her sales performance.

Competition for promotion from junior levels to more senior levels is based on performance. The first people to receive a promotion will tend to be the ones who outperformed others on their measurable targets. This initial experience seems to confirm for many the myth of meritocracy.

In the junior phase the aspects of power and promotion receive little attention. Networks primarily consist of personal contacts, such as friends and family, and provide social and emotional support. Self-promotion does not take place systematically or strategically and is aimed at promoting specific results in the job.

An excellent track record on performance is a prerequisite for development to middle and, later, senior management. Without such a track record, the other components of successful leadership will be obsolete.