

MARION KNATHS

THE
GAME
OF
POWER!

HOW TO NAVIGATE SUCCESSFULLY
A MALE-DOMINATED ENVIRONMENT

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HOW TO NAVIGATE SUCCESSFULLY
A MALE-DOMINATED ENVIRONMENT

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Names of persons and organizations have been changed.

Preface

Where are all the women?

Since 2004, more women than men in Germany have graduated from university with a first degree. Most of them with better results than their male counterparts. For all of seventeen years this has been the case. Where are these women today? After almost two decades, we might expect to find many of them in top positions, whether in business, academia, or the public service. But figures tell a different story.

At the same time, we have been hearing more and more often in recent years that it's time to stop talking about equality. In international organizations, some people even talk about being 'post-gender.' Really?

This book is aimed at those who are committed to their work and would like to receive appropriate recognition for it. At those who have decided that they want to make inroads within existing frameworks. At all those who would like to help shape those frameworks by exerting more influence. In that regard, learning from the mistakes and successes of others is a smart approach.

Before I founded my company 'sheboss' after a career in a corporation, I had most of all made one thing: plenty of

mistakes. But likewise I have always tried to learn from my mistakes. Or else I wouldn't have been the youngest executive in the company in my early thirties, and I wouldn't have been asked to become a member of the board of an American stock corporation at the age of thirty-four.

For the past sixteen years, I've helped women to avoid many of those mistakes. And as I enjoy the great privilege of working mostly with highly educated, intelligent, and experienced women, I've also been learning from these women. Every week anew.

The world has changed since I chucked in my career in the corporate sphere. The core issues have not. Naturally, my course participants and my coachees thankfully no longer have to move in the world of sixteen years ago. Yet the challenges are still enormous. And what all the women taking part in my training courses realize again and again even today: These are not just *my* issues; *numerous* women have these issues.

Fourteen years ago, I published my book *Spiele mit der Macht* [1], in which I wrote about my experiences. Since then, the world has kept turning, society has evolved, new trends in the labor market are emerging.

The present book, therefore, is not just about my experiences but also about the experiences and the knowledge of thousands of women who have to prove themselves and hold their own in business, science, medicine, consulting, the judiciary, trade

unions, public service or wherever. And I invite you to learn from the mistakes and successes of these many great women.

Should you be one of those professionals who have been successful for some time: when others ask you for pointers, it's sometimes not quite so easy to name precisely what made you succeed and what others can learn from it. Perhaps you will find suggestions in this text as to how you can support other people even more concretely. Because the more useful role models there are, the better.

Miss – young woman – widow

To begin with, a few experiences from my own past.

What do today's textbooks look like – is it still the male managing director and the female secretary? At the end of the 1980s, only those examples were given, and when at some point I asked out of exasperation whether we couldn't also work on an assignment featuring a female CEO, I was immediately regarded as a 'women's libber.' The lecturer sneered, 'And now an assignment for Ms. Knaths. An authorized signatory, female...'

Not bad, considering. Don't get me wrong: Being a secretary is a demanding job, and it's not for nothing that an American study carried out in the early 1990s showed that the IQ of personal assistants was evidently higher than that of the managers they attended to. But if you don't want to be a personal assistant, as a woman you'd like to work every now and again on an assignment with a *female* CEO – given that there is such a lack of female role models in the field.

And as for the day-to-day dealings in the company, there was a hail of '*Fräuleins*' (Miss) from all sides. Even though I found it annoying and tedious to have to change the form of address from 'Miss Knaths' to 'Mrs. Knaths' every time it occurred – capitulating was out of the question. After all, I had managed to

convince my own father, responsible for staff in the shipping industry, to do away with the term '*Fräulein*.'

'*Fräulein*' was followed by '*junge Frau*' (young woman) in conjunction with a reproving look and a 'Let me tell you something...' whenever an older male employee ran out of arguments in a discussion. What should a well-brought-up daughter say in response? 'Old man' would have been an appropriate retort but wouldn't have been honored by those around you – while 'young woman' is a killer phrase that is fully accepted in male circles. There's only one thing to do: to grow older. And until then, to continue arguing your point undeterred.

By the way, I now train my female seminar participants to successfully deal with such killer phrases by using verbal judo techniques. At the time, however, I wasn't yet familiar with those.

My most telling experience in regard to defending this bastion of manhood was with a purchasing manager in the electrical appliances department. Although that sector was teeming with macho men and I had never before heard so many sexist remarks, I found the topic of purchasing electrical appliances interesting. As a trainee, I was assigned to the microwaves and vacuum cleaners section and decided to tentatively ask the head of division about possible prospects for myself in purchasing electrical equipment.

I was told that, in his opinion, the purchasing of electrical appliances was not suitable for women (that's right, not the other way around: that women were not suitable for it!). When I wanted to know the reason, he replied that it already started with the fact that I, as a woman, couldn't carry a microwave.

Wow! What an argument! Stupidly, I had never seen the washing machine buyer with a washing machine on his back. There were carriers for that. When I pointed this out to the purchasing manager, he started fiddling with his pen. Then he had the saving idea, 'You know, it's not that I have anything against women in my division. But in our line, suppliers don't accept women as business partners.'

There it was: the uninvolved guilty third party. Until then, I hadn't suspected that women posed such a threat that a supplier would forego multi-million dollar contracts in defense of male rights. I was mightily impressed.

A year later, I received a very good job offer in this sector. No kidding. But I didn't have to think for a second to turn it down with thanks. I opted for a somewhat more women-friendly line of business. After all, one already has enough on one's plate with the actual work.

For years, I worked in a wide variety of managerial positions until the big moment came: I was appointed senior executive. My board of directors congratulated me and handed me my new contract with beaming smiles. And with a beaming smile I

left the boardroom and immediately read through the contract in my office.

It had to be a case of mistaken identity: The company pension plan in my contract was clearly addressed to a man. Among other things, it said that the company would grant a widow's pension in the event that my wife, to whom I would have been married until the time of my death, survived me. I took another quick look at the heading, but no doubt, it had my name on it. And at that time same-sex marriages were still a long way off...

So I picked up the phone, described my problem to the board secretary, and was referred to the head of the legal department. When I pointed out the discrepancy, he replied in a completely humorless manner that it was in no way a mistake. The text was legally flawless, he said, since it complied with the legal standard form. And as a lawyer he couldn't change things around at will. Under no circumstances would I receive an amended pension commitment from him.

Earth, 21st century. This lawyer headed the policy department of a corporation with more than 40,000 employees, over half of them female. There weren't all that many female executives but I was by no means the first. I ended the phone call with the words, 'I see,' and the thought, 'We'll see about that.'

I immediately called the HR director, whom I had known and respected for years and who, I imagined, wouldn't knowingly snub his (very few) women in leadership roles. And so it was: