

Theory & Practice

Female Training Classes Flourish

Executive-Education Tactic Aims to Bolster the Ranks Of Women in Management

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Helen Patton, a senior director of information technology at **J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.**, recently spent two weeks at an executive-education program at Smith College. The curriculum was typical: marketing strategy, negotiation, and leadership skills. But for this type of course, the participants weren't -- all 56 were women. The all-women program at Smith exemplifies an increasingly popular tactic for addressing the scarcity of top women executives. Corporate interest in these programs is growing. Smith of Northampton, Mass., began offering women's executive education in 1977 and now offers three programs. The one attended by Ms. Patton is aimed at upper-middle managers; a second focuses on global business issues, and a third is designed for young women engineers. Smith also creates custom all-women programs for companies such as **Johnson & Johnson**. In recent months, five big companies have approached Smith about creating such programs, says Iris Marchaj, director of Smith Executive Education for Women. Elsewhere, Babson College, Wellesley, Mass., began offering women's executive-education programs last year. Enrollment in all-women executive-education programs at Simmons College, in Boston, rose 30% in the past three years to 700 in the last academic year. Participants come from Deloitte & Touche and **Time Warner Inc.**, among other companies.

The programs give women "help in advancing their careers," says Debra Capolarello, chief talent officer for **MetLife Inc.**, which regularly sends women to the Smith program. Women face issues, she says, that "men don't." Behind the corporate interest in women-only programs are two stark statistics: Women now occupy slightly more than half of U.S. managerial and professional jobs, but progress at the very top remains glacial. Last year, women held 16.4% of Fortune 500 corporate-officer posts, according to Catalyst, a New York research group. Advocates say the women-only programs allow participants to discuss leadership challenges that men may neither perceive nor understand, such as navigating out of staff roles into line-management positions. The programs also let women trade strategies on balancing work with family commitments, which often are more acute for women than for men. Participants say the programs create a sense of camaraderie that inspires confidence and lessens a sense of isolation that many upper-level women feel. "It really opened up a lot of opportunities for thinking about the same problems we all deal with," says J.P. Morgan Chase's Ms. Patton. That dovetails with a recent study from the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research showing that women who attend all-women colleges report more challenging academic experiences and a more collaborative learning environment than women who go to coed schools. In the workplace, though, training opportunities reserved for one sex can stir resentment. Pamela Craig,

senior vice president of finance at Accenture Ltd. and the coordinator for the consulting firm's participation in the Smith program, says she has "heard the occasional grouching" from male peers of women who get selected for the program. She notes that Accenture offers many other coed leadership-development programs. Participants in the women-only programs, and the bosses who send them, say the experiences are beneficial. Of the 72 MetLife employees who have attended the Smith upper-middle-management program since 1997, 27 have been promoted at least once, including six who were promoted twice and one who was promoted four times, the company says. Munira A. Hirji attended a few years ago while working as a lawyer at MetLife. She was intrigued by the business discussions and her classmates, piquing her interest in work outside the law. About two years later, a MetLife human-resources executive approached her about a procurement job, dealing with vendor contracts. Ms. Hirji now oversees MetLife's international procurement. "It was a great opportunity," she says.

Focused on Women

Companies and participants in all-women executive-education programs say the courses offer many benefits. Among them:

- Women feel less isolated
- Women can network with peers
- Women can discuss sex-specific challenges without worrying about
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- Women can trade strategies about work and family issues
- Women quickly develop a sense of camaraderie in the classroom

Source: WSJ research

Accenture's Ms. Craig says students are "able to share their experiences -- what's been tough about the road they've traveled so far and maybe learning things about what's ahead. "Historically, women's executive-education programs focused on midlevel managers, says Deborah Merrill-Sands, dean of Simmons School of Management. But as the ranks of women managers expand, she says more programs are targeting higher-level executives as well. Ms. Patton of J.P. Morgan Chase enjoyed the Smith course. A discussion about career risk-taking helped her to realize she needs to become more comfortable jumping into unfamiliar roles without worrying so much about failing. "We did talk about, 'How do you make those leaps?'" she says. She also liked the freedom to talk about gender-specific challenges "without having to be concerned about potentially offending somebody," she says. "There is this nice connection to be made with other women and to be able to go, 'I dealt with this before, and this is how I handled it.'" Nicole Furst, a senior manager at Accenture who was in the same Smith course, says she learned valuable negotiating techniques, such as focusing on an underlying goal rather than a fixed set of numbers or points. She also brought home a stronger awareness of the need to support other women in the workplace. Even simple strategies like seconding women's good ideas at meetings can help, she notes. "We need to help make each other successful," she says.