

Carmen Baez: An Executive in Residence Explains How to Conquer the Corporate World

The Executive-in-Residence program, funded by Michaelene Glowacz'90, brings senior executives to the SOM to share their experiences and expertise. This transcript is from a presentation Ms. Baez gave at Simmons School of Management in March 2005.

She doesn't smoke cigars and has never played golf, but **Carmen Baez '79 UG**, senior executive at the world's largest advertising and marketing communications holding company, knows a thing or two about the 'corporate club' and how to work around it, while staying true to her own belief system. (Or, as she puts it, never compromising your "you.") Indeed, once you've heard Baez speak, you'll understand how she's made this personal philosophy not only work for her, but help her become one of the top women executives in today's business world.

Speaking to a group of 80-plus faculty, alumnae, staff, and students at Simmons's eight annual Executive-in-Residence program, Baez, President-Latin America, at Diversified Agency Services, a division of the Omnicom Group, held the audience captive for an hour-and-a-half with stories of her climb to the top of the corporate ladder and advice about how to get there. The nuggets of wisdom were non-stop. Some were familiar. Others less so. But all of the advice coming from this dynamic speaker was compelling, fresh, and new.

With a background comprised of strategic moves both planned and unplanned, Baez is her own best example of how to work your way up the corporate ladder and stay there in what is often still defined as "a man's world" or an "old boys' network."

At 29, she became the youngest president of the Boston advertising agency and now Omnicom subsidiary, Rapp Collins. Baez laughs when she thinks about being in charge at that 'green' stage in her career, but admits, with modesty, that she must have been "fairly decent at what I was doing" because the agency was both productive and profitable. Yet, Baez says she felt there was "something wrong with this picture."

"I loved my job, loved the clients, and the people I worked with, but I felt like I was on a treadmill."

Also, Baez says she just felt the timing was right; the stars were aligned: “I was at a phenomenal moment of non-responsibility in my personal life. I had savings, health — all I needed was personal time.”

So, after three years at the top, at the ripe “old” age of 31 (and-a-half), Baez decided to step down. She says some of her colleagues supported the decision, and others thought she was crazy. On her first day off duty, Baez’s replacement called to find out how she was coping. Her response? “I’m clipping coupons and watching *Oprah*. Life is good.” In reality, Baez says she had never been more terrified.

Still, the young businesswoman decided to take a year off and travel around the world. In retrospect, Baez says it was one of the best decisions she ever made. The year turned into two and included a trip around the world, visiting over 20 countries in six months. When Baez returned to the states, so did the need to do something else with her professional life.

Refreshed and rejuvenated, she was contemplating what to do next when Baez reconnected with a former colleague who was going through a similar transition. The two decided to pool their resources — and their rolodexes — to form the strategic marketing firm of Baez Zahorsky or, BZI, (That’s “I” for incorporated.)

Baez recounts the first meeting that took place around the ‘conference table’ (a.k.a., her dining room table.) The two young entrepreneurs began to brainstorm about their next move. Not one to think small, Karen Zahorsky, co-founder of BZI, suggested they pitch Disney, arguably one of the most well-known and well-respected brands in the world. Baez had her doubts but decided to go along for the ride, literally. The two pooled their pennies and headed to Orlando.

There was a method to the madness: Zahorsky tapped into her network and contacted a Disney executive who had once tried to recruit her for an in-house position. Not expecting much after the brief meeting, the two were pleasantly surprised when a week later the phone rang and they got their first legitimate assignment. Baez Zahorsky was officially launched, and, the rest, as they say, is history. For another three years Baez Zahorsky serviced clients like Bank of Boston, The Walt Disney Company, and Omnicom, among others.

In 1997, Baez Zahorsky was acquired by Omnicom and Baez was asked to head up the Latin American arm of the company. With a bravado that is now her signature, Baez said an enthusiastic “yes” and headed south, not bothering to tell her boss that, in reality, she had never been south of the Mason Dixon line: “He didn’t ask and I didn’t tell.”

What drove her to take the leap? A little bit of curiosity and a lot of fear. Of course, her Puerto Rican heritage was certainly an advantage. She explains, “And when I’m there I am very Latino. I speak their language. I am one of them. I really turn up the volume.”

Today, Baez speaks with great pride when she mentions Omnicom. “I have been with the Omnicom family since 1986 and have had the privilege of working with some of the smartest, most creative people in the world.”

As an organization, Omnicom is, according to Baez, “... very clear about who we are and where we want to be. We are not only the largest, but most importantly, also the most influential in our sector. It’s all about quality, depth, breath, reputation, and client servicing. It’s what drives us every day.” But, Baez adds that they are also very clear about their most important asset: their people.

Her comments are a perfect segue into what she says defines a great organization. According to Baez, extraordinary organizations create a culture of success, a culture of winning and delivering what is promised. “It’s an environment that attracts, motivates, develops, and retains the best talent,” she says.

Baez also spoke about the value profit chain coined by “that other B school down the street.” The key is to hire the best possible talent, empower them with the right tools, and support them in the right environment. Then, they will be able to produce a great product with good returns for the client. Put into the context of the advertising industry, Baez says it’s all about the three ‘Ps’: people (with a capital “P”), product, and profitability. And she adds, they all revolve around that “Holy C,” the client.

What about the elements of great leadership? As for great leaders? Baez says great leaders are ‘crystal clear about where they’re going.’ They command respect and are passionate about what they do. They lead by example and are great communicators.

They take *calculated* risks and decisive action, when necessary. Also, great leaders know how to pick what their people are best at and fit that talent to a need.

Baez says she is often asked about the role of women in corporate America, whether women are suited to the corner office. When asked if there is room at the top for more women leaders, Baez says, “Absolutely! I think the top ranks will continue to filled more and more by women leaders. The pipeline is constantly filling and will continue to supply leaders. Just follow the numbers.”

When asked if women are better or worse in positions of power, her answer is a resounding, “Both. Women can be both better and worse in these positions. We can be great and not so great. Just like men. I think the sweet spot is in the balance, when there is a great mix of competent men and women at the top of an organization.”

Indeed, throughout her presentation, Baez talked a lot about balance: balance between men and women in corporate leadership, balance between career and family: “Remember one thing: there is more to life than work and career. It’s taken a long time for me to figure this out, but I am finally learning.”

And about that club? There definitely *is* one. In fact, according to Baez, there are *two*: the “golf and cigars” club and the newer, less known “tea and spa” club. The audience chuckled as she explained, recounting a story about one of her colleagues. One of her colleagues The executive decided to host afternoon teas, so that other women in the company would have a venue for networking. Says Baez, “It was a great way for women to meet and discuss issues and a great way for the various Omnicom agencies to connect.”

In fact, on the subject of networking, Baez was ebullient. “I can’t stress it enough. Network, network, network. It was a very powerful key in my career.”

In preparation for her presentation, Baez talked to many of her colleagues around the world – as well as students, coaches, mentors, and friends — and discovered a commonality of distinctive traits particular (but not always necessarily helpful) to women in business. According to her informal research, women attend to details more than men; they are more humble and less likely to promote themselves; and they often don’t take enough credit when credit is due. Although she admits it’s a blanket statement of sorts, Baez says this may be because women shun the spotlight. Also, women gravitate to

accountability. “They tend to want everything to be right. They get things done. And then they move on.”

When Baez mentioned the old nugget about girls asking for permission and boys asking for forgiveness, the collective sigh from the audience was audible.

“You’ve all heard it before. Girls ask for permission, and boys ask for forgiveness. I see it globally at all levels of the organization. Today, we, as women executives, need to ask for permission *less* and forgiveness *more*.”

Making headline news these days is the controversy about women opting in and out of the workforce and the choices women face in the process. When asked about her decision to opt out and then back in again, Baez took issue with the phrase.

“Let’s focus on the word: “opt,” as in options and opportunities that are now open to women leaders and executives. I *opted* – (there’s that word again) — to take time off to travel around the world.”

As one member of the audience said, “What about making a business case for the positives of stepping out of the rat race? Isn’t this a great way to fuel your own professional creativity and innovation?”

Baez agreed and talked about how her time off helped her to become much more open in a business “that demands creativity.” She adds, “I became a more productive executive and a stronger performer. I got outside of my own four walls.” In fact, in her travels among various corporations and organizations Baez discovered that the number one skill being taught to the leaders of tomorrow is how to think creatively.

Another question Baez is often asked is, how do you get from point A to point B in your career?” “I have done a number of things. I’ve worked in corporate, had my own company, worked on Madison Avenue, and in Boston, and traveled around the world. And, I have come up with what I will humbly present to you as some elements of my modest success.”

So here, in no particular order of importance, are more nuggets of wisdom on how to make it in the corporate world according to Baez.

Differentiation is key. Baez related a story about being a young 20-something on assignment at her then-client, a large banking institution. . “A great client. But very

Yankee and very corporate, unlike me. However, that was more than okay because I was different, and they remembered me.”

Baez talked about the importance of turning this perceived disadvantage into an advantage. “You can do it, too. Being different doesn’t have to revolve around ethnicity or culture, but rather a uniqueness — and we all have it.”

Next, she mentioned the importance of self-promotion. Baez is nothing if not a marketer and, as such, appreciates the concept of promoting that “brand called me.”

“It’s more than okay to let people know what you’ve accomplished as long as it’s done with humility and without arrogance. If you don’t promote your own brand, no one else will.”

Baez also spoke about the importance of coaching and the necessity of having different coaches for different aspects of your life. Her advice? Cultivate coaches as well as “reverse mentors.”. She explains, “They are different from mentors in that they have had similar experiences in life. They really have your best interest at heart. My coaches are people I really trust and respect.”

That is not to say mentors aren’t important. Baez cites her first mentor, who is now in his eighties, and to whom she still turns on occasion. *Baez also talks about cultivating “reverse mentors”.*

“Mentors are not necessarily people who are older and wiser. During the dot.com era, we needed to talk to people who were younger and had a different perspective and so we started working with what we called ‘reverse mentors’.”

Baez was also quick to note that timing and luck are equally important when navigating the business world, but not in the way most of us tend to think. She adds that luck is important, but we all need to make our own luck or make the most out of the lucky breaks we have.

And, most importantly, all of the above are worth nothing if you don’t have two key essential elements: a value-added proposition and the substance — experience, brains, and credentials — to back it up. “If you are not valuable then you are expendable.”

So what has Baez learned in her twenty-something years up and down the corporate ladder and in and out of the business world? The following words of wisdom resonated with the audience:

- Understand the value of ‘you’. The more genuine you are to yourself the more successful you will be.
- Know what you are good at and not so good at. When strengths and passions collide, it’s a very powerful combination and the ultimate sweet spot.
- The older I get, the less I ask permission and the more I ask forgiveness.
- Sometimes, I still ask, “What would a guy do?”
- Adding value is imperative.
- Timing is key.
- Sometimes, life is not fair, and you have to learn how to navigate those circumstances.
- Luck is an element, not a driver, but you can make your own luck.
- Coaches are very important and different from mentors.
- There is more to life than work and career.

As to the very best advice she ever received? It came from a “dear, wise friend and best coach,” who told her, “Carmen, you have to let life happen to you.” Well, life has certainly happened and continues to happen to Carmen Baez, and one gets the distinct impression it will continue to happen to her. However, after listening to her remarks, it’s hard to believe there wasn’t a little bit of orchestration on her part in the process.

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