

Author Talks: Grace Puma shares how working women can shatter the glass ceiling

March 1, 2024 | Interview

Why do women hold only 28 percent of C-suite positions? A former PepsiCo COO shares how you can put your best foot forward to reverse the trend.

In this edition of [Author Talks](#), McKinsey Global Publishing's Emily Adeyanju chats with Grace Puma, former executive vice president and COO of PepsiCo, about her new book, [Career Forward: Strategies from Women Who've Made It](#) (Scribner/Simon & Schuster, February 2024), which is coauthored with McKinsey senior partner emeritus Christiana Shi. Puma helps empower women to take ownership of their career journeys, position themselves strategically for advancement, and invest in their well-being to maximize professional and personal fulfillment. An edited version of the conversation follows.

Explain the 'career forward' mindset. Why did you choose the book's title?

Video

When we thought about the title, it spoke to intentionality—owning your career and strategically choosing a long-term focus. “Career forward” represented creating that journey and that path very intentionally.

The “career forward” mindset is really about taking that long-term perspective and prioritizing it. It’s not good enough to be good at your job. That’s the cost of admission. It’s about consistently choosing to set a course to reach your aspirations in your career. That includes making career decisions and building capabilities.

“It’s not good enough to be good at your job. That’s the cost of admission. It [being career forward] is about consistently choosing to set a course to reach your aspirations in your career.”

How can employing the SOAR method help women build professional equity?

Video

The SOAR method is really rooted in viewing yourself as a growth stock. Growth stock companies are companies expected to accelerate performance at a higher rate than their competitors. They’re the ones that make consistent investments. They’re thinking forward as to how to make those investments and contribute to their shareholders.

Think of yourself as a growth stock—as someone who wants to progress their career and capabilities. Where does SOAR fit in? SOAR is a self-assessment tool that allows you to take stock of where you are, where you need to go, and what capabilities you need to build.

The “S” stands for self-assessment, the ability to think through your strengths. Think through not only what you have and can apply but also the new strengths that you need to cultivate and that will add value to your journey.

“O” represents a consistent search for opportunities. They may emerge in nontraditional but important areas that broaden your skill set. You might, for example, be in a regional job and a new opportunity provides global experience. The potential is broader than just a job search. It could increase capability.

“A” is for taking action. What specifically do you need to do to create that growth or capability and maintain that growth stock mentality?

Lastly, “R” is for red flags. Be aware. Think through the risks. The risks could be pitfalls on the horizon that you need to be aware of. Develop your contingency plans.

How can working women address unconscious bias and performance bias?

Video

Well-done studies of the workforce indicate that challenges exist and will probably continue to for some time. We discuss not giving your power away. Acknowledge the challenge but don't let emotions cause distractions. Focus on maintaining your high performance. Show them what you can do. Stay visible and engaged. Advocate for yourself. Don't leave it to others to dictate what will happen to you in the work environment.

“Advocate for yourself. Don’t leave it to others to dictate what will happen to you in the work environment.”

Being underestimated or experiencing unconscious bias can help you see your value. One of the things we talk about is the superpower of an underdog. How do you turn something that can be very difficult into something that can be motivating? You prove yourself and come from behind. There are many advantages to harnessing the power of your environment. When you exceed, you set yourself up for support. Others say, “Oh wow, I didn’t know she could do that.” All of a sudden, you’re gaining credibility and support, and people are rooting for you. You also gain greater professional confidence that enables you to say, “This is sludgy water, but I’m going to get through it. I’m going to excel and come out the other side.” Once you do that, you learn that you can. These situations may recur.

Motivation is a very big power. We see this in sports, for instance, when a team is down by one or two points. All of a sudden, they rally and achieve victory. That's because it can be very motivating to build and show the resilience that you have inside of you.

How can women navigate change during turbulent times?

Video

Almost everyone will experience turbulent times in their career. That’s just the nature of the business environment. Turbulence—including layoffs, reorganizations, and leadership changes—can be unnerving

for everyone. A good analogy to think about is the chapter “Steer into the SKID.” I love that title, because as with driving, everything can be fine and then suddenly roads turn icy and your instinct is to steer away—to panic and try to get control of the car.

There’s a discipline to navigating change and uncertainty. You can have mergers, leadership changes, and economic downturns. Change can often be something that is outside your control. But how you respond to it and how you apply strategies to deal with it is really the game changer.

“There’s a discipline to navigating change and uncertainty. It often can be things that are outside your control. But how you respond to it and how you apply strategies to deal with it is really the game changer.”

Accordingly, we devised the SKID principle. First, hit the pause button: stop and self-assess. But do so in a pragmatic way. Go to people you trust and ask for their perspectives to calibrate your sense of the reality. Once you do that, keep your power. Remind yourself that you have the power to act. You’re in charge of your career. You have choices. As long as you maintain your capability and your professional equity, you can think through options and choose your actions.

Then, increase your equity. Zero in on what’s happening and what can create value now or on the new priorities in your environment. Embrace them: show energy and passion to contribute to them.

Lastly, deliver. Again, being good at your job is only the cost of admission. If you are very good at your job, continue learning. Have confidence in yourself, even in times of turmoil. That’s your best job security.

From a 'career forward' perspective, is it better to change jobs often or to remain in one position?

Video

People struggle with career advancement. It might be the timing or the tenure. The struggle may relate to external events at a company, or some of it might be you.

Whether you stay or go is really rooted in the question of what's most important. Are you growing? Are you building capabilities that align with your aspirations? Consider the changes objectively. My career path involved different industries, for example. Working in consumer products, technology, and airlines, I learned about different industries and business practices. I learned how to maneuver in different cultures, and I built a lot of agility. But that may not be the answer for everybody. If you're in a company for the long term and you're still being given opportunities to grow and build capabilities aligned with your career aspirations, it's not a stay-or-go decision. It's much more rooted in whether you are getting what you need to continue to grow your career. You might have a big job and be very busy. Yet if you're not stretching yourself, then you're probably leaving learning and capability on the table.

Think about environments—even new ones that will allow you to stretch and grow. That means gaining new technical skills and potentially even being able to navigate larger, different roles. You have a finite period of time in your career. There are only so many years left to continue to grow and progress. So if you find yourself in a role wherein you're doing great but you might be stagnating, consider a risk-taking strategy that involves unconventional job moves. These can often propel your career very quickly. I left a food company and went to work at an airline, for instance. But I didn't go there to work at an airline. I went because the CEO was transforming the company and intentionally bringing in leaders from different industries. It was one of the best career moves I made, and I knew that it was for a finite period of time.

“You have a finite period of time in your career. There are only so many years left to continue to grow and progress.”

I was able to be part of a very lean management structure. I sat at the table for big enterprise decisions and was part of the team that transformed the company and ultimately led it to a merger. That experience really fine-tuned my skills and allowed me to take that next big job. Sometimes embracing risk and discomfort can lead you to some really good career experiences and growth.

Why the ‘360-degree life’ over ‘work–life balance’?

Video

Work–life balance has been touted for decades. Nobody has ever felt that it has been resolved or achieved. It’s a stale concept. The concept of a 360-degree life starts with your whole self. It doesn’t pit facets of your identity or your life priorities against everyone else. Instead, it puts you in the driver’s seat to seek solutions to feel successful and fulfilled. Having that feeling in your personal life is definitely tied to having it in your career.

When you seek solutions, it might be helpful to think of an intentionality wheel. On any given day and time, you’re clear about what the priorities are and where you need to be. It gives you the totality of addressing yourself as a whole person, which will make you better at your job.

There are lots of practical steps to achieve that. Building professional equity through high performance and contribution unlocks a ton of flexibility. If your employer knows that you’re a top performer and will

deliver, that gives you the flexibility to find solutions that work. Others will understand that you're a talent to be kept. They will know that you are taking care of the business as well as your personal life.

Start thinking about how you can activate a personal support system or find solutions that work for you. I used to go to the office early to have a couple of hours of productive work, for instance. It didn't take away from my kids, because they were getting up and going to school.

A 360-degree life must be rooted in taking care of yourself and being taken seriously. We've all had times in our careers when we didn't take care of ourselves. Those sacrifices catch up to you. So following strategies to invest in your well-being will allow you to have the capacity to have a full life. That is what's rooted in 360-degree life.

Working women often face the challenge of knowing when and why to say 'yes' or 'no.'

Video

Follow your gut. When faced with those decisions, depending on the magnitude of the situation, think them through. Often, you will arrive at the correct answer if you listen to your gut. The unknown can be scary. Sometimes, it feels safer to stay put or to reject an opportunity because you're in a good place where you are.

But *Career Forward* recommends that you consider the need to make big decisions and lean into them if you have other aspirations. Leaving a job, for example, can be tricky, because you can find internal dynamics affecting your decision. Your current company could suggest an upcoming promotion.

You have to assess where you are, what you need to achieve, and what the gaps in your current role are. Assess the potential roadblocks to advancement and whether you can overcome them at your current job.

Is an opportunity more likely to arise at your company, or do you see an external opportunity that might be the right change to make? I worry about someone who takes a job because it's a great salary bump or title. Think two steps ahead in your career. The next company may not provide the potential to grow and continue to expand.

Lean on people in your networks and connections to help you glean perspective. Regarding a 360-degree life, keep your eyes wide open when it comes to family considerations. Ensure that you can make peace with the professional or personal time commitment of the move, whether a location change or international travel is involved. Assess how that affects your family, personal life, and your 360-degree view.

What are five essential elements that define long-term career success?

Video

1. *Prioritize relationships and collaboration.* The more you advance in your career, the more you will need your peers and your team. Those include people inside and outside the company, with whom you can collaborate and build relationships.
2. *Learn the organization's dynamics.* This is critical for success. Over your career arc, you will be in different environments where there will be cultural shifts and leadership changes. Don't assume that the current environment is the same one in which you've been successful in the past. Pay attention to social norms. Think broadly about how people communicate and how they digest information.
3. *Communicate at scale.* As you grow your career, you must be able to communicate with different stakeholders. Be thoughtful when you're communicating to a large forum. Ensure that your

messages are clear and that you can communicate in different ways depending on the audience.

4. *Be mindful of the gender gap.* Roughly 25 percent of top jobs are held by women. So be comfortable and be prepared to work in an environment where a majority of the people in the room are men. Men bring a lot of value to the workforce. So think about your responses in the room. How do you speak, participate, and ensure that your voice is heard in a way that's productive and collaborative?
5. *Continue to grow.* Taking an active position in your role is critical. That's just one of the important elements of success. Your career is all about growth—building equity and capability. Focus on what that means for you and set a forward journey.

We wrote this book to help you set your journey and own your career decisions. And at the end of the day, we want people to know that it was worth it. It wasn't always easy. But the journey allowed us to grow, have very full lives, be intellectually challenged, and work through tough and good situations. Embracing your career, along with ambition, is a very good thing. We hope that more people will do that.

Watch the full interview

Video

Grace Puma on how working women can shatter the glass ceiling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)