

# DECODING THE EXECUTIVE WOMAN'S DRESS CODE



by John Agno and Barb McEwen

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“

The women are thinking fashion,  
but the men are thinking team ...  
to many men, work clothing is  
nothing less than a team uniform.

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Pat Heim, Hardball For Women

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If you are serious about being promoted ... then take heed.

There is one problem that career women face that often goes unaddressed. It is what it means to be wearing the right clothes.

A woman's wardrobe is an essential component of her presentation. It is as important as her handshake, her eye contact and her attitude.

The faux pas many women make is that they believe their wardrobe is a reflection of who they are. They are attempting to project their distinctiveness and their individuality. Others prefer to wear what is comfortable thinking that this is appropriate since they've noticed others in the office also dress this way. And then there are those who want to be known for their style and creativity. They want to stand out from the crowd.

All these women, instead of sending the right message they are signaling to those above that they are not a team player, that they are not ready for promotion.

The mistake is that they don't view the clothes they wear to work as their corporate uniform.

If you're like most women, this is eye opening. Don't lose the point that the real purpose of "the uniform" isn't for erasing your identity; its purpose reflects the symbolism that "you're part of the team." It creates a visual representation of a common goal and a shared purpose.

In the corporate world, the business suit is still viewed as the uniform.

This means that, when its leaders are representing the firm, others are not distracted by what they wear but rather the intent is to keep them focused on the message.

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Perhaps you're thinking, "But men now-a-days do express themselves in their clothing."

Yes, times are changing. But the problem is that most people in the upper offices are well over 35 years of age and the majority are still men. They are the ones who make up the rules of business. And they usually view managerial clothing as a corporate uniform. So when a person's clothing isn't the *team uniform*, these men think: "she's not a team player, she's not leadership material, she's not thinking of the organization."

Which leads to the point that different organizations have different uniforms. Your company may not have the same executive uniform as your best friend's organization. One company's formal is another company's casual. To fit in, you need to look at the star players, those people who have power and influence. See what they are wearing and emulate their dress.

But you might think, "But its only clothing! Clothes don't mean as much as performance." Can bare legs, snazzy tops or jeans and sneakers really derail a corporate career? The answer is yes.

Unless a woman recognizes the importance of her wardrobe it is unlikely she will be promoted regardless of how well she performs. Like Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*, she's not going to be taken seriously until she changes her wardrobe to one more in line with the corporate culture and expectations. Her clothes are sending a strong message that she doesn't want to be part of the team.

Even high-ranking business leaders underestimate the messages their clothing says about them. In an article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Christina Brinkley reported:

"I recently suggested to Dorothy Waldt, a New York executive recruiter, that CEOs and other high-level job candidates must know what to wear by that stage in their careers. "You'd think!" she said when she had stopped laughing.

"People don't understand the messages that their clothes send," says Ms. Waldt, a recruiter with CTPartners. Women sometimes don't realize how often a tight shirt or a low neckline comes across as seductive. People who meet them are likely to assume the sexual innuendo is intentional."

Sending signals by the clothes you wear isn't just a woman's issue. It's also a problem for men as this excerpt from Pat Heim's, *Hardball for Women*, reveals:

"In this bank, men had traditionally worn ties with diagonal stripes – until the bank hired a new president who wore nothing but paisley ties. On his first day, the president met with his direct reports, one of whom was Evelyn's husband. The next day, every man in that group was wearing a paisley tie – except Paul.

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“Now, it seemed a bit extreme that Evelyn would start working again because she was worried about her husband losing his job over a seemingly insignificant article of clothing. But within two months Paul was unemployed. Most probably there were other factors involved, but Evelyn was a political animal and knew that her husband, intentionally or not, had sent signals that he was not a team player.”

Sending the right messages with your clothing can, and does, impact promotion. Research by Forsythe, Drake & Cox showed that women who dress in tailored dark business suits and dresses are usually evaluated better and promoted to management more often than women who dress in feminine colors, patterns and dress styles, and wear more prominent jewelry and accessories. The suited women also get paid more.

## DRESS FOR SUCCESS

What you wear is still relevant. And some of these studies, although a bit dated, are still holding true. The truth is that business has changed. But not as much as many people assume. Most businesses are still conservative – and many are moving towards ultra-conservative in a backlash against business casual.

The bottom line is that even today, the women who mimic the dress of the top executives in their organization still get promoted more and paid more.

If you want to both be paid more and promoted, it may help you to think about your time at work in a different way. Instead of seeing work being an extension of who you are, start thinking of yourself as being on Broadway, playing the role of a ladder-climbing executive. And think, “What costume fits my role?”

Costume designers know that smart dressing involves sending subliminal messages. They don’t first think, “What colors will go with that back drop?” Instead, when casting the part of a successful woman climbing the corporate ladder, they think:

“What clothes portray a serious businesswoman who’s successfully climbing the ladder?”

“What judgments will people form when first seeing her based on the wardrobe?”

“What accessories and clothes would take away from the desired image?”

If you’re smart, you’ll think like a Broadway costume designer and be aware of the messages your clothing sends.

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## HOW SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE WOMEN DRESS IN MOST COMPANIES

Most successful ladder-climbing women look at what the CEO and VPs wear. Usually, they will be similarly dressed. Should these positions be staffed with men, then she will want to wear a feminized version of their outfit.

As Gail Evans tells us in *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman*, the message you want to send is that, “I am suited up. I am ready to play. I am wearing the appropriate uniform to achieve my goal.” Once on the team, you’ll find you will have some discretion.

Many career-minded women choose pant suites or dresses with a jacket. The purpose is to have pockets. This is something men never have to think about. Both business and business casual for men all have pockets! As a woman, you don’t want to be wondering what to do with your hands. You also will want to be able to have a place to put your credit card, keys or ID without the necessity of carrying a purse. Handbags become awkward. Where to put them when you’re *working a room*? If you must bring something to carry because during the day you will need your wallet, make-up, or keys then be sure to use your briefcase.

Who else can we look to for corporate clothing sense?

High-ranking female politicians know that their clothing sends messages. People want decisive leaders heading up their country. So female politicians know they need to get across that they’re intelligent, professional, and worthy of being promoted to office. As such, the ladder-climbing female should look to them for corporate uniform advice.

If you’re looking for a good example of what clothes shout “power or professionalism,” then look at women political leaders. Their hair is styled and always in place, but it never shouts individualism. Her clothes are put together and color coordinated. When you look at her, you see her face, not her clothes.

The bottom line is that she is smart enough to keep her “fashion style” for home. She’s smart enough to wear what will keep the focus on her, not her clothes. She realizes that even before she’s selling her party and platform, she’s selling herself. Smart women want people to focus on their face, not their accessories, or their figure.

We all subconsciously link dark colored suits to power and authority. But why?

Jean Dickson of *Communicate ZING* states,

“The reason may be as simple as ‘it all goes back to Hollywood.’ In all the movies we’ve seen since childhood, the male movers and shakers always wear either black, navy blue or charcoal suits.

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“The President consistently wears dark suits and crisp white shirts. Wall Street moguls wear dark suits. CEOs wear dark suits. Most people still subconsciously link dark colors with power and authority.

“A good example of how black is tied to authority is the film, *G.I. Jane*. Anne Bancroft plays a powerful female senator. The first time we see her, she’s chairing a meeting. And it’s no accident that she’s costumed in a black suit with a white blouse underneath. She doesn’t just exude power, she shouts it.

“Later, we see her in a light colored suit, and also in a light jacket and dark skirt ensemble. While both outfits are professional – and gorgeous – they in no way visually represent power as strongly as the black suit does.”

Take your cues from the influential and successful.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Barbara A. McEwen** is well known as a highly experienced executive, business owner, and seasoned master coach who works with senior executives to help them identify and assess personal development opportunities. Her unique, practical, and powerful strategies make her easy to talk to. She has a way of demystifying what it takes to become more effective. Her coaching deepens the clients’ awareness of their unique strengths as a foundation for improvement.



**John G. Agno** is a seasoned corporate executive, entrepreneur and management consultant who today coaches senior executives and business owners to reach decision-making clarity by exploring unintended consequences of their future actions. John helps you see things you are missing, affirms whatever progress you have made, tests your perceptions and lets you know how you are doing. His developmental coaching helps you focus your natural abilities in the right direction. The coaching allows your inner-potential to erupt outward through effective leadership; to develop commitment within organizations and in a world of "free agents" and "volunteer" talent.

