

Women at Work: A Guide for Men

Even the most well-intentioned male managers can be clueless when dealing with women in the workplace.

Author Joanne Lipman joins the News Hub to discuss the demystifying of women in the workplace and sharing advice for the men who work with them. Photo: Everett Collection.

By Joanne Lipman

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We are flooded with career-advice books for women. There are women's networking groups and leadership conferences galore. But they're all geared toward women, consumed primarily by women and discussed among women.

I am convinced that women don't need more advice. Men do.

Now don't get me wrong. I love men. I've spent my career as a journalist at publications read primarily by men. All my mentors were men. And most professional men I've encountered truly believe that they are unbiased.

That said, they are often clueless about the myriad ways in which they misread women in the workplace every day. Not intentionally. But wow. They misunderstand us, they unwittingly belittle us, and they do something that they think is nice that instead just makes us mad. And those are the good ones.

In short, men could use a career guide—about women. So I set out to discover what frustrates and perplexes professional men about the women they work with. My goal was to get to the bottom of issues that men face every day: why women often don't speak up at meetings, why they can seem tentative when they do speak up, why there are so few qualified women in the management pipeline despite good-faith efforts to recruit them.

And then I went in search of solutions. I sought out male executives who are getting it right. And I drew on the two-plus decades that I've spent covering mostly male executives around the globe while working in male-dominated environments.

The point isn't to blame men. In my view, there has been way too much man-shaming as it is. My aim instead is to demystify women.

The business case for this is compelling. Companies with more women in leadership posts simply perform better. Fortune 500 firms with the most female board members outperform those with the least by 26% on return on invested capital and 16% on return on sales, according to a

2011 Catalyst study. Yet the number of women at the top is barely budging: some 5% of Fortune 500 chief executive officers and 17% of board members. Numbers in law and finance are dismal too.

Family-friendly corporate initiatives like maternity leave and flextime are crucial, of course. But that is not enough. “If you want to change the numbers, you have to get men involved,” says Mike Kaufmann, chief financial officer of [Cardinal Health](#). He’s doing just that: He leads the company women’s networking group.

Executives elsewhere are following suit. Bain & Co.’s global women’s leadership council, created in 2009, is now about 40% male. And for the first time, the National Association for Female Executives is including men in its fall round table meeting.

The executives I spoke to don’t pretend to have it all figured out. Nor do I. Life at work, like life everywhere else, is messy. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions. But here are a few things men should know:



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The business case is compelling: Companies with more women in leadership posts simply perform better. Pictured, Pat O’Brien, Spencer Tracy, John Hodiak and Yvette Dugay in ‘The People Against O’Hara,’ 1951. Everett Collection

1. She’s not “sorry,” she’s not “lucky”—and she’s not asking you a question.

I’ve been at countless meetings at various news organizations where a male editor, suggesting a story idea, loudly declares something like: “We need a piece on the drop in gas prices!” A woman, making the same point, might ask hesitantly: “Has anyone noticed that gas prices are falling? Do we know why?”

Both are saying exactly the same thing: Get me the damn story on gas prices, and get it now.

But the woman’s suggestion often gets overlooked. Believe me, women are aware of this. Advice books tell us to dump the question mark, but I can tell you from personal experience that it is a tough habit to break.

Researchers say that this pattern of female speech often baffles men. Women are also more likely to add qualifiers (“I’m not sure, but...”) and apologies (“I’m sorry to interrupt, but...”). When complimented on her work, a woman is more likely to downplay it, saying she was “lucky.” The fact is, she’s not sorry or lucky. She just has a different way of giving direction.

These verbal tics date back to childhood, when girls learn to play with other girls by collaborating, while boys learn to play with other boys by trying to one-up each other. Boys “pay less attention to females of their own age than to other males,” Georgetown linguistics professor Deborah Tannen wrote in her 1994 book “Talking From 9 to 5.” “And the experience of women at meetings indicates the same is often true for adult men and women.”

For a study published in June 2014 in the Harvard Business Review, co-author Jill Flynn and her partners at the consulting firm Flynn Heath Holt analyzed evaluations of 1,100 female executives, surveyed 270 female managers and interviewed 64 top male and female executives. They consistently found that women didn’t assert themselves in meetings. Indeed, half of the male managers whom they interviewed said that women apologize repeatedly or allow themselves to be interrupted.

Men “need to recognize this,” Ms. Flynn says. “One of the things they can do in meetings is ask us, ‘What do you think?’ And include us.”

That approach works for Paul Gotti, Cardinal Health’s vice president of nuclear pharmacy services. Sometimes a woman “will say something, and it’s not acknowledged until a guy says it later,” he says. He makes sure to credit the woman and ask, “Why don’t you elaborate on that?”



ENLARGE

In the 1980 film ‘Nine to Five,’ three employees—played by Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton—get revenge on their sexist boss (Dabney Coleman). Today, the number of women at executive levels is still low. Everett Collection

2. She’s ready for a promotion—she just doesn’t know it yet.

Sometimes a woman will refuse a promotion or protest that she isn’t ready. Don’t believe her.

Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg, in her book "Lean In," cites an internal Hewlett-Packard study that found that men apply for a job when they consider themselves 60% qualified for it; women won't raise their hands until they feel 100% qualified. That goes for even the most ambitious women. [Virginia Rometty](#), [IBM](#)'s CEO, has said that when she was offered a promotion early in her career, she responded, "You know what? I'm not ready for this job." She reconsidered only when her husband told her that a man would never think that way.

So if you're serious about wanting more women in management, be prepared to twist some arms.

Carl Allegretti, chairman and CEO of Deloitte Tax LLP, says that when he chose a woman to succeed him in a senior post a few years ago, her response was, "Why me?" He explained that "you're an excellent leader, you're excellent with people, and you're excellent with clients," he says. "But she didn't raise her hand."

Mr. Kaufmann of Cardinal Health noticed that if a job opening has five criteria, a woman with four of them won't apply—but "a guy will have one of the five and will say, 'Give the job to me!'" Now, he says, he looks "for the women I know are qualified and ask them to apply—and I require others to do that." The number of female managers at his company has grown almost 20% in four years.

3. She's pretty sure that you don't respect her.

For most men in a room, respect is a given. But women in the corporate world will tell you they often feel the opposite: that they are treated as if they don't know what they are talking about until they prove otherwise.

In their 2014 book "The Confidence Code," journalists Katty Kay and Claire Shipman spoke to female leaders, including the defense-industry pioneer Linda Hudson, then CEO of BAE Systems. She told them that "even in the position I am [in] now, everyone's first impression is that I'm not qualified to do the job... When a man walks into a room, they're assumed to be competent until they prove otherwise." For women, it is the reverse.

This is a huge issue for women—one that few men can understand because they haven't experienced it. "It's not that women want respect more than men. It's that men start out with more," says Tony Schwartz, president and CEO of the Energy Project, a consulting firm. As a man, "you're the privileged one. You just don't realize you're privileged."

Bosses can help by providing more feedback. At Bain, employee surveys show that women more than men think it is important to feel the boss has their back. Women also value gratitude and recognition more than men—"not the limelight but simple things like, 'That was a great job in that meeting,'" notes Bain partner Julie Coffman, who heads the women's initiative at the firm.

4. She deserves a raise.

But she won't ask for it.

The biggest surprise for me when I became a manager was how many men paraded through my office asking for a raise, a promotion or a bigger office. It came as a shock because I didn't ask for those things myself. Nor did the women I supervised.

As it turns out, men are four times more likely than women to ask for a raise—and when women do ask, they typically request 30% less than men do, says Carnegie Mellon University economics professor Linda Babcock, co-author of “Women Don't Ask.” In a study of 78 master's students, she also found that just 12.5% of women negotiated for their starting salary, versus 52% of men. That leads, by her estimate, to as much as \$1.5 million in lost income over the woman's career.

Advice books tell women that we need to ask for what we deserve. But we don't. That is a major reason why the wage gap persists—in 2012, according to U.S. Census figures, American women earned just 77 cents for every dollar a man-made, based on median annual income for full-time workers. Even for young women starting out, the gap was 90 cents for every dollar.

Steven Boehm, an eBay senior vice president who leads the company's global customer-experience team, encourages women on his team to negotiate for raises when they move into new positions. “It doesn't mean you always get what you ask for,” he says, but he tries “to not have that as a one-sided conversation.”

5. That's actually not a compliment.

Recently I spoke with a finance executive who was praising the women at his firm—except that he referred to them consistently as “girls.” As in, “I've got a girl in operations who....”

This is one of the trickiest issues we face at work. It's known as “benevolent sexism.” It is the comment that seems innocuous or even complimentary but which unwittingly reinforces negative stereotypes.

One potential land mine: saying to a colleague who's a mother, “You've got two little kids? How do you do it?” For some women, “those comments can create unintentional disconnects. They make you feel like you're an alien from another planet,” says Bain's Ms. Coffman.

“I hate being referred to as ‘that very accomplished woman leader,’ ” adds Ms. Hudson, the former BAE chief, who now runs the consulting firm Cardea Group. “Why not just say ‘accomplished leader’? Why does it always have to be qualified?”

Then there are compliments that go wrong. After I guest-hosted a CNBC financial news program, a male executive sent this email: “You looked mighty cute there on TV this morning.”

A lot of this stuff seems innocent, but research tells us that just reminding women of stereotypes undermines their cognitive performance and confidence.

In a 1999 Harvard study of 46 undergraduate Asian women, researcher Margaret Shih asked some of the participant's questions that highlighted their gender, such as whether they preferred co-ed or single-sex dormitory floors. She then gave all of the young women a 12-problem math

quiz. Those who had been reminded of their gender solved an average of just 43% of the questions—six percentage points below the performance of a control group that had been primed with neutral questions (and 11 percentage points less than women reminded of their Asian heritage).

Most of us—women as well as men—have unconscious biases about gender as well as race, says Brian Nosek, a University of Virginia psychology professor. He warns of the consequences of assuming, for example, that a woman with children wouldn't want an assignment that requires travel. It “creates a self-fulfilling prophecy,” he says. “Very small decisions can accumulate very rapidly” to derail a promising career.

6. Don't be afraid of tears.

When Paul Gotti of Cardinal Health gave performance reviews, he says that, without even realizing it, he was easier on female directors: “I didn't want them to cry, to feel bad.” He recognizes now that this was no favor. They should have the feedback “so that they can grow too.”

Ms. Flynn of Flynn Heath Holt says that her firm has found that men aren't only afraid of tears but of getting in trouble with “the diversity police” for speaking harshly, or of women being “too high maintenance, or [that] she'll ask a million questions.” As a result, “men are scared to death to give us feedback... They'll let women run astray and off course and be fired before they'll take the chance to give them feedback.”

Her advice: Be honest. That doesn't mean you have to be blunt, adds Mr. Schwartz of the Energy Project, which is more than 60% female: “I've learned it's a balance between honesty and empathy. Honesty without empathy is cruelty.”

7. Children grow up.

Women with young children may intentionally step back from their careers—and then want to step up again years later, when their children are in school or out of the house. But too often, they have been sidelined by then. There's a simple solution: Keep talented women with little children on the list when positions open up.

For about four years when my children were young, I refused promotions so that I could keep an editing job at this newspaper that allowed me to work partly at home. To their credit, my bosses (all men) didn't stop asking me about bigger jobs. Finally, when my children started school, I jumped at the chance. Elsewhere, I might have been left behind—permanently.

The “career penalty” that women suffer from stepping back is well-documented. Female M.B.A.s who take off just 18 months after having children, for example, earn 41% less on average than their male counterparts, according to a 2010 study of some 2,500 business-school graduates by the Harvard economics professors Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz.

But don't assume that all women with children want to step back. Three or four years ago, Bain recruited female prospects by spending as much as 70% of their conversations talking about flexibility and support for working mothers. The firm found that women resisted because, like men, they "are joining to be the best and brightest," says Ms. Coffman. The firm still stresses its benefits for working women, just not as much.

8. She's your boss, not your mother.

When a woman is the boss, an entirely different set of issues arises. Georgetown's Prof. Tannen has found that men consider strong leaders to be those who hire good people and get out of the way. Female leaders are more likely to try for collaboration, treating others as equals and checking in frequently.

The result? Miscommunication. For many men, the hands-on approach feels like a lack of trust. Resentment often doesn't lag far behind.

Research consistently shows that both men and women are more likely to prefer male bosses. Most recently, an August Gallup poll of 1,032 adults found that 33% prefer a male boss, versus 20% who prefer a female boss (and 46% who don't care).

The good news is that more people are trying to bridge the difference. Mr. Boehm of eBay, who acknowledges that he is still on a "journey," says that his perspective has changed over the course of his career. Fifteen years ago, "I thought I was a good guy, I treated everybody fairly," but he didn't understand the challenges faced by women and minorities. "Lots of people are like me," he says. "They are well-intentioned. But they don't know what they don't know."

Women do know. But we need to go beyond just talking to ourselves. It is time to invite men to join the conversation, too.

Ms. Lipman is a former deputy managing editor of The Wall Street Journal and a former editor in chief of Condé Nast Portfolio. She is the co-author, with Melanie Kupchynsky, of "Strings Attached: One Tough Teacher and the Gift of Great Expectations."

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