



WOMEN VS. WOMEN

*Why are women often harder on one another in the workplace?
And how can we get past it?*

BY MOLLY DOAN

The “queen bee” portrayals of female bosses in film are numerous, from icy Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* to pushy Margaret Tate in *The Proposal*. (Forcing an employee to marry you takes “bad boss” to the extreme.) Most women in power, however, don’t behave nearly as badly as Hollywood would have us believe. In reality, men are much more likely to be office bullies than women, according to a survey conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute in 2012. Researchers found that 69 percent of office bullies are male and that when they harass colleagues at work, they choose women 57 percent of the time. But the survey also found that female office bullies disproportionately target other women, choosing female victims 68 percent of the time.

Bullying isn’t the only way women are harder on other women. In a U.S. survey by OnePoll, female participants reported that they spent an average of 20 minutes a day complaining about a co-worker. Forty percent of the women surveyed also admitted to sending a rude message in the past week—compared to only 20 percent of male respondents.

“Women are hard on both themselves and other women and can be quite bitchy and exclusive with one another,” says Suzanne Mercier, founder and CEO of Liberate Leadership, a Sydney-based workplace and behavioural consulting firm that describes its specialty as ▷

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helping female business leaders “recognize how they support or sabotage their own success.” “We have a sense that there are limited opportunities, and we often fight one another instead of fighting to make the pie bigger,” she says.

Despite these perceptions, many academic studies have found that women actually make better team members in the workplace. A 2013 study published in *The Economic Journal* found that women would rather work in groups and had more confidence in their teammates’ abilities. Another study, conducted by business psychology professors Jennifer Berdahl and Cameron Anderson, concluded that predominantly female teams tend to share power equally, while predominantly male teams have one clear leader—and that democratic groups perform better than those with a single leader. Still, there are a lot of issues women need to deal with when it comes to working together. So why is that and what can we do about it?

LEADERSHIP ATTITUDES As of June 2014, women held only 4.8 percent of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. Part of the reason for this may be that both women and men would rather work for a male boss—in fact, women prefer to work for a male boss even more than men do, according to a 2014 U.S. Gallup survey. It found that 39 percent of women wanted to work for a male boss, compared to 26 percent of men. Gallup has conducted this survey for 60 years, and women have never preferred having a female boss. The gap is, however, closing: 25 percent of women now say that they’d prefer a female boss versus only 8 percent in 1953. (The remaining 36 percent of women surveyed said they had no gender preference for a boss.)

A 2008 study conducted at the University of Toronto hints at why some women may avoid female leaders. The authors found that women working under a female superior reported more physiological and physical distress, such as difficulty falling asleep, increased anxiety and headaches. They determined that the significant factors contributing to employee

stress were job insecurity, demanding work and conflict with management.

Not surprisingly, then, problems also show up in performance reviews. Last year, Kieran Snyder, a Seattle-based linguist and tech entrepreneur, collected 248 performance reviews from the tech industry for Fortune.com. She found that 88 percent of the reviews of female employees contained critical feedback, compared to 59 percent of the reviews of male employees. In addition, 76 percent of the negative feedback given to women included some kind of personality criticism, such as comments that the woman was “abrasive,” “aggressive” or “strident.” Only 2 percent of the men were criticized for their personalities. The gender of the reviewer had no bearing on the results—in other words, women judged other women just as critically as the male reviewers.

“We do judge women more harshly,” says Mercier. “There’s a gender bias—women are supposed to be more nurturing and caring, which are not the characteristics we associate with strong leadership. Women have also been socialized to avoid conflict in favour of passive-aggressive behaviour, and they tend to lack self-esteem. Even if we recognize that we’re good at something, we don’t always see the value in it.”

Some positive notes: Another finding from the Gallup survey was that respondents who had a female boss were more likely than those with a male boss to say they would prefer to work for a woman if they got a new job (27 percent versus 15 percent), indicating that actually working for a woman can change someone’s opinion.

An extensive survey conducted by consulting firm Zenger Folkman and published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 2012 perhaps reveals why: It found that women make better leaders. The firm asked the peers, bosses and direct reports of 7,280 managers at companies around the world to evaluate the leader on 16 different competencies that best indicate overall leadership effectiveness, such as collaborating, inspiring others and building relationships. Women, on average, scored higher in all competencies save one—the ability to develop a strategic perspective. They outscored men by the ▷

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greatest margin in taking initiative and practising self-development, two traits that have long been considered male strengths.

But it's not all good news. The researchers then asked female leaders who did not participate in the study for their take on the findings. The answers they received point to the precarious position that women at the top feel they're in at their companies. "We need to work harder than men to prove ourselves," was one explanation. "We feel the constant pressure to never make a mistake and to continually prove our value to the organization," replied another.

CONFLICTING PERCEPTIONS When women go after other women at work, both sexes tend to view the conflict in the harshest light. (Men who disagree might be described as "butting heads," while women are having a "cat fight.") But the generalizations we make about female-female conflict may not ring true in reality—and they are likely part of the problem.

Researchers Leah D. Sheppard and Karl Aquino, of the University of British Columbia, published a paper in 2013 in *The Academy of Management Perspectives* examining how conflict between two co-workers is perceived depending on the gender of the colleagues. Participants in the study were asked to read a scenario about two managers at a consulting firm having a disagreement. They were told that the names of the two managers were either Adam and Steven or Sarah and Anna. Both female and male respondents thought that the negative personal consequences for Anna and Sarah would be far worse than for Adam and Steven. Respondents viewed the female-female conflict as being significantly more toxic and assumed that the two female managers would be less likely to repair their relationship and work together productively in the future. Yet in another study, when Sheppard looked at conflict in a real-world setting—she tracked parking-enforcement officers—she didn't find any evidence that female same-sex conflict at work differs from male same-sex conflict in any

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meaningful way, after comparing the source of the conflict, the frequency and severity.

"Women don't always have time for manners, thoughtful responses or sitting back to think about how we interact," says Meredith Fuller, author of *Working With Bitches: Identify the Eight Types of Office Mean Girls and Rise Above Workplace Nastiness*. "Sometimes women are juggling so many roles and issues that they're just managing to get by on autopilot and they may not realize how stressed or overworked they are."

WORKING IT OUT We can certainly all take a moment to assess our own actions and biases—particularly gender biases. But when it comes to dealing with another woman at work who's treating you unfairly, what should you do?

"The only thing you can really control is your job," Peggy Drexler, an associate professor of psychology at Cornell University, writes in an article for HelloGiggles. "Do it the very best you can. Above all, be brutally honest with yourself. Is she picking on you because you're too good at what you do? Or is it because you're not good enough? If you're really good, the odds are in your favour."

Mercier advises initiating a courageous conversation. "Talk to the other woman about how what you're feeling affects your performance at work," she says. "Try to look at the situation objectively. The other person may not be aware of the impact they're having. It's about making sure it doesn't come across as blame. For example, say 'When you do X, I feel Y, and when that happens, my performance suffers.' Women have a tendency to take things personally, which isn't always helpful. Just because someone's grumpy at work doesn't mean it has anything to do with you."

But what if you're dealing with a woman who has no intention of modifying her behaviour? Fuller suggests keeping your distance. "Minimize the damage. Think of yourself as Teflon and let it slide off, and ensure that you don't get caught alone with her if you can help it." Most of all, she adds, "don't try to engage in battle—she has more practice. And don't play the victim—this can easily exacerbate a bullying situation." □