Female enemy number one - other women?

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Work In Progress

James Adonis is one of Australia's best-known people-management thinkers

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Are you being sabotaged by colleagues of the same gender?

It's often said that if the gender imbalance were reversed so that women rather than men held a majority of leadership roles, that workplaces would be different. They'd be kinder, gentler, more empathetic. There'd be a greater focus on relationships, connections, teamwork, and support. So what's stopping women from getting ahead? In many cases, other women.

In a British poll published in *HR Magazine's* December issue, women were asked whether they'd prefer their boss to be male or female. Those who preferred a bloke outnumbered those who wanted a woman by six to one. Another survey, conducted last year by the Workplace Bullying Institute in the US, found most of the bullying that females experience is inflicted not by men but by other women.

And a couple of years ago, a report produced by the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia, revealed that women at work who didn't reflect the traditional female stereotype were intensely disliked by other women (as well as by men). The report used the word "rage" to describe the emotional reaction that colleagues felt upon being confronted by an unladylike female leader.

In her new book *Liberate Leadership*, Suzanne Mercier writes that some of the difficulties faced by women in the workplace can be attributed to the different criteria by which they're judged. So much

1

is expected of them – both at home and at work – and this creates a fear of failure or, conversely, a fear of success.

There are several ways that women react to this pressure. Some of them don't bother applying for promotions. Others adopt male characteristics as a way of getting ahead. And then there are those who instead choose to undermine other women by bullying, withholding support, and engaging in covert behaviour.

Mercier tells me there are several causes to explain this trend. One can be attributed to a lack of female role models who can mentor colleagues and provide a reliable blueprint on how to progress. This problem is perpetuated by an unconscious bias that prevents people from associating leadership with women, viewing females more as nurturers than as strong leaders.

Then there's the scarcity mentality. "There are currently only a few jobs for women compared with men," says Mercier. "Women already in positions of leadership may worry that if they support another woman to move up the ladder, she might lose her job to her later on."

If you're a woman striving to get ahead in business but are sabotaged by colleagues of the same gender, Mercier shares the following 10 suggestions:
- Develop your confidence by understanding your strengths and successes
- Acknowledge your weaknesses but don't be ashamed by them
- Identify the barriers standing in the way of becoming a great leader and create a plan to overcome them
- "Develop a strong internal compass" by recognising who you really are and by being clear on your values
- Stop comparing yourself to others because that undermines your self-esteem
- "Question your own biases" by challenging any unfair generalisations of the female gender that you may have personally formed
- Take responsibility by admitting you can't change what happens to you, but you can change how you respond to it
- Learn to have crucial and honest conversations
- Rather than becoming defensive or aggressive, choose instead to embrace vulnerability as part of the process of being authentic
- Be the kind of boss that inspires other women to work for you by being fair, consistent, collaborative, informed, caring, and "capable of tough love in order to help others reach their potential"
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Surely, someday soon, the issue of gender will be irrelevant in the modern workplace, right?

What are your experiences and observations? Are women holding women back?

Read more: http://www.smh.com.au/small-business/blogs/work-in-progress/female-enemy-number-one--other-women-20130131-2do2k.html#ixzz2JgwnQ13z