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LIFE'S WORK

The Feminine Critique

By LISA BELKIN

DON'T get angry. But do take charge. Be nice. But not too nice. Speak up. But don't seem like you talk too much. Never, ever dress sexy. Make sure to inspire your colleagues — unless you work in Norway, in which case, focus on delegating instead.

Writing about life and work means receiving a steady stream of research on how women in the workplace are viewed differently from men. These are academic and professional studies, not whimsical online polls, and each time I read one I feel deflated. What are women supposed to do with this information? Transform overnight? And if so, into what? How are we supposed to be assertive, but not, at the same time?

“It's enough to make you dizzy,” said Ilene H. Lang, the president of Catalyst, an organization that studies women in the workplace. “Women are dizzy, men are dizzy, and we still don't have a simple straightforward answer as to why there just aren't enough women in positions of leadership.”

Catalyst's research is often an exploration of why, 30 years after women entered the work force in large numbers, the default mental image of a leader is still male. Most recent is the report titled “Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don't,” which surveyed 1,231 senior executives from the United States and Europe. It found that women who act in ways that are consistent with gender stereotypes — defined as focusing “on work relationships” and expressing “concern for other people's perspectives” — are considered less competent. But if they act in ways that are seen as more “male” — like “act assertively, focus on work task, display ambition” — they are seen as “too tough” and “unfeminine.”

Women can't win.

In 2006, Catalyst looked at stereotypes across cultures (surveying 935 alumni of the International Institute for Management Development in Switzerland) and found that while the view of an ideal leader varied from place to place — in some regions the ideal leader was a team builder, in others the most valued skill was problem-solving. But whatever was most valued, women were seen as lacking it.

Respondents in the United States and England, for instance, listed “inspiring others” as a most important leadership quality, and then rated women as less adept at this than men. In Nordic countries, women were seen as perfectly inspirational, but it was “delegating” that was of higher value there, and women were not seen as good delegators.

Other researchers have reached similar conclusions. Joan Williams runs the Center for WorkLife Law, part of the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. She wrote the book “Unbending Gender” and she, too, has found that women are held to a different standard at work.

They are expected to be nurturing, but seen as ineffective if they are too feminine, she said in a speech last week at [Cornell](#). They are expected to be strong, but tend to be labeled as strident or abrasive when acting as leaders. “Women have to choose between being liked but not respected, or respected but not liked,” she said.

While some researchers, like those at Catalyst and WorkLife Law, tend to paint the sweeping global picture — women don’t advance as much as men because they don’t act like men — other researchers narrow their focus.

Victoria Brescoll, a researcher at [Yale](#), made headlines this August with her findings that while men gain stature and clout by expressing anger, women who express it are seen as being out of control, and lose stature. Study participants were shown videos of a job interview, after which they were asked to rate the applicant and choose their salary. The videos were identical but for two variables — in some the applicants were male and others female, and the applicant expressed either anger or sadness about having lost an account after a colleague arrived late to an important meeting.

The participants were most impressed with the angry man, followed by the sad woman, then the sad man, and finally, at the bottom of the list, the angry woman. The average salary assigned to the angry man was nearly \$38,000 while the angry woman received an average of only \$23,000.

When the scenario was tweaked and the applicant went on to expand upon his or her anger — explaining that the co-worker had lied and said he had directions to the meeting — participants were somewhat forgiving, giving women who explained their anger more money than those who had no excuse (but still less money than comparative men).

Also this summer, Linda C. Babcock, an economics professor at [Carnegie Mellon University](#), looked at gender and salary in a novel way. She recruited volunteers to play Boggle and told them beforehand that they would receive \$2 to \$10 for their time. When it came time for payment, each participant was given \$3 and asked if that was enough.

Men asked for more money at eight times the rate of women. In a second round of testing, where participants were told directly that the sum was negotiable, 50 percent of women asked for more money, but that still did not compare with 83 percent of men. It would follow, Professor Babcock concluded, that women are equally poor at negotiating their salaries and raises.

There are practical nuggets of advice in all this data. Don’t be shy about negotiating. If you blow your stack, explain (or try). “Some of what we are learning is directly helpful, and tells women that they are acting in ways they might not even be aware of, and that is harming them and they can change,” said Peter Glick, a psychology professor at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis.

He is the author of one such study, in which he showed respondents a video of a woman wearing a sexy low-cut blouse with a tight skirt or a skirt and blouse that were conservatively cut. The woman recited the same lines in both, and the viewer was either told she was a secretary or an executive. Being more provocatively dressed had no effect on the perceived competence of the secretary, but it lowered the perceived competence of the executive dramatically. (Sexy men don't have that disconnect, Professor Glick said. While they might lose respect for wearing tight pants and unbuttoned shirts to the office, the attributes considered most sexy in men — power, status, salary — are in keeping with an executive image at work.)

But Professor Glick also concedes that much of this data — like his 2000 study showing that women were penalized more than men when not perceived as being nice or having social skills — gives women absolutely no way to “fight back.” “Most of what we learn shows that the problem is with the perception, not with the woman,” he said, “and that it is not the problem of an individual, it's a problem of a corporation.”

Ms. Lang, at Catalyst, agreed. This accumulation of data will be of value only when companies act on it, she said, noting that some are already making changes. At Goldman Sachs, she said, the policy on performance reviews now tries to eliminate bias. A red flag is expected to go up if a woman is described as “having sharp elbows or being brusque,” she said. “The statement should not just stand,” she said. “Examples should be asked for, the context should be considered, would the same actions be cause for comment if it was a man?”

In fact, Catalyst's next large project is to advise companies on ways they can combat stereotypical bias. And Professor Glick has some upcoming projects, too. One looks at whether women do better in sales if they show more cleavage. A second will look at the flip side of gender stereotypes at work: hostility toward men.

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