



# #MEFIRST

Can our new-found sisterhood survive the workplace?

By Katherine Gougeon

Despite the sense of female solidarity that movements like #metoo inspire, countless studies indicate that most women would still rather report to a male boss. Katherine Gougeon investigates why this is and what needs to happen for women to start supporting one another in success.

As a corporate senior communications specialist, Angela Moffat\* gets plenty of face time with C-suite executives. This, she suspects, is the part of her job that can trigger a territorial instinct in female colleagues. The two times she made the decision to confide in higher-ranking women about an area she was struggling with, the response was the same: “Let me help you with that.” While she was initially thrilled at the prospect of collegial interaction and mentorship, it was only a matter of time before they used what she didn’t know to undermine her credibility, kicking off a downward spiral that ended badly on both occasions. “The sting of a woman making your life miserable can feel worse than a man sexually harassing you,” says Moffat, who has been on the receiving end of both types of behaviour. “It’s like mothers eating their young—it’s just wrong. In our species anyway.”

Tales like Moffat’s from the trenches suggest that

the “queen bee syndrome” is alive and well. The term, coined in the ’70s but still in popular use, refers to a woman in authority who treats female subordinates more critically and undermines their success. Theories as to why this occurs range from girls being socialized to be rivals from a young age to females being conditioned, thanks to the historical scarcity of senior positions, to yank the ladder up behind them. An array of damning statistics—like the 2014 Gallup poll that found that 39 per cent of women would rather work for a male boss versus the 25 per cent who’d prefer a female boss—further supports the possibility that women in the workplace are their own worst enemies.

While it seems out of step, even treacherous, to be talking about horrible female bosses when Silence Breakers were named *Time’s* Person of the Year, the thorny question persists: While women are incredible at supporting one another in victimhood, how good are we at supporting one another in success?

Before writing her 2015 book, *Sex and the Office: Women, Men and the Sex Partition That’s Dividing the Workplace*, Dr. Kim Elsesser, a lecturer at UCLA, conducted a survey of over 60,000 people that reinforced the extent to which both sexes favour male bosses—even though both genders were perceived as equally competent. She discovered that in male- and female-dominated workplaces alike, 85 per cent of women who’d never reported to a woman stated a preference for male management. Even more dispiriting, 75 per cent of women who were managers themselves also admitted they’d prefer to report to a man. How can females expect to get ahead if they don’t want to work for their own gender?

It’s tempting to blame it all on the sting of queen bees, but Elsesser has an additional theory. “Any woman who has made it to the top knows how hard it is for women to get there, so she may instinctively dissociate herself from her gender to give the impression she is not like them,” she says. Instead of challenging the gender bias, women use it to their advantage, often alienating female colleagues along the way.

Elsesser’s insights ring true to Nancy Vonk. Vonk and her partner, Janet Kestin, rose to the highest rungs of the ad business and had the “chief creative officer” titles to show for it. For the longest time, the duo’s personal success in a male-dominated industry blinded Vonk to the idea that gender is a barrier to advancement. “For the first 20 years of my career, a woman’s networking event was the last place you’d find me,” says Vonk. “My world view was that gender was irrelevant to finding career success. When female friends would occasionally complain that they had bad experiences with men that held back their advancement, I thought ‘It can’t be that; it must be something else.’ My feeling was always ‘If I’ve managed to get up the ladder, you can, too.’”

According to Barbara Morris-Blake, an organizational development consultant, it’s easy for women who have not experienced the problem directly to have a low level of empathy for those who have. “Women are naturally empathetic in the sense that they are quick to identify with one another,” she says. “But this can backfire in that they can’t help but compare themselves. It’s like ‘I have two kids and you have two kids. So why am I able to work longer hours?’”

Morris-Blake adds that the expectation of sisterhood and friendship can put additional pressure on female bosses trying to set their personal leadership persona. “In trying to escape the bias against women leaders, a female manager may go out of her way to create a leadership style that bucks the

## 5 WAYS TO DO RIGHT BY THE WOMEN YOU WORK WITH

1. Make the conscious, proactive decision not to engage in damaging competitive behaviour at work.

2. Understand that identifying with another woman isn’t the same as empathizing with her. Your worlds may look similar on paper, but she may be dealing with challenges or complications you don’t see.

3. If you’re a junior employee, don’t assume that your female superior has sacrificed everything to get where she is and the reason you aren’t getting a promotion or more attention is because she’s bitter, jealous or threatened.

4. If you’re a woman in a position of authority, Vonk says to “share with a generous spirit.” Take the time to be open with junior team members about your experiences, including the barriers and compromises you grappled with on the way up.

5. Stop thinking about female advancement as a zero-sum game. One woman’s success is not another’s failure.

stereotype of women being nurturing and supportive,” she says.

To further complicate matters, a recent study by two researchers from the University of Colorado found that both women and minorities were penalized in performance reviews when they advocated hiring a counterpart, and in a later attempt by the researchers to replicate these findings in a controlled environment, participants found women and minorities to be more competent if they hired someone who didn’t look like them. White men, the initial performance reviews showed, were the only group not penalized for “diversity hiring.” Researchers concluded that the resulting social construction—including the unconscious bias that hiring your own is a sign of weakness—is hard to overcome and one of the reasons the glass ceiling persists in the corporate world.

For Vonk, the gender bias blinders came off in 2005, at an industry event headlined by her company’s worldwide creative director. While being served drinks by a young woman in a French maid costume, the cigar-chomping icon suggested that the reason women don’t make it to the top is because they “wimp out and go suckle something.” Vonk snapped and wrote an angry editorial denouncing his comments. The post went viral and was widely linked to the executive’s dismissal a month later. “As a woman, accepting the status quo may help some get a place at the table, but when you look the other way when you see gender bias in action—as I did many times in the past—you aren’t doing your gender any favours,” says Vonk, who, with Kestin, now runs a consultancy dedicated to helping individuals of both sexes grow into creative, compassionate leaders.

In an article about the unseen barriers women face in the workplace, the *Harvard Business Review* explains how a shortage of female leaders reinforces a male-dominated structure in powerful, subconscious ways. “Fewer female leaders can suggest to young would-be leaders that being a woman is a liability—thus discouraging them from viewing senior women as credible sources of advice and support,” the authors write. It’s an insight that may also help explain why the preference for male bosses dies hard.

For Moffat, it comes down to patterning: “For better or worse, you learn from the people around and above you.” Which is why Moffat nipped the toxicity in the bud with a heartfelt apology when she caught herself having a queen bee moment with a junior colleague. Sometimes, to fix the wheel, you need to break the wheel. □

(\*Name has been changed)

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