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# Managing Women and their Own Unconscious Bias



## **Managing Women and their own Unconscious Bias**

**Gender stereotypes in the workplace still hold women back, but not all adversity comes from coworkers. Often the demon is inside.**

Gender bias is culturally entrenched, and, in most cases, unconscious. As diversity expert, Howard J. Ross, explains, “Virtually every one of us is biased towards something, somebody, or some group.”<sup>1</sup> But not all bias is external: Women stereotype themselves, too. Women think they are better multitaskers, better nurturers, and generally not as tough as men. They feel guilty when they are at work instead of being with their kids or “giving back.” In a phenomenon known as “The Tiara Syndrome,” women wait to get picked for promotions or raises. They internalize cultural rules about femininity, and allow this to guide their behaviors, whether or not those assumptions and biases are even valid.

Consider the traditional stereotype of a “good woman.” She is neat and well dressed. She smiles and is friendly. And she calmly takes care of everyone, selflessly giving her time so things run smoothly. When tension occurs, she neutralizes it, but she doesn’t show off or rock the boat. We like her. She does nice things for us and asks for little in return. She is especially attractive when she is vulnerable, because it makes the rest of us feel strong and needed. According to business leader, Kathy Oneto, the ideal woman does it all, looks good, and behaves nicely<sup>2</sup>.

We may think this stereotype is outdated, but alas, it is not. Think of [Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella's comments](#) about women waiting for Karma to bring them raises and promotions at work. Or Matt Lauer’s question to Ford CEO Mary Barra about whether or not she could do such a big job at Ford when she had a big job at home with her family. We like when our women follow the rules. Look at the backlash against Marissa Mayer for going back to Yahoo within a few weeks of giving birth to twins: She was portrayed as cold, unfeeling, and un-feminine. And from Hollywood to Silicon Valley, these gender assumptions affect a woman’s bottom line.

We may think the only people who have bought into this stereotype are men. But women hold one another to outdated standards, too. They cut each other down for breaking the rules, criticize one another’s clothing choices, compete in the motherhood arms race, and question other women’s values when they prioritize work over family.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cookcross.com/docs/UnconsciousBias.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Oneto, <http://www.anthemww.com/whitepaper/todays-women-newfound->

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Oneto, <http://www.anthemww.com/whitepaper/todays-women-newfound-power-persistent-expectations/>

But the worst part is how women hold themselves to the stereotype, even at their own expense. For example, they downplay their own intelligence, choose less challenging careers, or exhaust themselves on so many little tasks they don't have time for the big picture stuff. They go to extraordinary lengths to look good, even perfect, at the expense of taking risks and learning from failure. And they don't ask for raises and promotions, or articulate their needs for fear of not being liked. They keep themselves from appearing too committed to their careers, because women shouldn't really think of their career as the primary purpose of their lives. Even Jennifer Lawrence, one of the highest paid actresses in Hollywood, [blamed herself](#) for gender wage discrimination in her films. She worried about seeming "spoiled" or "difficult," and did not negotiate harder because she wanted to seem likeable.

Corporate Human Resources departments have spent the past decade trying to wring out bias and support female leaders. They have offered women flexible schedules, extended childcare leave, and daycare support. Unfortunately, many of these so-called remedies have the unintended consequence of reinforcing internal biases. Offering women daycare support, for example, institutionalizes the assumption that parenting is primarily a mom's job. **The real question for managers is this: How can you unleash women from the constraints of their own biases?**

Here are 4 ways to **cut bias and maximize female potential in your workplace:**

### **1. Examine the problem through a different lens.**

People assume that barriers for working women include a lack of affordable daycare, long office hours, and extensive travel. But these are flawed, often unconscious, assumptions. Long days and time away from home are only obstacles if a woman believes it is her responsibility to be the primary caregiver, or that her career comes second to her partner's. We need to check our gender biases at the door, and help our high-achieving women examine these myths and beliefs more objectively.

When a woman becomes overwhelmed from trying to "balance work and life," challenge her to delegate or better engage her partner. Ask about her assumptions. Support her while she chooses to let less important tasks go. Teach her to see her own bias so she can take responsibility for the role it takes in her decisions.

### **2. Women wait to be picked – so pick them!**

Women are culturally pressured against self-promotion. Most assume they aren't entitled to a career or its spoils, so they let others decide whether recognition is deserved. And if they do put themselves forward, colleagues often react negatively. Nice girls don't ask.

Women have been trained since the high school dance to let others do the asking. They aren't going to toot their own horns. We will serve ourselves and our organizations better by actively seeking out those who have talent, experience, and grit, but whose contributions haven't necessarily been high-profile. We need to notice more about people than where they went to school, what brand names they worked for in the past, or how many high-level projects they've completed. When we go into the trenches and see who is really carrying the workload, we can differentiate valuable workers from those merely manufacturing façades to attract senior level exposure.

Stop by any neighborhood soccer field and you will notice that – even for girls' sports -- most coaches are men. Leagues ask volunteers to put themselves forward. Research has shown that even if they have no prior coaching experience or have never played the sport, more men raise their hands. Most women assume they are not qualified and remain silent. However, those same studies demonstrate that if someone contacts a woman directly, and explains why she would be a good coach, there is a significantly higher likelihood that she will take on the role. The same principle applies in business. You make a greater difference when you reach out and motivate rather than waiting for female workers to put themselves forward.

When I was in high school, I participated in a business program. A volunteer told me I seemed pretty sharp at leadership and suggested I pursue a business career. I felt special. Like the vast majority of women, I was influenced by external validation. That interaction changed my future. Similarly, managers can use their positions of power to recognize talented women. They can offer guidance and mentorship and motivate them to further develop those skills.

### **3. Women think they need to be perfect—so help them learn how to fail.**

Women tend to be their own worst critics. For many, perfection is their goal. They wait to attain all the suggested requirements of a new position before even applying for it. Even when they are qualified, they often don't have the confidence to try. Failure is already a daily struggle. When perfectionism is not just the goal, but the standard or minimum bar, then a woman's days are a string of failures. *I have a pimple. My blouse is wrinkled. I weigh too much. I forgot to buy pastel markers for my daughter's class. I'm late because the dog threw up on the carpet. My Powerpoint slide has a typo. I can tell other people are judging me. It's only noon and I'm already falling apart.* In this context, why would anyone challenge herself more? Failure reinforces an existing ticker tape message in their heads: *I'm not good enough. I knew I was not good enough. I never should have tried.* It's no wonder women need positive recognition so badly. Of course they safeguard their work. Women will wait until they KNOW they can nail something before letting anyone else take a look.

As a manager, recognize these perfectionistic tendencies: When you convince a woman to take on a challenging project, don't abandon her. Don't penalize mistakes or call them out publicly. Instead, offer feedback one-on-one. Push her to view

mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow. Show her how to pivot and look good failing. Remind her of others who are successful but imperfect, particularly those who experienced real barriers, setbacks and failures along the way.

Another watch-out is undercapitalization. Women are more likely to under-spend, under-resource, and keep a venture small to minimize the impact of failure. But this can hamper growth and their ability to be successful on a grand scale. Don't reward coming under budget. Instead, discourage small time thinking and embolden women to think bigger. When you find a female working on safe, menial, low-level tasks, mentor her to delegate and step up. Developing leaders need to work ON the business, not IN the business; push them do this.

#### **4. Women think they should do it all—so help them prioritize.**

We've heard the expression, "Jack of All Trades, Master of None." Well, it doubly applies to women. The cultural pressure to be everything to everyone is strong. Who is at fault when a child goes to school without a jacket? Or when the house is messy? Who sends the family holiday cards? Or plans vacations? Mostly, it is women. They are the default household administrators and lead parents in the vast majority of homes. The best compliment a woman craves: "I don't know HOW you do it!"

At work, many of these same women also take on too much (often to prove subconsciously that they deserve the job). They focus more on the quantity of projects and tasks rather than the outcome or importance of the work. They try to show commitment by doing the most. It's no wonder the majority of stress-induced leave time is taken by women.

When you recognize a talented woman taking on too much at work, it can be difficult to intervene. It is tempting to lean on that female taskmaster—she makes everyone's life run so smoothly! She gets so much done! And she probably takes pride in that role. But what she likely does not realize is that it is limiting her. By taking on the work others should be doing, the already overworked woman makes herself invaluable where she is, all but eliminating personal development and advancement opportunities. Help her prioritize. Challenge the relative importance of her lesser tasks. Take work off of her plate. Steer her to tackle the most critical responsibilities and publicly validate quality outcomes over quantity.

Gender bias is especially difficult to confront in the workplace. Many of our assumptions are unconscious. We do not always know the ways in which we are holding women back. This is made even trickier when those we might look to as leaders in this battle resist acknowledging its existence. Some of the most powerful women in business deny the prevalence of gender stereotypes and the harm that they can do. Since they were successful at overcoming gender bias, they often reject the idea that such bias existed in the first place. But with all due respect to these corporate women pioneers, cultural pressures on women are as strong as ever. [In](#)

[2015](#), only 14% of the top five leadership positions in the Fortune 500 were held by women. Women make up nearly half of the labor force, but they hold only 14% of the top jobs. It is not innate skills that hold women back. Women are demonstrably as capable as men. What holds women (and men!) back is deeper, a pervasive cultural bias that lies within each and every one of us: the assumption that, at work, men have to be there and women have a choice.

As managers, we must recognize gender bias in ourselves, and most importantly in the women who work for us. We can customize our management style according to each woman's level of internal bias. When women hold themselves back, we can nudge them forward. We can help teach them to recognize internal bias within themselves. When they begin to understand the extent to which their adherence to the rules of femininity limits their options, they can make more conscious choices and change these behaviors. Removing the limitations of self-bias can free women to maximize their potential. And perhaps most importantly of all, it can help them recognize gender bias in their own female charges to shape the next generation's stereotype of the "ideal woman."



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