

GENDER

Don't Underestimate the Power of Women Supporting Each Other at Work

by Anne Welsh McNulty

SEPTEMBER 03, 2018



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top as more of a “pipeline” problem, not a cultural one. But the support I expected to find from female colleagues – the feeling of sisterhood in this mission – rarely survived first contact within the workplace.

When I was a first-year accountant at a Big Eight firm (now the Big Four), I kept asking the only woman senior to me to go to lunch, until finally she told me, “Look, there’s only room for one female partner here. You and I are not going to be friends.” Unfortunately, she was acting rationally. Senior-level women who champion younger women even today are more likely to get negative performance reviews, according to a 2016 study in *The Academy of Management Journal*.

My brusque colleague’s behavior has a (misogynistic) academic name: the “Queen Bee” phenomenon. Some senior-level women distance themselves from junior women, perhaps to be more accepted by their male peers. As a study published in *The Leadership Quarterly* concludes, this is a *response* to inequality at the top, not the cause. Trying to separate oneself from a marginalized group is, sadly, a strategy that’s frequently employed. It’s easy to believe that there’s limited space for people who look like you at the top when you can see it with your own eyes.

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Friendships



Having Work Friends Can Be Tricky, but It's Worth It

by Emma Seppala and Marissa King

By contrast, men are 46% more likely to have a higher-ranking advocate in the office, according to economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett. This makes an increasing difference in representation as you go up the org chart. According to a 2016 McKinsey report, *Women in the Workplace*, white men make up 36% of entry-level corporate jobs, and white women make up 31%. But at the very first rung above that, those numbers change to 47% for white men and 26% for white women – a 16% drop. For women of color, the drop from 17% to 11% is a plunge of 35%. People tend to think that

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men felt women were “well represented” in leadership.

Worse than being snubbed by the woman above me was the lack of communication between women at my level. Of the 50 auditors in my class, five were women. All of us were on different client teams. At the end of my first year, I was shocked and surprised to learn that all four of the other women had quit or been fired – shocked at the outcome, and surprised because we hadn’t talked amongst ourselves enough to understand what was happening. During that year, I’d had difficult experiences with men criticizing me, commenting on my looks, or flatly saying I didn’t deserve to work there – but I had no idea that the other women were having similar challenges. We expected our performance to be judged as objectively as our clients’ books, and we didn’t realize the need to band together until it was too late. Each of us had dealt with those challenges individually, and obviously not all successfully.

I resolved not to let either of those scenarios happen again; I wanted to be aware of what was going on with the women I worked with. As I advanced in my career, I hosted women-only lunches and created open channels of communication. I made it a point to reach out to each woman who joined the firm with an open door policy, sharing advice and my personal experiences, including how to say no to doing traditionally gendered (and uncompensated) tasks like getting coffee or taking care of the office environment. To personal assistants, who might find some of those tasks unavoidable, I emphasized that they could talk to me about any issues in the workplace, that their roles were critical, and that they should be treated with respect. The lunches were essential, providing a dedicated space to share challenges and successes. Coming together as a group made people realize that their problems weren’t just specific to them, but in fact were collective obstacles. All of this vastly improved the flow of information, and relieved tension and anxiety. It reassured us that though our jobs were challenging, we were not alone. In doing so, I hope it lowered the attrition rate of women working at my company – rates that are, across all corporate jobs, stubbornly higher for women than men, especially women of color.

~~My own daughter has arrived to a workplace that has not changed nearly as much as I had hoped~~

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So, what are women in the workplace to do, when research shows that we're penalized for trying to lift each other up? The antidote to being penalized for sponsoring women may just be to do it more – and to do it vocally, loudly, and proudly – until we're able to change perceptions. There are massive benefits for the individual and the organization when women support each other. The advantages of sponsorship for protégés may be clear, such as access to opportunities and having their achievements brought to the attention of senior management, but sponsors gain as well, by becoming known as cultivators of talent and as leaders. Importantly, organizations that welcome such sponsorship benefit too – creating a culture of support, and where talent is recognized and rewarded for all employees. Sponsorship (which involves connecting a protégé with opportunities and contacts and advocating on their behalf, as opposed to the more advice-focused role of mentorship) is also an excellent way for men to be allies at work.

But there's still so much work that needs to be done. I'm thrilled by the rise of women's organizations like Sallie Krawcheck's Ellevest Network, a professional network of women supporting each other across companies to change the culture of business at large. (I'm especially fond of it because it began as "85 Broads," a network of Goldman alumnae that drew its name from the old GS headquarters address before Krawcheck, a Merrill alumna, bought and expanded it.) That network spawned a sibling, Ellevest, an investment firm focused on women and companies that advance women. Other ventures include Dee Poku-Spalding's WIE networks (Women Inspiration and Enterprise), a leadership network whose mission is to support women in their career ambitions by providing real world learning via access to established business leaders. I am attempting to make my own dent in this area, having endowed the McNulty Institute for Women's Leadership at my alma mater, Villanova, which supports new research and leadership development opportunities for women.

These are wonderful supplements, but they can't replace the benefits of and the necessity for connections among women inside a company – at and across all levels. It reduces the feeling of competition for an imaginary quota at the top. It helps other women realize, "Oh, it's not just me" – a revelation that can change the course of a woman's career. It's also an indispensable way of

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Jane Michalek 4 hours ago

The so-called "queen bee" has to come in a fight for her position every day and live generally outside her comfort zone. She can't be responsible for all of the other women and it's unfortunate that she is expected to bear that burden. The phrase is extremely sexist and it annoys me when I read it.

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