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Women as Managers

Myths and Realities

Carol B. Hillman

The negative myths about women in management are dying. The new reality is that women can and do manage men and women exceedingly well. Because of this, women clearly have the opportunity to attain economic power and security. But another new reality is raising its ugly head: women who refuse to work for other women or, worse yet, undermine their female managers. Mentors, training, and commitment on the part of institutions to employ them as managers will assure women the fair chance to succeed as managers.

Men cannot work for women; women cannot work for women; women are too tough on subordinates; women are too soft; women are too emotional to manage; women are not tough enough to make hard decisions, and besides, they cry a lot; you cannot promote women, they just leave to have babies; women are not serious about having positions of authority; women lack the skills and traits needed to do a manager's job; women are temperamentally unfit for management; women are indecisive; women have difficulty delegating; women are too controlling; women are grabby, pushy, bitchy; women cannot or will not share power with subordinates; women are too considerate and solicitous of subordinates; and on and on it goes.

These comments, perhaps not uttered aloud, often form the basis for decisions about hiring or promoting women, particularly in male-dominated institutions. While most people recognize them as myths, they are alive and well in today's workplace.

Myths, or misconceptions, about them as managers prevent women from achieving their full potential as employees and as individuals and become barriers that limit their economic security and growth. In an era in which more than 50 percent of the work force is female, and with more women than men entering the work force, employers cannot afford to let myths keep half the work force from achieving its full potential.

This article attempts to review where we have been, where we are, and where I believe we must go if women are to achieve economic security. Examples from my own and other women's experiences give concrete examples of the problems and solutions we might bring to this issue.

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The Last Two Decades: Progress?

There is no doubt that perceptions are changing. Carol Watson, in an article in *Group and Organization Studies* states, "A consensus is emerging that, contrary to our stereotypes, women are not less dominant, less goal directed, or less confident than men when they attain or are given leadership positions."¹

This was not always the case.

In 1965 the *Harvard Business Review* conducted an extensive survey of 1,900 male and female executives to find out "to what extent which broad generalizations about women are accepted or rejected by today's business executives."² Findings from this survey could have made a tough female executive cry: 51 percent of the male respondents said that women were "temperamentally unfit for management." When a follow-up study was published in 1985, the results had changed somewhat: only 18 percent of the men felt that way. In 1965 a mere 9 percent of the men surveyed said they held "strongly favorable" attitudes toward women as executives, but by 1985 that number had risen to 33 percent. In 1965, 9 percent of the men and 15 percent of the women said they felt men would be comfortable working for a woman. By 1985, 21 percent of both groups felt that way. This is progress, perhaps, but slim progress.

Looking at the group surveyed in 1965 as a whole, 88 percent of the respondents felt that men would not be comfortable working for a woman, and things have not improved much since then as evidenced by the fact that 79 percent still felt that way in 1985.

The 1965 study also pointed out that 54 percent of the men and 50 percent of the women respondents agreed that "women rarely expect or want authority." In that study, almost all agreed that "a woman has to be exceptional to succeed in business today." In the 1985 study, that perception did not change much among the women respondents, although the men felt less strongly about it.

What the 1985 Harvard study found particularly disturbing was the "apparently growing adversarial relationship between women superiors and their female subordinates." Fully 46 percent of the women surveyed felt that other women would not be comfortable working for a woman, and 69 percent of the men agreed. One male vice president is quoted as saying, "It has been my experience that women in general are the greatest detriment to the success of other women."

Unfortunately this finding has been substantiated by other independent studies. One such study using Maier's Change-of-Work-Procedures case was described by Carol Watson in her article "*When a Woman Is the Boss*." The study seemed to show that "women subordinates disliked their female bosses more than men did and judged them more negatively. . . . It seemed possible that the women subordinates were actually less accepting of women supervisors and harsher critics of them than men."³

The Harvard study authors suggested at least one reason for this attitude: the higher expectations of women subordinates that women managers would be more supportive and more nurturing than they were actually perceived to be. To explain this, these authors noted that the lack of support and nurturing seemed to be the reality only because women managers expected more from their women subordinates: they wanted them to succeed but realized that women in a male-dominated environment had to be better, tougher, and more resilient than men to make it. "In an effort to mold her female subordinates into competent corporate women, the female boss may actually demand more of them." Because of this, the female subordinates were disappointed in not receiving the warmth,

support, and encouragement that female bosses are supposed to provide. Thus the female managers “appeared” to be harsher toward their women subordinates, in spite of the fact that they felt they were preparing them for the real world in which they would have to work. Another, even more disturbing explanation suggested by the authors of the Harvard study is that because female subordinates suspect there may be a limited number of positions open to them, they “feel competitive with their female bosses.”

One Manager’s View

My own personal experience supports the suggestion of increased conflict and competition between women subordinates and their female superiors precisely because of the limited-promotion-potential theory. Although competitiveness has been present in both male and female subordinates, I have seen the “conflict” only in female/female relationships, which showed itself in several ways. Among them were an unwillingness to take direction or suggestions from another woman and an argumentative rather than collegial or consensus approach in decision-making situations.

This conflict, coming from females whom I assumed would naturally be more supportive of a woman manager, was more surprising to me than it should have been and illustrates that this is an important issue which both men and women managers will have to face as new generations of women enter the work force and begin to work their way up the corporate ladder to management positions.

On the positive side, my first experience as a manager taking over a department in which an older and, in his view, more experienced male professional resented my presence may prove instructive. “Jack” as much as told me that he was going to be difficult. How could I win him over without diminishing my own position? Jack, who reported directly to me, had two other professionals reporting to him. Since he had been with the company for many years and knew every plant manager well, I intended to rely on him to bring me up to speed and asked him to travel with me on my first visits to the company’s various manufacturing facilities.

On our first few trips to plants outside our headquarters area, Jack invariably introduced me without stating the relationship — “I’d like you to meet Carol.” — rather than introducing me as head of his department and using my full name. Therefore, those who had not read the internal announcement of my promotion thought I worked for *Jack*.

As the months went by I made a conscious effort to be supportive of Jack in his projects and recommendations. I discovered that, by any standard, he was being underpaid and proceeded to process a salary increase for him. I asked for his advice and counsel in areas in which I knew he had real experience and expertise. I tried to demonstrate to him the areas in which I could bring something to the group. The day finally came when I knew I had made it. Jack and I went to an outlying facility, a first-time visit for me. When we entered the plant manager’s office I expected Jack to do his usual “This is Carol” introduction. To my surprise and delight, the introduction went as follows: “Pete, I’d like you to meet my boss, Carol Hillman, head of public relations.”

Since that day Jack and I have been fast friends and mutual admirers, even though both of us have left the company to undertake new careers. I knew he had a great deal to contribute when I became his manager, even though he was not so sure about me. It took patience, respect, and support to win his trust, respect, and support, but it was well worth the effort. For women managing men for the first time, this may be an appropriate model

for behavior, at least until one sees that such a strategy clearly does not work in a specific case.

The Harvard study theory that there is a “growing perception that men feel comfortable working for women” seems also to have been borne out by my experiences at two Fortune 500 manufacturing companies and by a limited, less than scientific, but interesting pair of interviews conducted by Nancy Woolley, coordinator and researcher for this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Woolley interviewed two men who currently work for female corporate vice presidents of Fortune 500 corporations. At the outset of the interviews, both men averred that they had had no preconceived ideas about working for a woman manager before accepting their jobs. Both stressed competence as the only issue for them in terms of male or female supervisors. “Chemistry,” however, was a key factor for one in turning down a position in another company with a female department head. Both men made revealing comments which suggest that there are still some hidden preconceptions that men bring to the office when dealing with women managers. For example, one noted that he still does not know how to shake hands with a woman: “Some are like limp fish.” (I have found a fair number of “limp fish” handshakes from men as well as women.) The other said he would be concerned about going out with an attractive woman for a business dinner as “friends might see us and misconstrue the situation.” It is doubtful he would have the same problem with a handsome male manager.

The Decade Ahead

A *Wall Street Journal* article reporting on a survey done in 1988 of students at the Wharton School and at Columbia University Business School suggests that modern male business school students are more willing to accept women in leadership roles, while women are more inclined to strive for such positions.⁴ But the *Journal* notes in the same article that Arlene Johnson, a vice president of Catalyst, says that male senior-level executives still do not feel comfortable with women. Underscoring that notion is the comment from Jane Evans, former president of Monet, who noted that “the CEOs of most major U.S. corporations have never worked for or with a superbly qualified woman. They know us only as secretaries, wives and lovers. This group is simply not comfortable with us.”⁵

What is interesting about all this — both the pluses and the minuses — is that in an age in which corporate America is looking for new leadership, leadership that will encourage change, risk taking, team work, and a new approach to motivating employees, women continue to be an underutilized resource. The assumption that a good leader has to be tough, unfeeling, and “macho” as well as competitive to be effective is no longer the reality.

Martha Lemkin’s statement in her 1986 Indianapolis speech to Women in Communications that “good managers want power. . . The top managers of a company must possess a high need for power, that is a concern for influencing people,” does not automatically exclude women.⁶ Women do not have to act more like men to want power and to be leaders. What they have to do is demand the resources to allow them to be effective leaders. Too often women managers are given the responsibility for getting a job done without the authority or the resources to do it. In their gratitude for being given a chance to “manage,” women frequently fall into this trap. It is a recipe for sure failure. Resources and authority must be as much a part of the package as a title and salary for a woman — or a man — to succeed as a manager.

Advice to Women

Where does all this lead? First it leaves women with many conflicting perceptions and recommendations about how to be successful managers. Depending on the point of view of the particular adviser, women should be more like men, more like women, or more like a combination of both. I lean toward Ann Morrison's suggestion that "women must constantly monitor their behavior, making sure they are neither too masculine nor too feminine."⁷ Both Morrison, who works at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, and a 1986 Catalyst report quoted in their article, pointed out that there are more similarities than differences between male and female executives.

The Center studies found that "executive women are just as able as executive men to lead, influence, and motivate other group members, to analyze problems and to be task-oriented and verbally effective." What women must do, according to Morrison, is to "contradict the stereotypes that their male bosses and co-workers had about women — they [have] to be seen as 'better than women' as a group." In addition, Trudy Heller, in her study, suggests that "one could say that [the] women are perceived as incompetent until proven capable, while [the] men are perceived as capable until proven incompetent."

⁸Unfortunately, this is still the reality for women in corporate America, and while they work to change the reality women will need to play the existing game.

If my premise is true, that institutions must hire, promote, and support women as managers in order to succeed in the new, global competitive arena and, further, that public policy must promote this, how are women to accomplish it? What does all this mean for women who aspire to become managers? What must they do to succeed?

Warren Bennis suggests that "organizations — not individuals — need to be transformed."⁹ To a great extent, I agree. Heller's comment that as women adopt "male work attitudes the men change the rules or values put on those attitudes, i.e., women abandon egalitarianism and men adopt participatory management"¹⁰ should be taken as a warning that there is a danger in trying to be "one of the boys," and that changing the organization is a better way to go.

There are things a woman can do to help herself move ahead in a corporation without abandoning the attributes that make her special. First, she must focus on the leadership skills necessary to be a good leader. These include a vision of where she wants to take her people; the ability to invite her associates to help her make a difference in reaching the institution's goals; the desire and ability to support and promote her people; the ability to communicate her goals and vision to her subordinates, her peers, and those senior to her in the organization; the ability to make the tough decisions that may not endear her to her subordinates but are necessary in accomplishing the goals she has set and committed herself to achieve; and the ability to demand from and demonstrate excellence to her people in everything she does.¹¹ Rosabeth Moss Kanter of the Harvard Business School pointed out some other areas to address, noting that "women need help learning... the experience of power, task orientation, intellectualizing, behaving 'impersonally' and addressing large groups, [and] invulnerability to feedback."¹²

In addition, women who aspire to management positions have to recognize that they must, in many instances, ask for what they want, whether it be resources to get a job done or a promotion. The greatest surprise many women have in their careers is that merit alone does not necessarily mean promotion, recognition, or resources. One example will illustrate this point.

A woman of my acquaintance who was a supervisor in an operating division of a major industrial manufacturing company wanted to be promoted to plant manager. The position opened up, and in a meeting with a women's support group, the supervisor mentioned her desire. When group participants asked her what she planned to do about it, she replied that she knew the male manager of the division was not planning to ask her if she wanted the job. The support group women urged her to take the initiative and ask to be considered for the job. With some reluctance, she agreed to do so.

Several weeks later the supervisor announced to the support group that she had followed their advice — and been promoted to the job (although the title “plant manager” was still not hers). What, she was asked, had been the reaction of the division manager to her request that she be considered for the position? “Surprise,” said she. He said, “We hadn't even thought of you, but now that we know you're interested, let's talk.” And while they were talking, several other women in senior positions were promoting her candidacy with other senior male managers who had input into the final selection. This small victory might never have come about had the woman not taken the initiative and been supported by other women managers. Thus women must support other competent women, share knowledge and experience with them, and compete fairly and openly when necessary and appropriate.

Advice to Employers

How can corporations and institutions help women succeed as managers and dispel the negative myths about women as managers through a different reality? Mary Anne Devanna, director of executive education at Columbia University's Graduate School of Management says: “Organizations can facilitate the transformation [of their organization's acceptance of women] by putting women in positions of authority with men reporting to them, and by giving them the needed organizational support to succeed.”¹³ She suggests this can be done in part by rewarding managers who promote women with the same frequency as men; providing team-building help to forge mixed-gender groups, especially those led by women, into effective management teams; and developing greater sensitivity to the situations that cause men to resent women.

Institutions should also design special managerial training courses for high-potential women with emphasis on the issues the women will face as managers. These courses would enable the women to deal frankly and forthrightly with the issues about women in management as seen by society and by the women themselves. Focus groups for men and women in the corporation should discuss the issues and talk about the feelings on both sides relative to working with and for women managers. Management women should be included in the groups.

Business and professional schools need to focus on this issue and help prepare men and women for a world of employment in which women will ultimately make up half the managerial work force. Corporations, as well as other institutions, must recognize that this is a vital issue on which they must take serious action.

Of further concern are the problems faced by women when they *are* promoted to managerial positions. Most people — men and women — are promoted into management positions without adequate preparation or training. It is assumed that once an employee reaches a certain level of competence in a profession, the next step is to manage people in his or her area of expertise. Rarely, however, does the person receive the benefit of any

formal preparation for the role. Occasionally, some managerial preparation is provided, but only after promotion.

It is for this reason, although it has become something of a cliché, that a mentoring program involving male and female senior managers to guide women with high potential should be instituted by corporations and other employers serious about promoting and keeping such women in management positions. The lack of “someone to talk to” is often a major problem for talented women who want to progress in an organization. Formal, as well as informal, training is also important, and companies must commit themselves to management training and development programs that will not be eliminated in every business downturn, which has so often been the fate of such programs.

In the final analysis, the failure of employers to provide training, mentors, and commitment becomes an exponentially greater hindrance to women succeeding as managers when this deficit is considered in conjunction with the existing stereotypes and prejudices that are brought to the workplace by subordinates and superiors. Men are presumed to be naturally capable of managing; women are presumed to be followers. Only with recognition of the problem and positive action on the part of those in a position to effect change will women be assured of a fair chance to succeed as managers, and thereby their economic independence and security. 🐼

Notes

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3. Watson, “When a Woman Is Boss,” 174.
4. Larry Reibstein, “Managing,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 1988, 25.
5. Janice Castro, “More and More, She’s the Boss,” *Time*, December 2, 1985, 65.
6. Martha Lemkin, Speech to Women In Communications, Indianapolis, Indiana, October 24, 1985.
7. Ann M. Morrison, et al., “Executive Women: Substance Plus Style,” *Psychology Today*, August 1987, 18.
8. Trudy Heller, *Women and Men as Leaders* (New York: Praeger, 1982): 40.
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12. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “Women in Organizations: Sex Roles, Group Dynamics and Change Strategies,” in A. G. Sargent, *Beyond Sex Roles* (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1977), 383.
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