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A three-step program to help women work together

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As the numbers of women in the workforce continue to rise, their positive impact on work environments is widely acknowledged. At the same time, there is a persistent perception that supervising women can sometimes pose particular challenges for managers when women co-workers do not get along. Until recently, there was no systematic way for managers to understand and prevent these conflicts, or address them when they occurred.

Based on more than three decades of consulting and coaching experience, along with recent research projects involving women from a wide variety of private and public organizations, Anne Litwin & Associates has identified three steps that will build skills to enhance the ability of women colleagues to work together. These steps will help managers create an environment in which women can work together to develop and contribute to their organizations without the distraction of unproductive conflicts and misunderstandings.

Step 1. Develop women's skills to name and negotiate friendship expectations

Women's friendship expectations are an unacknowledged and often unknown template underlying their workplace relationships. Women can benefit from learning to identify, describe and negotiate their friendship rules, or expectations, with other women in the workplace. Because friendship rules are primarily developed in childhood and are deeply embedded in the unconscious, it is difficult to name them. Learning to name them and mastering skills to negotiate and modify these expectations can prevent conflicts.

Both women and men have friendship rules, or expectations, but they are different because of gender socialization. Men's friendship rules, which emphasize activity and status, fit more neatly within the norms of the hierarchical workplace and are rewarded. Women's friendship rules, which researchers describe as founded on equality and include loyalty, affirmation, self-disclosure and sympathy, are often at odds with workplace norms and devalued or discouraged. Consequently, women's unspoken friendship expectations can clash with masculine workplace norms and create confusion for women about what behaviors to expect from other women. This confusion can become problematic.

Our consultation team recently worked with an all-woman claims-processing group from a unit where work was at a near standstill. We determined through interviews and small-group exercises that the work problem arose because of conflicting friendship rules among the women. During a series of three half-day retreats we explored friendship expectations through a review of research and case studies. We then gave the women a homework assignment to help them reflect upon this work and identify their friendship rules during the time between retreats. We have learned that it takes a period of reflection between retreats for these expectations to come into consciousness for most adult women.

Once they are identified, they can be discussed and negotiated. In this instance the process eventually revealed that one of the women lived by a dramatically different set of rules than the others regarding self-disclosure. Through the naming of the friendship rules, it became apparent that an effort to enforce conformity had resulted in a virtual “civil war” as women took sides for or against this colleague.

Once these women were able to name and describe their friendship rules, we taught them to utilize Berlow’s Exchange Strategy of Negotiation. They learned to use the skills of: (a) advocating, (b) inquiring, and (c) negotiating quid pro quo to create win-win outcomes that would satisfy the expectations of all parties. After the naming and negotiation process, this group was able to allow for differences and work together productively once again.

Managers should assume that women are operating under a mostly unconscious set of friendship rules in their interactions with their women co-workers. Friendship rules create filters through which women interpret and react to the behaviors of other women. Women in the workplace need skills for naming their friendship rules and skills to negotiate them in order to prevent or mend the damage to work relationships that can come when their expectations of each other are not met.

Step 2. Develop women’s skills to negotiate role boundaries

Women need skills for negotiating role-boundaries when they are the boss, as well as in peer relationships and when reporting to women bosses. Negotiation skills will enable them to be explicit about whether they are wearing the hat of “friend,” “teammate” or “boss” during interactions where expectations from each other may need to vary. Many women who work in predominantly-male teams complain that it is difficult for them to feel heard by their male colleagues. It can feel, then, like a violation of friendship rules if another woman on the team disagrees with her in front of the men in a team meeting – yet it is important to be able to express differences of opinion when part of a team. These women could explicitly agree that in mixed-gender team meetings they are free to disagree with each other. At the same time they could agree to expect each other to help get their ideas heard by saying something like “I think we moved away too quickly from consideration of Jane’s idea and we should come back to it before we make a decision.” In other situations, women can clarify when they are stepping out of a “colleague” role and into a “friend” role where they need empathy, instead of challenge, on a professional level by naming the role switch they are making. Women can learn to discuss and agree about what they expect from each other in different roles, keep their relationships strong and avoid feeling disappointed or betrayed.

Step 3. Develop skills for direct communication

There are times when direct communication skills, such as: (a) giving, receiving and inviting feedback; and (b) describing feelings, are necessary to strengthen and maintain work relationships. Many women are not comfortable with direct communication. Indirect communication, such as third-party communication, can have a constructive purpose, even in the workplace, and is preferred in many cultures – yet direct communication skills are also important. Examples of direct communication skills that we teach are feedback and disclosure. Identifying and disclosing feelings is often difficult for women and requires practice. Giving feedback, inviting feedback, receiving it without

defensiveness and acknowledging the possible value in it are all skills that will help women keep their relationships strong and productive.

The role of managers

The role of managers in identifying, preventing and resolving conflict between women in the workplace requires that managers learn how women's friendship culture can add value to an organization, as well as create confusion for women in the context of the hierarchical organization. Organizations in the 21st century understand that it is not effective to manage women by expecting women to behave like men. Managers also understand that conversations between women change when men are in the room, and vice versa. That is why it is important to support this three-step skill development program in all-woman retreat settings, under the umbrella of Women's Leadership Training with the focus on the workplace.

In summary, preventing and managing conflict between women in the workplace requires that managers make sure their women employees have the skills they need to demonstrate productive behaviors in the hierarchical workplace. Following the three-step program outlined in this article in all-women retreat settings can help managers create an environment where women can realize their individual potential and more fully contribute to creating high-performing organizations.

About the author

Anne H. Litwin, PhD, works with public and private organizations in the areas of executive coaching, leadership development, change management, teaming across global cultures and cultural competency. She has been an internal and external consultant, executive coach and trainer for more than 30 years. She also conducts research and offers workshops on women's relationships in the workplace.

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