

PREOCCUPATIONS

Girl Power at School, but Not at the Office

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I WAS born in 1982 — about 20 years after the women’s rights movement began. Growing up in what many have called a post-feminist culture, I did not really experience institutional gender bias. “Girl power” was celebrated, and I felt that all doors were open to me.

When I was in college, the female students excelled academically, sometimes running laps around their male counterparts. Women easily ascended to school leadership positions and prestigious internships. In my graduating class (more than half of which was female) there was a feeling of camaraderie, a sense that we were helping each other succeed.

Then I left the egalitarianism of the classroom for the cubicle, and everything changed. The realization that the knowledge and skills acquired in school don’t always translate at the office is something that all college graduates, men and women, must face. But for women, I have found, the adjustment tends to be much harder. It was certainly hard for me — I lasted only nine months in my first job out of college.

Inspired by my own rocky entrance into the work world, I decided to interview other young women and discovered that many of them, like me, were facing a steep workplace learning curve. What was it, I wondered, that was making our first career steps so wobbly when we had been so accomplished and self-assured in school?

Every workplace is different, but certain patterns began to emerge. I experienced and heard of instances when some women, instead of helping a new female colleague, tried to undermine her. Rather than giving “the new girl” the tools to succeed, they might try to sabotage her advancement.

I saw some men, raised in a different era, who refused to take young women seriously, focused on their appearance and gave them the least desirable assignments. Even in this day and age, I saw women becoming “assistant-ized”— saddled with all the coffee runs and photocopying.

Some workplaces are more sexist than others. A woman should never accept a job offer without first finding out whether the odds are already stacked against her. This background check will assess how a potential employer treats its female employees, how many women are in leadership positions and whether there is a history of pay discrimination or sexual harassment.

But outside forces are only part of the story. I have also seen young women — myself included — getting in the way of their own success. I have found that we need to build a new arsenal of skills to mitigate some of our more “feminine” tendencies. Having lived in a cocoon of equality in college, we may have neglected these vital, real-world skills.

In my own case, I realized that I needed to develop a thick skin, feel comfortable promoting myself, learn how to negotiate, stop being a perfectionist and create a professional network — abilities that men are just more likely to have already.

The more traditionally “feminine” trait of sensitivity, while often appreciated, is not always an asset in the work world. I have spent too much time being rattled by terse e-mail from editors, agents who have told me that I’d never get a book deal, and bosses who have berated me as not being “detail-oriented.” I think that in order to break through any kind of glass ceiling, or simply to get through the day, you have to become impervious to the daily gruffness that’s a part of any job.

I used to think that perfection was the pathway to success. Not so, according to women I have interviewed who have reached the apex of their professions. Rather, it can lead to paralysis. Women, I have found, can let perfectionism stop them from speaking up or taking risks. For men, especially if they are thick-skinned, the thought of someone telling them “no” tends not to be viewed as earth-shattering.

One tactic I've found useful in getting over the perfectionist tendency is a shock therapy called soliciting feedback. Not only does it demystify what your boss thinks about you, but it also gives you the data to become a more valuable employee.

The other dose of shock therapy I've undergone is reprogramming my brain to think that, yes, girls do brag. I've indoctrinated myself with the idea that my job is a two-part process. One part is actually doing the work and the second part is talking about it, preferably in bottom-line terms.

The old-boys' club proves that men have long known that a professional network is imperative to success. Women don't have as much of a tradition of business networking ("Do you want to go grab a beer?" doesn't quite roll off our tongues) and, understandably, they may feel awkward or clueless about how to do it.

I can tell you that it doesn't work to go up to someone and say, "Will you be my mentor?" That's the workplace equivalent of "Will you be my boyfriend?" A more organic approach — saying something like, "Can I pick your brain about some ways to transition out of my entry-level position in the next year?" — has been much more effective for me.

Young women also need to learn how to speak salary, a language that many men already seem to know. Coming into the work force, I thought that, just as my professor had given me the grade I deserved on my political science midterm, my company would pay me what I "deserved."

RECENTLY I had a conversation with a male friend, a reporter in his mid-20s, about how hard it is to ask for money and negotiate for raises. He looked puzzled that I'd have an aversion to something that he does with ease, telling me: "When I want a raise, I just ask for it. And even if they say no, I'll keep asking for it."

The American Association of University Women found that men who are a year out of college make 20 percent more in weekly pay than their female co-workers do. Why? Because my friend and scores of other young men

understand the central tenet of a bigger paycheck: ask and you shall receive.

The pay disparity speaks to a larger issue that women, coming directly out of the colleges that nurtured and rewarded them and gave them every advantage, may have trouble grasping. For me, it was crystallized in a comment made to me by Myra Hart, a retired senior faculty member at Harvard Business School who studies women as entrepreneurs:

“By and large women believe that the workplace is a meritocracy, and it isn’t.”