

## when there's a woman at work you really don't like

Maybe you've heard about the research on women's likability –there's been a lot more conversation and media attention about this topic since the publication of *Lean In*.

A wide range of studies show that the more assertive a woman is in her leadership or management style, the less likable she is to her peers. Men, on the other hand, are seen as perfectly likable when they behave in assertive ways. This presents a tough double bind for women, since we often need to be both assertive and likable to get things done in our careers. What's behind this difference? The researchers hypothesize that when women violate gender norms (i.e. that women should always be kind, inclusive, listening, focused on others) we like them less.

Most often, discussions about this research have a kind of frustrated, hopeless tone to them, because, hey – what can women do about this very real and very problematic bias in our culture? Sometimes, the discussions ([like this very good one](#)) talk about one thing women can do: they can reduce their attachment to being liked, which is one of the things we are also working on this week in my [Playing Big program](#).

But there's something that's been largely missing from the conversation. It has to do with how women can change this phenomenon, the power we have. No wonder it's been left out.

The research shows it's not just men who view assertive women as less likable. It's both women and men. That means you and me honey.

We are a part of the problem, because we are holding women our women bosses, colleagues, direct reports, business partners, and clients, to a different standard. We are likely expecting them to be nicer in the midst of a busy and stressful work day than we are expecting men to be. If a woman is gruff or emotionally unavailable or terse at work, we tax her in a way that we don't tax the guys. If a woman makes an autocratic decision that isn't aligned with the opinions of her team, we'll tax her for it in a way that we wouldn't tax a man.

*I've heard from countless women about how the best bosses they've had have been men and the worst ones they've had have been women. I want you to consider that maybe part of the reason your relationship with those women bosses was so tough was this bias. You were holding her to a different standard, a standard you wouldn't hold a man to. If you are human, no matter what your feminist principles, your intentions, or your narrative about "what she did," the truth is your*

*perception of her was shaped by your deeply conditioned assumptions – conscious or unconscious – about the always-kind, inclusive, gentle, and non-assertive way a woman should behave.*

As you move through your day today, if there's a woman your workplace you find difficult, that you don't like, that you think is too scheming, too political, cold, too harsh, too autocratic, and god forbid if there is a woman in your workplace you've ever called a bitch, an ice queen, or a ball buster – in your head or out loud – this week do something different.

When something she does bothers you, pause. In your mind, picture Grandpa Patriarch. 60 years old or so. White hair. In a senior, very powerful role in the organization. A guy known mainly not as Mr. Nice Guy but rather as a powerful leader, a great mind, and the driving force behind the success of the organization. Now picture that \*he\* did the same thing, whatever she did. Picture he said the same thing she said. Picture he ran the meeting that way or gave you that negative feedback or sat in the room with the same the body language she did. How would you respond to the same behavior in him? How would you interpret it if it was coming from him? Now apply that interpretation back to her.

Do this again and again, until it has overwritten the old bias you never wanted to be a carrier for anyway. Notice if the new way you relate to other women has also impacted how comfortable you feel when it comes time for *you* to act assertively. Has it changed how you see yourself?

And when you've gotten really good at seeing the women you work with without bias, you can tell your male colleagues about your little thought exercise, and invite them to do the same.