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Queen Bee Syndrome: Do Women Judge Women Leaders More Harshly?

Working women have come a long way, but there is sometimes a price to pay.

By [Joanna L. Krotz](#) September 27, 2016



Is it really up to senior women to ensure that all younger women are mentored and promoted?

Certainly women are gaining corner offices, starting businesses in record numbers and flocking to peer-to-peer networking groups. Yet a part of this good news that refuses to die are the stories of spiteful, insecure senior women who block the rise of younger women. One recent study finds that narratives of high-ranking "mean girls" who backstab female rivals—behavior dubbed the "Queen Bee syndrome"—are more an [Old Boy's Club strategy](#) to maintain executive male privilege than an actual girl problem. When women run the show, says the study, junior women thrive. And yet ...

I put out the microphone to a range of advisors and businesswomen while delving into the research (besides the Columbia Business School study cited above). Turns out, you can cherry pick the data to bolster whatever you believe about Queen Bees. One survey reports women are more often bullied at work than men and more by women supervisors. Another details the generosity of newly minted high-level women mentors to younger women. Still another finds that women on the rise prefer male bosses because women managers are defensive and obstructionist.

So, to mix metaphors, we also seem to be dealing with the elephant in the office.

Stories from the Hive

Says relationship advisor [April Masini](#): “Queen Bee syndrome is fact. Politically correct brigades will try to have you believe it doesn’t exist and girl power is about community, but the truth is, women compete with each other. They check each other out for status cues, power cues and make unconscious decisions about how to connect, repel or conquer the spot held by another woman in a community.”

Even so, obvious competition among women continues to be seen as unseemly, if not downright unfeminine, because women still don’t break through glass walls and ceilings on merit alone. Decades of conscious and unconscious [gender bias](#) serve up the unspoken rule: Women who make it must reach back and pull our sisters forward. On a parallel track, male managers who decide to promote women expect gratitude and not aggression. No Queen Bees allowed.

“It’s a very fine line for women to balance,” says [A.J. Marsden, Ph.D.](#), a psychology professor at Beacon College in Leesburg, FL. “Women don’t want to come off as a bitch by being too strict. We must balance dominance with compassion.”

A prevailing theory about Queen Bees is that they figure they made it without help, so junior women can do it too. But if that’s the case for some women, where are the guys? Is it really up to senior women to ensure that all younger [women are mentored and promoted](#)? What if a senior woman is focused on a challenging job and also stressed by demands of family and childcare—which, often, the senior men have handed off to their wives?

Generational Divide

Typically, Boomer and older Gen X women harbor the greatest expectations for successful women to advance women’s parity. That’s because they’re the ones who most often pioneered, endured and persevered to move forward.

[Millennials are reaping the workplace rewards earned by older women, but they don’t necessarily tune in to the journey.](#)

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s famous line, first uttered in her celebratory keynote for the 2006 WNBA team, has been endlessly repeated: “There is a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women.” Yet early this year, when Albright invoked that argument to admonish younger women who weren’t supporting Hillary Clinton, [the backlash](#) was fast and furious. Perhaps younger women don’t realize that not much longer than a decade ago, being female was an instant disqualifier to corporate success. Millennials are reaping the workplace rewards earned by older women, but they don’t necessarily tune in to the journey.

One young star recounts a formative early experience when a woman mentor she admired “stabbed her in the back.” She felt it was workplace bullying. “I confronted her and we agreed not to work together.” Today, she’s still “wary of older women.” But the devil may be in the details: “She told me I was too cocky, and I didn’t like that,” acknowledges the young woman. Later she realized, “it was good feedback and maybe I was egotistical.” She reined it in and “it really benefited me.”

So was the mentor a Queen Bee? Or do young women discount advice from cautious women who’ve come up the hard way?

Royal Ambivalence

Kim Shepherd, CEO of nationwide recruiter [Decision Toolbox](#), is often invited to deliver keynote talks to women’s business groups. A success story herself (“I believe in micro train and macro manage”), Shepherd understandably doesn’t want her talks to dwell on struggles or hardships. Rather, she says, “I want to lift up and empower women, to show we’ve truly arrived.”

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But while she believes women now excel in business and “oppression is breaking down quickly,” Shepherd bemoans a common behavior she sees, when “women shy away from their feminine strength and flip to catty mean girls who criticize others' hair and clothes.”

OK, not very nice, and maybe even disheartening. But why must we be paragons all the time? Who made the rule? Why must we be all one way or the other rather than sometimes some of each?

I began this article expecting to find that the Queen Bee syndrome was a myth or, at very least, is fading as more women gain power and as male bosses realize (slowly) that women can be leaders too. But I've had to revise my thinking. Like so much of the issues around workplace gender, the reality is way more nuanced. If men can be openly and aggressively competitive while choosing not to mentor up-and-comers without penalty, then why can't women? Long live Queen Bees.

Joanna L. Krotz is the author of [Being Equal Doesn't Mean Being the Same: Why Behaving Like a Girl Can Change Your Life and Grow Your Business](#), because when men make the rules, women don't advance. She hosts [The Woman's Playbook](#) podcasts and also wrote [The Guide to Intelligent Giving](#). Joanna frequently speaks and writes on women's leadership. Follow Joanna: [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [G+](#)

