

## Skills to trump a stacked deck:

**One of the most important next frontiers is helping women see the power they have to change the conditions around them – so they can be more successful and effective leaders. The Women’s Leadership Initiative is at the forefront of this change, forwarding leadership on the personal level, on behalf of the corporation, and in industry and society.**

*Excerpts from Getting to 50/50: How Working Couples Can Have It All by Sharing It All by Sharon Meers and Joanna Strober. Published by Bantam Dell, 2009. Website: [www.gettingto5050.com](http://www.gettingto5050.com).*

### **1. Are Women as Ambitious as Men?**

In her Harvard Business Review article “Do Women Lack Ambition?” Cornell University psychiatrist Ana Fels explores what it takes for women to go for their goals—whatever they may be. She finds that female ambition is often drained by the fact that female victory is often ignored.

When studies show men to be more confident than women (regardless of their skill), this is an “accurate reflection of the praise and recognition” gap and little else. Men get roaring cheers. Women get quiet nods. And over time, women (regardless of their skill) start to believe the audience, that their accomplishments just aren’t that exciting.

Anna Fels, “Do Women Lack Ambition?” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2004. See also Anna Fels, *Necessary Dreams*.

### **2. How “Nice” Should Women Be?**

Studies show women are, in fact, looked to as the merry wives of the workplace. Female employees are often assumed to be “happy to help” and this may be one place where a can-do attitude is not in your best interest. At Columbia Business School, professor Frank Flynn studied how these expectations play out. Flynn engaged the employees at two companies to find out what women win (or lose) from their image as willing helpmates.

Flynn found that women were more likely than men to be asked for favors and were more likely to grant requests for help. When the recipients of help were asked how “indebted” they felt, they appreciated the help of women less than the help of men; people felt entitled to female help, it was taken for granted. Worse, the more “agreeable” the woman seemed, the more the value of her help was discounted by the person she assisted (as if they assumed “she just likes to help”). In fact, women who were rated as less agreeable were more appreciated when they provided help, and so were men

Francis J. Flynn, “Thanks for Nothing: The Effects of Sex and Agreeableness on the Evaluation of Helping Behavior in Organizations,” working paper. Also see Laurie A. Rudman, “Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes and Backlash Toward Agentic Women,” *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001): 758–759.

(Note: Francis Flynn is now an associate professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business)

### **3. How different are the standards for men vs. women?**

Howard is a successful entrepreneur in Silicon Valley. He started his own software company, worked at Apple Computer, and now serves as a partner at a venture capital firm. Howard’s career is described in a business school case study that reveals how he uses his “vast personal and professional network” to achieve his professional goals. Leveraging his “outgoing personality,” Howard builds relationships that help him do deals and give him a reputation as a “catalyst” and a “captain of industry.” Students who read about Howard rated him as effective, likeable, and someone they would hire.

Howard does not exist, but Heidi—Heidi Roizen, a venture capitalist and veteran of the microcomputer industry—very much does. In 2006, Columbia Business School professor Frank Flynn and his colleague, Cameron Anderson at New York University, wanted to test how much someone’s sex matters in the way they are perceived. Flynn and Anderson changed Roizen’s first name in the copies of the case study they gave to one class and left her as a woman for the other class.

How did students rate Heidi versus Howard? While they saw Heidi as equally competent and effective, students felt Heidi was significantly less likable and worthy of being hired than Howard. Why? Students saw Heidi as more “selfish” than Howard—though she was described as identical in every way (except that she’d been a cheerleader in high school and he’d been a football player).

Flynn calls this a “backlash” effect. When women don’t behave in a way that conforms to standard gender roles, even young people can get uncomfortable and they express their discomfort by viewing the woman negatively.

But here’s a loophole in this perception tax. Flynn and his colleagues ran another experiment on the relationship between the students’ familiarity with their peers and how they rated them. When raters didn’t really know their classmates, they responded just as the students in the Heidi/Howard experiment. More assertive men were seen as more hireable while more assertive women were seen as less hireable. But when students were more familiar with the person they were rating, the “backlash” vanished. Assertive men and women were seen as equally hireable. And more assertive women were more likely to be hired than their less assertive female peers (just like men).

Francis J. Flynn and Cameron Anderson, “Too Tough, Too Soon: Familiarity and the Backlash Effect,” working paper.

(Note: paper now under review at the [Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes](#))

#### **4. If a room is majority male, how do women perform?**

For decades, studies have shown that when women are a small minority of an applicant pool they are judged more harshly than when they are more than one-third of a group. In a study of women in math, science, and engineering, psychologists Mary Murphy and Claude Steele asked how men and women feel (and perform) when there are dramatically more men than women involved.

When outnumbered (three to one), women had higher heart rates, sweated more, and had a lower sense of well-being and desire to participate. When part of a balanced group, women were more at ease—and likely to perform better. Men functioned the same in both scenarios but said that they preferred the environment with more female peers.

Mary C. Murphy, Claude M. Steele, and James J. Gross, “Signaling Threat: How Situational Cues Affect Women in Math, Science and Engineering Settings,” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 10 (October 2007): 879–885

#### **5. Can women shrink male/female pay gaps without policy change?**

At Harvard Business School, Linda Babcock (economist and coauthor of *Women Don’t Ask*) found that male MBAs were negotiating up their salaries about 6 percent and their bonuses a whopping 19 percent relative to their female MBA peers, after adjusting for field, functional position, and geography.

Then Babcock and her colleagues intervened. They gave students of both sexes the same information, including data on the range of salaries and bonuses that alumni had negotiated. Armed with numbers and the knowledge that they could ask for more, these women bargained their way to parity. The male/female pay difference vanished.

Hannah C. Riley and Linda Babcock, Gender as a Situational Phenomenon Is Negotiated, Paper presented at the International Association of Conflict Management 15th Annual Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 9–12, 2002 (Kennedy School of Government working paper No. RWP02- 037, September 2002)

(Note: Linda Babcock is now a professor at Carnegie Mellon University's H. John Heinz III College)

Backlash against women decreases when women frame their requests in a way that says “help me to help you.” Stanford’s Maggie Neale tells the story of a female professor who got a job offer at another college that would mean a lot more money. The woman went to her dean and said, “I really love working here. I want to stay but I have this offer and I can’t turn down such a big raise. Is there anything you can do to help me?” The dean didn’t want to lose a talented professor. So while he didn’t match her offer, he got close. Make sure to focus the other side on what they win by giving you what you ask for.

Neale observes that women create a better mind-set for negotiation when they consider all the other people who benefit when they bargain well. Your raise isn’t merely for you, it’s for the good of your husband and kids. Neale also points out how much women gain if they can see negotiating as something they are perfectly good at. In a recent study, men and women were “primed” before a negotiation game. One group was told “good negotiators are tough, competitive, bold”—words typically associated with men. The other group heard that “good negotiators are good at listening, they problem solve and try to see the other point of view”—qualities often considered “female.” When female traits were the ones touted, women in the group not only outperformed men, they performed just as well as the men in the group who were primed to believe men were “naturally” better.

Laura J. Kray, Adam D. Galinsky, and Leigh Thompson, “Reversing the Gender Gap in Negotiations: An Exploration of Stereotype Regeneration,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 87, no. 2 (March 2002): 386–409