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ForbesWoman Feed

Top 10 Unwritten Rules For Working Women

ForbesWoman Community 10.20.09, 7:00 PM ET

Come to think of it, when was the last time you heard or read the word "sexism?"

That's what ForbesWoman Community member [Ann Daly, Ph.D.](#), an executive coach and professional development specialist for women based in Austin, Texas, wants to know. She replied to a conversation thread on [salary and self-esteem](#) on our [LinkedIn group](#). Elizabeth Miles, chief executive of a U.K.-based legal software company, started the conversation with the suggestion that women generally don't assert their value in the workplace. "It's as if women can feel less deserving." (See "[Salary And Self Esteem](#).")

That brought in the mail. [Victoria Pynchon](#), a commercial mediator and arbitrator at ADR Services, a Southern California alternative dispute resolution firm, had this to say: "Sexism still exists (shocked! I'm shocked!). When orchestras recently began conducting auditions behind screens so that the "jury" couldn't see the gender of the musician, callbacks for women *doubled*. It's not their fault ... So let's not go *blaming* ourselves."

On her [blog](#), Ann Daly, whose sixth book, *Do-Over! How Women Are Reinventing Their Lives*, is scheduled for release in February 2010, points out that "the 21st-century version of sexism is nothing blatant, nothing *Mad Men*. Men, for the most part, have learned to appear politically correct. Most of them are savvy enough not to engage, at least consciously, in so-called 'gender stereotyping.' "

Sexism, whatever you call it, hasn't disappeared. But it's better to know exactly what you're up against. To that end, Daly pulled together the [top 10 unwritten rules for working women](#). "Don't let them sabotage your ambitions."

Men get the benefit of the doubt. Men generally get hired on their promise and women on their demonstrated experience. Men are usually taken at their word, while women get challenged more, required to deliver data and substantiation for their views.

Looks matter. Bare those arms and legs at your own risk: Flesh conjures up images of the beach and the boudoir, not the boardroom.

You won't get sufficient feedback. Professional development depends upon rigorous, comprehensive, ongoing feedback. Your (male) boss may not feel comfortable delivering that information to you. You need to be direct in asking for it from him and from other colleagues and team members.

A working mother's commitment is assumed to be ambivalent. At worst, mothers are seen as potential flight risks from the organization, and therefore not worthy of any further investment. At best, they are denied plum travel and assignments, under the guise of benevolent protectionism. Don't let anyone else speak or decide for you.

Actually, it *is* personal. In mid-career, at the point where everyone brings comparable talent to the table, it's *who* you know, not *what* you know, that gets you promoted. As HR pros will tell you, you don't push yourself to the top, you get pulled there. Men knew what they were doing when they invented the old boys' club. From the get-go, women need to be just as savvy, cultivating mentors, allies and champions.

Men are bred for self-confidence. From Little League to fraternities to the golf course, men's lives emphasize competition. By the time they get to the workplace, they are seasoned competitors, with all of the self-confidence that comes from having successfully weathered both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Consider the consequences: One internal corporate study showed that women will apply for an open job only if they meet 100% of the criteria listed, while men will apply if they meet just 60%. In order to assume that same level of self-possession (and entitlement), you have to design your own path to self-confidence.

Women are rendered invisible until they demonstrate otherwise. If you want to be noticed, you've got to offer your ideas, approach a mentor, ask for the assignments, build a network, convey your aspirations and communicate your achievements. I've heard Sharon Allen, chairman of Deloitte LLP, tell this cautionary tale from her early career, when she was passed over for a promotion that she had earned. Allen asked why she had been passed over, since she had done X, Y and Z to earn it. "Oh," her boss replied, "I didn't realize that you'd done X, Y and Z ." It's one thing to lose the game because you were outperformed, but it's another thing altogether to lose because you were never in play.

Women don't take charge, they take care. Research has shown that both men and women will judge a woman less favorably who asks for a higher starting salary than a man with the same credentials asking for the same thing. Men are rewarded for being outspoken, while

women are expected to go along for the greater good. In order to negotiate this "woman penalty," you've got to dance that fine line between assertive and pushy, authoritative and bossy, smart and arrogant. Brush up on your cha-cha.

Women are different. Make no mistake. "Different" never means "equal." "Different" is code for "other." And in any us-them situation, you know what happens to the outsiders. Just think back to the "separate but equal" credo of racial segregation. Defining women as "different" (whether it's done by men or by women) serves to keep women positioned as outsiders, despite our increasingly dominant numbers in the workplace.

Women make great worker bees, but visionary leaders--not so much. Margaret Thatcher is often quoted as saying: "If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman." Unfortunately, that's the kind of thinking that keeps the vast majority of women stuck in middle management, while men move forward into leadership roles. At a certain point, you've got to give up the grindstone to pursue vision and strategy.

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