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"Forget the Past—Women Have to Move On to Move Ahead"

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If you're a woman, you've probably noticed that there's been a whole host of research published lately on the subject of "relational aggression among girls." Translation: Why girls are so horrible to each other.

Books such as "Queen Bees & Wannabes" and "Odd Girl Out" purport to look inside the sometimes vicious world of young girls and give us nonteenage girls some insight into what makes them tick. Now comes "Woman's Inhumanity to Woman," which takes the vicious, back-stabbing world of teenage girls and applies it to the world of women.

My complaint with this body of research isn't that it's invalid (from what I can tell, it seems to be based on some solid research—probably far more than it deserves). My complaint is that, despite the authors' best intentions, their work ends up doing little more than solidifying the negative stereotypes that have dogged women for centuries.

And by solidifying those stereotypes, they may slow the already glacial pace of creating the kind of support network for women in business that has been the cornerstone of success for men in business.

True, each of these books is aimed at helping girls and women work their way through these landmines. But, since all that most people will read or hear about these books is the publicity they generate (and they have generated a lot, in everything from the New York Times Magazine to Oprah), what they probably will walk away with is a reinforcement of the notion that girls and women are cruel and manipulative.

While that may make for great TV, it doesn't get women in the real world any closer to where we need to be, which is firmly ensconced in a network of professionals who, without even thinking about it, refer business and generally support each other's professional goals.

Let's face it. For men, supporting their friends' businesses is second nature. It's unspoken and innate. And it's one of the many reasons they tend to excel in business in greater numbers than women do.

If you ask a man who his mentors are, chances are he'll name several other men he's worked with over the years. But if you ask a woman the same question, you probably won't find many other women on her list. Whether that's because women on the higher rungs of the corporate ladder are nonexistent, too preoccupied with their own survival or for some other reason, we need to snap out of it.

I'm not advocating a mandatory code of behavior requiring women to help other women develop business and excel in the workplace. But women need to support other women just as a matter of practice, whether it's referring business to a law school classmate, mentoring a young associate or just generally being more supportive of the women in their midst.

SOME GOOD NEWS

Fortunately, there was recently some good news on this front—at least for women of color.

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Catalyst, a New York-based research organization that studies issues affecting women in the workplace, reported on July 16 that women of color in corporate management showed significant career improvement (in the form of raises and promotions) over the past three years.

Networking and mentoring appeared to be a significant factor, according to the survey. Among the respondents, 58 percent said they had mentors (compared with just 35 percent in the previous survey three years earlier), and 49 percent cited networking as an important factor in their success (up from only 29 percent three years earlier).

So there has been progress, despite a recent body of literature pointing out how catty and unsupportive the female gender can be.

Yes, we can all tell tales of the "mean girls" in high school who excluded us. But that was 10, 20, 40 years ago. Let's get past it.

We're adults now. And the truth is that most girls grow up to be perfectly likeable women. And as we age, we start to soften at the edges and forgive each other's faults and transgressions. Perhaps even most gratifying is when we discover that the girls we considered Queen Bees were actually as insecure and shaken up by the whole adolescent experience as we were.

Women, in general, are great co-workers, bosses and subordinates, not to mention friends and neighbors. But rather than giving researchers fodder for books about how back-stabbing we can be, we need to focus our energies on developing and maintaining a support network that will ensure our and our daughters' success for years to come.

Let's leave the schoolyard stereotypes in the past, where they belong.