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"Are Women Really "Bitchy" Bosses?"

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Being a supervisor is never easy. To do it well, one must walk a fine line between being demanding and being compassionate.

And, as anyone who has coached a sports team knows, each team member, whether superstar or bench warmer, needs to be treated differently in order to ensure that that player reaches his or her fullest potential. Nevertheless, there must be a sense that the group as a whole is treated fairly, or team harmony will be disrupted.

But if managers have it tough, in general, women managers have it particularly hard. Not only do we have to overcome other people's perceptions and expectations (and even insecurities) about what kind of managers we'll be, but we often also have to overcome their natural inclination to judge us by unfair standards.

Many women - myself included - are perfectly happy working with and for other women. But many women (and men) will say their experiences with female supervisors have been hellish. Among the stated reasons: She was insecure and saw me as a threat, or she thought she needed to be a man, and she chose Gen. Patton as a role model. (There's also women who prefer working for men because they find them easier to manipulate, but these women are thankfully few and far between.)

Juggling and the B-word

But let's start with the happy stuff: why women can be better managers. In my experience, women are jugglers, particularly women with children. We juggle work assignments, errands, personal and professional social obligations, children's doctor appointments, etc. Juggling necessitates organization and good time management; both are hallmarks of a good manager. Women can also be more intuitive, therefore making it easier for them to spot and address intra-office tension before it becomes crippling to the institution.

Women also tend to be more compassionate. And here's where our femaleness can start to work against us. Though an element of compassion and empathy on the job is a plus, when overdone, it can be our worst enemy.

But the complaints I hear most often about women bosses have less to do with being too nice than being too demanding. Actually, demanding isn't the word most people use. It's "pushy," "bossy," or, worse, "bitchy."

From where I sit, the person to blame for this perception is more likely to be the employee than the supervisor. I'm sure there are women bosses who throw their weight around for the wrong reasons, just as many male managers do the same thing. And truly outlandish behavior is usually seen as such whether the supervisor is male or female.

Where women managers are treated unfairly is when they are neither cream puffs nor tyrants, but somewhere in between. Nobody holds it against a man, for instance, when he's curt and doesn't spend much time asking how his associate's weekend was or inquiring about her family. In fact, his "businesslike" demeanor is likely to be respected and may be a reason for his success. But a woman who keeps her professional distance from those who work for her is likely to be labeled a "bitch."

From "Girlfriend" to Boss

Many women who dislike their female bosses are most likely suffering from their own unreasonable expectations. Whether it's genetic or cultural, women seek to bond with other women. We share our personal thoughts more readily than men, and we like to feel a sense of intimacy with the women around us.

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And this is OK. But women who work for other women need to know that, at some point during the day, their "girlfriend" may have to turn into a boss in midsentence if, for example, she receives a phone call or an unexpected fax. That can be a rocky transition if the employee hasn't accepted the fact that her chum is also her supervisor - and when work necessitates, the supervisor role is going to take precedence. Unless there's a working relationship built around mutual confidence, competence, respect and trust, both the personal and the professional relationships will suffer.

The legal profession is tough enough on women that we don't need to be labeling our female bosses "bitches." If we ever want to level the playing field, we need to hold the women around us - and above us - to a gender-neutral standard, nothing more and nothing less.

Next month: Women-only business development outings: Are they reverse discrimination, or the long-overdue advent of the New Girl's Network?

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