

Tips for Countering Workplace Bias

From learning how to build an ensemble to adopting personal techniques, there are a number of approaches that can improve workplace conditions.

By Sandra Guy, SWE Contributor

No matter how hard you work on yourself — your demeanor, your skillset, or your attitude — you might be wasting your time if your boss insists on getting his or her way all the time and refuses to change or listen to others' ideas. If that's the case, it's probably time to pivot — quit the job and find a boss who's open to new ideas, admits mistakes, and learns from others.

MOVING BEYOND HIERARCHY

This advice comes from an executive at the storied The Second City comedy club in Chicago, which birthed stars such as John Belushi, Gilda Radner, Tina Fey, and Stephen Colbert.

Kelly Leonard, executive director of insights and applied improvisation at The Second City and co-author of the book *Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses "No, But" Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration — Lessons from The Second City*, who worked his way up from a dishwasher, says, "There are some situations in which you're not going to succeed and (those situations are) not going to be healthy."

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"We've taught workshops where one person isn't getting it," he said. "We're trying our darnedest. That's a bigger problem than improv can solve. A narcissist cannot improvise. But at least we'll give you skills for deflecting that kind of situation." Yet if leaders who run workplaces agree to act "with inclusion,

charity, and respect" toward others — characteristics that do nothing to detract or diminish their decision-making authority — the bullies usually decide to leave, according to the *Yes, And* chapter titled "How to Build an Ensemble."

The idea of building "ensembles" instead of "teams" frees companies to drop hierarchies — an admittedly difficult step for many to even consider — and let everyone feel important, exchange ideas, and be responsible to one another in order to generate innovation and attract talent.

It's a difficult process because such group dynamics mean that leaders must build consensus, stay alert to how the group's dynamics affect each person, and how the people affect the group, according to the book.

HELPFUL TECHNIQUES

One of the key traits of ensemble members is giving up the need to be right all the time. That doesn't mean that women, in particular, concede important issues. Indeed, women need to recognize and purposefully counter

workplace gender stereotypes and biases, says Andrea "Andie" Kramer, J.D., a partner at the McDermott Will and Emery law firm in Chicago who leads the financial products, trading, and derivatives group.

Determined to ensure that women can be happy and successful, Kramer

co-founded the Women's Leadership and Mentoring Alliance, a not-for-profit corporation that provides a national mentorship program for women in a variety of industries and professions, and she developed a leadership institute for the Women's Bar Association of Illinois.

Kramer has also written a book with her husband, fellow attorney Alton B. Harris, J.D., advising women how to overcome discriminatory biases in the workplace. In the book, *Breaking Through Bias: Communication Techniques for Women to Succeed at Work* (Routledge), Kramer writes that she realized that "successful women deal with gender stereotypes through nuanced and carefully honed communication techniques."

Harris said he co-wrote the book because he believes it's important for women to hear what they're up against from a man's point of view. "Most senior men don't have a clue about how much harder it is for a woman to succeed in a career than it is for a man," he writes. "Too many of these men don't think about unconscious gender bias at all, or they do not take the issue sufficiently seriously."

The book's glossary includes definitions of what they dub "benevolent bias," the "double bind," "mind priming," "power posing," and "self monitoring." The authors emphasize that they aren't blaming women for the biases they encounter, but rather aim to offer techniques to thwart those biases.

One such bias, deemed benevolent, is seen when senior men in a company act in a kind, considerate, and even solicitous way toward women who work for them, but never think of offering women the same career opportunities and responsibilities as men. "It is a form

of subtle sexism,” they write.

The “double bind” sets up a similar dilemma: It’s “a situation in which a woman suffers adverse career consequences whichever way she behaves: if she is communal, she is likable but not regarded as a leader; if she is agentic, she is competent but regarded as not likable and subject to backlash. We often refer to this situation as the Goldilocks Dilemma: appearing too tough or too soft but rarely just right,” according to the glossary.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

The first step is for a woman to understand herself so well, she reaches a high degree of self-awareness, or what the social science literature often calls high self-monitoring. “This is an awareness of what you are communicating — not just the substantive content of what you are saying, but everything you are conveying about yourself as a result of the totality of your behavior,” according to the book, excerpted with the authors’ permission.

That means you’ll be able to do what the authors call “impression management” to be promoted — as someone your superiors notice will benefit your employer and offer exclusive value to your organization.

“The way you see yourself affects the way you act; and the way you act affects the impressions others form of you,” the authors say. The book offers examples of phrases to avoid; the appropriate tone, pace, and volume of your voice; self-deprecating and self-defeating words to steer clear of; and giving and accepting work assignments in empowering ways.

Even for the most confident woman, preparing for a new or stressful situation still requires “priming,” the authors say. That’s accomplished by, for example, spending five minutes concentrating on a time when you felt especially powerful. It might involve reminding yourself when you received a promotion and job transfer you’d dreamed of.

After adopting a powerful mindset, the authors suggest taking videos of

yourself to see how you communicate. “Identify your tics, habits, gestures, postures, and expressions that could be sending negative messages about your abilities. Then start working to get this sort of behavior out of your communication repertoire,” they advise.

And, just as SWE provides its members, the authors urge women to find mentors — other women, whether upperclass female student or career professionals — to look up to, seek advice from, and work toward goals together.

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Of course, the employer bears a key responsibility, too — assessing employees’ work objectively, so that gender has no bearing on how people are recruited, hired, trained, assessed, and rewarded.

“Subjective work processes are the root of almost all evil in the workplace” because bosses can jump through loopholes and evade fuzzy language to behave in ways that drive people away, said Rex Conner, a workplace expert, partner at the Mager Consortium, and author of the book, *“What if Common Sense Was Common Practice in Business?”*

“The more companies take subjectivity out of their work processes, the less power someone has to advance their own agenda,” Conner said. Conner noted that, as engineer and quality-control guru W. Edwards Deming, Ph.D., once said, “A bad process will beat a good person every time.”

The Mager Consortium is named for Robert F. Mager, Ph.D., a psychologist and pioneer of performance-based training credited with revolutionizing the performance-improvement industry

with his groundbreaking work — the Criterion Referenced Instruction (CRI) framework. According to Conner, the good news is that people, and women in particular, can make a difference as individuals. He noted that companies are starting to take notice of the need for objective processes.

“It needs to be a culture that comes from the top,” Conner said. “It needs to be OK for everyone to have open conversations. Those conversations could include asking, ‘What does a being

a ‘team player’ mean?’ The boss may say, ‘Show up for team meetings on time.’ Fair enough. ‘And volunteer for assignments at least once a month and stop rolling your eyes when your teammates speak.’

You’ve just objectified and translated ‘team player’ into observable performance,” Conner said.

“When companies hear the message and say, ‘This doesn’t break the bank. This can make me money,’ they recognize it’s what industries need to do,” Conner said. “Not only does it make a business more money, it improves the lives of the people involved.” ✨

Editor’s note: See the feature story, “Proactive Approaches to Difficult Times,” along with the Life and Work column, “Interactive Theater: Improving Human Interactions and Advancing Equity,” and this issue’s Viewpoint, “How to Fake It Until You Make It ... Improvise!” for related material on this topic.