**Caution: Women Competing at Work**

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By Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster

Here’s some exciting news: women now make up 49% of the workforce and 57% of the college population—indisputable evidence that women aren’t just a part of the workforce, they’re shaping it. After years of fighting for the rights and privileges that men enjoy, women are finally positioned to become the top influencers at work, at home, and in the world.

So what’s the downside? While women continue to forge ahead educationally, economically, and professionally, they face a particular challenge: helping each other succeed. As female professionals continue to enter and occupy the workforce in large numbers, there are a few skills they need to develop and a few habits they must unlearn. The number one interpersonal habit that has to go is covert competition among women.

What is covert competition?  Put simply, covert competition involves “winning” by indirectly putting the other person down. Here are a few examples:

* When Joyce got a promotion, her coworker remarked, “Wow. How did you pull that off?”
* Just before a sales presentation, Carol’s colleague told her, “I’m surprised that you’re leading this meeting. I heard that the client doesn’t like you.”
* Tracey was stunned to discover that her employee failed to give her important messages from a top client.

Covert competition is a form of indirect aggression, which many women are prone to practice when they feel competitive with other women at work. This is not an indictment against women or the way they relate. The fact is, while men are friendly at work, women often become friends. And while men may be comfortable competing directly with each other for promotions, raises, and recognition, women have a harder time dealing with these issues.

Women’s tendency to bond with other women is a complicating factor when competitive feelings emerge at work. A woman can like her coworker but still feel jealous when the coworker gets promoted. She may admire her colleague’s presentation skills yet feel threatened by that same person’s popularity. Or, a female employee may respect her boss professionally but resent her material wealth and extravagant vacations.

In response to the growing number of woman-to-woman relationships at work, we think it’s time to replace covert competition with a different interactive model. We’d like to recognize and accept the fact that the workplace is a competitive environment, and that today’s professional woman must find a way to successfully navigate the competitive feelings and actions of other women, as well as manage her own responses.

We believe the most important way to refrain from covert competition is simply to *not go there;* that is, if you sense that a woman feels threatened by or competitive with you, do not react to her negative behavior. We realize this is much easier said than done. The natural response when a woman feels attacked by one of her female colleagues is to counter attack; yet counter attacking leaves both parties caught in a cycle:

* Joyce might counterattack the woman who asks her how she “pulled off” her promotion by making a face, telling her off, or badmouthing her to others.
* Carol could counterattack her mean-spirited colleague by shutting her out, calling her names, or defriending her on Facebook.
* Tracey could counterattack the female employee who fails to give her important messages by yelling at her or ridiculing her in public.

Each of these counterattacks is understandable but not constructive.  Counterattacking just perpetuates the power struggle and keeps the covert competition going.

To “not go there” requires approaching any covertly competitive situation with another woman at work from a professional—not personal—perspective.  It means that you pause before responding to her rude remark or sabotaging behavior. Instead of retaliating, you take the high road, by addressing the professional situation without engaging in a personal battle.

* In Joyce’s case, the high road would involve not reacting to her coworker’s sarcastic question defensively. Instead, she could state the facts, “I got the promotion based on my performance,” and leave it at that.
* Carol could address her jealous colleague’s quip about the client not liking her with a neutral statement like, “That’s not my understanding of the situation. Want to help me set up the PowerPoint?”
* Tracey could take the high road by meeting with her employee to find out why these important client messages failed to reach her. Together they could design a fail proof message-relay system going forward.

Having interviewed hundreds of professional women from many different industries, we’ve learned that most woman-to-woman workplace relationships are stellar. When the chemistry is right, two (or more) women can combine their talents and expertise to produce tremendous results. They can also be great friends.

Still, as we continue to shape the new world of work, we understand that covert competition is bound to exist in certain situations, for example where two women are vying for a promotion, a raise, or recognition at work. Developing healthy ways to “not go” there becomes part of our professional challenge.

**“Don’t Go There” Tips**

1. Acknowledge that the workplace is, by nature, a competitive environment. You are going to face both friendly and unfriendly female competitors at work.

2. If there is a mean girl (covert competitor) in the office, do your best not to take her behavior personally. Trust that whatever she’s doing (spreading vicious gossip, displaying a condescending attitude, making petty remarks) says more about her than it does about you.

3. No matter what the other woman does, *do not*counter attack. Do not roll your eyes at her, badmouth her to your girlfriends, or turn a cold shoulder to her as she walks by.

4. Try to devise a professional approach to solving any problems that arise between the two of you.

5. Practice being friendly toward other women at work without necessarily becoming friends. Be selective about the female colleagues that you let into your inner circle. Let each woman earn your trust.

Women are definitely slowly but surely climbing up the corporate ladder. Learn how women successfully compete in a business enviornment by [signing up to our free webcast](https://www.amanet.org/webcasts/How-Women-Succeed-in-Competitive-Business-Environments/).

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