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High Octane Women

How superachievers can avoid burnout

by Sherrie Bourg Carter, Psy.D.

The Invisible Barrier: Second Generation Gender Discrimination

The New Face of Gender Bias and How We Can Stop It

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Given the multitude of stressors in today's workplace--inadequate resources, long work hours, increasing work demands, and lack of recognition to name just a few--it's not surprising that more than half of American workers report being dissatisfied with their jobs. However, these rather obvious stressors account for only part of the stress high octane women experience in the workplace. Gender-biased workplace stressors are often the most difficult to cope with and to combat, largely because they're often invisible.

Unlike first generation gender discrimination (intentional acts of bias against women), women in today's workforce, especially those working in traditionally male-dominated fields, are experiencing a much more camouflaged foe--second generation gender biases that are impeding their advancement and adding stress to their lives. According to researchers at the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO), second generation gender biases are "work cultures and practices that appear neutral and natural on their face," yet they reflect masculine values and life situations of men who have been dominant in the development of traditional work settings.[1] These deeply entrenched gender-biased dynamics exist in our culture, norms, and organizational practices and directly impact hiring decisions, promotion, and salaries.

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Gender-Biased Dynamics

One common gender-biased dynamic is the way in which leadership tends to be judged in the workplace. "Good" leaders are expected to be strong, confident, and assertive. Yet, when women act strong, confident, and assertive, they're often perceived and judged as uncaring, self-promoting, and aggressive. And when they act in more collaborative ways, they're viewed as not possessing "good" leadership skills. It's a classic double bind.

Another common dynamic that works against women in the workforce is how they are compared to a traditonally masculine ideal. For example, most businesses today have policies that, at least on their face, appear to be sensitive to work/life balance issues (paid family leave, flex schedules, etc.). However, favor is still shown to those workers whose work habits encapsulate what most companies view as an "ideal worker"--that is, someone who puts work before family, who can work long hours, and who doesn't take much if any time off for personal matters. Because most women are still primarily responsible for child care, family care, and home care responsibilities, the edge often goes to males who don't have or don't typically assume these non-work types of responsibilities.

A third example of gender bias in the workplace is gender stereotyping. Gender stereotypes are "false representations or misrepresentations of reality based on gender that unconsciously govern our thoughts and actions."[2] Gender stereotypes can have a powerful influence over the way women are viewed by their colleagues, both male and female. For instance, women are typically viewed as having better "taking care" skills (supportive, encouraging) whereas men are generally viewed as having better "take charge" skills (problem-solving, assertiveness, influence).[3]

Although such gender-biased views are often inaccurate, their existence in the workplace colors the way men and women are treated, judged, and promoted. In fact, gender stereotypes and double binds often work hand in hand. For example, when a woman's performance is measured in stereotypical ways (supportive and encouraging), it often places her in a double bind (she's judged as more personable and better liked, but seen as less competent). The opposite is true as well (women who are viewed as strong, assertive problem-solvers tend to be judged as competent, but overly aggressive and unlikable).[4]

What Can Be Done?

The first step to short-circuiting these invisible barriers is knowledge and awareness, and not just on the part of the worker. CGO researchers note that because second generation gender biases are largely invisible, misperceptions that gender bias no longer exists abound among leaders in

the workforce. Workplace education and training can go a long way in helping coworkers and bosses understand the new face of gender bias and its differential impact on men's and women's careers.

Secondly, calling attention to gender bias when it occurs can sometimes be an effective tool for reducing or eliminating it. Rather than stew with anger, speak up. Yes, in some instances, there may be backlash, but the alternative is to prolong the life of something that should have died long ago. In addition, some instances of gender bias are unintentional and unrecognized by the perpetrator. By calling attention to what is happening when it happens, the perpetrator will either learn from it or at least may think twice before doing it again, recognizing that you're not going to silently stand by and let it continue.

What the Future Holds

As more and more women move into upper level management and executive positions--despite the odds against them--these gender-biased perceptions and workplace practices should begin to slowly disappear. In fact, women may not be the only agents of future change. According to sociology professor Kathleen Gerson, author of *The Unfinished Revolution*, both men and women in the generation just now moving into the workforce--the generation she calls "children of the gender revolution"--hold high hopes for a world unrestricted by rigid gender roles, and they want a workplace that can provide that. Hopefully, the diversity of this new generation's experiences will serve to shape the workplace into a place where the unique qualities of women will no longer be devalued and punished, but instead will be respected and embraced.

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[1] Spela Trefault, Deborah Merrill-Sands, Deborah Kolb, and Suzanne Carter, "Closing the Women's Leadership Gap: Who Can Help?" April, 2011, accessed May 1, 2011, http://www.simmons.edu/som/docs/insights_32_v6.pdf.

[2] Sherrie Bourg Carter, *High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011), p. 43.

[3] *Women "Take Care," Men "Take Charge": Stereotyping of U.S. Business Leaders Exposed,* research report for Catalyst (New York: Catalyst, 2005), p. 4.

[4] *The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't,* research report for Catalyst (New York: Catalyst, 2007), p. 11.

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