

Women of Influence



DENNIS G. HENDRICKS

Jo Miller, CEO of Women's Leadership Coaching Inc., conducts a meeting at HP, in Palo Alto, with members of the Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology.

WOMEN BOTH HELP AND HINDER EACH OTHER

By Diana Diamond

Women can be each other's best allies — or worst obstacles — in the Silicon Valley world of business. They can help — or just as frequently hurt — each other in a corporate climate where women valiantly strive to climb the corporate ladder.

Indeed, when a number of female managers were asked whether women “helped” or “hindered” each other in the workplace, the resounding answer was “Yes! And yes!”

And while times and attitudes have changed, and

there are more women in the workplace than ever before, and more female managers, sometimes the competitive struggle to get to the executive level can oftentimes find one female manager blocking another woman's path to the top.

A CLIMB

Depending upon the age of the female manager, and the struggles involved to get to that level, the “you must do it on your own” philosophy still prevails.

“There's been this stereotypical image of senior-

level executives who climbed the ladder in high heels. They worked hard and were driven, and they are of the opinion that everyone else has to pay their dues, too,” says Jo Miller, CEO of her own company, Women's Leadership Coaching Inc.

During the past two or three decades, major changes have occurred. Women now are well-regarded and respected in the workplace as professionals, and while the path to the top may still be a difficult road to drive down, middle-level managers frequently are women. Women are no longer easily ignored.

It was only a couple of decades ago when all the men in the office were called “Mister,” and all the women were addressed only by their first names.

But women still have workplace obstacles their male counterparts do not. For one thing, they are sometimes not viewed as seriously.

In the famous experiment called the “Goldberg paradigm,” people were asked to examine a specific article or speech, supposedly by a man. Other individuals were asked to evaluate the same article or speech, supposedly by a woman. The findings were consistent worldwide: The very same words are rated higher if coming from a man.

In somewhat similar studies by social scientists, it was found people perceive female leaders more negatively than male ones — even if women behave exactly the same as the men.

Alice Eagly, a psychologist at Northwestern University has shown “that people discriminate against female leaders because qualities stereotypically associated with women (nurturance) conflict with stereotypically masculine qualities associated with effective leaders (assertiveness).

“Women who display masculine qualities often achieve success but lose out in popularity. Women leaders face a double bind that is difficult to overcome,” Eagly says.

WOMEN MORE WILLING TO HELP

Perhaps because of these stereotypical hurdles, women are more caring about each other now,

especially if they are in their 20s and 30s. And they are learning to self-promote.

“Women are more willing now to help each other. They give each other ideas, trade information. They don’t count the hours they give quite as much as men do,” says Kay Paumier, CEO of Communications Plus in Fremont.

“Women need to know they have to boast of their accomplishments. But they also know not to become strutting peacocks. Men sometimes don’t get this. But women also have to learn to talk about their accomplishments,” says Miller.

But a word of caution: A Rutgers University study by psychologist Laurie Rudman found that people dislike self-promoting women far more than they dislike self-promoting men. Men are hesitant to hire a self-promoting woman even knowing that she is competent — they are more comfortable hiring a woman they like than one they know can do the job.

Women sometimes feel, Miller says, that if they work hard, do well and produce results they will get rewarded — just like being in school and getting a gold star. “But if you put your head down and work hard you will get deluged with more work — but not necessarily promoted.”

MENTORING CAN HELP

Women also are learning that they need mentors — just as men have had mentors in their trek to the top.

“Women today recognize the need to mentor and

champion each other. There’s a driving demand to offer a strong networking component,” says Jerri Barrett, director of marketing for the Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology in Palo Alto. This nonprofit organization works to help increase the impact of women in technology as well as help them network.

Two factors that can prevent women from helping each other, Miller says, are:

- The feeling that senior-level women have so many demands on their time that they can’t do any one-to-one mentoring.

- Junior-level women see senior-level women as too busy to even have lunch with. They feel they are wasting a person’s time in asking them to be a mentor.

But, Miller says, many senior women are willing to take time to mentor younger women, because they know how valuable such mentoring can be.

“I encourage women to use mentors — even if it’s only for 20 or 30 minutes now and then,” says Miller. “Men seem to attach themselves to male mentors more naturally. Men seem more willing to be mentors for each other and they go to each other for business advice. They ask each other to open doors. They position their mentees for opportunities.”

Women should do the same thing for each other, she says.

Diana Diamond is a freelance writer based in Palo Alto.