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Put Down Powder Puff, Grab Weapons of Success

By Dawn Sagario, the Des Moines Register

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I've come a long way from the stammering, blushing high school girl who stared at the ground when meeting new people.

But there are still times when that demure, accommodating, girly girl makes her presence known through the nuances of my communication style at work.

Women are taught as children to be sweet and no aggressive - traits that are reinforced throughout their lifetimes, said Lois P. Frankel, author of "Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: 101 Unconscious Mistakes Women Make That Sabotage Their Careers" (Warner Books, 2004).

Women need to be advocates for themselves by playing up their strengths - like being nurturing, accommodating and good listeners - while also adding complementary behaviors, said Frankel, president of Corporate Coaching International in Pasadena, Calif.

"You don't have to be like a guy to get ahead in business, but you do have to be an adult woman," said Frankel, who is an executive coach.

One common mistake Frankel sees women make is couching statements as questions. By doing that, women hand over the power of decision-making to someone else, like the boss.

Instead of using phrases like, "Would it be all right if...," she suggests saying, "I just want to let you know..." or "I've got this great idea that I'd like to move forward with, and I want to give you the heads-up on it."

Women, who tend to react more quickly than men, need to instead take some time to think about how to best handle a situation, said Maureen McCormick, director of the learning and development unit in the human resources department at the University of Iowa.

If a situation upset you, take an hour to evaluate what the best response is to attaining your goal, McCormick said. Maybe wait a day. "If you just react, you may do or say something you regret."

McCormick said women have become increasingly more assertive in the workplace, but are generally still more nonassertive than men.

Frankel's other suggestions for women include:

- Don't explain ad nauseam. Women look for clues like "mmm hmm" and head nods to ensure that the message they're trying to convey is getting through. When women don't get that reinforcement, "We make our point, we make it again, and make it again," she said. "The more words you use, the more you soften a message."

- Don't use minimizing words. If someone compliments you on a job well done, steer clear from saying, "It was nothing," or "I was really lucky." Instead say, "Thank you, I'm proud of what I achieved."

- Do go to meetings. Women often think that poorly run meetings are a waste of time, and that they can skip them in lieu of doing more productive tasks, Frankel said. Instead, meetings should be seen as a place to network and build relationships that can benefit you in the future.

- Don't apologize for other people's mistakes or misdirection. The boss gave you minimal instructions for a project. Once you've completed it, the boss says that it wasn't what he had in mind. Instead of saying, "I'm sorry," and minimizing your position, Frankel suggested, "Well, the instructions weren't clear to me. Tell me how you want it."

- Do get involved in office politics. Replace the word "politics" with "relationships," Frankel said. "That's what politics is - it's about building a relationship before you need it."

Skittish about the schmoozing? Try this: Schedule 10 minutes, every other day, to visit a colleague's office and have a "doorway conversation." Maybe you noticed her son's graduation picture on the desk; you can ask if he went on to college. Make more contacts by joining a professional association and getting on the membership committee. That will give you a chance to meet new members.

McCormick said a big problem for both men and women is being too afraid to put a request out there. Many mistakenly have a predetermined notion that they'll get shot down, before they even try asking.

Find a mentor and model your behavior after people with successful work communication skills, said Wendy Ford, interim director of the career center at the University of Iowa.

Know the possible negative impact of nonverbal communication - crossing your arms, rolling your eyes, putting your hands on your hips or rocking back on your heels, Ford said. Find venues to practice not only your oral and written communication skills, but your body language, too.

Women should also be aware of the level of professionalism their manner of dress projects, Ford said. Think about the level of professionalism associated with a top with a lower neckline versus a button-down blouse with a scarf.

In interviews, wear less jewelry and stick with a skirt that's no higher than just above your knees, she said. "You want to minimize distractions."

And don't forget the value of eye contact, and a good handshake: the two hands should meet

solidly at the base of the thumbs. Don't extend just your fingers or cup the other person's hand.

McCormick said managers can be more assertive by giving employees specific feedback on how to improve work behaviors.

For example: Telling a worker, "You're being rude to customers," leaves too much up to interpretation. Try: "You need to look up at customers and say 'Good morning.'"

She said managers are increasingly recognizing the value of integrating traits into their management style typically viewed as feminine: being empathetic and supportive, listening effectively and coaching workers.

McCormick said that's resulted in men and women meeting in the middle: Women are becoming more assertive, while men are trying to be more empathetic.

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