

AS YOUNG GIRLS SOUTH AFRICAN woman are socialised into being submissive, unassertive and relatively unambitious. This form of behaviour manifests itself in both overt and covert ways, consciously and subconsciously. Despite this pattern, more women are entering the corporate world.

Discrimination against women, however, has been an integral part of the corporate world and will take a long time to be eradicated. Nevertheless, a start can and must be made.

Once in the workplace, female employees encounter two types of men: those who do not acknowledge women's equality or potential and those who think they are being kind and considerate when they give women fewer responsibilities.

More importantly, these patterns of behaviour which are overtly sexist, privilege men, and are common in many organisations. As a result, women are substantially under-represented in management and over concentrated in positions with few prospects for mobility or growth. Although some women are competent to hold management positions, they continue to experience lingering prejudice against

promotion. Many women hold the view that as a result of sexism, particularly in male dominated fields, women must work harder than men and achieve more in order to gain acceptance and promotion. The stage of a male-dominated culture, also takes much more subtle forms. For some women a male dominated culture means being patronised or not being taken as seriously as men. For others it is a feeling of not being heard and of lacking the confidence or desire to be assertive enough to make an impression.

Hence, women encounter problems that have nothing to do with their skills, intelligence or work record but only with their sex.

One of the first things about the corporate world that needs to be understood is that it is a world not very receptive to women. It is an environment which has fed on the myths of male superiority and female subservience.

How then, do women assert themselves in organisations that continually disregard them in their formal structures?

- ▲ Woman should not accept any forms of discrimination.
- ▲ Women should tackle these incidents in a resolute manner. To let an incident pass unchallenged is to encourage this type of behaviour. Their presence in the corporate world presents an opportunity to alert males to their stereotypes and to help them overcome it.

WOMEN

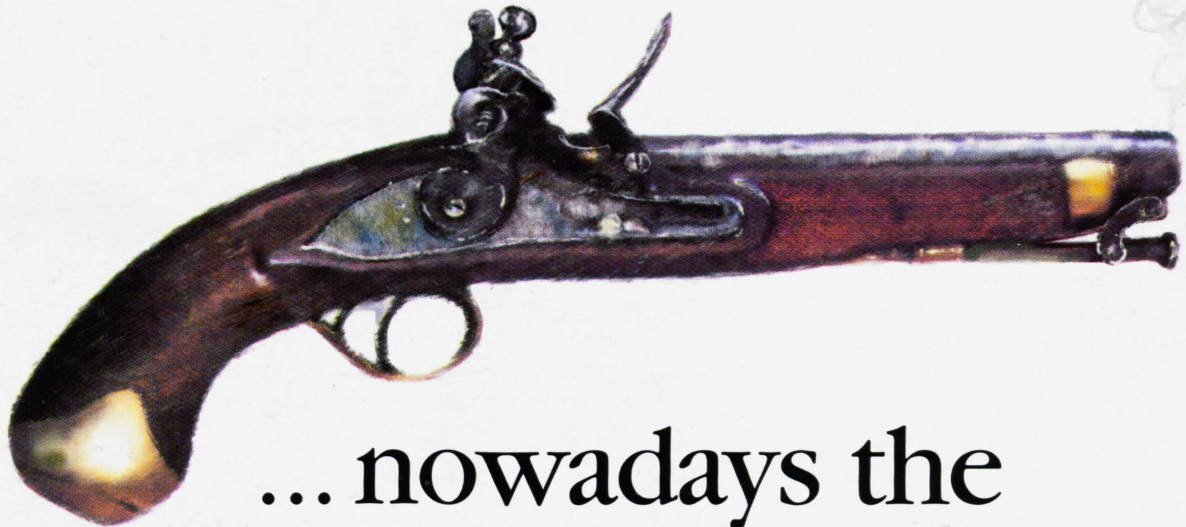
SHOULD ASSERT THEMSELVES IN ORGANISATIONS THAT DISREGARD THEM IN FORMAL STRUCTURES

By Goonasagree Naidoo



N

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MAXIMISING THE POTENTIAL OF PEOPLE

- ▲ Women will need all the emotional and intellectual resources they can muster.
- ▲ Ignorance or lack of proper training can no longer be an excuse. If women are not properly informed on the right procedures in the corporate world, it is their duty to become so. Women can only demand respect as professionals if they act professionally.

Dress appropriately

One of the very serious difficulties for women is how to be taken seriously in the corporate world. Dressing inappropriately tends to count against women as it reinforces the male notion of women as sex objects.

Developing self-esteem

One of the first casualties of sexual oppression is loss of self-esteem, confidence and a sense of who one is. This psychological dimension of discrimination is often overlooked, yet it plays a powerful role in whether or not women can rise above obstacles that have been put in their way. Women have a valid and distinct role to play in the corporate world which no one should take away.

Having the self esteem and confidence is therefore extremely important. Knowing who they are and being proud of it will arm women to fend off the various overt and covert acts and attitudes by which being women is demeaned and being male elevated. It means making a point of objecting to the use of negative stereotypes of women and a whole range of other negative phenomena that are so frequently encountered. These things may appear insignificant but a woman's reaction to them send a certain message about what she thinks about herself.

Be assertive

If women have sufficient self-esteem and confidence, they will find it easy to assert themselves when treated in a manner that they are not happy with. Being timid will not help. Nor will being abrasive. If a woman feels that she has been treated unfairly, she should go and speak to her boss and explain calmly and clearly why she believes that she is being treated unfairly. Sitting in the office fuming but not saying anything is cowardly and liable to be detrimental to one's health. The worst thing that can happen if a woman asserts herself is that her superiors will get angry and perhaps victimise her. But she is being treated unfairly so she might as well stand up for herself. Always keep in mind that her supervisors may not be aware that something is wrong or that she is unhappy. Only once she has brought it to their attention, can she be certain they know.

Learn to play the games of corporate politics

Research indicates that success in the corporate world is generic rather than gender bound. However, women often do not understand corporate politics and do not know how to play it to their advantage. Despite all the problems that women experience there is still some leeway which can be used. White males in the corporate world have used the system to get ahead and so can women This may mean



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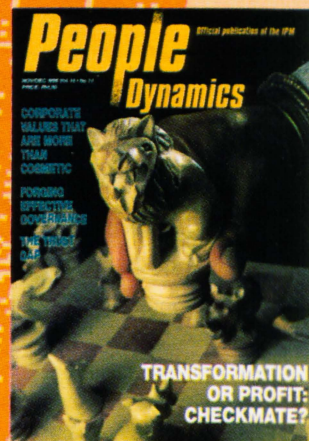
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sometimes doing things that they may not necessarily enjoy, like going to cocktail parties and sacrificing their free time. After all, a lot of corporate decisions are made at social gatherings outside working hours. The fundamental premise is that working is a game and women had better learn to play it.

Professional success can be attributed to a forceful personality and sharply defined short and long-term goals.

Exhibit competence and act professionally

Even if women do not feel confident, because of the various stereotypes of women they must act confidently and in time these attitudes among men will dissipate.

To gain the confidence and greater co-operation of the corporate world, women need to exhibit competence and act professionally. If they are competing with other male managers, women should observe closely what the men do wrong, and do things differently.

Be authoritative

Given the relations of domination and subordination in the country, it is very difficult for men and women to relate to each other outside of those parameters. Men are not used to being in a subordinate position. Women may at first find it difficult to give orders to men and to do so in a confident and businesslike manner. They need to draw on their confidence and self-esteem. When women deal with subordinates be it male or female, they need to send a message that they are their superiors, without being overbearing or officious about it. How women behave with subordinates will give others a clue as to how they should act. If a woman is in charge she should act accordingly. Subordinates will give problems of a different nature. Some of them are only used to white males being in positions of authority and will not find it easy to take orders from a woman. Here, knowledge of why they behave in this way and tact will come to one's rescue. It is, however, important to win their trust. Others will feel that they can get away with sloppy work, coming late and so on. It is important to keep a professional distance, if not you will not be able to work efficiently.

Get support

A consequence of the underestimation of women's abilities is the phenomenon known as the glass ceiling. Women are not promoted as fast and as frequently as white males. This is happening and will continue to happen in spite of the hard work, competence and enthusiasm. It is absolutely infuriating for women not to get the same recognition as men. If life gets unbearable inside the company, get support. In the corporate world support is vital. Support can make the difference between success and failure.

This support can come in many different ways. One can draw support from other women who are probably experiencing the same problems. Arrange for a group to be formed to deal with some problems. The corporate environment is more likely to change

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company to form pressure groups for change and negotiating forums for dialogue with management. Management will initially not be well disposed towards groups of this nature, but if the process is handled well they will gradually accept it. If similar groups get established at a number of companies, women might then begin the process of liaising with one another in order to learn how best to solve problems.

Groups of this nature would also relieve the social isolation women feel in the corporate world. It is pointless to pretend for the sake of appearances that everything is okay when it is not. Remember, these problems are not the fault of women. There is nothing wrong with women. They should not be ashamed to speak to other women about their problems.

WOMEN HIGHER IN AN ORGANISATION ARE UNDER AS MUCH STRESS AS WOMEN AT THE LOWER END OF THE CORPORATE LADDER.

If you are a manager, it would be useful to share your experiences with other women in your company and to guide them in resolving the problems they will inevitably encounter. Women in these positions need to become mentors, so that they can encourage other women to advance in the corporate world. Talking to several women in junior positions, one gets the impression that the higher women go, the more distant they become from other women in junior positions. However, the senior women in management indicated that the problems do not necessarily subside as they go higher and that they are under as much stress as other women at the lower end of the corporate ladder.

Fight stress

The stress levels of working women in the corporate world are unacceptably high, certainly higher than in men. This conclusion is not the result of a scientific survey, rather an inference made by many women in organisations.

Be an agent of change within the company

Do not accept things that hamper your ability to realise your full potential, or that impair your dignity as a woman. Change the environment not just for yourself but for other women.

Discourage stereotypes and myths

Women must embark on programmes to fight discriminatory behaviour against women. Questions of prejudice and stereotypes, for example, should be brought out in the open and discussed so that men are alerted to their own prejudices and sexist actions which are often unconscious. Many companies

already have sensitising workshops where general matters on transformation are brought up, but there is no specific focus on gender. It is important for companies to conduct workshops to heighten gender issues.

As long as we are inactive, gender insensitivity will continue and organisations will do nothing about it.


Discourage offensive terminology

Though men may not be conscious of the use of certain terminology, such terms have important psychological implications for women employees. Though they seem petty at first glance, they do reinforce stereotypes in a subtle way. Women have the right to be referred to in a manner that they find acceptable. This is the essence of equality and respect for others. The fact that some women do not object to certain terms and even accept them does not render such terms any more acceptable to the majority of us. They should not be used. Period. Nothing is lost by using more acceptable terms, thereby enhancing worker relations.

What role can organisations play?

Organisations can:

- ▲ develop an explicit hiring policy with viable goals to place women;
- ▲ provide perks, such as day-care support;
- ▲ institute mentoring programmes for talented women;
- ▲ make appointments and promotion criteria as transparent as possible, and allow for a minimum of subjective decision-making;
- ▲ discrimination in the provision of benefits;
- ▲ develop commitment to measuring and understanding sexism, and discover ways of providing gender-sensitive environment;
- ▲ have proper channels for the reporting and handling of sexual harassment;
- ▲ provide leadership/management training for women.

None of these recommendations, individually or together will give women the equal status in the workplace that they deserve. But organisations can help to change a culture from being hostile and closed to women to being open-minded and recognising their talent. These measures will, however, have a cumulative beneficial effect on the position of women in the corporate world. 

Goonasagree Naidoo

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