

Women at work 101 for male colleagues

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Male employees, who consider themselves progressive and meritocratic, can sometimes find themselves at a loss as implicit and/or explicit accusations mount up that they are “dinosaurs” with regressive ideals. They might find themselves gently steered away from roles that require significant engagement with foreign clients and partners, or roles that require innovative, cutting-edge engagement with a younger demographic. These men genuinely do not know what they are doing wrong or what they should be doing. Here’s is a list of assumptions, even if they are unintentional, about women colleagues that might be holding back many a competent men from growing in the organisation, and a primer on what can be done about it.

She is not your mom. Mothers selflessly give of themselves, attend to everyone’s needs, and do it without compensation or credit. Male colleagues, sometimes unconsciously, expect their women colleagues to play the same role in the workplace. It is not uncommon for men, and even women, to assume that it is ‘natural’ for women colleagues on the team perform certain tasks like community-building, remembering birthdays, catering food for the team, or setting up workplace creches and summer programs for children. While these are important for meaningful engagement in the workplace, they take up time and effort. The work, however, is not acknowledged let alone compensated.

Team members, both men and women, will do good to share these evenly. If you are a man and find yourself expecting a woman colleague to do these tasks, then step back and chip in instead.

She is not your personal assistant. The dominant model that most of us saw growing up is of a male boss and a woman assistant (male pilots and women stewardesses and male doctors and women nurses, to name a few). It is possible that these notions of social stereotypes are so hard-wired that male colleagues expect women on their teams to play by it. Asking women in the team to set up meetings, and make reminder calls are common and go unnoticed.

Both men and women should watch out for these unconscious, stereotypical gender roles. And if you are a man and find yourself expecting female colleagues to pick up after you and play your secretary, you need to rein in this behavior.

She is not your shishya (pupil). Gurus, across religions, typically tend to be men, and religious leaders, across religions, are also typically men. Given that this is what we have seen and imbibed growing up, both men and women tend to associate knowledge, abstract thinking, and visionary ideas with masculinity. This assumption is problematic in workplaces, and sometimes male colleagues unconsciously enact the role of ‘guru’ schooling women bosses and colleagues on what to do and how to do their jobs. This undercuts and belittles women’s experience and expertise.

Another consequence is that women’s ideas, especially when they are strategic, long term and visionary (rather than operational and short-term) get ignored or discounted, burying new ideas and initiatives. To counter this, women find themselves giving the credit for their ideas to a male colleague, in the hope that it will be accepted. This inhibits free exchange of ideas and knowledge.

She is a fellow professional; treat her as such. Male colleagues, at any level in the organisational hierarchy, must make efforts to identify and verbalise latent biases, and counter them. Listen, consciously, to oneself and others. And give credit where credit is due.

We form and reinforce associations between leadership, abstract thinking, and masculinity through observations, which then become our expectations and belief of how the world is; even more dangerous, they can become our framework for how the world should be.

As society and the workforce changes, these unconscious assumptions must be called out and changed. They have a pernicious effect on both men and women at work, taking away credit from women employees, and boxing male employees into a corner, making them less effective leaders.

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