

# Gendered expectations and workplace conflict

June 20 2017

---



Women often expect more support and flexibility from their female bosses.  
Credit: Massey University

Massey University PhD graduate Jane Hurst studied the complicated relationships between women in the workplace – and found that women

often have gendered expectations of each other.

She found that women with female bosses sometimes had negative experiences – but it wasn't necessarily because of the Queen Bee Syndrome, a phenomenon where women managers aggressively work against the interests of other women in the organisation.

"I think the Queen Bee Syndrome exists but I don't think it happens to the extent that people may think. None of the women who reported having a difficult relationship with a woman manager in my study had what would be described as a Queen Bee boss," Dr Hurst says.

"While I did see evidence of poor relationships and conflict, it's interesting that bad relationships between women get labelled 'Queen Bee' or 'Bully Broad', but bad relationships between men don't get negatively labelled in that way."

Through a series of workshops where women were asked to explore their expectations of female managers, Dr Hurst found they expected a higher degree of emotional understanding and support from their female bosses.

"At first they said there was no difference – I think we are all led to believe that everyone is treated equally," she says. "But when I began scratching beneath the surface, it became apparent that they did expect their [female managers](#) to be more aware of the complexities of their lives and to offer more flexibility to accommodate those complexities.

"It shows that underneath the veneer of what's socially accepted – that we are all treated the same – we still hold gendered stereotypes and expectations that we are probably not even aware of."

## **The 'double bind' faced by female managers**

Dr Hurst says women managers face a "double bind" because female employees don't have the same expectations of their male bosses.

"If women managers aren't focused on [relationship](#) building, it can be seen very negatively by their female staff. Whereas women probably don't expect a man to be as focused on relationships. If male bosses are, they exceed our expectations; if they aren't, they're just acting how we expect them to."

In her thesis Dr Hurst also investigated the impact bad relationships between women in the workplace have on their careers. She says that while the majority of relationships work just fine, at some stage most women will have a difficult experience and it is likely to affect their career path in some way.

"In my study, when this happened, most left their jobs and took either a backwards or sideways career step. Many also had their confidence dented.

"Interestingly, the women did not necessarily view the incidents as having a negative impact on their career, especially if they happened some time ago. I think this is consistent with most women not looking at their careers in terms of upward mobility in an organisational hierarchy."

She says women are more likely to view career success in terms of challenging, interesting and fulfilling work.

"It came through quite strongly in my research that traditional organisational hierarchy and executive positions don't fit with how many women see their careers. They take a whole-of-life view, their [career](#) isn't just their job. Many also saw management as becoming more and more removed from the work that actually made a difference."

## What organisations can do to help

Dr Hurst says she had always assumed that as more women entered the workforce, they would support younger women coming through and gender inequality would eventually disappear. She chose her thesis topic because that obviously hasn't happened.

She believes women managers, female employees and organisations all have a role to play. She says it's important for people to be aware of the expectations they hold, and whether those expectations are realistic in any given situation, because they affect relationships and can lead to misunderstandings.

"This level of self-awareness can only occur if there is an environment where women are encouraged to communicate. There also needs to be a trusted mechanism that provides staff with advice when there is conflict, someone to talk to without it becoming part of a formal process."

She says organisations also need to support women managers to meet the expectations of their female employees, including having influence on policies and structures that allow female staff to work and live their lives in a more integrated way.

"It's not going to have much impact if [women](#) in senior positions just have to abide by policies that don't support their female staff. And even when organisations have flexible policies, there can be a culture where people who take advantage of those policies are seen as less committed. If you are going to provide flexibility it has to be genuine."

Provided by Massey University

Citation: Gendered expectations and workplace conflict (2017, June 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-gendered-workplace-conflict.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.