

The Tyranny of the Queen Bee

Women who reached positions of power were supposed to be mentors to those who followed—but something is amiss in the professional sisterhood.

By Peggy Drexler (Wall Street Journal) March 6, 2013

Kelly was a bright woman in her early 30s: whip-smart, well qualified, ambitious—and confused. Even a little frightened.

She worked for a female partner in a big consulting firm. Her boss was so solicitous that Kelly hoped the woman—one of just a few top female partners—might become her mentor. But she began to feel that something was wrong. In meetings, her boss would dismiss her ideas without discussion and even cut her off in mid-sentence. Kelly started to hear about meetings to which she wasn't invited but felt she should be. She was excluded from her boss's small circle of confidants.

What confused Kelly was that she was otherwise doing well at the firm. She felt respected and supported by the other senior partners. She had just one problem, but it was a big one. One of the male partners pulled her aside and confirmed Kelly's suspicions: Her boss had been suggesting to others that Kelly might be happier in a different job, one "more in line with her skills."

I met Kelly while I was conducting research on women in the workplace. She was trying to puzzle through what she had done wrong and what to do about it. (To protect the privacy of Kelly and others in the study, I refer to them here by first names only.) I wasn't sure Kelly had done anything wrong, and I said so. As I told her, "You might have met a queen bee."

Having spent decades working in psychology, a field heavily populated by highly competitive women, I had certainly seen the queen bee before: The female boss who not only has zero interest in fostering the careers of women who aim to follow in her footsteps, but who might even actively attempt to cut them off at the pass.

The term "queen bee syndrome" was coined in the 1970s, following a study led by researchers at the University of Michigan—Graham Staines, Toby Epstein Jayaratne and Carol Tavris—who examined promotion rates and the impact of the women's movement on the workplace. In a 1974 article in *Psychology Today*, they presented their findings, based on more than 20,000 responses to reader surveys in that magazine and *Redbook*. They found that women who achieved success in male-dominated environments were at times likely to oppose the rise of other women. This occurred, they argued, largely because the patriarchal culture of work encouraged the few women who rose to the top to become obsessed with maintaining their authority.

Four decades later, the syndrome still thrives, given new life by the mass ascent of women to management positions. This generation of queen bees is no less determined to secure their hard-won places as alpha females. Far from nurturing the growth of younger female talent, they push aside possible competitors by chipping away at their self-confidence or undermining their professional standing. It is a trend thick with irony: The very women who have complained for decades about unequal treatment now perpetuate many of the same problems by turning on their own.



A 2007 survey of 1,000 American workers released by the San Francisco-based Employment Law Alliance found that 45% of respondents had been bullied at the office—verbal abuse, job sabotage, misuse of authority, deliberate destruction of relationships—and that 40% of the reported bullies were women. In 2010, the Workplace Bullying Institute, a national education and advocacy group, reported that female bullies directed their hostilities toward other women 80% of the time—up 9% since 2007. Male bullies, by contrast, were generally equal-opportunity tormentors.

A 2011 survey of 1,000 working women by the American Management Association found that 95% of them believed they were undermined by another woman at some point in their careers. According to a 2008 University of Toronto study of nearly 1,800 U.S. employees, women working under female supervisors reported more symptoms of physical and psychological stress than did those working under male supervisors.

Something is clearly amiss in the professional sisterhood.

Erin, another participant in my own study, was a food writer at a glossy magazine. Her supervisor, Jane, seemed out to get her from day one—though never quite to her face. Jane liked playing hot and cold: One day she would pull Erin close to gossip about another colleague; the next she would scream at her for not following through on a task Erin hadn't known she was expected to perform.

Erin eventually found out that Jane was bad-mouthing her to mutual contacts in the food and restaurant industry. Jane would casually slip barbs into business conversations, telling others, for example, that Erin had engaged in an affair with a married man (she hadn't) or was giving more favorable reviews to restaurant owners who were her friends (she wasn't).

Jane's campaign against Erin wasn't much more than mean-spirited gossiping, but Erin felt that it caused her peers to think of her differently and certainly made her professional life more difficult. But how could she lodge an official complaint? "What would it say?" Erin asked me. "Jane is talking about me behind my back?" At various points, Erin thought the only way to fight back was to play along and start trash-talking Jane. But was that really the solution?

As the old male-dominated workplace has been transformed, many have hoped that the rise of female leaders would create a softer, gentler kind of office, based on communication, team building and personal development. But instead, some women are finding their professional lives dominated by high school "mean girls" all grown up: women with something to prove and a precarious sense of security.

What makes these queen bees so effective and aggravating is that they are able to exploit female vulnerabilities that men may not see, using tactics that their male counterparts might never even notice. Like Jane's gossiping about Erin's personal life. Or when Kelly's boss would comment on her outfit: "Who are you trying to impress today?" Or not-so-gently condescend: "Did you take your smart pill today, sweetie?" Their assaults harm careers and leave no fingerprints.

That is one reason many victims never see such attacks coming—and are powerless to prevent them. In Kelly's case, she had assumed her female boss might want to help foster her growth out of some sense of female solidarity. Erin had specifically sought out working at the magazine because she admired Jane's writing and wanted to learn from her. Why wouldn't Jane be eager to teach? It is women, after all, who are hastening the table-pounding male bullies toward obsolescence.



But both Kelly and Erin's superiors seem to have viewed the women under them not as comrades in arms but as threats to be countered. In a world where there are still relatively few women in positions of power—just 2% of Fortune 500 CEOs and 16% of boards of directors, as noted in Deborah Rhode and Barbara Kellerman's book "Women and Leadership"—it is an understandable assumption that the rise of one would mean the ouster of another. One for one, instead of one plus one.

Though it is getting easier to be a professional woman, it is by no means easy. Some women—especially in industries that remain male-dominated—assume that their perches may be pulled from beneath them at any given moment (and many times, they are indeed encouraged to feel this way). Made to second-guess themselves, they try to ensure their own dominance by keeping others, especially women, down.

The result is a distinctive strain of negative leadership traits—less overtly confrontational than their domineering male counterparts but bullying just the same. Comments on appearance or dress are part of their repertoire—something that would be seen more obviously as harassment when coming from a man—as are higher, sometimes even unreasonable, expectations for performance. Women who have risen in male-dominated fields may want to tell themselves that their struggle and success were unique. As a result they sometimes treat the performance of females who follow as never quite good enough.

It cuts both ways, though: Women aren't always the best employees to other women either. Female subordinates can show less respect and deference to female bosses than to their male bosses.

Queen bees are less overtly confrontational than their male counterparts, but they are bullies just the same. C.J. Burton/Corbis

A 2007 Syracuse University study published in the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology found that both men and women were less satisfied with female managers who were not empathetic. In my experience, women also tend to resent female bosses who adopt a brusque and assertive management style, even as they find it perfectly acceptable for male bosses. And so they question and push back, answering authority with attitude.

One woman I encountered in my research, Amanda, faced this problem when she began a new job as a vice president at a Manhattan ad agency. The role was her first in management and included overseeing three women who were her age or younger. She knew she was qualified for the position, but from the very first day, Amanda had a difficult time feeling that she had their respect, or even their attention. Though deferential and solicitous to her male colleagues, they openly questioned Amanda's decisions. They went above her head, made comments about her wardrobe and even refused to say good morning and good night. She felt like she was back in high school, trying to break into an elite clique.

Amanda tried various tactics: being overly authoritative, being their "friend." Eventually she stopped trying to get them to respond or encouraging them to do their jobs as directed. Instead, she fired all three.

Queen bees are creatures of circumstance, encircling potential rivals in much the same way as the immune system attacks a foreign body. Female bosses are expected to be "softer" and "gentler" simply because they are women, even though such qualities are not likely the ones that got them to



where they are. In the more cutthroat precincts of American achievement, women don't reach the top by bringing in doughnuts in the morning.

Men use fear as a tool of advancement. Why shouldn't women do the same? Until top leadership positions are as routinely available to women as they are to men, freezing out the competition will remain a viable survival strategy.