



# I BELONG HERE

## WHY GOOD GIRLS COULD BE LOSING OUT IN THE WORKPLACE NOW

TEXT: ANNETTE REISSFELDER FOTO: DREAMSTIME.COM

*“Equality is a losing proposition” – so said Elisabeth Dennehy, last Business Woman Breakfast speaker, in a recent talk she gave on women managers’ issues.*

Dennehy’s interesting twist inspired me to look at issues of management from quite a different angle. Dennehy argues that because we are physiologically different – and indeed, the physical, hormonal and neuronal differences are well researched these days – men and women are biologically programmed to create complementary environments; also at the office. Now that’s an interesting point!

I can see what she is saying, even though I don’t believe this is 100% gender specific: diligent, nice, humble, conflict-avoiding individuals play an important role in keeping the

overall work environment the same – thus allowing others to get away with displaying boastful, self-promoting alpha-male behaviours. Because of the friendly, “complementary” female micro-environment at the water cooler, the atmosphere doesn’t turn completely toxic, and the team can still be efficient as a result.

But I wonder: isn’t it time for women to switch from creating a few islands of relief to actively SHAPING a DIFFERENT corporate culture? We still see many women showing the old behaviours (and speech patterns!) of learned powerlessness in business meetings today. Isn’t it time to stop

staring at the “glass ceiling”? What would change if we stopped asking ourselves: ‘How can women be on par with men?’ and replaced it by, ‘What new standards do we need so that our businesses will be prepared for what lies ahead?’ and ‘How can each of us nurture the right combination of male and female traits to allow us as individuals to thrive?’

### Upgrade yourself

Both men and women show feminine and masculine behaviours. In fact, we all have met successful women whose style showed none of the enlightened aspects of feminine wisdom and leadership, but who seemed more like needy pretty girls with a powerful internal sponsor. Men and women alike, regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of male and female traits, will need to make some important internal adjustments in order to

respond to the technological changes affecting the European workplace now. Medium-value and routine work is already either taken over by new technology, or devalued because it takes less and less skill, and can therefore be done by people with minimal education. Don't be fooled that this only applies to blue-collar work or low-value and admin work like bookkeeping. This also affects bankers, notaries, lawyers and doctors, and managers in general – and it has only just started...

As a consequence, we can either accept to be “downgraded”, or choose to “upgrade ourselves”.

What will make this transition difficult for many women is that they still don't look beyond the „top notes“ they aspired to during their childhood, i.e. the four standard value-informed behaviours of *diligence, collaboration, good conduct, and compliance*. (Perhaps it will require a new gene-

ration of parents to finally take care of these shadows of the past. The problem is, since these are below our conscious awareness I am wondering when this generation of “aware parents” will emerge.)

There is nothing wrong with valuing the above-mentioned traits. In fact, they are fantastic attributes for a worker bee: very useful for establishing a reputation as a hard worker and expert. The only downside is that they don't work for people who – unlike worker bees – have ambitions to higher levels of management, or want to become successful business owners (BTW this isn't gender-specific. There are also men who show these characteristics, and face much the same issues as a consequence.). The very traits that help promote a career in the earliest stages, work against those who show them in subsequent phases of career development – unless they are complemented by a set of high-impact mindsets.

### No excuses, no blame games

Prof. Gunter Dueck, the German ex-CTO of IBM, who has turned into a prolific writer and business maverick ever since he retired from IBM at age 60, is very concerned about innovation and the dramatic changes technology brings to the workplace. He argues that in order to keep our privileged position in the world, we in Europe will need to educate a different type of personality that will be prepared for the future, where managers won't be able to just “deduct-guess-derive” their goals from those of their bosses: Instead, goals will be defined in a much more general way, and only business results will count. In the new business world, it will be up to every person in the organisation to make sure they have what they need in order to meet their goals. There will be no excuses, and no blame games: either you made your target profit or you didn't.

I've been arguing this for years, and have also helped many highly talen-

## NEW MANAGEMENT IDEAL .....

The business world is changing- and if we don't change along with it, we'll be out of a job. There is a new 'management ideal' developing- it's ideal because it is what is most likely to bring success to the modern manager. This ideal is the same whether you're a man or a woman - because unlike in the current model, whe-

re a 'weaker' counterbalance is necessary to maintain team stability - the ideal business team will be made up of truly equal players. Not equal in traditional sense (women rising up to meet men on an equal level), but in the sense that men and women both display a mix of masculine and feminine qualities.

However, your upbringing, as well as your gender, will place you closer or further away from that ideal. Why? What we believe, not what we KNOW, shapes who we are, and what we may become. Our beliefs, in turn, are shaped by our gender and our upbringing. We haven't all had parents who were able to engender their

children (particularly, us girls) with beliefs that serve them well. So we need to be able to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, by carefully connecting with our subconscious to determine what beliefs we currently have, throw out the ones that don't serve us, and add in those that will serve us better.

ted people of both sexes to find those resources within themselves; for it sometimes takes some digging... Dueck calls those the “new top notes”:

- > Creativity, originality, sense of humour;
- > Constructive, joyful will;
- > Initiative that radiates to others;
- > Sense of community which activates others;
- > Sympathetic appearance and openness;
- > Balanced self-confidence;
- > Looking forward to a good personal future;
- > Curiosity that inspires others;
- > Positive attitude to the diversity of life;
- > Loving general attitude towards people.

These changes in the workplace (which mean any job worth considering will require an agile brain, everything else will be outsourced and/or low paid) will favour people who can negotiate not just their pay, but also their resources – which includes people, time, budget, and support. Now women are for the most part still NOT very comfortable negotiating – and can therefore lack practice, when they miss low-risk (or no-risk) ways to learn how to negotiate. Women still behave as though according to an underlying belief that “things should be the way I want them to be”. This idea belongs to the realm of fairy tales, not to the business world; not even to the “better version of it” that I believe aware and educated women can shape.

Women’s issues are discussed a little differently in the ex Austro-Hungarian empire, and countries with a Latin culture than in the Pro-

testant Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and German parts of the world. Though there is lots of exposure to gender-specific content everywhere nowadays, there do seem to be more alternatives. In particular, the more educated the family, the less

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parents expect daughters to be docile and pretty. I was lucky that, as a teenager who showed zero interest in clothes, make-up, parties or boys, nobody in my family suggested I was “weird”...

### **Ambitious worker bee**

In her talk, Dennehy touched on another relevant point: women in management positions still have a tendency to implicitly or explicitly justify how good they are – instead of just walking into the room exuding the SECURITY of “I belong here”. But that’s difficult to “fake” - so if you haven’t experienced in your childhood that you are ok as you are, even if that’s different from others, you will struggle. This is where many men still have a real advantage.

It is thanks to books like „The Drama of the Gifted Child“ - which nearly 35 years after its first publication is still a highly relevant classic by Swiss Alice Miller, and recommended reading

for any woman operating in a male-dominated field!) that we know what behaviours girls are encouraged to show . They pay much more notice to the subtle and implicit messages from those around them than boys, and pick up and try to comply these

because they try to please (originally, Daddy). Whether this is good or bad depends entirely on the context. Perceptivity and receptivity can absolutely be qualities of a great leader, but only if these are complemented by more proactive, driving skills.

Because when “gifted girls” grow up, their luck changes – now, they will often just do more of the same, even though they can no longer reap the desired rewards from it. If they then go and train those old behaviours more, they will just confirm their positioning as “worker bee”. Or shall we say, *ambitious worker bee*... because in the kingdom of Mother Nature, worker bees are believed to have no higher ambitions, no drive to self-actualize, and no need to be appreciated by others...

### **Beliefs trump facts**

In the Czech Republic, many women call the time they spend in the gym “čas na sebe”. Now I am not sugges-

ting that people cannot have meaningful thoughts on a treadmill; in fact, I like reading difficult texts on a training bike. But for me, time for myself has always been time where I do absolutely nothing: sitting in the sun or in a café, by myself, not chatting with a friend. Such “real free time” is what we need – time to let our thoughts wander – if we want to notice how our beliefs shape our thinking, since these are usually at work below our attention threshold. This is exactly why it takes active awareness to even notice them at

the more likely there is a value conflict (real or, more likely, imagined). Beliefs don’t change when confronted with conflicting evidence; our brains find ways to reorganize our knowledge, or simply ignore such information.

As a coach, I get away with confronting people with blind spots in their belief systems, because I meet the holders of those beliefs when they can’t find good solutions to their dilemmas and double-bind situations, but and assume there must be some-

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work! (BTW They work 24/7, so once you are alerted you are in for some amazing discoveries!)

Beliefs often trump facts; as someone who often experiences that behaviour changes only take place after beliefs have changed, and not after more knowledge has been acquired, I am here to tell you that people only take in those facts that reinforce their existing beliefs. I know this sounds shocking, but the research is absolutely unambiguous. Don’t take my word for it: next time you have angry comments or words of praise for someone or something, take notice – most likely these are only expressions of your existing beliefs. The more emotional your response,

thing they aren’t seeing, or easier ways out; and this makes them curious about my observations. This is an excellent experience for everyone by the way - so maybe it’s time to discover some unquestioned beliefs that may hold you back? You’ll find some clues in my article in the next issue of Business Woman that will discuss the belief systems that are setting us up to win – or lose. /BW

PS If you are fluent in German, and are interested in Gunter Dueck’s insights on how technology will change our professions in the coming years, check out his excellent speech on the subject - just Google “Dueck” and “Professionelle Intelligenz” on Youtube. Stunning stuff!



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