

How female managers can break through gender stereotypes

As a businesswoman herself and someone who specializes in coaching women in executive roles, Sally Srok—principal at Inner Compass Consulting—has witnessed firsthand the stereotypes female managers often face. She recalls one example that sums up the type of seemingly no-win situation often faced:

“I coached a successful female CEO who achieved extraordinary results for her organization. Yet, for all her successes, she was told by her staff that she was too direct. While her male counterparts in the industry were lauded for their straightforwardness, she was told she was alienating.

“Open to coaching, she softened her approach, only to receive the feedback from her team that she was too ambiguous. She reached the point where she questioned everything she said and how she said it. In essence, her organization had stripped her of her unique style, and she felt unsupported.”

As this situation touches upon, employees may view a manager’s actions through an alternate lens based on the boss’s gender.

More inconsistencies females sometimes discover when entering leadership ranks include:

- A male manager reminding someone of a deadline is helpful and goal-oriented. A woman doing the same gets tagged a micromanaging nag.
- A male leaving early for a family-related event cares about his kids. A woman doing the same is too concerned about her personal life and not enough about the company.
- A male reluctant to listen to a worker’s personal problems knows how to draw a line and stay on task. A woman doing the same is uncaring and cold.
- A male who encourages team members to solve their own problems shows trust and aids in development. A woman doing the same doesn’t want to be bothered or is clueless about what advice to provide.

Behind the female manager stereotypes

Getting to the bottom of why employees—both male and female—make such assumptions is a tricky mix of history and gender inequality in the culture at large.

“Social norms about gender roles are slow to change,” says Yana Rodgers, faculty director at Rutgers Center for Women and Work.

“They stem from long-term patterns around caregiving at home and women’s responsibilities in nurturing and raising children. Their implications for how women are perceived spill over into the workplace,” she says.

Navigating gender preconceptions can prove frustrating. For example, Catalyst, a global nonprofit dedicated to creating workplaces that work for women, notes in its research report “The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership” that female leaders who are nurturing, emotional and communicative are liked—but viewed as less competent leaders.

When women leaders take charge by being strong, decisive, and assertive, they are viewed as competent—but disliked. The result: Women leaders are seen as competent or likeable, but rarely both.

What female managers can do to advance equality

While challenging, actions such as the following can improve the situation and pave the way for fairer treatment for all.

Interrupt bias. Catalyst suggests speaking up if you notice colleagues using phrases that reinforce negative gender stereotypes such as “she is abrasive” or “she’s so emotional.” Such words undermine a woman’s perceived competence and ability to lead.

Stay true to yourself. As a female CEO in the tech industry, Andrea Loubier of Mailbird at first found herself delegating and assigning tasks “the way I thought a man might do it, which comes off as disingenuous.” Seeing that was problematic, she changed her ways.

“Obviously, I’m not a man, so I began to play toward my strengths, rather than try to deter from what some board members and team members saw as a weakness,” Loubier says. “I soon realized that it’s all about what you can offer, and the bottom line of the return investment or the manner in which you engage with your employees.”

Value diversity. Women aren’t the only ones faced with untrue assumptions. Building a team that represents the population at large can help break down barriers as people begin to see one another as individuals rather than as stereotypes.

“Hire people of all generations, genders, races and religions. Diversity is always key!” says Alexandra Zamolo, head of content marketing at Beekeeper.

Keep growing. Instead of worrying about stereotypes, work on honing abilities.

“The best gift we can give ourselves and those around us is our own journey in self-awareness,” Srok says. “Take personality profile assessments, read leadership books, join leadership groups, and listen to podcasts on leadership. The most important thing we can do is bring our own unique style to our leadership roles and to strive to become the best leaders possible.”