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What's Still Not Working for Women at Work

By Lindsay D'Andrea

Joan Williams, distinguished professor of law at UC Hastings Law School, was kind enough to share her insights and research on the effects of gender in the workplace at the National Conference of Women's Bar Associations Summit. Professor Williams delivered her lecture with keen insight, great humor and an underpinning of outrage that after all these years, we are still talking about the disparities that women face in the workplace. It's maddening, it's frustrating and at times it feels hopeless.

Professor Williams echoed this frustration when she stated, "When I began my research twenty years ago, 15% of law firm partners were women. Today, 15% of law firm partners are women." We are all familiar with the problem. We all live it. But after so many years of fighting and striving, the situation seems stagnant. What is perpetuating this cycle and what can we do about it?

While the nuances of the problem remain decidedly complex, Professor Williams has a seemingly simple answer for what is causing it. In short, Professor Williams attributes the persistent disparity in work to schemas. Everyone utilizes certain schemas to evaluate the world. She explains that they are efficient tools, but they are often inaccurate representations of reality and people's consciously held beliefs. For example, industry leaders tend to have a distinct and lasting understanding of what a successful managing partner or CEO looks like, sounds like and acts like. He is male, white, assertive and mature with gray-haired wisdom. If someone does not conform to the schema, she is perceived as less competent and a less appropriate choice for a particular role.

Unfortunately, these schemas continue to operate in ways that favor Caucasian men and disfavor women and people of color. Interestingly, by identifying schemas as the cause, it becomes clear that gender bias does not necessarily have to stem from hatred or prejudice. It can be the result of simplistic mental processes and a failure to compensate for primitive evaluative abilities.

As far as how to combat the problem, Professor Williams has taken a somewhat individualistic approach. She has co-authored a book with her daughter, Rachel Dempsey, called *What Works for Women at Work*. The book explains how these schemas operate in practice and identifies four persistent patterns of gender bias: Prove it Again!, the Tightrope, the Maternal Wall and Tug of War. While Professor Williams acknowledges that individual strategies are not a substitute for structural change, the book aims to give women solid advice and effective tools to increase their chance of success in the world of office politics.

In her lecture, Professor Williams focused on the first two patterns of gender bias: Prove it Again! and the Tightrope. In discussing "Prove it Again," she explained that since women are not what power-holders think of when they think of success, women are forced to prove competence more frequently. Her research shows that women and people of color must produce twice as much evidence of competence as Caucasian men. Further, Professor Williams has found that women are judged on past

achievements, while men are judged on potential. She explains that all of these interlocking forces lead to the oft repeated pattern of “He’s skilled; she’s lucky.” To combat the “Prove it Again” pattern, Professor Williams suggests: 1) Keep proving it, but don’t burn out 2) Keep careful detailed records of your contributions and achievements 3) Build a network who can rally for you.

The second pattern that Professor Williams discussed is the Tightrope, which essentially describes the contradictory roles and personality traits that a woman must possess in order to succeed. She outlines how women must be both aggressive but also, feminine; women must be respected, but also liked. Professor Williams has found that too much aggression, too much passivity, too much anger, too much self-promotion or too much self-effacement are all detrimental to a woman’s career. Consequently, women are left with the unnerving task of constantly trying to strike the right balance. Simply emulating successful men will not always work for women because what works for a man may actually harm a woman’s ability to succeed. With that dichotomy in mind, Professor Williams suggests that women must stand their ground at work but with softeners. Essentially, a woman should assert her position adamantly, but politely. She also recommends that if the choice comes down to being liked or respected, always choose to be respected.

Professor Williams’ lecture provided an interesting conceptual framework to dissect the pervasive problem of competent, skilled women being overlooked and underappreciated in the workplace. The audience was very engaged and seemed extremely familiar with all the patterns she discussed. While structural change still feels pretty far off, perhaps being more aware of these patterns and implementing these tools will help more women succeed. Once there are more of us at the top, when you ask someone what a managing partner or a CEO looks like, you may get a very different answer.

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