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From one working woman to another: About that fear of being 'bitchy'...

ANDEE HARRIS

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"Be agreeable, stay nice and don't make waves. Solid plan if you're an aspiring Stepford Wife. Horrible plan if you want to lead a team."

An open letter to my fellow working women:

Come on ladies, our collective fear of being labeled "bitchy" at work is undermining our ability to actually support one another and advance our careers. Without the courage to be honest and assertive, we're diluting our feedback, rendering it useless—or worse, harmful.

Watch this video from Indra Nooyi, the CEO of Pepsi. She's not afraid to call it like it is.



I. Love. Her.

It's true that we have a long way to go before we'll see true diversity in corporate leadership—in case you missed it, [read the Uber engineer's blog](#) about why her office was a terrible environment for women.

But it's not helpful to compound the problem with weak communication. Let's at least take some personal responsibility to change where we are, lest we bitch-block ourselves right out of our chance to change things for good.

Starting now, I want to actually be there for the women who need me. I want to be fearlessly honest, so my feedback matters. Starting now, I am breaking bad by doing the following.

Who's with me?

1. EARNING TRUST BEFORE GIVING FEEDBACK

I remember my first field hockey coach. When she said, "Andee, you have to run and think faster"—that is exactly what I heard. I didn't hear, "You're slow and stupid." Why? I knew her advice was coming from a pure desire to see me improve, so I just trusted that and heard her advice constructively. It was powerful.

If our female friends and co-workers can really trust that we are coming from an honest place with a desire to help, they can hear our feedback without getting defensive.

And here's a PSA: If you aren't really coming from the right place, as in trying to pass false compliments as feedback, it'll backfire.

2. CHOOSING WORDS CAREFULLY

Have you ever thought about the fact that people get Ph.D.s to give advice, yet we just nonchalantly let our opinions fall out of our mouths #nofilter?

How we say something to someone is almost as important as what we say. Offering advice to help a colleague avoid executing "death by PowerPoint" is not the same as treating someone with serious depression. But choosing your words carefully is a good idea.

While women are perfectly suited to lead today's workforce, finding equality at leadership levels is still uncharted territory. We must remember that most of us were raised to stay likable, "be nice" and not make waves, which means there is some powerful context to navigate when we choose our words.

Instead of: "Your leadership can feel aggressive," try this: "Being direct shows good leadership and keeps people clear on their responsibilities. Having emotional intelligence shows great leadership and keeps people motivated. You will not appear weak if you show that side of yourself as well."

3. AGREEING TO DISAGREE

I mentioned the way many women were raised: be agreeable, stay nice and don't make waves. Solid plan if you're an aspiring Stepford Wife. Horrible plan if you want to lead a team.

Our male counterparts are not at work to be best friends; they are at work to accomplish amazing things. Women are, too. While cultural fit is important for building relationships, it doesn't require us to be besties all the time and it certainly won't withstand frenemies.

Agree to disagree, politely, and own it. Find confidence in knowing that amazing things come from diversity of thought, healthy debate and challenging disagreements (I love [this TED talk from Margaret Heffernan](#). She explains how the best partners aren't echo chambers; rather, great research teams, relationships and businesses encourage people to deeply disagree.)

Also, don't diminish your accomplishments and do vocally acknowledge the contributions of other women. Men don't downplay their accomplishments, and they aren't afraid to appreciate each other's contributions. There is a lesson in the #humblebrag somewhere—I'm not sure where yet, but it's somewhere.

4. LETTING SHIT GO

Arguably the hardest one on the list, but for me it is one of the most important. I'm not sure about you, but I don't have room in my brain to hold grudges. I can barely remember my grocery list, let alone some random slight that no longer affects my present or future.

I remember the first time I found myself at odds with my male co-workers. We were at each other's throats! I was expecting it to take days and endless talks to get over it. They strolled in the next day ready to grab beers and laugh it off.

Let. It. Go.

If the person who wronged you no longer has any bearing on your ability to perform moving forward, don't burn the energy keeping that torch lit. Snuff it out; bring that heat to your next chance to shine.

If women truly want to find equality at and outside of work, it starts with us. We can scream and yell and march, but if we aren't doing the work on the inside, too, well, then, it's all for naught.

Change starts with our ability to control what we can: our behaviors and our communications. To do this, we must be honest about our intentions. If we really aren't coming from the right place, change won't happen. Let's earn each other's trust, think before we speak and find the courage to be disagreeable.

If we don't, aren't we just perpetuating the cycle?

Andee Harris is the chief engagement officer at Chicago tech company HighGround.

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