

# The Equality Equation

5 ways women can confront—and rise above—gender stereotypes.

By Andrea S. Kramer

**Editor's Note:** At the 2015 Women's Executive Committee Women's Leadership Breakfast, Andrea S. Kramer, a partner in the international law firm of McDermott Will & Emery LLP, spoke about gender bias challenges in today's workplace and strategies for overcoming them. Here, she recaps her remarks and offers her insights into how to reach your career goals while remaining true to yourself.



What's your take on gender bias in business and finance today?  
@IllinoisCPA #AccountingWomen

"Reprinted courtesy of INSIGHT Magazine, The Magazine of the Illinois CPA Society. For the latest issue, visit [www.icpas.org/insight.htm](http://www.icpas.org/insight.htm)."

We all rely on stereotypes to simplify our cognitive processes. These "shortcuts" allow us to quickly evaluate and relate to other people. As useful as stereotypes can be in some situations, they often get in the way of accurate evaluations when we're dealing with individual people, and they often operate as discriminatory scripts for how we relate to others.

Given that, it's really no big surprise to learn that women tend to have a much harder time advancing in their careers than their male counterparts with similar qualifications and work experiences. Looking at accounting and finance

specifically, studies quoted by PCAOB Board Member Jeanette M. Frazel in *Leadership in Public Accounting Firms: Why So Few Women?* indicate that women make up almost 50 percent of all U.S. accountants and represent 19 percent of all partners in CPA firms nationwide. At the same time, they represent only 17 percent of all partners at firms with staffs of over 50 people.

These statistics, which are similar to those of many other professions, illustrate the ongoing issue of gender stereotypes and the often unconscious biases that flow from them.

## Feminine vs. Masculine

Common gender stereotypes associated with women include being affectionate, sensitive, warm, emotional, sympathetic, friendly, kind, understanding, appreciative, mild, pleasant and concerned about other people. We can summarize these traits by saying that women are "communal," meaning that women tend to care about the goals and needs of the entire community.

On the flip side, gender stereotypes associated with men include being aggressive, dominant, ambitious, willing to take risks, forceful, self-confident, independent, tough, achievement-oriented, competent, problem-solving and self-reliant. These traits are called "agentic," meaning that they are assertive and independent, and get things done.

Biases that flow from these stereotypes say that a woman who is "too hard" is unfriendly, cold and unlikable, even if she brilliantly performs her job. A woman who is "too assertive" is seen as agentic, which violates traditional gender stereotypes.

At the same time, gender biases say that a woman who is "too soft" is likable but not capable of being a successful professional. This means that a woman who follows traditional gender stereotypes is, in all probability, someone people like but also someone who may not readily succeed in her career. The dilemma of being too hard (agentic) or too soft (communal)

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is often referred to as the “double bind.” And mothers, who face the maternal wall, face the double bind on steroids.

Mothers, the stereotypes say, should be available to their children 24/7. People who hold this view believe that mothers can’t possibly be as committed to their careers as are fathers. And if a mother is a devoted accountant, auditor or finance professional, she must be (the stereotypes say) neglecting her children.

## Gendered Career Roles

It’s no new news that stereotypes often hold women back in their careers. Our tendency is to think that appropriate careers for women and for men ought to match the stereotypical characteristics associated with them. For instance, if caregivers are considered communal, then women should be caregivers. And if agentic traits are associated with leaders, then men should be leaders. These stereotypes divide the world into career roles supposedly appropriate for either women or men, but not both.

Nowadays we’re unlikely to hear—out loud anyway—something like, “Women aren’t smart enough to be accountants.” Instead, we’re more likely to hear something along the lines of, “Women aren’t as ambitious as men.” Because of these biases, women often feel they need to demonstrate higher competence and commitment than their male counterparts to reach the same career levels.

Gender bias makes it hard—but not impossible—for women to reach the top.

## Strategizing for Success

Before explaining ways in which women can work around traditional gender biases, I want to make a few things clear. First, I’m not buying into gender stereotypes by acknowledging that they exist and affect the ways in which women are viewed in the workplace. What’s more, I’m not suggesting that gender stereotypes accurately reflect reality. And I’m not telling women they need to be inauthentic in order to succeed in gender-biased workplaces.

What I am saying, however, is that women need to be aware of the way in which gender biases can—and do—affect their careers. I’m also saying that to reach the top, women need to be skilled in specific communication techniques and strategies. Here are just five of them.

1. **Manage the Impression You Make.** Impression management is the intentional effort to shape or change the impressions we give to others about ourselves. And the first step in impression management is to be sufficiently self-aware to accurately “read” ourselves and the reactions other people have to us. Nonverbal communication is vital in this—understanding what is actually being said, not just the words being spoken.

Keep in mind that you never get the chance to make a first impression twice, so it makes sense to have a memorable one-minute introduction prepared to use at any time, explaining what’s new in your career and what projects you’re involved with. This can help to give you the confidence to connect with others in ways that showcase your strengths and talents.

2. **Balance Communal & Agentic Qualities.** Studies show that women who use both communal and agentic traits have significantly improved performance ratings and more career opportunities, and receive more promotions than their peers. In *Reducing the Backlash Effect: Self-Monitoring and Women’s Promotion*, for example, researchers found that women who use both types of traits do better—much better—than women with agentic-only or communal-only traits.

3. **Build & Demonstrate Your Confidence.** To be successful, you need to take pride in what you’ve achieved and believe in your abilities. This requires confidence and a willingness to display agentic characteristics. Two techniques—“mind priming” and “power posing”—can help you in this. Mind priming involves writing a couple of paragraphs about a time when you felt powerful or happy, or writing about your goals and aspirations. The process of focusing on something positive about yourself gives you a more positive attitude, which increases your self-confidence—something the people you interact with will pick up on. In other words, you can actually think your way into more powerful and confident behavior. Power posing, on the other hand, involves adopting an open body posture (standing or sitting tall with your shoulders back), which increases your testosterone levels and reduces cortisol levels to help you feel more powerful.

4. Master the Art of Self-Evaluation. Based on my personal review of well over 1,500 self-evaluations, it's usually easy to identify those written by women and those written by men. Women (as a group) tend to play into traditional gender stereotypes by downplaying their accomplishments, acting modestly, and remaining silent about their career objectives. Men (as a group) tend to be self-laudatory, proudly setting out their accomplishments and making sure their career objectives are clearly known to their supervisors. I can't emphasize enough that you need to give your self-evaluation as much attention as you would to an important work project, and confidently explain and boldly recount your achievements.

What's more, our career goals and accomplishments aren't automatically broadcast to supervisors or colleagues as we think and feel them. You have to clearly explain them on a regular basis and seek out a sponsor and a mentor to champion your efforts. You are evaluated all year long, so stay in touch with those people who have a say in your career.

5. Forge Strong Connections. Connections are important for more reasons than I can list here. My recommendation is to develop an inside and outside network that will create a positive buzz about you. Join and actively participate in professional societies, associations and, of course, ICPAS. Participate on firm or company committees to help build your workplace alliances and friendships. And get involved in trade associations relevant to your clients and their industries. These connections are well worth your time. □

**Note:** Check out Andrea S. Kramer's forthcoming book, *Scripts for Success: Communication Techniques to Break Through Gender Bias in the Workplace* (Bibliomotion), or contact her at [akramer@mwe.com](mailto:akramer@mwe.com).



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