

DEVELOPING CLOUT

while navigating
gender bias



Women must find ways to deal with and work around gender stereotypes and biases without giving up career aspirations.

By **Andrea S. Kramer**

IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT WOMEN LAWYERS CAN HAVE A MUCH HARDER TIME ADVANCING IN THEIR CAREERS THAN MEN with similar qualifications and work experiences. I believe that the major reason for this discrepancy is gender stereotypes and the often

unconscious biases that flow from them. 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 dealing with individual people and

operate as discriminatory scripts for how we relate to others.

Stereotypes hurt women lawyers in at least three key ways. First, common gender stereotypes are that women have “feminine”



Andrea S. Kramer is a partner in the international law firm of McDermott Will & Emery LLP, resident in its Chicago office. This article is based on discussions at the NAWL Mid-Year Meeting in March and her forthcoming book, *Scripts for Success: Communication Techniques to Break Through Gender-Biased Workplaces*. She can be reached at akramer@mwe.com.

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All stereotypes hurt women lawyers – especially women with children and other family responsibilities

characteristics: they are affectionate, sensitive, warm, friendly, kind 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 the needs of the entire community. Gender stereotypes also say that men have “masculine” characteristics: they are aggressive, willing to take risks, forceful, confident, independent, tough, achievement-oriented, competent and self-reliant. These traits are called “agentic,” meaning that men take actions; they are assertive and independent. When applied to jobs and careers, these stereotypes have a powerful impact on the make-up of the career landscape. Our tendency is to think the careers for women and the careers for men ought to match these stereotypical characteristics. Thus, if caregivers should be communal, then caregivers should be women. And if agentic traits are stereotypically associated with leaders, then men should be the leaders. The result is a world divided into career roles that are supposedly appropriate either for women or men.

We’d like to believe that gender stereotypes have changed in recent years but studies show gender stereotypes remain almost the same as they were 40 years ago; 75 percent of people still think “male” when they hear career-related words such as “business,” “profession” and “work,” according to the book, *Blindspot, Hidden Biases of Good People*, by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald. These biases make it hard for women to get the same career opportunities as men. A woman who steps into an opposite gender role makes many people think that something is amiss, out of place, or inappropriate.

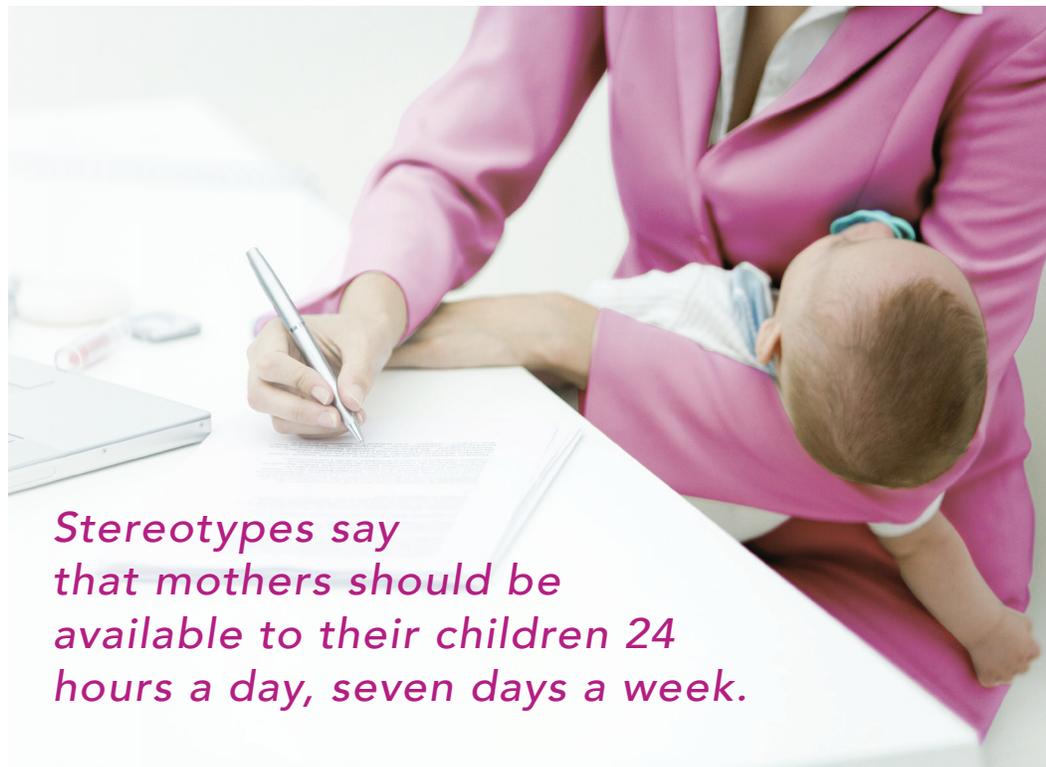
A second group of gender stereotypes that hurt women lawyers is about mothers. These stereotypes say that mothers should be available to their children 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Someone who holds this

view believes mothers cannot possibly be as committed to their careers as are fathers. And if a mother is a devoted lawyer, she must be neglecting her children. A woman who neglects her children is not communal, does not follow gender stereotypes and is not likable.

In today’s society, women are much more likely than men to have family responsibilities requiring them to take time off, reduce their work schedules and turn down assignments that would require increased travel responsibilities. This leads us to the third group of stereotypes, which is about successful lawyers. Successful lawyers, the stereotypes go, have a relentless commitment to working long hours in the office or on the road, while single-mindedly pursuing career success. Successful lawyers do not allow for any interruptions to their

careers as they aggressively seek advancement. All of these stereotypes hurt women lawyers, especially women with children and other family responsibilities.

Nowadays we are not likely to hear — out loud anyway — something like, “women are not smart enough to be lawyers.” Instead, we are more likely to hear something like, “mothers of young children are less committed to their jobs” or “women are not as ambitious as men.” Because of these biases, women must often demonstrate higher levels of competence and commitment than men to get to the same career level. To compound the problems women lawyers face, they frequently receive fewer sponsorship opportunities, less challenging assignments, fewer supervisory responsibilities and fewer opportunities for career advancement. And, because women are supposedly communal, they



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Women need a set of skills that allow them to address gender bias in a way men simply don't need to worry about

Women tend to believe gender stereotypes, too.



are often expected to handle more administrative work than men – work that promotes the smooth operation of the business. But administrative work does not get valued or counted at compensation and promotion time. It is hardly surprising that with so many people holding these gender stereotypes and biases, women lawyers tend to receive less compensation than men.

Of course, women as well as men need talent, challenging work experiences and first-rate legal skills to succeed in today's legal environment. But women also need a set of skills that allow them to address gender bias in a way men simply don't need to worry about. Gender-

biased legal environments make it hard – but not impossible – for women lawyers to develop their professional clout.

Before turning to ways to develop your clout, I want to make it clear that I am not in any way buying into gender stereotypes by acknowledging they affect the ways in which women are viewed by others. I am not suggesting that gender stereotypes accurately reflect reality. I am not buying into gender stereotypes by suggesting that women should adjust their attitudes and behavior in response to stereotypes. And, I am not telling women to be inauthentic or phony to succeed in gender-biased workplaces. What I am

saying, however, is that women need to be aware of the impact stereotypes and biases have on their careers. To reach the top, a woman needs to find ways that work for her to deal with and work around gender stereotypes and biases *without* giving up her career aspirations.

Biases that flow from common gender stereotypes say that a woman who is “too hard” is unfriendly and unlikable, even if she brilliantly performs her job. A woman who is “too assertive” can be seen as agentic, which violates traditional gender stereotypes that women are (or should be) communal, making her disliked and penalized. And an agentic woman is penalized by women as well as men; after all, women tend to believe gender stereotypes, too.

On the other hand, gender biases are that a woman who is “too soft” is likable but not capable of being a successful lawyer. This means that a woman who complies with traditional gender stereotypes is, in all probability, someone people like but she is someone who is seen as unlikely to succeed. The dilemma of being too hard (agentic) or too soft (communal) is often referred to as the “double bind.”

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Impression management is the intentional effort to shape or change the impressions we give to others about ourselves. We want to assure that people who observe us recognize and relate to us in the ways we want them to. We want the impressions we make to actually match the impressions other people actually have of us. Many factors are involved in determining when, why and how you might want to engage in impression management: setting, context, audience, status and objectives, time available, past treatment, organizational dynamics, how decisions are made and gender salience. But the first step in successful impression management

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is that you must be sufficiently self-aware of who you are so you can accurately read yourself as well as the reactions that other people have to you. To do this, you must accurately observe nonverbal communication and listen carefully to what is being said to assess how others are reacting to you.

Given gender biases, you need to recognize the line that gender stereotypes draw between a woman's technical competence and her social competence. The way to do this is to use both communal and

agentic behaviors that will allow you to show both technical and social competence. A 2010 study by Olivia A. O'Neill and Charles O'Reilly, noted by Marguerite Rogolioso in 2011 in the *Stanford Graduate School of Business News*, showed that women who demonstrate both communal and agentic traits have significantly improved

performance ratings, wider career opportunities and receive more promotions than all other women. They do better – much better – than women who are agentic (three times better) and women who are communal (1.5 times better).

These findings should not be surprising. You can deal with the double bind if you act forcefully to get the job done while knowing when to “dial it down” to demonstrate that you have communal characteristics. Sometimes a smile, a nod or a friendly gesture is all you need to accomplish this.

Because impression management deserves much more attention than I can give it here, you can read more at “Taking Control: Women, Gender Stereotypes, and Impression Management.” I wrote this article with Al Harris, and you can find it in the Winter 2014 *WBAI Newsletter* or at bit.ly/nawl-1003-3.

BUILD UP YOUR CONFIDENCE AND DEMONSTRATE IT

To succeed, you need to take pride in what you have achieved and believe in your ability. This requires confidence and a willingness to display agentic characteristics. To build confidence and develop agentic behaviors, you should engage in positive self-talk. To do this, I suggest two techniques: “mind priming” and “power posing.”

Turning first to mind priming, consider doing this before an important meeting, speech, interview or high-stakes situation. Take a few minutes to write a couple of paragraphs about a time when you were powerful or happy, or write about your goals and aspirations. You don't need to share your thoughts or what you wrote down with

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Focusing on something positive about yourself gives you a more positive attitude as you enter the high stakes situation



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anyone. It is simply the process of focusing on something positive about yourself that gives you a more positive attitude as you enter the high-stakes situation. By mind priming, you not only feel more confident, but the people you interact with are more likely to see you as a leader than they would if you had not felt as confident. In other words, you can actually think your way into more powerful and confident behavior.

Another way to build your confidence is by power posing. Before a high stakes situation,

take a few minutes to adopt an open body posture. By opening up your body posture (standing or sitting tall with your shoulders back), you can change your mindset and change how other people view you. An open body posture also allows hormonal changes that actually work to help you feel more powerful. For a few minutes before you walk into that important meeting or interview, stand in the classic Wonder Woman pose with your legs apart and your hands on your hips. You do not need to stand or sit in a power pose in the

actual meeting itself. Rather, it is the process of power posing before the event that does the trick. When you feel powerful, you can perform at the top of your game. If you would like to see the body postures associated with high power and low power, watch Amy Cuddy's Ted Talk from June 2012 at bit.ly/nawl-1003-1.

Before that high-stakes situation, combine mind priming and power posing. You will be ready to tackle the most difficult and stressful situations. I suggest you do both of them for maximum effect.

UNDERSTAND GENDER COMMUNICATION TENDENCIES

To navigate gender stereotypes and develop your clout, you need to understand gender tendency differences in business communications, including differences in language content and speech patterns. By understanding these tendencies, you can identify ways to make your communication skills more effective, while managing the impressions you make to the people with whom you interact.

Nonverbal Differences: Women tend to take up less space, while men tend to take up more space. Women tend to physically close their bodies into themselves (low power) and to give up personal space to make room for others who arrive late at meetings. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to spread out (high power) and take up more space than women. The same is true with gestures. Women tend to gesture towards their bodies (low power), men away from their bodies (high power). While listening, women tend to lean forward (low power), men tend to lean back (high power). These nonverbal tendencies put women in low power postures making them appear meek, small and weak, while men appear larger and more powerful.

To develop your professional clout, don't play into these gender communication tendencies.

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Claim your fair share of space and don't give it up when other people join the meeting

Bring a pile of papers to all of your meetings – even if you don't refer to them – and spread out. Sit tall and straight with your shoulders back. Claim your fair share of space and don't give it up when other people join the meeting. Gesture away from your body when you speak, and if you are not being heard, stand up for a

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cup of coffee or glass of water and speak while you remain standing. These simple techniques help you show others that you are confident and powerful.

Language Content and Patterns: Women are often socialized to speak in a communal way, which is vague and imprecise so as to not be aggressive or confrontational. Men are often socialized to speak directly, which projects confidence and power. Women's tendency to speak indirectly also extends to the ways in which they give instructions and assignments to other people. Suppose, for example, that you have just given an important research project to a male junior lawyer. He will not understand that when you gave him the project and asked him to "consider" a particular legal point that you were actually "telling" him that you expected him to carefully analyze that legal point. This difference can result in misunderstandings and miscommunications when women and men communicate.

Here is another example: when answering questions, women are more likely than men to answer the question by asking another question or by explaining the rabbit holes she went down

before finding the answer. Not so for men; men tend to answer questions directly. As a result, women who follow gendered speech patterns can appear tentative and unsure of themselves, as if they don't know what is expected of them. To avoid such miscommunications — and to appear confident and in control — you should

clearly explain what you want someone else to do, and you should directly answer the questions you are asked to answer. To help you stay on point, you might want to prepare a brief outline or bullet points that you can refer to,

allowing you to stay focused on communicating more directly.

In considering language patterns, you should avoid language patterns that suggest you are weak, incompetent, or lack confidence. For example, women are more likely than men to use self-deprecating language patterns, such as, "I may be off base here but ...," "I don't know if this is helpful but...", or "This is just a guess on my part but ...". These phrases are career killers because other women – not just men – tune you out if you speak in such a self-deprecating way. If you use this language pattern, stop using it.

Let's look at another weak language pattern: the phrase, "I'm sorry." Studies show that women believe that certain actions justify an apology more often than men do. As a result, women say "I'm sorry" more frequently than men do, and women expect to receive an apology more often than men expect an apology. But there is more to the use of the phrase "I'm sorry" than different gender-based views with respect to the sorts of violations that require apologies. Women are more likely than men to say "I'm sorry" as a language pattern to express sympathy or to

make a connection with others. The problem with using "I'm sorry" in this way is that men can think that women who repeatedly apologize must have something to apologize for (after all, why else would she keep saying she's sorry?).

If you say "I'm sorry" as a language pattern, try saying something else, like "that's too bad," or "that's terrible news," or "I'm sure you are disappointed." Don't say "I'm sorry" unless you actually have something to apologize for. And, when you make a mistake, acknowledge it and move on. Don't dwell on it. Don't stew about it. Don't beat yourself up. Just say "I'm sorry" once and be done with it. If you'd like to learn more about the rules of gender communication, you can read my articles on this subject in the Fall 2011 *WBAI Newsletter* or at bit.ly/nawl-1003-2.

Your verbal and nonverbal behaviors are all key elements in managing the impressions you give others and in demonstrating and building your clout. Practice speaking in a straightforward and direct way, avoid weak nonverbal behaviors and combine agentic with communal behaviors. It is through the impression you give to others that your power and confidence will come through. That's where mind priming and power posing come in.

MASTER THE ART OF SELF-EVALUATIONS

Let's turn now to mastering the art of preparing your self-evaluation. This is another important step in building your clout. Based on my personal review of well over 1,500 self-evaluations, it is usually easy to identify those self-evaluations written by women and those written by men. Women (as a group) play into traditional gender stereotypes by downplaying their accomplishments, acting modestly and remaining silent about their career objectives. Men (as a group) are self-laudatory, proudly setting out their accomplishments, and making sure their career objectives are clearly known.

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Confidently explain your achievements and boldly recount them

Don't play into gender stereotypes when you prepare your self-evaluation. Confidently explain your achievements and boldly recount them. Approach your self-evaluation with planning, determination and a serious effort. Give it as much attention as you would give to an important client project. To learn more about preparing self-evaluations, you can read my self-evaluation dos and don'ts in the Fall 2011 *WBAI Newsletter*, or at bit.ly/nawl-1003-2.

FOCUS ON ADVANCEMENT

Our feelings, desires and accomplishments are not automatically known to our supervisors and colleagues. Neither are our career objectives. Tell your supervisors about your career objectives, clearly explain your career and compensation

Develop an inside and outside network to create a positive buzz about you.

expectations (on a regular basis), and seek out a sponsor and a mentor. You are evaluated all year long, so stay in touch with those people who have a "say" in your career, not just during the annual review period.

CONNECT, CONNECT AND CONNECT SOME MORE

Connections are important for more reasons than I can begin to list here. Many connections we make are fleeting but the impressions we give others are often fixed before the blink of an eye. Keep in mind that you never get a chance to make a first impression again. (Sure, with luck you can change a first impression but you need to work very hard to try and sometimes you just can't change it.) So it makes sense to have a memorable

one-minute introduction about yourself ready to use at any time, explaining what's new in your career and what projects you have been involved with. Keep it updated.

Having that short introduction handy whenever you need it can help give you the confidence to connect with others in ways that showcase your successes and talents.

Develop an inside and outside network to create a positive buzz about you. Join and actively participate in women's bar associations and – of course – NAWL. Participate on firm or company committees to help build workplace alliances and friendships. Get involved in trade associations that are relevant to your clients and their industries. These connections are important and well worth your time.

In other words, to build your clout you should connect, connect, and connect some more. Try all of my suggestions. Some will feel good and you'll stick with them. You might try others and reject them if you don't see the benefit. But don't give up on them too soon. If you give my suggestions a try, you will see positive results. I am sure of it. ■



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