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Drawing the sting of the office queen bee

A paper published last week argues that women aren't innately bitchy — it's a survival mechanism in a hostile environment

Eleanor Mills Published: 24 July 2011

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‘Women beware women’ is one of the old truisms of the workplace. The tales of the cunning witch who manages up with incomparable charm and crushes down with iron ire are legion. The politics of these queen bees — in the interest of self-preservation and propulsion at all times — is brutal; they are your best friend when the boss loves you and don't even say hello if they think you are out of favour.

Think Professor Umbridge in Harry Potter, the evil pink-clad stooge of power at the Ministry of Magic who was all girliness on the outside.

I knew one just like her who viciously guarded her own interests by promoting talentless sycophants while undermining any clever young woman who might be a future rival.

Now some light has been shone on the reasons for queen bee behaviour. It explains, quite persuasively, this chronic lack of sisterly solidarity. Belle Derk, a social identity theorist, published a paper last week in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, which argues that rather than being innately bitchy, women behave like this as a survival mechanism in a hostile environment.

‘This isn't just about women,’ Derk explains. ‘It is classic group behaviour. If you are a member of a group which is undervalued by the wider culture, you can pursue your own ambitions by distancing yourself from that group.’

So when a queen bee wants to get on, she does so by running down her own sex. When other women whine about work-life balance, or leave early to catch the school play, the queen bee sniggers with the boss-class males, haughtily superior at her sisters' inability to manage. The implication is: I'm made of sterner stuff; I don't need special treatment.

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When a queen bee wants to get on, she does so by running down on her own sex, sniggering with the boss-class males

Margaret Thatcher was a classic of the kind. Sure, she smashed the glass ceiling herself to become our first female prime minister, but did she bring a generation of Tory women in her wake? Hardly. At last count the Tory front bench boasted four women, including a certain Cheryl Gillan. No, me neither.

The first female pioneers in a man's world had to be tougher than any man. My aunt Barbara Mills, the first female director of public prosecutions and a mother of four, famously said that if her child was ill in hospital but she was due in court, she'd be in court with her wig on. (She added that she'd be at her child's bedside before court, at lunch and after work, though that was swiftly forgotten.)

"Queen bees," Derk writes, "advance their career through emphasising their masculine characteristics, expressing gender-stereotypical views of other women and denying the existence of gender bias. Although queen bee behaviour benefits individuals, it leads successful women to distance themselves from other women, reducing the likelihood that they will improve opportunities for other women or be seen as role models by female subordinates." Basically, if women are seen as inferior and you want to get on, you disassociate and differentiate yourself from other women.

Until recently this attitude was common, according to Mirella Visser, author of *The Female Leadership Paradox* (and a former management board member of ING, the international banking group). At one point she ran a women's network with 3,000 members. "I was amazed by how often I would ask the only woman on a company's board to come and address the women's group and they would refuse," she said. "They didn't want to contaminate their personal brand by hanging out with a group with lower status within the company."

This is changing. Visser admits it would be "politically incorrect" to express such an attitude now, particularly because recent studies show that companies with more diverse boards (ie, those that have more women) are more profitable, by as much as 34%, according to Catalyst research.

The rate of female penetration at the very top is still glacial: only 13.9% of FTSE 100 company directors and 9% of those in the FTSE 250 are women. But in the so-called marzipan layer just below the top, women are well represented and here there is a generational shift going on.

The pioneers had to struggle damn hard to make headway in a man's world: women returned to work after 12 weeks of maternity leave, grateful that they still had a job. In my generation it is normal to be a working mother and we have benefited massively from more generous parenting policies and flexible working. There still aren't enough of us at the very top, but middle management is awash with women. Our sheer numbers at work have changed the culture and the way we act towards one another.

The new buzzword around minorities in corporate cultures, particularly successful ones such as BMW, Coca-Cola and Microsoft, is "the power of three". I saw a great cartoon that sums up why. It shows two men sitting at a boardroom table. A woman comes and sits with them. "Look at the woman," they say. Then another woman arrives. "Look at the new woman," they say. Then a third comes along ... "Look at the new board member," says the group.

Research shows that if there is one woman around, then everything she says is taken as indicative of a "female" point of view. If there are two, then if they agree, they are colluding; if they argue, then they reinforce the stereotype that women can't get on. When there are three, it becomes clear that women — like men — have different takes

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on issues; women become normal. This is the power of three.

As women achieve critical mass in an organisation, they no longer need to define themselves as “not a woman” or “different from other women” to succeed. At that point, women’s networks, rather than being an oddity, become where it’s at. When one female chief executive started having jolly dinners for the “girls” (talented women within a highly macho organisation) the chaps got shirty: they wanted to come too. The women’s network was suddenly a hot ticket.

It’s all about where the power lies. If being a woman in an organisation becomes a positive, queen bee behaviour diminishes or even disappears; ambitious women no longer need to behave like that to get on. Now that girls out-achieve boys in education and women make up 60% of university graduates, more of the top talent of the future will be female and our top companies — if they are to remain so — will have to reflect that. The truth is in the demographics: the day of the queen bee is over.

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