Taking Control: Women, Gender Stereotypes and Impression Management
by Andrea S. Kramer and Alton B. Harris

What follows is an edited version of a chapter from our forthcoming book, Getting There: Career Success for Women in a Gender-Biased World. We would welcome your thoughts and comments as we prepare the book for publication.

Gender-based obstacles to women’s career advancement are real, substantial, and not likely to go away any time soon. It is simply a fact of business and professional life that women have a tougher time moving up the leadership ladder than do similarly qualified and motivated men. Women and men need many of the same skills for career success: “social presentability, visibility, organizational demeanor and political skill, as well as competent job performance.” But women need skills that men don’t, most particularly skills to cope with the biases they face simply because they are women. Whether it is the “double bind,” the “double standard,” the “maternal wall,” the “baby penalty,” or any number of other subtle and not so subtle gender putdowns, women need a set of communication skills that are irrelevant for men. We will have a great deal to say about the acquisition and nature of these skills in our book, but here our discussion is limited to why these skills are needed and what women need to do to start using them. In other words, this article is about women taking control.

The Problem – And the Solution

Imagine a typical mixed-gender business situation. It could be a conference, presentation, negotiation, performance review, brainstorming session, or any other task-oriented meeting. Whatever the purpose of the session, everyone there, the women as well as the men, will be operating with at least three stereotypes. First, they will expect the men to be “agentic,” that is, tough-minded, aggressive, confident, independent and assertive. Second, they will expect the women to be “communal,” that is, friendly, unselfish, warm, compassionate,
supportive, and nurturing. And third, they will expect whoever leads the session to be agentic.

Given these stereotypes, one of two scenarios is likely to play out if a woman tries to assume a leadership role. If she attempts to take charge without communicating agentic qualities, she is almost certain to be ignored. On the other hand, if she seeks a leadership role by using agentic qualities, she is likely to be regarded as “masculine” (or at least not feminine) and, therefore, socially clumsy and unlikeable. Moreover, because she will be seen as having violated traditional gender roles, she is likely to have difficulty in exercising leadership and may suffer economic penalties and professional and social isolation. The practical reality is that whichever approach a woman takes, in seeking a leadership role in a mixed-gender business situation, she is going to encounter obstacles that a man will not.

After having lived through a number of such situations, an ambitious woman may very well start to curse the unfairness of the business world and come to believe that her time will come only when that world is “fixed” and becomes gender-neutral. When the “fix” doesn’t come, she is likely then either to drop out of the competitive struggle for career success altogether or settle into a vocational existence of frustration, anger, and disappointment.2

In stating the picture of women’s career prospects so bleakly, we do not mean to suggest that the male-dominated business culture in the United States does not need to be “fixed.” Nor do we want to suggest that women seeking to advance in that culture need themselves to be “fixed.” We firmly believe that our business culture is profoundly biased against women and would be far more productive if fundamental changes were made so that long-term successful careers were more accessible and attractive for women. The problem is that we don’t see those changes coming in the foreseeable future, and we are unwilling to advise talented and ambitious women who want successful careers now to wait. As for the need to “fix” women who want a career, we think women are just fine the way they are, thank you. There is no need for career women to become “more like men” or to “suck it up” or to “try harder.”

But we do think there is something that women need to do. They need to learn techniques that will allow them to work smarter within our gender-biased economic system so that those biases don’t hold them back. They need to take control of their careers by anticipating the biases they will face and acquiring the skills to deal with them. If they will do this, we are convinced that women can play the career advancement game with and against men with a real fighting chance of winning.

Our mixed-gender business scenario was meant to illustrate that a woman who communicates only agentic traits or only communal traits is likely to face the full force of gender bias and discriminatory backlash. But if she can use both traits, as appropriate, she is likely to escape or minimize the negative consequences of acting against stereotypical expectations. For example, if a woman using an agentic communication style can also project communal traits of warmth and inclusiveness, she can often “facilitate trust and the . . . absorption of ideas. Even a few small nonverbal signals — a nod, a smile, an open gesture — can show people that [she is] pleased to be in their company and attentive to their concerns . . . demonstrating that [she] hear[s] them, understand[s] them, and can be trusted by them.”3

Andie: During the summer between my second and third years of law school, I worked at a large law firm, enjoying the variety and challenge of my projects and the mix of people with whom I was working. I had received high praise from many of the partners I had worked with, so I was shocked when I was told I had not received an offer to work at the firm after graduation. Why? I was told that a senior partner had stated that I would get a job offer only “over his dead body.” When I heard this, I was deeply troubled. I had met this partner only once for, maybe, five minutes and had handled only one project for him and, as far as I knew, had given him exactly what he had asked for.

I thought back to our brief meeting. When I was called to his office, his door was open and he was sitting with his feet on his desk. I knocked on the door frame to catch his attention. He looked my way and motioned towards the corner of his office. I was young and eager and had been told to always shake hands with someone when introducing myself. So, I walked towards his desk, extended my hand, and made the introduction. He stood up and shook my hand. I sat down in one of the chairs across from his desk. He gave me the assignment; I thanked him; I left his office; I did the assignment; and I never gave our five minute meeting another thought. Not another thought, that is, until I was told I would not have the option to work at “his” firm. As I replayed our brief meeting, the reality of the situation finally struck me. I had totally missed the signals he had sent. By walking towards his desk and extending my hand, I had forced him to take his feet off the desk and stand up. And then by sitting down in one of his guest chairs rather than on the low couches in the far corner of his office, I had crossed the line from a dutiful intern to an assertive, pushy woman, clueless as to law firm protocols.

As I have recounted this story over the years, I am often asked if I would have behaved any differently if I had then been aware of the need to manage the impression I was making. The answer is, “yes and no.” While I would not have taken a seat in the corner on a low sofa, I would not have forced the partner to stand up and lose his studied composure by needing to shake my hand. I would have tried to balance my own sense of self with a softer impression. I would have thought about how I appeared to him, and I would have been alert to the discomfort and disapproval I was provoking. I might not have been able to change the outcome, but I would have had a better sense of what I had been actually communicating.

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2 Generational issues may also play a major role here. We discuss these issues at length in our book but largely ignore them in this article.

Of course, standing alone, our recommendation that women need to use a combination of agentic and communal communication to advance their careers is hardly helpful, for it leaves unanswered the practical questions of what those communication styles are, how they can be employed, and when they are appropriate. Our book is intended to answer those questions, to provide concrete, hard-headed, and practical advice so that women can navigate over, around and through the gendered speed bumps and traffic barriers they will encounter on their road to career advancement. For the present, however, we want to focus exclusively on how women can take control of their careers by taking control of communication.

Verbal and written language are obvious forms of communication, but so are gestures, facial expressions, posture, touch, preferred physical space, dress, attitudes and dispositions, displayed preferences, punctuality, performance expectations, standards of quality, task proficiencies, care for others, responsiveness, praise and criticism, and so on. Indeed, as we use the term “communication,” it includes every aspect of a woman’s interactions with other people, from the first impression she makes to her ability to influence, lead, inspire and motivate. Communication is the whole spectrum of observable human behavior. It includes “natural” tendencies and characteristics, but it also includes learned techniques for controlling the impressions a woman makes. We refer to these learned techniques as “attuned gender communication;” our short-hand phrase for a woman’s ability to control her communication so that she can play into, conflict with, or finesse gender stereotypes as and when she chooses.

There is certainly no guaranteed formula for career success, no silver bullet to “get there.” Too many qualities are demanded in too many circumstances for any given set of techniques to provide a definitive road map to the top. Nevertheless, we are confident that an ambitious woman will not find her career stalled because of gender biases if she is prepared to learn and use attuned gender communication.

Stereotypes and Impression Management

In a typical mixed-gender business situation such as we described earlier, a woman in the group will be affected by the prevailing stereotypes in direct proportion to how she communicates with, reads the reactions of, and adjusts her behavior in response to the communication of the other group participants. This is the heart of attuned gender communication: managing people’s responses to you by managing the impressions you make on them. Study after study has found that a woman who can consciously control the nature and content of her communication is in a far better position to overcome or defuse adverse gender stereotypes than a woman who cannot. Thus, the basic premise of attuned gender communication is quite straightforward: by managing the impression you make, you can manage the biases with which you are confronted.

The importance of a person managing the impressions she or he makes is hardly a new notion. Philosopher and historian David Hume eloquently made the point in the 1770s.

“A [n] orator addresses himself to a particular audience, and must have a regard to their particular genius, interests, opinions, passions, and prejudices; otherwise he hopes in vain to govern their resolutions, and inflame their affections. Should they ever have entertained some prepossessions against him, however unreasonable, he must not overlook this disadvantage; but, before he enters upon the subject, must endeavour to conciliate their affection, and acquire their good graces.”

If we substitute “woman in a business situation” for “orator” and modernize Hume’s language, we have the essence of attuned gender communication in two sentences.

“Impression management” has been a topic of serious scientific and academic study since at least 1959, when the sociologist and anthropologist Erving Goffman coined the phrase. Goffman studied the ways in which people adjust their communication to influence the impressions they make on others. Many subsequent researchers have expanded on Goffman’s work. In 1972, the social psychologist Mark Snyder developed a 25 question Self-Monitoring Scale to measure the extent to which people observe and control their expressive behavior and self-presentation. This test was updated to an 18 question test in 1986 with the collaboration of Steven W. Gangestad. Richard D. Lennox and Raymond N. Wolfe published a third Self-Monitoring Scale in 1984. All three of these tests are designed to distinguish people who are “high self-monitors” from those who are “low self-monitors” based on the extent to which a person “strategically cultivates public appearances.” While there is disagreement over which of these scales is the most useful and accurate, for our purposes, that debate is irrelevant, for there is no disagreement over the fact that people who are good at self-monitoring are more successful at career advancement than those who are not. And women who are effective self-monitors manage gender bias far better than women who are not.

High self-monitors key off of cues from others’ communication to regulate their own communication. Low self-monitors “are controlled from within by their affective states and attitudes.” Low self-monitors “lack either the ability or the motivation to so regulate their expressive self-presentations.”


11 Snyder and Gangestad, supra note 7, at p. 125.
responsive to social and interpersonal cues of situationally appropriate performances.” In a social situation, high self-monitors ask: “Who does this situation want me to be and how can I be that person?” Low self-monitors ask: “Who am I and how can I be in this situation?” Low self-monitors behave as though, “I am who I am, and that is whom I will always be.”

Research makes it clear that high self-monitors consistently and decisively beat out low self-monitors for career promotions. They advance further, and more often than low self-monitors, whether they stay at one company or move from company to company. There is no logical or empirical reason why this should be so if the judgment of superior job performance are based exclusively on the skill with which specific tasks or projects were performed. But if the judgment of superior job performance is also based on effectively cooperating with others, the quality of interpersonal communication, an ability to perform a variety of different roles, and being able to quickly respond to the needs and demands of a large number of diverse personalities and temperaments, then high self-monitors would clearly have a significant advantage in playing the promotion game. Moreover, this advantage would increase as the high self-monitors move up the career ladder and the jobs to be performed shifted away from specific tasks toward leadership, motivation, and coordination.

As soon as we recognize that the successful manager is “the one who manages the good opinions of others,” it ceases to be surprising that study after study has shown that high self-monitors hold more senior positions in businesses of all sorts than do low self-monitors. “Managers may have the right ideas and skills, but unless their reputation, or others’ perceptions of their abilities is valued, purchased and used by those in power, their management capital is worthless for their career advancement.”

Andie: I was mentoring a young woman who had just started her career. She was finding that the techniques she had used in school to assure success were not working in business. She believed that the senior colleague with whom she worked most frequently did not like working with her. As I questioned her about her communication, I learned that, like many young women, she made it a practice of asking a lot of questions when she got an assignment. Young men generally do not do this; they listen, learn the deadline, and say, “Got it, will do.” But my mentee would pepper her boss with questions right off the bat. My guess was that as a result of her behavior, her boss thought she was confused, slow on the uptake, and tentative rather than eager and committed. Instead of allowing him to explain what he was looking for in his own words, she was forcing him to communicate on her terms and by doing so she was annoying and frustrating him.

I suggested that she start asking only the most basic questions needed to orient herself. She should listen to what he had to say and then say something like “I’ll get right on it.” She should then—back in her office—think carefully about the assignment and identify the steps she would need to take to get it done. Only then—and only if necessary—should she go back to her boss with a few well organized, focused and concise questions posed in the context of just wanting “to be sure the two of them were on the same page.”

This young woman was skeptical, but she went along with my suggestions and over a relatively short period of time the whole work dynamic had changed. Her boss grew calmer in her presence, more respectful, and less frustrated. She realized that she had been really annoying him with her questions. By changing her communication, she began to create the impression that she was in control, competent, and highly motivated — and thus far more “promotable” than she had appeared before.

**Women and Impression Management**

The early research on self-monitoring and career advancement was done largely without regard to gender. But in 2002, Val Singh, Savita Kumra and Susan Vinnicombe published a groundbreaking study entitled, “Gender and Impression Management: Playing the Promotion Game.” Singh and his colleagues found that women are significantly less willing to engage in self-monitoring than are men, but that when women do self-monitor, they gain a substantial promotion advantage over other women and men. In 2011, Olivia O’Neill and Charles O'Reilly III built on this study by tracking 132 female and male MBA graduates over an eight-year period. They found that women who were high self-monitors were comfortable using agentic (traditionally male) behavior or nurturing (traditionally female) behavior (or both) as it seemed appropriate in particular situations. High self-monitoring women had a clear awareness of when agentic communication was called for and when nurturing or communal communication was needed. These high self-monitoring women received more job promotions than the low self-monitoring female MBAs (whether they were nurturing or agentic) and all of the male MBAs. In fact, high self-monitoring women received 1.5 times as many promotions as agentic men; 1.5 times as many promotions as nurturing women; 2 times as many promotions as nurturing men; and 3 times as many promotions

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12 Snyder, supra note 10, at p. 1048.
13 Id.
15 Id., at p. 1056.
17 Kilduff and Day, supra note 10, at p. 1048.
18 Singh et al., supra note 16, at p. 87.
19 Singh et al., supra note 16. The researchers conducted two studies. In the first study they studied female UK business school graduates and their male peers to investigate the frequency they reported using impression management to advance their careers. In the second study, they conducted 34 in-depth interviews of consultants in a large international management consulting firm based in the UK.

The results of the O’Neill and O’Reilly study are striking and provide a strong argument for women learning attuned gender communication. As Singh notes, “[T]he prime reason for attempting to ‘manage’ the impression we create is that through the construction of ‘desirable’ social identities, our public selves come closer to our ideal selves. We seek to influence how we are perceived, and, therefore, the way in which others treat us.”\footnote{Singh et al., supra note 16, at p. 78. These “skills form part of the rules of the game of acknowledgement, recognition and promotion, which most of these managerial and professional males [in the study] seem to understand and comply with, in a more straightforward and less emotional way [than the women in the study].” \textit{Id.}, at p. 86.}

As a result, impression management “may directly impact material outcomes. For example, giving the impression that one is competent and ambitious can lead to benefits such as improved performance ratings and career enhancing opportunities.”\footnote{Anderson and Thacker, 1985, cited in O’Neill and O’Reilly, supra note 20, at p. 2.}

Before O’Neill and O’Reilly’s study, most of the research about the effect of self-monitoring on women’s career success was conducted in laboratory settings, involving college students dealing with other students who were strangers. O’Neill and O’Reilly’s study confirmed these laboratory results in the real world of work, significantly increasing the importance of these results. There is now no reason to doubt that “[h]igh self-monitoring women exert more influence, [are] perceived as more valuable, and claim more resources [than men or other women].”\footnote{Francis Flynn and Daniel Ames, \textit{What’s Good for the Goose May Not be Good for the Gender: The Benefits of Self-Monitoring for Men and Women in Task Groups and Dyadic Conflicts}, Journal of Applied Psychology, 91, 2006, pp. 272-281. See also O’Neill and O’Reilly, supra note 20, at p. 2.}

Why Women Resist Impression Management

Given the dramatic career advantages for women who are high self-monitors, why are women so often reluctant to employ it? As Singh found, even when women recognize that impression management can positively influence their careers, they are less likely to use these techniques than are men.\footnote{O’Neill and O’Reilly, supra note 20, at p. 2. Andie: At a recent gender communication workshop I told the following story:}

A woman that I was asked to mentor in a different city was being criticized by many of her supervisors as a “sloppy thinker.” I found this inexplicable because I had found her sharp and focused during my many telephone conversations with her. The next time I was in her city, I went to visit her in person. She was dressed in her normal outfit, which was very casual. It was hard to tell if she was wearing her pajamas or a sweat suit. I knew she would be participating in an important meeting the next week where she would interact with some key decision makers. I stuck my neck out and suggested that she go to a local department store and ask the personal shopper to help her “dress like a banker.” She did just that and attended the meeting dressed in a professional manner. After her meeting, she reported to me that the reactions to her had been entirely different from those she had experienced before. I don’t know how much of the change in response to her was the result of her dress, the increased self-confidence she displayed or an alignment of the stars. But what I do know is that she started dressing “like a banker” every day, and I never again heard her being criticized for being a “sloppy thinker.”
distinct reactions. First, I realized that I must not have done a very good job of communicating my message during the workshop. Although I have spent much of my professional life working to dispel biases resulting from gender stereotypes, I must have come across as complacent about them, which was surely not my intent.

My second and more important reaction was one of extraordinary sadness. I realized that the women who had criticized me were unlikely to get as far as they wanted to in their careers, for career advancement depends not on “buying into gender stereotypes” but on buying into reality. While there is solid evidence that the power and reach of gender stereotypes has lessened in recent years, these stereotypes are still a pervasive fact of economic life in the United States. Unless women are prepared to drop out of the struggle for career success until the nirvana of the gender neutral business organization arrives, women will need to learn to play a game in which stereotypes that significantly disadvantage them provide many of the most important rules.

Let me illustrate this point with another story. A few years ago, I was handling a major tax case in which the principal IRS trial lawyer was a “man’s man,” an avid sports fan and hunter. Quite literally, I could find nothing to talk about with him except the weather and the tax case. But my job was to settle this case and to do so on terms that were favorable for my client. If that settlement was going to happen, someone needed to establish a real rapport with this IRS lawyer, and that was unlikely to be me. So what did I do? I brought on to my team one of my male partners who was also a sports fan and man’s man. And you know what? The two of them bonded, and the client got a great settlement.

Now this is hardly an unusual story. All of us have had occasions when we have thought it would be advantageous to bring another person on to our team because she or he had talents or qualities we did not. This is what I would call “team impression management”—making sure that the people on your team are collectively capable of presenting the impression that is needed to get the job done.

But sometimes, you are the whole team—as is the case when the job is advancing your own career. When this is so, managing your “team’s” impression is up to you. If decisiveness is called for, you have to provide it. And when a sense of inclusiveness and warmth is needed, that’s up to you too. This has nothing to do with “buying into gender stereotypes;” it has everything to do with getting the job done. You would not hesitate to bring another person on to a business team if her or his qualities were needed for the job at hand. Therefore, when the job is advancing your own career, you shouldn’t hesitate to bring on a new or different communication style if that is what it will take for you to get that job done.

Impression Management and Authenticity

Let us look more closely at exactly what we are recommending when we advise women to become effective self-monitors. First, we are not advising women to change their communication style so that they will always be perceived as communal. A woman has no reason to adjust the impression she is making unless she believes that by doing so she can achieve a better result for her client, her company or herself. As Andie’s last sidebar emphasized, the objective is never the impression itself but always the job to be done. High self-monitoring is important for women so that they can “get the job done” without being hindered by gender biases.

Second, we would never advise a woman to be “phony” in order to get a job done. To engage in effective impression management, a woman must be deeply connected with her own feelings. And, as Amy J.C. Cuddy, Matthew Kohut, and John Neffinger note, “[W]hen we are connected with ourselves, it is much easier to connect with others.” A woman who is truly in touch with herself is anything but a phony; she is a person who can draw on the many different aspects and qualities that make her who she is. A woman who can do this will authentically meet the requirements of the business situations in which she finds herself. That may not be easy but it is not being a phony.

We generally find that women are open to using impression management when they are advocating on behalf of a client or pushing to advance their company’s business objectives. In such situations, women generally behave as Hume’s orator, for they recognize that to achieve their objective ‘they must endeavor to conciliate [the] affection [of those with whom they are dealing], and acquire their good graces.’ But when it comes to advocating on their own behalf, many women find impression management inappropriate, if not distasteful.

One reason for this reaction seems to be that many women assume that by just “doing a good job” they will be recognized and promoted, that the acclaim they so clearly deserve will automatically come their way. But, of course, this seldom is the way the business world works. Skill and competency are necessary characteristics for career success, but they are seldom sufficient. To move up in one’s career and continue to move up, a person needs to be noticed.

Consider the skills needed for promotion that we identified at the beginning of this article: “social presentability, visibility, organizational demeanor and political skill, as well as competent job performance.” All of these skills—except job performance—involve impression management. Promotion decisions depend on highly subjective ratings as to a person’s potential or “promotability.” Simply quite, a woman needs to be noticed as someone with promotability, someone who satisfies the requirements to move up. But—and this is the key difference between career advancement for a woman and a man—

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31 Cuddy et al., supra note 3.
woman not only needs to be noticed as having the needed leadership skills, she also needs not to be noticed as running afoul of traditional gender stereotypes. She needs to be noticed positively for her talents and not noticed negatively for triggering the backlash that often comes from stepping outside of traditional female gender roles. But, and this is the good news, the techniques she needs to know to do this—high self-monitoring and attuned gender communication—are skills that can be learned.

**Conclusion**

To wrap up, we would like to emphasize five points.

- First, determine what sort of a self-monitor you are. Are you a low, intermediate, or high self-monitor? You can find this out by answering the questions on the Self-Monitoring Scale. The test we suggest taking has 25 true and false questions. An interactive version of this test is available online at [http://personality-testing.info/tests/SM.php](http://personality-testing.info/tests/SM.php), and should take only a few minutes.33

- Second, if you are a low self-monitor, you can change. Practice getting in touch with your feelings; experiment with different communication styles; and study how others react to you as you do. (Our book should help with this). Chances are you are already good at picking up on nonverbal clues.34 It is probably the verbal communication to which you will need to pay particular attention. As the saying goes, this is not rocket science, but it requires listening to yourself and others.

- Third, stop worrying about being a phony; you will never be anyone other than the woman you are. If you are in touch with yourself, you will realize you have many aspects and possibilities. Impression management is simply drawing on those different aspects of yourself as they become appropriate. That is not being a phony; that is being real.

- Fourth, take it slow. Finding the right mix of communal and agentic behaviors may not be easy for you, but you can do it if you care enough about yourself and your career.

- Fifth, when things do not work as you would like, figure out why—as Andie did when she was not offered a job after her summer internship—and regroup. Think about how to adjust your communication to change the situation’s dynamics, and when you have, get back into the game. And never, ever, believe it is your fault when you encounter gender bias.

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33 Website visited January 10, 2014.