

No More Ms Nice Person

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Too often I hear experienced businesswomen putting forward the idea that the best quality women bring to business is our nurturing ability, and it makes my blood boil. Worse still is when this 'pearl' has the usual 'be assertive not aggressive' rule tagged onto it. Does anyone really believe that the individuals advocating this *blah* got to the top by cuddling competitors, playing coochie-coo with a disgruntled colleague or by soothing a grazed ego with an Elastoplast and a kiss?

More likely is that the job of nurturing is so familiar to females that whether at home or in business, women accept it as their lot. But nurturing is a quality that both men and women are equally capable of; it's just that this attribute has been assigned a female face for so long that it has become habitual for women, not for men. In itself nurturing is a splendidly generous act but it is behaviour more suited to being a spouse or a parent rather than being a forceful influence in the boardroom.

Now this is not to say that by dispensing with ideas about nurturing, every woman risks becoming a hard-nosed ball-breaker. Although this is what both men and women fear, complex issues like behaviour cannot be simplified down to such clear-cut black or white terms. So occasionally nurturing a distressed colleague may be appropriate but if someone's trying to screw you out of a mega-buck deal, aggression is probably far more effective than smiling sweetly while trying to be nice and assertive.

The origin of the word 'nice' reveals a very telling story. According to the Oxford Dictionary, this offensive little word comes from old English and Latin phrases that mean 'stupid' and 'ignorant'. So being 'nice' only makes one appear *doff* and the real consequence of this is confirmed by bumper sticker philosophy that reads: No well behaved woman has ever made a name for herself in history.

So if being well behaved maintains mediocrity, what's up with all the rules?

For untold generations women have had to live according to an unwritten rulebook that defines a 'good' woman as one who sacrifices herself so that others can thrive. Self-sacrifice is not natural to the female psyche, it is a learnt, and nurturing is the behaviour that expresses how self-sacrificing we are. Neither the original idea nor its expression is helpful to women in business.

Self-sacrificing behaviour is the primary cause of women earning less than men (women ask for less) and it drives counterproductive styles like the 'disease to please', which keeps women stuck in middle management. A 'good' woman supposedly never fights or argues, making negotiation and conflict-resolution awkward, and the growing number of supporters in the 'assertive not aggressive' brigade shows just how firmly this behaviour is still entrenched in women today.

For some 6000 years self-sacrifice has dominated the women's agenda and because, by definition, it knocks the fight out of women (rendering them helpless and ineffectual), men have been free to run the world. From about 4000 BCE onwards males have used aggression or destruction to gain and maintain control and they continue to do so because it works. Aggression may not be the best way to gain long-term co-operation but it's a particularly powerful controlling mechanism to make an adversary back off.

Popular belief has it that the battle of the sexes is as old as the mythical Adam and Eve but it is only during written history that the gender war ignited. For some estimated 190 000 years prior to this women held the cards of power but the sexes lived comfortably together as relative equals. It was only when these matrilineal societies were forcefully invaded by groups of nomadic men that governing systems gradually became patriarchal in nature. It was also at this time that the deity had a sex change and almost overnight the female God acquired a dangly bit.

As men have never been emotionally, mentally or spiritually superior, the only power they had at their disposal was greater physical strength. Since then men have asserted their 'ownership' of women through physical force or violence. The first 600-odd pages of the Old Testament substantiate the violence that was wreaked upon the matrilineal Pagan people, whose only crime was their belief in an all-powerful female Goddess.

Although in anybody's book this is ancient history, the problem is that we still live with the consequences today. For men to justify their brutish behaviour - at the time - they artificially separated male and female qualities. Although men and women have both an emotional and rational brain, rational thinking was turned into a masculine quality and issues like emotions, morals and ethics were weakened and softened by placing them squarely in the female domain.

This is why today men still pride themselves on being masters of rational thinking and anything difficult to deal with gets dismissed as 'illogical' emotional stuff. So much so that modern concepts like 'emotional intelligence' are judged by many men to be an oxymoron because, in their book, the words 'emotional' and 'intelligence' are contradictory.

Over the centuries women didn't just passively accept their self-sacrificing role, they were bludgeoned into being submissive and witch-hunting is just one example. But, without considering feelings (like empathy and compassion) or values (like morals and ethics) men still have free reign over atrocious behaviour, such as rape and warfare, to protect their man-made position.

So the nicer we women are, the more we unwittingly give permission for men to behave badly. Also without curtailing aggressive and destructive behaviour under the guise that 'boys will be boys' youngsters will continue to grow into men who will run other calamitous unethical institutions, like Enron and Worldcom... and good, self-sacrificing women will continue to nurture them.

But even though we see the cost of this behaviour all around us, why do so many women still adhere to these archaic ideas? Some say that these sex-roles are traditional and tradition shouldn't be messed with. But when convention impacts negatively upon the well being of more than half the world's population, how can anyone uphold it as righteous?

So I say it's time we chucked out the rules and instead of female mentors campaigning for more unreasonable guidelines for women, how about the outrageous idea of each of us finding our authentic selves and living accordingly? I know my female form seldom feels like being sweet and nice and I also know that, like nature, I can be generous and comforting but also wild, passionate, fierce and furious. Like most other women I don't need to be told when to be assertive and if the situation demands aggression, the person on the receiving end will get the full force of my fury.

In reality this means making friends with the bitch inside because, ironically, it is only with her protection that women feel safe enough to reveal the softer aspects of our character, like vulnerability for instance. Although the bitch is continually condemned, she's the one who protects the integrity and strength of all aspects of our genuine female nature, and it is primarily through her that women can reach wholeness. To do so the only nurturing required is to keep stirring the cauldron that feeds the ancient witch/bitch archetype of the wise woman inside.

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