

The Soul of the Businesswoman

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The choices made by Baby Boomer women - a generation of girls born in the 1940's & 50's - have changed all of our lives. Certainly they have irreversibly altered the landscape of our working world. As a result today more women earn money for a living than ever before.

Yet these pioneers who turned their backs on traditional roles have received no acclaim for their courage, resilience and wisdom. Instead, society has characterised these extraordinary self-made women as selfish man-haters who are unappealing, egotistical and even - on occasion - stark raving mad.

From movies like *Fatal Attraction* and more recently *American Beauty*, it can be seen that career women are often portrayed as miserable neurotics whose success inevitably makes them unattractive to men. Of course the filmmaker's naiveté would have us believe that the male rejection is the real source of their bizarre craziness!

Although millions of women have moved from behind the vacuum cleaner to the boardroom table, society continues to strike at two important areas for women; her femininity and her role in child rearing. Still today working women are subjectively blamed for an assortment of atrocities. This nonsense makes women believe they are the cause of anything from aggressive behaviour in children to the lack of morals in society.

Yet even with the shoddy reputation forced upon females in business, *Sleeping Beauty* continues to awaken from the coma conservative thinkers have attempted to induce in girls.

Today it is well known that women initiate most business start-ups in the western world. Yet very few set out in their career with the aim of ultimately becoming entrepreneurs. It happens because women work to make a difference. When they feel their corporate job no longer enables them to do this, they start developing the blueprint for their own business. So, the reality reveals the opposite of society's portrayal of the selfish successful shrew.

As a result women-owned enterprises tend to be more carefully planned than those of their male counterparts. Also, with the idea of 'making a difference' as the business foundation, women enter commerce with a ready-made passion. Certainly their mission is not something that needs to be invented as they go along. Significantly, these two factors combined, tend to translate into longer-term success.

Anita Roddick, founder of the global Body Shop, is a powerful example. Not only does her booming business employ thousands of people, but she also initiates many projects in developing countries. For her these suppliers are the source of both raw materials and finished product. Also, when questioned by her male directors about profits channelled into charity, she is adamant that if her business cannot be used to make a contribution, she would rather not be there at all. These are hardly the egotistical, narcissistic views the media would have us believe about successful career women.

With few female mentors as role models, working women have had to cut their own track. This has not however been without its problems. Many women who reach the top often do so at great cost to themselves. Many, like myself, have believed that to justify success, one has to half kill oneself in the process. Others have beliefs that success will bring various forms of betrayal and punishment. These too become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Yet these counter-productive but deep-seated convictions are not inherent in a woman's psyche. They are rooted in our rearing. Still today girls are emotionally raised to become good wives and mothers. Unlike boys who learn to slaughter the competition on the playing field, girls learn the value of giving. As business leaders this often translates into confusing management behaviour.

To gain co-operation from their staff, women tend to rely heavily upon the maternal caring role. This usually does the trick ... until of course things go wrong. Then they switch to the role of the wicked stepmother and ruthlessly play the witch/bitch role. This breaks down trust - a key area in effective leadership.

Women behave this way because girls learn that confrontation is not OK. Being 'nice' is valued and feelings like anger carry the unladylike label. So, to cope, women bury their irritation. Over time this becomes explosive. However, instead of hiding feelings, I advise women to get into a new habit of dealing with annoyances as and when they arise. Start with baby-steps and important matters will eventually become easier to deal with.

The motto: 'No More Ms Nice Person' can also be of great benefit to women. After all, being consistently 'nice' has never made anyone successful. *The Oxford Dictionary* shows that the word 'nice' has its origin in old English and Latin phrases meaning 'stupid' and 'ignorant'.

From the thinking on emotional intelligence (EQ) it is known that success is about choosing the response you deem most appropriate for each situation. This is much more likely to gain co-operation than playing the nice caring mum or sweet little girl.

Seldom are these behaviours appropriate in management. However, this is not to say that either real caring or the witch/bitch, in themselves, are bad for business. The problem arises when women only use the two extremes. Many effective responses lie in between these roles. That is why focusing on what is good for business can liberate women from the more traditional stereotyped behaviours.

Added to the complications of our rearing is the fact that girls also learn to carry the emotional load of the family. However, it is to a woman's detriment if she continues this role in leadership. Firstly it makes her vulnerable to being manipulated by others. Secondly, carrying other people's emotional garbage produces high levels of unnecessary stress.

This is one area where unleashing the bitch can prove particularly useful. When a woman's good nature is being taken advantage of, there's nothing like a murderous look or a curt comment to force others to back off. Sparingly used, the bitch inside serves as a powerful means of self-protection. To use her effectively, understand she is a really good friend.

As successful women have had to fight against a backlash of ridicule and blame, Baby Boomers have also gone all out to prove that they can do everything, perfectly of course. Now the 'control-freak' has taken over from the Superwoman of the Eighties. Today few women have time for themselves because they are too busy trying to manage everyone and everything. It's an impossible task. It also destroys others creativity and inhibits them from taking initiative.

To relax this controlling behaviour, ruthlessly examine your own priorities. Then start leaving non-essentials for others to pick up upon. This is particularly true in close relationships. Think about it! If you had someone who was prepared to bring home the bacon and look after your needs and those of the children, why would you get out of your comfy armchair to help her? Far more effective than nagging, is to skip town for a while. Then he will have to get on with it.

With Baby Boomers now in their forties and fifties, it is clearly time to start handing over the baton to the younger generation. Already with working mums, girls have far more powerful role models when it comes to their own choices. As for the boys, they are growing up with a greater respect for adult women than those who had doormats for mums. So all that remains now is the final frontier: Is there anyone out there who can straighten out the men?

Stephanie Vermeulen of *The Effective Training Corporation* runs practical training programmes on Applied EQ in both business and public forums as well as being an inspiring conference speaker and personal coach.

Her books, *Stitched-up: Who Fashions Women's Lives?* and *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone* are available from all leading bookstores and online from Amazon and Kalahari. She can be contacted on:

Phone: +27 11 486 1211

e-mail: steph@theeqsite.co.za

website: www.theeqsite.co.za

