

No one wants to be the mean girl... or do they? Statistics show, if you want that promotion, you might just need to man up

STORY RACHEL SMITH

Nobody wants to be considered the 'nasty girl' in the office. But could being too nice, too accommodating and too attached to the safe path be holding you back? The statistics don't lie. Australian women certainly aren't high-fiving each other in the corporate world's upper echelons. According to last year's census by the Equal Opportunity for Women Agency, we hold just three per cent of CEO positions in ASX 200 companies and eight per cent of executive management positions. We're penalised on the pay scale, too: earning 18 per cent less than our male counterparts. All of which begs the question: how seriously are women taken in the workplace? No wonder some of us think twice before putting a photo of the kids on our desk.

Clearly, there's a culture of niceness at work. A culture of women not speaking up in meetings. Of saying yes when we really mean, "Only if you pay me an extra \$30K a year." But why do we persist in toeing the line when it gets us nowhere, fast?

According to psychologist Lois Frankel, co-author of *Nice Girls Just Don't Get It*, mixed messages are part of the reason, and the belief we should fulfil others' needs before our own stops us gambling for what we want. A converted nice girl, Frankel says her workshops have introduced her to hundreds of Australian women who don't feel they can take risks, and this is leaving a lot of them on the back foot – especially in the workplace.

"Winning women take risks. They're willing to say, 'I don't want people to think badly of me, but I want the things in life that are important to me,'" she says. "Isn't that a horrible dilemma? You go for what you want and you're a bitch – and if you don't, you're a loser. It's a lose/lose proposition."

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(from left) Heather Maloney prides herself on being direct and forceful in business dealings, while Maureen Pound eventually toned down her assertiveness.

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Both businesswomen put their success down to their approach.

– it takes guts. Nice is necessary, but to climb the ladder, you need a tool kit of tactics you can pull out at a moment's notice. One strategy (there are 99 in Frankel's book) is being ready to lock horns, rather than always letting others have their way.

"We avoid confrontation at all costs, but it's really no more than approaching someone with an alternate viewpoint," Frankel explains. "It's about learning how to use words to make the case for what you want. It doesn't mean you always win. I've been a business coach for 25 years; do difficult conversations ever become easier for me? No. Is it ever comfortable? No. But am I going to avoid it? No! I know the way to live the life I want and enjoy the things I feel I've earned, is to be a little uncomfortable."

That doesn't mean being aggressive or losing your cool – it's about honing a savvy, gracious and diplomatic approach, says Frankel. "It takes a skill, which many of us haven't been taught. Women will often err on the side of being too gracious or being a ball-buster, and neither works. It's a balance."

At any rate, we have to stop sitting back and hoping success will fall into our laps. "Hope isn't a strategy," says Frankel. "Risks and rewards go together. Learning the right strategies will help you create the life you want." Not to mention more chance of a key to the corner office.

"I'M NOT IN BUSINESS TO WIN A POPULARITY CONTEST"

Heather Maloney, 42, is managing director of Contact IT Services, which offers online business solutions.

"Before starting Contact IT, I worked at a few large companies, including Toyota and ANZ. My experiences showed me the glass ceiling is alive and well, and there are a lot of boys' clubs out there. It's frustrating for a woman. I spent years in the corporate world, not being offered the same opportunities as my male counterparts. Fed up with my whingeing, my husband told me to quit and start my own business, so I did.

I'm assertive and unapologetic about it. But it's a fine line to tread. Unfortunately, assertive women are often considered pushy, whereas their male equivalents would be seen as passionate. If it's a man, people think, he's on fire! If it's a woman, you'll hear disparaging comments such as, 'She's got balls.'



I'm very direct and men often find that hard to deal with. But I've always said I'm not in business to win a popularity contest. I've never worried too much about how I'm perceived. For women to make progress, I believe they need to be assertive, but not aggressive. You need to remain calm.

Being driven can cause problems in relationships outside work, though, especially if your partner is more relaxed and just wants to veg out. I've had to learn to adjust and realise a balance is healthy. It probably tones me down a bit."

"BEING NICER WORKS FOR ME"

Maureen Pound, 42, is director of Performance Toolkit, an executive training company.

"I was the youngest of nine kids at home and always had to speak up to be heard. I think those experiences hard-wire you, as do those you come across in the workplace.

Before I launched my business, I was looking into using a tool with clients that compiles feedback about you from your >

colleagues. Quite innocently, I decided to see what mine thought of me. When the results came in, it said I was 'reactive'. Others had called me 'snappy' or 'a bit harsh' in the past, and it was quite confronting reading that on paper. People don't say these things to your face. It was an 'Aha' moment.

I've done a lot since then to become more mindful. I hold back more, and think things through instead of letting my emotions take over. Nine times out of 10, my approach is different when I wait and address a situation the next day. I no longer ask accusatory questions – 'Why are you late?' or 'Why haven't you done the report?' – I use other tactics.

I admire women who have total control over their communication. Former Democrat leader Natasha Stott Despoja is one of them. She's worked in a male-dominated arena, but she's likable and gentle, while still being assertive. I've never seen her lose it, but I get the feeling she knows her stuff and you wouldn't want to mess with her.

I look at women and men who are assertive to the point of being pushy or unpleasant and think they could be much more effective with a different technique.

Changing my approach at work filtered through to my personal life, too. I don't raise my voice any more. It's changed how I am as a parent. It's affected all my relationships. You could ask anyone and they'd say there's a difference in me compared to 10 years ago. I love my work more now because I'm encouraging people to communicate in new ways, and to be nicer in the workplace." ■

Nice Girls Just Don't Get It by Lois Frankel (Hachette Australia, \$24.99) is out now. Frankel will tour Australia in June. For details, visit www.hachette.com.au.

FRANKEL'S TOP FIVE TACTICS FOR 'WINNING' WOMEN

1
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5

EXAMINE YOUR CHOICES "We feel stuck when we think we have no choice. But, in fact, we always have choices. We might not like them, and they may be hard, but we always have choices."

KNOW WHEN TO WALK AWAY "Women stay in bad situations too long. You need to know when to walk, from a job where you're not being treated respectfully to something as serious as a marriage. When you've done your best to turn a situation around, or to be fair or gracious, and none of it works, there's no shame in walking."

SPEAK IN HEADLINES WITH TAGLINES "Part of what keeps us from obtaining what we want is not communicating effectively. The first thing you say should be the most important thing – that's your headline. Your tagline is your supporting reason."

DITCH THE GUILT "If you're feeling bad because you didn't do something, tell the person, 'I didn't do it, I feel bad, it won't happen again.' Then put it behind you. Guilt has no purpose in our lives."

LIVE YOUR VALUES "In the end, they're all we have. If you're being abused, marginalised or taken advantage of, you're not living your values every day."

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