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Removing Self-Imposed Barriers to Success for High Potential Women in the Workplace



OrangeGrove
Consulting



Summary

For organizations to see talented women rise through the ranks at the same pace and numbers as men, significant attention must be paid to the role of unconscious bias in creating barriers for women. While much of the current research has uncovered unconscious bias in recruiting, rewards and recognition, talent management systems, and organizational culture, little has been done to recognize the role of unconscious bias in women themselves.

The impetus for driving this change for organizations is twofold: First, women outnumber men in college graduation rates and in low to middle management roles but have little to no representation in senior management ranks¹. The cost to companies of this talent leakage is high in terms of training spend, churn, and human capital underutilization. Second, pay equity legislation and overall public scrutiny are driving more wage transparency². Women, more than ever before are becoming aware of their collective power and dissatisfaction with traditional workplace structures. The growing "rise of women" trend could create a significant legal risk and competitive threat to inflexible organizational structures.

Merely highlighting unconscious bias is not enough. In fact, in some cases, calling people to task has further entrenched stereotypes, rather than removed them. Recognition of these biases is only the first step in the process. A structured approach to identifying and impartially analyzing these biases must be undertaken so that the underlying assumptions can be challenged and reframed. Only then will structural systems, and their participants, be free and flexible to create new thinking and innovative workplace solutions.

Our Research Study

In 2013, we published the results of a 2-year study of more than 100 college-educated women ranging in age from 23 to 67 in a book called, *The Orange Line: A Woman's Guide to Integrating Career, Family, and Life*³. The range of industries, jobs and management responsibilities was wide. The representation of race, geographic location and marital status mirrored current workplace diversity⁴.

Our original intent was to share success stories of women who successfully integrated their work and life. What we uncovered were some surprising findings about women's cultural beliefs and underlying career assumptions. We noticed women holding themselves back and limiting their personal growth because of their own unconscious bias about womanhood. And we found those women who were the most successful at integrating career, family, and life were those with the self-awareness and mental agility to be

¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/03/06/womens-college-enrollment-gains-leave-men-behind/>
<http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/statistical-overview-women-workplace>

² <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/04/07/obama-seeks-wage-transparency-with-executive-orders/>
<http://money.cnn.com/2014/02/04/news/companies/gm-ceo-pay/>

³ By Jodi Ecker Detjen, Michelle A. Waters, and Kelly Watson, JMK Publishing 2013

⁴ <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/statistical-overview-women-workplace>



able to push past the bias and its barriers. We identified 6 disciplines that successful women can develop and practice throughout their careers.

The Role of Unconscious Bias

There has been a lot of previous study about the role unconscious bias plays in the workplace in limiting the advancement of women and minorities. However, much of that work has been about the external bias: The bias of others. The major finding of our research was that there is also an internal unconscious bias: The bias women themselves have about the nature and roles of women. We call this bias, "The Feminine Filter™," because it represents a distorted or "filtered" view woman have of themselves and others.

The Feminine Filter™ view of the world is the cumulative result of generations of cultural socialization. It is difficult for women to see themselves outside of this context. And it is based upon a set of widely-accepted assumptions that guide how women should live and what women should believe.

Career Ambivalence Bias

60.2% of interviewees had mothers who worked in mostly traditionally female jobs. Many stepped back when family came along and most were the primary caregivers.

The first major internal bias we found was that **women don't really feel entitled to pursue a career as the primary purpose of their lives.** Further, if they wanted a substantial career, it was expected they would have to sacrifice having a family or a personal life. While many of our interviewees grew up believing a litany of exciting career paths were open to them, at some point along the way, most women, even young women, were struck with the belief that family was their primary responsibility. We found this true of even single women without children or elder-care responsibilities. Many of them described anticipating a future time when they would have these responsibilities and thus felt they needed to modify their current career expectations accordingly. 60.2% of our interviewees said their mothers worked outside of the home, although many of them were in traditionally "female" jobs such as teaching, nursing, and secretarial work. And for most, when family came along, their mother's career took the backburner. Many of them described watching their mothers struggle to balance work and life and wanted to avoid a similar struggle by limiting their careers to the most flexible jobs. For those young interviewees who hoped to prioritize their career, they felt family was out of the question, or they needed a stay-at-home spouse to support the family. The overwhelming assumption was that women cannot do both, that there is a trade-off, and an "either-or" decision.

This belief was largely unspoken. Where we found it was in the presence of guilt. Working women described feeling guilty when they were at work, particularly if they felt they had to miss a family event, attend a doctor's appointment or even if their homes were



messy. They held themselves to a high standard in household roles, despite having achieved high performance or recognition at work. This almost universal feeling of guilt highlighted for us the underlying, unconscious belief that career is not where women are “supposed” to focus their energies, at least, not until the household was running smoothly.

Underpinning this assumption is, we think, a broader unspoken belief in a natural state where women who sacrifice themselves to take care of others will be “taken care of” over time. Because of this, even younger generations of **women have relinquished responsibility for earning a living**. “Breadwinning” is still seen as a masculine responsibility and when women do it, it is remarkable. This belief in role responsibility was nearly universal in the single (never married) and married women in our study. Most also described having a traditional household division of labor, where men did the outdoor work while the women cooked and cleaned. Divorced women who had returned to the workforce after failed marriages were far more realistic about having to earn a living but even then we found some were bitter because they felt as if a larger social contract had been breached. We also found negative cultural pressure on career-oriented women from other women, which manifested in alienation and factional conflict. This behavior reinforces the unspoken message that women shouldn't embrace a career as their primary focus.

75% of women studied wanted a career

What is sad about this discovery is the finding that most women in our study felt they needed their career as part of their own personal, emotional fulfillment. When asked if they “had to work” or “wanted to work”, the overwhelming response (75%) was they wanted to work. Most described their work as rewarding.

We also discovered that because women tended to believe the needs of others are primary and their career is secondary, **they internalized their own personal needs as secondary**, too. When women took time off to focus on family, we found they cancelled support services such as housekeepers and laundry services, taking on this work themselves. They stopped investing in their retirement accounts and absorbed all of the previously shared parenting duties. We found women who had invested in their husband's career in this way realized later they were unable to access the return on this investment. We also found that women who had left the professional workplace for an extended period had significant trouble finding a suitable re-entry job. Moms viewed daycare as a cost comparable to their salaries alone before determining it wasn't worth the investment. Working women described being underutilized and working far below their capability so they could support others. Many took a pay and hours cut to give themselves flexibility and later found this negatively impacted their career trajectory. By placing themselves in a perpetual position of weakness, women hampered their own ability to negotiate, invest in their career development, and express their workplace needs authentically.



Women seem to have accepted the traditional workplace assumptions and have molded themselves to fit in rather than pressured systems to change.

The result of this career ambivalence is three-fold. First, not bringing themselves fully to the table has disabled women's bargaining power to make change. This has sustained pay inequity and contributed to the continued belief that daycare and work flexibility are women's issues. Second, when women feel pressure in their careers, whether from external workplace barriers, work-life conflict, or personal discouragement, they are much more likely to succumb to burnout, leave a job or limit their own career potential. It becomes easier to give up when the underlying message is that a career-focus is an unnatural state. Third, women-vs.-women conflict has fragmented the potential collective power of women to help lift each other up or make lasting structural change. It is not terribly surprising, then, that workplace systems therefore still largely support and promote a single-career orientation household where generally the man has more upward flexibility and mobility.

Case Study: Terri is a high performer on a strategy team for a Fortune 500 Brand. She's being considered for a promotion because of her superior outcomes. She is someone her team relies on because of her ideas and enthusiasm.

She is well liked by her team and manager. She really enjoys her work and gets enormous personal satisfaction from what she's been able to accomplish. She finished her MBA 18 months ago and was successful in her program as well.

Terri's fiancé recently got offered his "dream job" across the country. Not only is it his ideal work, he'll make more money. He is very excited about this opportunity and can't believe how lucky he is. She is contemplating what to do and thinks she might quit and move with him. She's toying with idea of starting a family and either slowing down work or quitting altogether. She's really worried that if she doesn't go with him that it will end their relationship and that she will be the reason. She thinks ending this relationship at this point in her life could kill her dream to have a family.

Terri's company risks losing a star performer and all of its previous investment in training and development. Worse, there seems to be little the company can do to prevent it.



Ideal Woman Bias

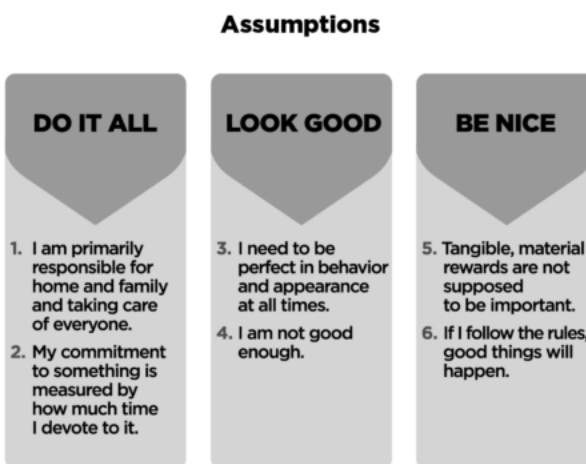
The second major internal bias we found was a tendency for women to accept as "rules of conduct" an aspirational model of the "Ideal Woman." The Ideal Woman is seen as someone who:



- 1) Does it all
- 2) Looks Good
- 3) Is Nice⁵

Notice “Be smart” is not on this list. In fact, being smart can alienate or threaten others so women may downplay their intelligence. Being technical or good at math also does not rate highly. And being seen as selfish, aggressive, bitchy, or bossy are all negative feminine traits.

Underneath this Ideal Woman framework lies a set of flawed assumptions:



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The problem is living up to the “Ideal Woman” leaves women in conflict with what it takes to be successful at work and sets them up for some career-limiting bad habits. “Doing it all” limits the ability to delegate or be strategic with where energy is spent. “Looking Good” can lead to an unhealthy perfectionism standard and resistance or unwillingness to delegate. “Nice” girls don’t ask for money or make tough, unpopular decisions. Women in our study reported feeling trapped between contradictory expectations of themselves as workers and as women. Unfortunately, the Ideal Woman lacks or resists developing exactly the kinds of leadership skills necessary for advancement through the organization. The problem is not a lack of opportunity or commitment to developing these skills, but rather the core cultural conflict for women that needs to be addressed first.

⁵ Kathy Oneto, <http://www.anthemww.com/whitepaper/todays-women-newfound-power-persistent-expectations/>



Case Study: Sonia works at a large accounting firm. She is considered a high performer. Her manager regularly looks to her to tackle large, complex projects.

Sonia only allows perfection in her work. She will take over work done by her co-workers or her staff in order to ensure it looks 100%. As a result, she is not well liked by some of the women in her group, although the men seem happy to let her take lower-end, detail work off their plate.

She is sometimes a difficult boss. Because she expects perfection, she struggles to delegate and promote. When her team comes to her because they have too much to do, she solves the problem by adding more staff. The result is a large team of low-level "worker bees".

Sonia gets a lot of compliments from her manager and other senior leaders. Her work is touted as the example across the division. Her manager often comments that he couldn't run the place without her. "How does she do it all?" is routinely heard. This positive reinforcement feeds her belief that her 'A' type personality and perfectionism standards have been the key to her success.

Sonia works long hours and sometimes feels overwhelmed. She tries to hide it and views it as a weakness. She thinks she looks like she has it together. Inside, Sonia is approaching burnout and doesn't think she can add one more thing to her plate. Her manager wants her to step up and become more strategic but he can't seem to get her to stop "doing" long enough to see the bigger picture. He tells her to take time off and worry less about getting things perfect but she doesn't seem to get the point. Her occasional tendency to have a meltdown at work leads him to believe she is not ready for the next career step.

Overcoming Unconscious Bias

Internal

Our belief is that before women can overcome the workplace barriers created by external unconscious bias, they must first overcome the self-limiting barriers created by their own flawed assumptions. The goal is to unleash women's potential by focusing on what every woman can all control -themselves. We advocate the practice of six disciplines:

1) Reframe the Ideal Woman

The objective of the first discipline is to train women to recognize when the Feminine Filter™ is at work. Women can learn to recognize their own guilt, bad habits, or career-limiting decisions that hide flawed underlying assumptions. They can develop a new level of consciousness about their decision-making and their ideals. They can see how adherence to the ideal woman limits their possibilities.



It is also important to help women acknowledge the importance of their career to their overall life's purpose and establish comfort with their career responsibilities.

Much of this includes challenging widely-held societal expectations. Even if a woman emerges from the challenge accepting the underlying assumptions, it is critical she make decisions more consciously.

The outcome of this discipline is an ability to see more nuance, more flexible decision making, and an energy shift from guilt to creativity.

2) Reframe Selfish

The objective of the second discipline is to empower women to bring themselves into the equation as an equal party. This means finding their voice instead of adapting themselves. It also means addressing the painful part of negotiating and boundary setting so women ask for what they need.

Women will encounter resistance to this assumption of equality in the short run, particularly if they negotiate in a heightened emotional state. Societal pressure to suppress emotions and "sacrifice" their needs is strong. But women need to overcome the resistance and find a way to be direct while maintaining emotional neutrality.

This discipline results in increased collaboration, a reduction in negative consequences such as burnout, and development of the wider capabilities of the people under their supervision.

3) Reframe Confidence

Developing self-efficacy is the objective of the third discipline. We recommend moving women beyond the superficial "fake it 'til you make it" advice and digging more deeply into self-awareness to find a solid foundation for self-confidence. Women need to listen more closely to their bodies and learn to integrate objective feedback from others for greater agility, much of which is traditionally blocked by Feminine Filter constraints.

Some of this comes from creating a safe environment for women to try something new that has a high risk of failure. By taking risks, experiencing failure, recovering, and ultimately succeeding, women can build their own belief in self-efficacy. Protecting women from failure, and unduly penalizing mistakes threatens this ability and reinforces traditional belief systems.

Building self-efficacy can increase the confidence to take on challenging roles and the ability to help others do the same.



4) Reframe Do It All Myself

Women can have it all without doing it all but they first need to understand the roots of their own unwillingness to delegate. They can be trained to build and manage support in a way that maximizes effectiveness and quality, while addressing the underlying need to control. Women are encouraged to invest in their career future by developing the skills of others and prioritizing their time and creative energy more effectively.

The result of this discipline is women can unlock the “Feminine Multiplier Effect,” the hidden impact a woman can make when she offloads formerly unpaid work to others and focuses her talents on where she can make the biggest impact. Women become more committed to their work and less distracted. They become better managers. And by increasing demand for paid services, they create a market for new and better support solutions.

5) Reframe Imperfection

The objective of this discipline is for women to get comfortable operating in imperfection. We advocate making a case for a new modus operandi – being “a work in progress.” Women should be taught learn to recognize the trappings of perfectionism and choose when it is appropriate to “punt.”

When women become proficient at this discipline, the result is better prioritization, more experimentation and risk taking, and increased collaboration. Less important tasks take less time, because they can be done less well, leaving more time for critical projects. Mistakes can become learning opportunities instead of deal-killers. And removing the fear of criticism or failure can invite critical collaborative feedback earlier in the process.

6) Reframe Risk

We recommend pushing women to set goals outside of their comfort zone as a means for growth. Without the constraints of perfection or career ambivalence, women can be free to expand themselves and reach new possibilities.

Reframing risk builds the ability of women to think more strategically, identify the longer term impacts of risk and see a wider breadth of opportunities.



The cumulative outcome of mastering these six disciplines is an expanded career and family life. Women can become less burdened with task-orientation and instead embrace expansive challenges and new possibilities. Risk can become a necessary step in career and personal development rather than something to avoid. By addressing their own internal unconscious bias and practicing these six skills, women can hone their delegation, negotiation, prioritization, and management skills for long term, mutually-beneficial career success.



Case Study: Pina works at a large drug company. She has been with the company for almost 20 years and is a senior executive. When her children were young, she insisted her also-working husband step up to an equal share of the parenting role. Together they hired a babysitter and a cook. She is careful to draw boundaries on her time and use her work hours as wisely as possible.

Pina resists unnecessary meetings and delegates everything she possibly can, often exposing junior associates to high-growth opportunities. She has developed a strong reputation as a manager and her team is known to be a reliable talent pipeline for the organization. Pina trusts herself and exudes confidence. She consistently delivers solid results for the organization.

The Problem with being Politically Correct

We found political correctness to be a strong internal barrier to women's equality. Instead of addressing gender bias, pay inequity, and lack of diversity, political correctness keeps people from acknowledging problems. Political Correctness helps people avoid having difficult conversations and promotes further unconscious bias.

External

Once women are on the same page and working to overcome their own unconscious biases, the organization can benefit from some complementary awareness as well. It is important to train managers of both genders to recognize the Ideal Woman assumptions and proactively reframe them.

When qualified women fail to ask for promotions or raises, managers can be trained to recognize the true reasons: Instead of assuming a lack of ambition, look for lack of confidence. When women hold back their ideas for fear of group rejection, managers can learn to proactively draw them out in a one-on-one environment.

An important technique is "direct speak" – honest, clear, non-emotional communication. This helps address women's inner critical voice by removing ambiguity.

Rewards and recognition systems should be calibrated to measure the level of unconscious bias latent in the work environment and corporate culture. Greater transparency on pay, job grades, and hiring practices helps move organizations towards solutions more quickly. If objective measurement cannot be achieved internally, external resources should be utilized.



Expected Results

For individual women, the results of eliminating unconscious bias are:

- Reduced Burnout
- Better management skills – including prioritization, delegation, creativity, and collaboration
- More women helping women, less competition
- More time for career, better control over life, better career outcomes
- Inner peace – less conflict with true self, less catastrophizing, less second-guessing self

For the organization, the results include:

- Reduced turnover
- Better engagement from women (less distraction, career ambivalence)
- Less wage disparity, risk of legal action
- Overall cultural shift to a focus on results
- A system that leverages talent more effectively

The key to achieving these results is to ensure more than simply exposing bias. Teaching employees about unconscious bias alone has been shown to be ineffective⁶. Instead, the underlying assumptions must be identified, challenged, and reframed to facilitate new possibilities for decision-making. And both the individual woman and the surrounding organization must play a role in this transformation.

Orange Grove Consulting is an innovative training & leadership development consultancy focused on helping women and organizations eliminate outdated “rules” and structures that stifle creativity and innovation. Learn more at www.OrangeGroveConsulting.com



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⁶ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/07/19/203306999/How-To-Fight-Racial-Bias-When-Its-Silent-And-Subtle>