

Women at Work: How to Gain Contentment

By Connie L. Ingram, Ph.D., LMHC

It's said that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world! However, in the work world a different cliché would be in order. Although women have made striking progress at work, it is still a place where men hold the majority of titled leadership positions. While everyone may be a leader to someone, the distinction here is the authority and the accompanying benefits that come with the title of leader.

The question, then, is how do women find fulfillment in their careers and in the workplace in the midst of a masculine oriented work world?

A New York Times census reports that women still earn about 89% less money than their male counterparts. The research further reports that men get more raises and other benefits than women because they ASK! However, women are expected to be the major breadwinners in one quarter of the nation by the year 2030. So then, can women leaders enjoy their jobs rather than simply go to work every day? I believe they can.

The secrets to enjoying the workplace are:

- Maintain your femininity
- Learn to be content
- Adopt an attitude of personal freedom
- Own the solution to problematic co-workers
- Speak your needs
- Keep a broad view

Maintain Your Femininity

Femininity is defined as the trait of behaving in ways considered typical for women. It is the line of demarcation from masculinity. Femininity does not mean less than, insufficient, subordinate, or inadequate. It simply means that women and men differ in the way that they perceive and behave in the world...including the work world.

According to Susan L. Miller, associate professor of sociology in a mid-west university and author of *Gender and Community Policing: Walking the Talk*, feminine characteristics include trust, cooperation, compassion, interpersonal communication and a non-threatening demeanor. Other writers of feminine characteristics expand the list to include being friendly, gracious, tactful, sensitive, caring, helpful, and supporting. Thus, in the work world a woman must use these qualities to add value to herself and her organization rather than try to circumvent her innate predisposition. A woman's internal conversation about needing to be more like men or more masculine to be more successful connotes thinking that disavows diversity as constructive and positive.

Keeping and celebrating your femininity will serve to further your leadership success.

Learn to be Content

It is said that we must learn to be content no matter the state in which we find ourselves. Learning to be content means women must learn to be appreciative and gracious. Generally speaking, women tend to compare themselves and their possessions to others. Comparison is a recipe for misery. Each of us has our own unique personality, body type, leadership style, worldview, and station in life. They are what they are because of our life experiences and our choices. None is better or worse, just different. Using what you have and appreciating what you have accomplished reaps internal benefits beyond measure. It removes the need for external approval. It takes the focus off of what you think you are missing and puts it on altruism and generosity. When leaders of organizations exhibit generosity, acceptance, and appreciation it is contagious. The culture of the organization changes from one of self-interest to the interest of others. Putting the interest of others – and the organization-- ahead of individual desires opens a woman's thinking to endless opportunities and possibilities. Altruism, coupled with appreciation and generosity, is the antidote to comparison and misery. Content leaders breed content followers, which in turn increase workplace performance and the proverbial bottom line. Look beyond yourself. Magnify appreciation, look for opportunities to give and internalize gratitude. Contentment will be unwaveringly yours.

Adopt an Attitude of Personal Freedom

A leadership style of personal freedom is one of empowerment. Personal freedom not only produces trust and loyalty in relationships within the work place, but it creates an atmosphere of safety. The only person a woman can control is herself. Therefore, a relationship of punishment and force can only lead to relational disconnection. Connection is a universal need. Personal freedom is freedom from the disappointment of unmet expectations. Expectations are a demand that causes others to feel coerced or controlled. Even expectations we have of ourselves can leave us feeling disparaged and insufficient. Changing expectations into desires offers freedom and relief. An expectation carries an ultimatum with it.

A desire is hopeful, but ones' reaction or emotional state is not dictated by the outcome. Since we are desirous of personal freedom that allows choice and liberty, then we ought to be willing to offer the same to others. An expectation of effective performance and productive outcomes is prevalent in the workplace-- as it should be. However, achieving high levels of each will be had only in an environment free of punishment and coercion. Using a coaching style of leadership that includes helping others to see the benefits connected with organizational outcomes generates an atmosphere of excellence.

Own the Solution to Problematic Co-workers

Problematic co-workers are found in every work environment. No healthy person wants to be problematic; yet we can be so because we have individual personalities, idiosyncrasies, and preferences. The answer to effectively handling problems caused by

co-workers is to own the solution. Once you have asked for the cooperation of the coworker in discontinuing a behavior that you find unhelpful or offensive and she has chosen not to cooperate, then the onus is on you to change. That is the good news because you can control you. First, clearly identify the behavior that is unhelpful, annoying or offensive. Then brainstorm for options to rectify it. Choose from your list of options and use that solution for at least two weeks. After that time, evaluate how your solution is working. Depending on your evaluation you may choose to continue to respond in the same way or choose another alternative from your list. Most importantly is the way you allow a situation to affect you internally. If your solution is not coupled with a positive attitude toward the uncooperative person, your solution will not work.

At times, it may seem as if there is no solution to be had. However, you can always change the way you think about it. No one can control the way you think. The way we think dictates how we experience life in our personal circumstance and in the workplace.

Speak Your Needs

One area with which women seem to struggle is speaking their needs clearly and concisely. Leadership in the workplace demands such a skill. In my years of psychotherapy practice, I have worked consistently to teach women that others are not mind readers and it is unfair to ask them to be. Women tend to think that others should instinctively know what they need. Nothing is further from the truth! People can only know for certain what you think if you communicate it to them. In sales, it is called *asking for the order*.

Clearly speaking your needs creates an atmosphere of trust and harmony because it reduces ambiguity and allows for more effective outcomes. Leaders who are clear about their desires and needs show respect for others and supply an undergirding of safety and confidence in the people with whom they work. Change is inevitable; therefore, what is necessary today may not be the same tomorrow. That is one reason that clear speaking is critical in the workplace. Clear speaking also reinforces the connection between people that is vital for efficient performance and internal contentment on the job. When speaking your needs, be sure to ask for understanding on the part of the hearer. Albeit, we often understand the words that are spoken, the definitions or perceptions may differ in ways that can alter the result. Out of respect for those you lead, be sure to say what you mean and mean what you say.

Keep a Broad View

Leadership requires the leader to constantly be cognizant of the bigger picture. In the workplace there are individuals with particularized issues, problems, perceptions, views, thoughts, and behaviors. A person's natural tendency is to focus on those individual paradigms. However, as the leader of an organization, you must see those independent parts of each person as pieces of the whole; pieces that will serve to help meet the

mission and vision of the organization. So, while seeking to serve the independent needs of the people on your team, you must keep in mind the overall mission for which the organization was formed. A great example of this concept is found in the Ritz Carlton hotel chain. Employees of the Ritz Carlton have the motto: "ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen". In other words, they are committed to treating each other the same as they treat the hotel guests. In concept, this is servant leadership. We all have needs, wants, and desires. Knowing that focusing on them individually will cause disappointment and discouragement, then our job as leaders is to meet as many as possible within the scope of the corporate mission and vision. Every corporation wants team members who are able to understand and act on the overall needs of the organization rather than their own personal needs. Effective leaders can create just such valuable teams as they lead by example.

Women in leadership positions are on the rise. Women who lead must be confident, clear thinking, and flexible. They can, indeed, love their career and their workplace by celebrating their unique differences, learning to be content, adopting an attitude of personal freedom, owning the solution to problematic co-workers, clearly speaking their needs, and keeping a broad view.