Madeleine Albright, Former US Secretary of State, famously said, “There is a special place in hell for women that don’t help each other”. Women not supporting other women is a significant contributor toward women not advancing in the workplace. I recently conducted a cross-industry survey of 100 UK women between the ages of 25 and 50, working in roles that varied from interior design to marketing to tech. It looked at the negative experiences with other women in the workplace, and found that approximately 70 per cent had been the victim of either workplace bullying or covert undermining by a female boss.

Along with the approximately 70 per cent who had endured bullying by their boss, 33 per cent had been on the receiving end of a woman on the same level or below being unhelpful, holding them back, or undermining them.

**Queen Bee syndrome**

There is a name for this, and it is called the Queen Bee syndrome. The Oxford Dictionary’s definition for the informal use of Queen Bee is “A woman who has a dominant or controlling position in a particular group or sphere,” but this fails to fully capture the negative side to a Queen Bee. In short, Queen Bees are women in the workplace who treat colleagues in a demoralizing, undermining, or bullying manner. This isn’t to confuse them with strong, ambitious women in the workplace who may have to assert themselves and perhaps ruffle a few feathers along the way.

Queen Bees can be viewed as adult versions of the mean girls from school. Their behavior manifests in ways that can have lasting negative effects on both individual careers and entire organizations. The Queen Bee syndrome can be the biggest hindrance to women advancing in the workplace because:

- They often lack the sponsorship or support necessary to get promoted owing to their negative behavior. Poor leadership negatively impacts organizational performance and profitability.
- They often prevent other talented up-and-coming women from advancing in the workplace. Research from the *Workplace Bullying Institute (2006)* has suggested that, as many as 58 per cent of bullies in the workplace are women, and these individuals most often victimize other women. The study found that Queen Bees choose other females as targets nearly 90 per cent of the time.

Research proposes that females are not often overtly aggressive with one another, but instead they use their social intelligence to manipulate relationships or damage the reputations of others (*Crick et al., 2002*). These socially aggressive behaviors include...
gossiping, social exclusion, social isolation, social alienation, and talking about someone with others (Crothers et al., 2009a, 2009b). The jury is still out on exactly why Queen Bees exhibit such behavior. Nearly 75 per cent of my own survey respondents thought that Queen Bee behavior might stem from insecurity, while other possible causes include feeling the need to be aggressive in order to be taken seriously, or even Queen Bees desiring to be the only “top” woman.

My own experience
Perhaps this is what has spurred my own interest in the subject, as I have had female bosses that would support you as long as you were the underdog and in their shadow. However, if you started to shine, their behavior would change.

Queen Bees are not always in a position of authority. In my own case, I experienced a mean girls’ culture in which certain female peers would exclude me by not inviting me to after-work drinks or lunch with other colleagues. I also found they had spread untrue gossip about me and were speaking negatively about me to colleagues.

Attending Wellesley College (an all-women’s university known as an environment that fosters a culture of women supporting each other) influenced my passion to help advance women in the workplace. We all came from different backgrounds, but we faced similar challenges. There was nothing more rewarding than to celebrate another woman’s success and one woman’s success inspired others.

However, after graduating and entering the “real world”, I quickly learned that I was no longer in this inspirational environment. I was in a situation in which many of the women viewed each other as competition. I was dealing with a culture where there was more energy put into tearing other women down rather than seeing how they could help each other to advance.

Removing the sting
Queen Bees can exist at all levels of an organization, and employees are likely to experience working with one. The question is, what can one do to neutralize a Queen Bee and not be victimized? As an individual, some ways to handle the situation include the following:

- **Do Not React When Provoked**: Queen Bees often thrive on getting a reaction. Remain calm and show no emotion. Always be polite and do not engage in gossip.
- **Develop Yourself**: Use your energy to develop yourself and expand your network. Sign up for opportunities that allow you to improve your industry knowledge and skill set.
- **Expand Your Network**: Join professional networks at your company and within your industry.
- **Find Sponsors**: Develop strong professional relationships with senior decision-makers in your organization who can influence your career.

Breaking the cycle
What if you are reading this and wondering if you are a Queen Bee? Or perhaps you are a manager with a Queen Bee working within your team. Recognizing the Queen Bee syndrome is the first step to addressing the problem. Here are some ways you can work on changing your behavior:

- **Solicit 360-Degree Feedback**: Ask team members who are peers, superiors, and junior for anonymous feedback. The feedback will provide insight about how others perceive
your behavior. People are more likely to give honest feedback if it can be provided 
anonymously to an unbiased third party (e.g. your boss, Human Resources).

- **Engage in leadership development**: Ensure you take responsibility to refine your 
  leadership skills and address behaviors that might negatively impact your career 
  progression.

- **Get a Career Coach**: A career coach can be a great investment to help you address 
  specific areas requiring improvement and set goals to achieve your career objectives.

- **Show Genuine Interest in Your Team Members**: Take some time to get to know your 
  team and also let them know more about you. This is a great way to develop strong 
  professional relationships and form allies. Can you help them with any professional 
  challenges?

- **Support Other Women**: Make a commitment to help advance other woman in the 
  workplace. Join and actively participate in female professional networks.

**Organizational impact**

The Queen Bee syndrome can also have a negative impact on organizational performance 
and bottom-line results. Because women have “attained a critical mass in the professional 
and managerial ranks of a significant percentage of companies, especially financial and 
services organizations”, management should be particularly concerned about issues of 
abusive conduct by and toward women (Levin and Mattis, 2006).

Management must develop a more complex and realistic image of women that includes 
recognition of their aggressive tendencies and the forms of victimization women are more 
likely to use (Crothers et al., 2009a, 2009b). Addressing the Queen Bee syndrome can 
result in positive organizational outcomes such as:

- reducing attrition of strong female talent;
- strengthening of the talent pipeline of future leaders;
- improvement in recruitment efforts owing to the supportive environment;
- improvement in employee morale; and
- increase in productivity.

The Queen Bee syndrome is often difficult to talk about. It can be disheartening to realize 
that not all women support other women in the workplace, and it directly contradicts much 
of the female solidarity that is seen on social media within women-orientated conferences 
today. However, it is an issue that cannot be swept under the carpet if companies are to 
truly improve the advancement of women in the workplace.

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**Further reading**


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