

How to Navigate the Niceness Paradox, Part 1

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By Robin Madell (San Francisco)

"People working for me have loved me; peers have resented and hated me. For years, I was the top female executive in my area in a very male-dominated industry, but I've grown tired of trying to be someone I am not, just to be perceived on a personal level as favorably as my male counterparts. I'm in the process of leaving a corporate job and starting my own law firm due to this very reality."



The anonymous quote above reveals that when it comes to leadership, women face a cultural conundrum. Studies show that when women adopt certain behaviors believed to be essential to successful leadership, they are evaluated more negatively than men. Women continue to be perceived as less qualified than men in most leadership roles.

Always Be Professional

Being nice doesn't mean you must always be agreeable, says Vickie Milazzo, author of [Wicked Success Is Inside Every Woman](#). It can mean delivering a difficult message from a place of professionalism rather than emotion or antagonism. "Women, even more than men, should have a consciousness about the way we express dissatisfaction and deliver tough messages," Milazzo says.

In the balancing act between 'nice' and 'effective,' Milazzo recommends that women opt for effectiveness over the need to be relatable. "Women who will do whatever it takes to be 'one of them' end up rendering their whole group ineffective," she says. "Women have to know when to detach from the junk and from their emotional response to it."

Lisa Quast, founder of [Career Woman, Inc.](#) agrees that given a choice of being seen as 'nice' versus 'effective,' she would choose 'effective' every time. "As a manager, my job is not to try to be everyone's best friend; my job is to be their boss by helping them achieve their work goals and developing their careers so they can advance to higher levels," Quast says. "Would any of my previous subordinates use the term 'nice' to describe me? Doubtful. But they would say they learned more from me than any other manager they've ever had."

Anastasia Valentine CEO of marketing agency [Sandbox PM](#) and who previously held executive positions in the technology industry, emphasizes the importance of staying fact-based rather than emotion-based. "Operating on emotion or being nice to get into favor is a recipe for disaster or loss of respect," Valentine says. "Yes we encounter bad days and challenging situations and people, but facts don't lie. If you rely on facts as your foundation for your decisions and strategy, you can't go wrong."

