

# Women Rise Through Collaboration

## 5 actions you can take to support women at work

By **Dr. Lisa Aldisert**

I started my first career as a banker at a time when there weren't many professional women in the industry. Ironically, my first supervisor was a woman who told the women in our department to think again if we expected to have any kind of an advantage under her wing. She had worked hard to get where she was and we would need to work hard as well.

Times have changed, but I still see situations like this in the workplace. I still encounter women who feel like there isn't enough pie to go around or who resent others' success.

Fortunately, much of this is changing now in part due to the #metoo movement and the increasing presence of Gen Y (Millennials) and Gen Z in the workplace. There is significantly more attention on women's collaboration as a result.

Michelle Duguid, Associate Professor of Management and Organizations at the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business, observes that women tend to support each other in their rise to the top as long as they feel there is room for more than one woman. This is a welcome contrast to the early days of my career, although there are still plenty of companies that not only have an embedded male bias but have women who don't support each other.

This reinforces the residue of negative stereotyping among women in the workplace. It seems like I've

“There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women.”

- Madeleine K. Albright

heard it all. “Don't ask Laura to run that project because she'll take all the credit.” “She'll never get promoted because she's not a team player.” “She can't run the department because she'll never have time as a young mother and that makes other women look bad.”

### So, What Can You Do About It?

As a rising woman in your workplace, you need to step out of your comfort zone and contest this narrative through your actions. Yes, you may be unpopular and be subject to snarky comments from colleagues, but your organizational culture won't shift without action.

My previously mentioned experience as a young banker triggered a strong urge to become a mentor to the women who came after me. I took such offense to what she had said that I knew I wanted to be a different kind of leader. Here are some of the key lessons that I've passed on along the way.



### Become self-aware

Take a personal audit of your behavior toward other colleagues and think about your recent encounters with them. Were the interactions positive? Negative? Gossipy? Encouraging? What can you do to make your behavior more collaborative in every situation? Importantly, if you notice a negative bias in terms of your actions towards women colleagues, know that this needs to change immediately.

### Build self-confidence

This is often easier said than done, but without it, your professional behavior can be significantly muted. You might begin by recalling your successes. When you know intuitively what you are good at and have an innate sense of value, you will be less apt to compare yourself with other women (and men) on any level. When you have the confidence to embrace your talent, you won't be threatened or intimidated by others' success.

### Foster relationships and collaboration

Identify and build the right relationships with managers and mentors, connections that will come in handy in tough situations. You should also encourage relationships among your team by initiating team-building events or pairing up with colleagues to brainstorm and work collaboratively on projects. Give genuine compliments. Notice what other women are doing right and point out these successes.

### Rise above the drama

When catty situations do occur, don't participate. Avoid other people's drama, and if a colleague is trying to start issues with you, just stay out of it. Don't allow yourself to be snippy, catty or needlessly critical. Instead, be the model of what you would want your culture to look like.

### Be a leader

Even if you are not in a leadership position, how you behave will demonstrate leadership. It will also show your manager and others that you have what it takes to move ahead. Leaders should be aware of and must have a zero-tolerance attitude toward gender inequities. They should reinforce a culture where opportunities exist for everybody, and if they see an issue occurring, they should make sure it is stamped out.

Your actions will encourage others to follow your lead. And this, of course, is leadership at its core. Be intentional in how you support and elevate women in your company, your family, and your community. When this becomes part of what you do instinctively, everyone will rise. Remember the saying, "a high tide raises all boats". You can move this metaphoric tide and make an important contribution.

Recently, one of my clients asked me to work with his daughter, who is navigating some obstacles as she makes some decisions about her nascent medical career. After one brief conversation with her, I know she is a rock star. I told her that I will absolutely help her on her path and for her to acknowledge that she already has more answers than she thinks she has. Her confidence will rise, and she will have an amazing career.

Build self-awareness. Enhance self-confidence. Cultivate relationships. And be a leader.

Let's make Madeleine Albright proud.



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