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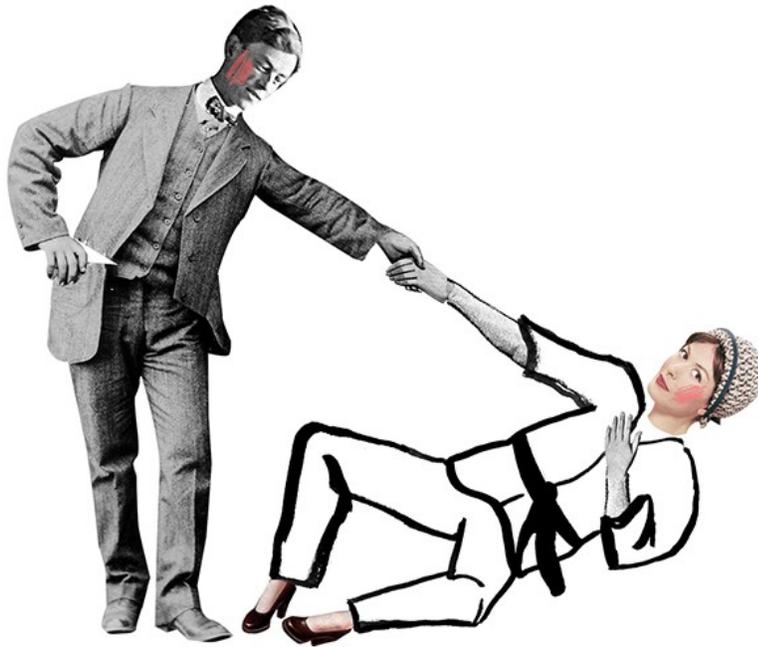
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Clarification: An earlier version of this piece incorrectly implied that Kirsten Gillibrand was pregnant while a senator. She had her second child while serving in the House. This version has been corrected.

Women, work and the art of gender judo



The Call for Help: Instead of criticizing employees and asking them to change their behavior, try saying: "I'd like to do this, and I could use your help. What do you think?" (Illustrations by Natalie K. Nelson for The Washington Post)

WRITTEN BY

Joan C. Williams

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When asked at a September fundraiser in San Francisco how she manages as a woman in the Senate, Kirsten Gillibrand explained that most senators are older men, so they see her as a daughter. Rather than dismissing her, they have been helpful and protective, especially when she was pregnant while serving

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in the House. In this way, the New York Democrat is able to translate something relatively unfamiliar and potentially threatening — a female senator — into something comfortable and familiar. That comfort level allows her to build relationships and get other senators’ support for legislation.

Powerful women often take feminine stereotypes that can hold women back — the selfless mother and the dutiful daughter, for example — and use those stereotypes to propel themselves forward. I call it gender judo. The martial art of judo, which means “gentle way” in Japanese, focuses on using your opponent’s momentum to overpower him.

Why practice gender judo if women are supposed to lean in and just ask for what they want? My interviews with 127 highly successful women show that more straightforward strategies can backfire. While plenty of glass ceilings have been shattered, most good jobs — from senator to scientist, comic to chief executive — are still seen as requiring what have traditionally been perceived as masculine qualities. Lawyers are aggressive; chief executives are decisive; techies are nerds; comics are obsessed with sex. So women have to behave in “masculine” ways to be seen as competent.

One problem: Women are still expected to be feminine.

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Of course, if you’re too feminine, you’re perceived as incompetent. But if you’re too masculine, you’re seen as difficult to work with. Gender judo helps solve this problem. For example, Adrienne D. Davis, a friend of mine who’s a vice provost at Washington University in St. Louis, said that as a young law professor, when the class threatened to get out of hand, she joked to her students that she was going to turn the lights off and make them put their heads on their desks, the way a kindergarten teacher might do to

quiet students down. The class laughed — and gave her their attention. Most probably had kindergarten teachers who were women, so her technique felt familiar and comfortable.

Similarly, a female investment banker told me that acting like the “big sister with the big personality” is one way to exert authority without triggering pushback.

“Be warm Ms. Mother 95 percent of the time,” a technology executive advised, “so that the 5 percent of the time when you need to be tough, you can be.”

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The Warm Mother: Be kind to your subordinates 95 percent of the time. That way, when you have to be tough, they'll listen.

This was the most common strategy: mixing strong messages of competence, or “masculinity,” with equally strong messages of warmth, or “femininity.” It’s a tack a female former chief executive of a Fortune 500 company uses in one-on-one meetings: “I always start a meeting with picking up from the last personal conversation we had. Like: ‘We talked about your son, he was having trouble in school. How’s he doing?’” She’s doing something masculine — being the boss — but in a feminine, empathetic way.

The women my research team interviewed played to feminine stereotypes in very targeted ways. No woman slept her way to the top. No one acted like a little girl. Instead, they chose elements of traditional femininity they felt comfortable with. For some, these tactics were self-conscious; for others, it was just part of the savvy that made them so successful.

Baby boomer professional women, many of whom chafed at feminine stereotypes in their youth, are more likely to be outraged at the thought of adding a pinch of femininity to their power plays. For example, as a young woman in the 1970s, it was only because I felt so uncomfortable with femininity that I could resist the pressures to become a homemaker. Yet millennial women like my daughter and co-author, Rachel Dempsey, more often think that everyone — men as well as women — should strive for the right mix of masculine and feminine traits.

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I tend to agree. The problem with our rules about how men and women “should” behave is that they separate very human tendencies that are best intertwined: For men as well as women, authority exercised with warmth is better than a strut of dominance. What’s troubling about traditional femininity is that it married warmth with submissiveness. Tying femininity with authority instead is important feminist work.

You often hear that female leaders are naturally more communal in their leadership styles — that they’re relationship-oriented and sympathetic to others’ needs. But our interviews showed that female leaders are communal not by nature but by necessity. They act empathetic because they sense, accurately, that that’s what works for women; it’s a style that mixes masculine competence with feminine niceness. The command-and-control strategy that can work for men is often still risky for women.

Our research also pushes back against the trope that women don’t get ahead because they don’t negotiate. Here’s the thing: Women don’t tend to ask for things they need or want because they sense, often correctly, that they’ll be worse off if they do.

Linda Babcock, a co-author of “[Women Don’t Ask: The High Cost of Avoiding Negotiation](#) — and Positive Strategies for Change,” looked into what happens when women do ask, and it’s not pretty. In a 2007 study, Babcock and her colleagues found that men are less willing to hire and less willing to work with women who “ask” because they’re seen as too demanding. Women sense this, so they are reluctant to negotiate with men, though they are more likely to do so with other women.



Why does it hurt for women to ask? It violates stereotypes of women as selfless and attuned mainly to others’ needs rather than their own. Asking for things is a mark of ambition, which is often seen as admirable in a man but unsettling in a woman.

The solution is gender judo: Doing something masculine — such as negotiating — but in a feminine vein.

One strategy is to say you’re negotiating for the team, not for yourself. (Women are supposed to be communally minded, after all.) Blame it on someone else: “My supervisor stressed that I should negotiate this.” (What a good girl, just following orders!) Or negotiate while expressing concern for social relationships: “My team really needs this, but I am concerned

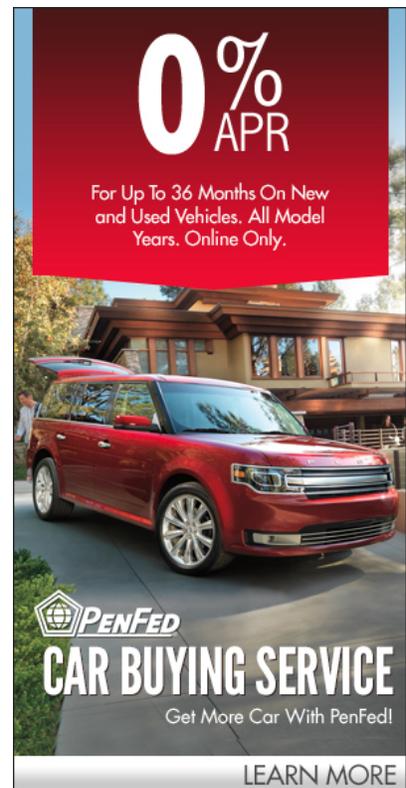
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that X will feel Y about it. How can we address his concerns?”
 (A good woman, always concerned about the feelings of others.)
 Not surprisingly, the women we interviewed used all these strategies and more.



The Posse: Form a group of men and women who publicly celebrate one another's achievements. This way, your successes will be known, you'll be seen as a team player and you won't have to shamelessly self-promote.

Another classic challenge is self-promotion. Women often receive pushback for self-promotion — the reaction is stronger from other women, but men can also find it distasteful. The solution my team and I teased out is a strategy we call “the posse.” For example: “Leti did a good thing,” said an e-mail I received one day from Peter, who explained how our colleague Leti worked hard to get a coveted fellowship for a student. Several months later, I got an e-mail from Leti, telling her colleagues about the prize Peter won.

That's gender judo in action. Leti had formed a posse of women and men to celebrate one another's accomplishments. This was a good idea for the men but indispensable for the women: After all, what's more appropriate in a woman than celebrating the accomplishments of a man? Leti's posse let her use the selfless-woman stereotype, which typically holds women back, to propel herself forward. Not only did people know about Leti's accomplishments, but she also avoided getting dinged for being a self-promoter. Instead, she got kudos for being communal.

One executive said she started out with a combative management style but realized that she was more effective when she framed her criticism as a request for help. “Instead of

saying, 'You've been a bad guy, and you've got to change your behavior,' I was saying: 'I'd like to do this, and I could use your help. What do you think?'"

The same executive learned from her mentor how to get a word in when the guys were talking over her. When someone was talking but winding down, she would start talking over him. If he didn't stop talking, she'd say: "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were finished." In this way, she did something masculine — interrupting — but in a feminine way, making it clear that the furthest thing from her mind was to interrupt.

I would love to see a world where men, as well as women, mix the masculine and the feminine. In fact, much of contemporary leadership advice recommends a collaborative style for everyone. But what we have is a world where men get a pass when they do things — such as exercise authority, express anger, self-promote — that often trigger pushback when women do them. This double standard reinforces the idea that women should be selfless and noncompetitive, self-effacing and nice; should always think of others; and should never, ever interrupt.



The Good Girl: When asking for something, say you're just following orders. For example: "My supervisor stressed that I should negotiate this."

The "Oh, Excuse Me!": When someone is talking but winding down, start talking over him. If he doesn't stop, say: "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were finished." You've done something perceived as masculine — interrupting — but in a feminine way.

Our research suggests that gender bias remains pervasive: Seventy-two percent of the women interviewed recognized the type of biases we've discussed here. Given that, it's better to train women to spot those biases early on and arm them with ways to fight back.

Of course, individual strategies for navigating bias are no substitute for eliminating it. Today most organizations either do nothing to interrupt bias, or they offer a training session or two to help employees recognize implicit bias. But a 2006 study



by sociologists Alexandra Kaley, Frank Dobbin and Erin Kelly found that such training typically does not help, and may actually hurt, job prospects for women and people of color.

Eliminating bias would require redesigning hiring, assignments, evaluations, promotions and compensation to interrupt subtle bias.

For example: Men tend to be judged on their potential, women on what they have actually accomplished. So, evaluators should assess potential and achievements separately — that way, both men and women are more likely to be judged by the same metrics.

Basic business practices need to be changed, but few, if any, organizations are going in this direction. In the meantime, heads up: Successful women all around you are using gender judo.

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Joan C. Williams, a law professor, is the director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California Hastings College of Law. Her book *“What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know,”* co-authored with Rachel Dempsey, was released this month.

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LisaWhite1 wrote:
1/26/2014 9:04 AM CST

I understand the point of the author, but she should be talking about savvy judo, period, not gender judo. We all should be more tactful and better use qualities and situations the best way possible. But insisting on specific masculine vs feminine qualities only reinforces stereotypes we need to get rid of.



JBinVA wrote:
1/25/2014 7:43 PM CST

This is all such a bad idea on so many levels.

For men, it reinforces all of their narrow, negative, extremely harmful stereotypical views of women, encourages them in their biased thinking and actions toward women employees/coworkers, and does nothing to educate them to the reality that there are all kinds of women in the world, with all kinds of personalities -- most of them just fine, thank you -- just as there are all kinds of men.

For women -- lord, where do I begin? Just for starters:

- 1) Just how much energy and thought and effort and time is a woman supposed to have to waste each hour of every day on trying to be someone she is not?
- 2) How much of that wasted energy, time, could be put to better use -- say, in learning a new language, or finding the cure for cancer?
- 3) Worst of all, it strongly reinforces all the wrong messages to women -- that there are so many things terribly, terribly wrong with the way they are, individually, naturally, that they all have to try to be something they are not. How totally sick THAT is.

This is also one of the few negative things I've ever read about Gillibrand. Thanks, but no thanks, Kirsten -- I'll stick with Hillary. She knows who she is, she's earned it, and she damned well doesn't care if insecure little boy-men don't approve.



SeriousLee responds:
1/25/2014 8:43 PM CST

(My original comment was deleted, I'll try to be more polite):

No kidding! This article decimates the idea that America is some sort of meritocracy. Instead, it suggests that merit only matters if you have the appropriate plumbing.

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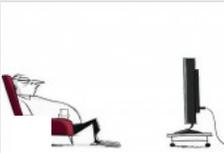
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