

Mary Ellen Connelly

YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES

Success Strategies for
Women at Work



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The stories shared here are true.

Names and some identifying details have been
changed to protect the parties involved.

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INTRODUCTION

I RACED IN FROM THE SCHOOL BUS to show Dad my report card. “Look, Dad, straight A’s!” I looked eagerly up at him, only to see a carefully composed frown and then, “You do all right. . .for a girl.”

Now it was my turn to frown and stomp my foot. “Da-aad!” Only then did he smile at me, as if I were in on the joke. I was not amused.

But maybe he knew what he was doing. Maybe he knew that being a smart girl would not be enough. That having that fighting spirit and a little righteous indignation would be needed to really find success in what was still “a man’s world.”

Maybe he was trying to see what was in me—besides head smarts—that would help me to succeed in life and the working world.

I loved math and science, so I decided on a career in engineering—before it was trendy for girls to be in STEM fields. Having grown up in a house full of boys, I had no issues with being the rare female in my engineering classes.

I knew I had it in me to succeed. **That belief would be challenged, as it is for many—maybe most—smart, capable women.**

I entered the workforce fully expecting to be treated equally, but I was not prepared for the obstacles that would come my way. I thought that surely doing my job well would get me the same recognition as anyone else. When I discovered that a male colleague with less experience, education, and responsibility was making more than I was, I immediately went to management. I was sure that once I pointed this out, they would fix it. I was wrong.

When my boss interrupted my technical briefing to comment on my earrings, I was thrown off balance—then left doubting myself because I had let this bother me. Whether boldly or subtly, there are so many things that can undermine us in the workplace.

When I was denied a promotion because I had children at home, I got angry. My strategy had to change, and I moved on. In fact, all along the way I had to create strategies to work around obstacles in my path—all the while holding onto the knowledge of my worth and helping others to recognize my value to the company.

Let me be clear about something at the outset. Though many of us women face challenges on the job *just because* we're women, this is not a book that focuses primarily on strategies to win over our male counterparts.

When the women in one office turned against me, I was shocked. But there it was: woman against woman competition.

This book is about helping you to survive and thrive at work despite obstacles, and to achieve whatever success at work may mean for you. Knowing how to do the job itself is often not enough: learning to strategize takes you the rest of the way.

Personal Challenges

I have had to endure the “million paper cuts” of being ignored, dismissed, and harassed—and not let any of it take me down.

In my 30+ years of experience in the male-dominated professions of engineering and high-tech sales, I’ve been through a lot—and succeeded anyway. I am proud of what I have accomplished. But more than that, I am passionate about helping other women find their own inner resources that lead to success. I wrote this book to help women learn not only from my experiences and insights gained but also from the women profiled here.

As I interviewed women for this book, I was amazed at the determination and savvy shown as we found our way to achieve our personal definition of success and accomplishment. Not everyone wants to be CEO, but we all want to feel valued and appreciated. We all want to be paid what we are worth and to have opportunities to move up. We want to have a voice and a place where our ideas are listened to and respected. We want our contributions to be recognized, and we want to look with pride at our accomplishments.

At the same time, I was saddened by what so many of us have had to endure. There is rarely a straight path to the top of our game, whatever that may be. The dozen women whose stories I share here learned to be strategists in a world still hostile to our positions in the workplace. We work in many different fields: law, engineering, marketing, information technology (IT), sales, human resources, and healthcare. Some started in supportive families and others in unsupportive ones. Some of us had children, and we worked while raising them. We’ve all faced and dealt with crises and blockages in the course of our careers.

Between us, we have been denied promotions because of having children or for refusing the sexual advances of our superiors. We

have had projects and jobs taken from us and given to a man with no explanation, or we were sabotaged by other women who perceived us as a threat. We have been told to wear short skirts to meet with clients or were excluded from the boys' clubs at executive levels. We have suffered outrageous indignities, small slights, and blatant opposition. We have sometimes failed and always learned.

And yet we have adapted, changed, and developed into powerful, successful women on our own terms.

The thing is, you have what it takes to succeed and get the respect you deserve at work. What it takes is a deep desire to use the skills you possess naturally and those you have gained through training and experience. To these things, you can add or bolster other skills that are highlighted and explored in the pages that follow. You can learn to . . .

- » Recognize when you become a threat to others (male or female) and find ways to defuse the threat or deal with it.
- » Be aware of the tactics used against you and develop strategies to respond.
- » Leverage your strengths and improve your areas of weakness to achieve your goals.
- » Develop awareness of the world around you and others' motivations, finding the win-win approaches to dealing with them.
- » Learn to seek help and understand how to get others to do what you need.
- » Explore the laws and options for responding when discrimination or harassment occur.
- » Make your own rules, sometimes defying traditional female roles and bucking the status quo without guilt.

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- » Fight back when it's warranted or play the game, when that's the better choice.
- » Change the game, when neither fighting nor playing along makes sense.
- » Keep your cool under fire, recognizing self-defeating thoughts and behaviors, and replacing them with more empowering ones.
- » Look for the positive in situations and avoid dwelling on the negative.
- » Pick yourself up after every setback and move on.

Most important, when all is said and done: you will understand how to define personal success in your own terms and move toward your goals with eager determination.

And while this book is about finding your own level of success, it is also about helping you to believe in yourself. You do have what it takes to succeed—and now you can add to that the experiences and strategies shared here.

Because no one should have to settle for a serious message of “You do all right. . .for a girl.”

CHAPTER 1

WOMEN AS A THREAT TO THE STATUS QUO

YOU KNOW A LOT, because you've experienced a lot. You have know-how, insight, great ideas, and maybe a good bit of life wisdom, too. All of this makes you a savvy woman.

It also makes you a threat.

How to be a threat to the status quo: Question unfair treatment

The first time I felt that being a smart woman was a threat—or at least the first time I recognized it as such—I was a young engineer working for a defense contractor in Northern Virginia. In the five years since graduating from college with an electrical engineering degree, I had established myself as a top-performing engineer in my company. Most recently, I had co-written a winning multi-million-dollar proposal for a hardware and software project, and was lead systems engineer and deputy program manager for this complex

program—the largest in the Systems Engineering Group. I was also working toward my master’s degree in electrical engineering, with only a few classes to go for completion. In a note celebrating my five-year anniversary with the company, Doug, the vice president who had hired me, told me, “I was high on your capabilities then and am even higher now.” I loved my job and believed myself to be a valued asset for my company.

Then I got wind that Joey—a colleague of mine working on a smaller project—with less experience, responsibility, and education than me—was making a significantly higher salary than I: 20% more. It didn’t make sense. My first instinct, knowing how important I was to the company, was that this was a mistake. *They must not realize that this discrepancy is there*, I naively thought.

Fighting back

I marched right in to see my boss. Bill was a kindly older gentleman, retired military, who had been supportive of me since he was hired as my manager a few years prior when Doug was promoted. He had given me glowing performance reviews and increasing responsibility through the years. In one recent review, he praised my “flawless” writing skills and “extraordinary” technical abilities. Saying I had “exceeded all expectations” for professional growth, he recommended me for promotion and program management duties. Surely Bill would have my back. This was a very naive assumption.

The conversation started out awkwardly, as I tried to explain how I had found out Joey’s salary while not compromising the person who had told me. Bill’s face reddened a little as I spoke, though when he broke eye contact, I realized it was more from embarrassment than anger.

“Mary Ellen, you know how important you are to me and to the company,” he started slowly, looking straight at me. “I noticed the discrepancy in Joey’s and your salaries when I was hired on, after I got to know your abilities, and I have been trying to fix it.” He looked down at his hands, which were fidgeting with his pen on the desk. “But I only have so much leeway with salary to hand out. Since Joey is doing a good job, I can’t not give him a raise, so it is taking some time to correct the disparity.” He looked up at me, eyes beseeching me to accept this explanation.

I watched him, trying to separate in my mind the respect and affection I had for him from what he was saying. He was admitting the salary treatment was unfair but telling me he couldn’t fix it. He didn’t have the leeway to make the change. Twenty percent was a big difference. I needed to think.

“Thank you for acknowledging that the salary is inequitable,” I told him, watching his eyes widen as he realized what he had said. “Please give this some thought, and we can talk more about it tomorrow.” With that I walked away, fists clenched at my sides.

Struggling with the response

As I thought about it that evening, I couldn’t sit still. I stomped around the house, thoughts raging in my head as I tried to understand what was happening. I had been so naive, assuming that my accomplishments, dedication, and hard work were appreciated and fairly rewarded. I had heard about women being paid less than men, of course, but I had assumed this was because of the types of jobs they were in. I didn’t consider that in the same company, industry, and education level, a man would be paid more than a woman who had more experience, education, and responsibility. This feeling that they valued him more than me—after I had helped bring in the

largest contract in the company and was lead systems engineer on that contract—was like a punch in the gut. I gave in to self-pity for a few moments, before the anger made me grit my teeth. This was a load of crap.

I took some time to make an objective assessment of the situation—always important. Responses made in the middle of an emotional flood tend to be and sound emotional; objectivity is critical.

Not only had Bill acknowledged that the salary difference was unfair but also that it had been that way for years, as he tried to slowly narrow the gap through slightly larger raises for me than Joey. I decided they owed me not only an adjustment to my current salary but also some reimbursement for being underpaid the past few years. However, as I thought about telling Bill that, I realized he wasn't the problem. He had been my supporter and mentor, recognizing my achievements and providing me with opportunities and increasing responsibility. The pay gap was there before he was hired. He was trying to fix it, but his hands were tied. I needed to take this up the chain if I wanted to get anywhere.

Escalating

The next day, I asked Bill to join me, and we walked in to the director's office and sat down across from Dick. I got right to the point.

"I have discovered that I am being paid inequitably, and I would like to discuss how we can fix that." Dick looked confused, and I realized Bill had not told him about our previous discussion. Bill squirmed in his seat, offering nothing.

"I found out that Joey is making a significantly higher salary than me. As you know, he has less experience, less education, and less responsibility than I." Dick interrupted, "How did you find that out?" aiming his narrowed eyes first at me, then at Bill.

Knowledge is power. Power can be a threat.

When a woman has knowledge and insights into what is happening at a company, she gains power—and becomes a threat to those who want to maintain the status quo.

Everything was going swimmingly—according to my company—when I was doing more work for less pay and didn't know about it. My finding out made me a major threat to the status quo. Dick was very unhappy about this.

Salaries are generally kept secret at companies for a lot of very good reasons and a few not-so-good ones. Knowing what your colleagues are making can be very disruptive for morale. If there is a major pay gap between management and workers—even when it is industry standard practice and based on responsibility and education and experience—those making less can take it hard. But this secrecy can also be a breeding ground for unfair salary treatment as in my case.

My gaining knowledge about the discrepancy and confronting it directly put me in a pitted battle with a company that didn't want to be called on its unfair practices.

It would not be the last time in my career.

The struggle is real—it's not a joke

What lies ahead for you as an accomplished woman is still, sad to say, struggle—maybe even a war. Yes, women are making strides, but there is still resistance. In historically male-dominated professions, women are challenging the status quo and need to fight to move ahead. Even in more typically female professions, women face obstacles when they try to move up in their careers. Savvy women are being promoted above men and other women, both of which groups

may resent the change and feel their egos threatened. Mothers are working to stay on track with their careers—upsetting the status quo both at work and in their families and communities. Men comfortable with their male colleagues are unhappy finding their behavior is not acceptable in a mixed workplace—and perhaps the new woman is to blame. As women gain knowledge and power, they can become a threat to the egos of those around them—and suddenly find themselves targets, battling tactics aimed to bring them back down.

There are ways to win the struggle and move toward where you need to go. That's what this book is about.

First, we need to be shrewd about how entrenched the forces of the status quo can be.

It gets worse

“It wasn't Bill that told me, and I'd prefer not to say how I found out. What's important here is that I know, and Bill tells me he has been trying to make adjustments to the salary gap but is limited by management on what can be done.”

At this point, Dick's steely eyes aimed back at Bill, who continued to squirm but kept quiet, waiting to see how this would play out. The strength in my voice masked the butterflies in my stomach as I continued. “I would like to get an out-of-cycle pay increase to close the gap. Frankly, I feel like you owe me more than that, since this has been going on for a while, but I will settle for making our salaries equal.” I sat back in my chair and waited, watching Dick's knitted brow and red face.

He studied me for a moment and then looked away. “Now, Mary Ellen, you need to just calm down.” The syrupy sweetness in his voice made me want to slap him, as he looked back at me with a manufactured look of concern.

“Of course we value your contributions, but you don’t realize how much value Joey brings to the table? His customer has a lot of respect for him over at the lab. It’s not just about experience and education, you know. I’m sure Bill would agree.” He looked over at Bill with daggers in his eyes. Bill nodded slowly. He was in enough trouble already. But his reddening face and inability to look at me told me he didn’t really believe what Dick was saying.

As Dick continued to talk about how great Joey was, my stomach sank, and I stopped listening. I realized they had no intention of correcting my pay. Dick felt he was right in paying Joey a higher salary and was going to find plenty of reasons to justify it. Never mind that I had “exceeded all expectations.” As long as salaries were kept quiet, they could pay me less and get more. I was a bargain.

By confronting them with the issue, however, I was now a threat.

Now what?

Could I have done something different with my knowledge of the pay discrimination? Were there strategies I could have used to support my case or others I should have consulted? Probably, but I was still young and figuring things out. I’m sure putting Bill in the middle and catching him off guard in front of his manager, Dick, was not the smartest move. At that point, I lost him as an ally. I was strong but not willing to fight what was looking like a losing battle. I had not yet developed the savvy I would need to negotiate this terrain, but it was a learning experience.

In the end, no adjustments were made to my pay. I now knew how they felt about my contributions, and my loyalty to the company dropped as well. Within a few months, I sought and accepted a job elsewhere, hoping that my skills would be more valued by another company.

Accept that you're going to be a threat to someone

Studies and statistics document well that women continue to make less money than men and face many biases in the workplace. This occurs at all levels of society and in nearly all industries, though it may be greater in typically male-dominated careers such as engineering, computer science/IT, military, law enforcement, and law.

Here's the thing: when intelligent, ambitious women strive to change the status quo, challenge male-dominated companies, compete on a level playing field, and achieve what is rightfully ours, we are very likely to become a threat.

Look at the situation I was in more closely, and you'll see the anatomy of what occurs when you pair your knowledge with something else you possess—personal power. As women, we need our power as well as our knowledge, because we can find ourselves on a playing field—or even a field of battle—where strength is needed. Whether we intend it or not, others can see us not just as adults using our insight and knowledge but as adversaries.

It may seem that when I questioned my salary's being lower than Joey's, I became a threat to management, because there were laws about equal pay, and they were afraid they were "caught." Certainly there is some truth to that. Even back then, in the mid-1980s, laws were on the books to protect against such discrimination.

But stepping back, there were larger forces at play. Why was the salary difference there in the first place, and why did they feel the need to defend it rather than fix it? More than 20 years after the passage of the Equal Pay Act (more on this in Chapter Six), these men felt justified in paying a woman a lower salary than a man, even though she did *more* than he. This was the way it was; they were

comfortable with it and wanted to keep it that way. In questioning management's decisions and exposing the discrepancy, I became a threat to the status quo that women could be paid less than men.

Knowing you are a threat is one thing; learning to accept it is another. It takes experience—and confidence in yourself—to own your power. I didn't like knowing that I was paid less for doing more and that my value was somehow less than Joey's because I was a woman, or for whatever other reason they could come up with. I knew my own worth, and I parlayed it into a higher salary at a new company.

Becoming a threat: Be the first female in a typically male role

Though it may seem that glass ceilings have been broken, they still exist. We still see women breaking through to become the first in a typically male role. This does not sit well with everyone.

The salary issue was not the only time I would find myself threatening the status quo based solely on the fact that I was a strong woman. As I progressed in my career, I noticed there were no women in positions above me. As I strove to move up, I found myself again threatening the status quo of only men in management roles. The tactics used to keep me and other women from moving up and ahead were astounding.

Valerie, a young woman in a man's world

Valerie broke ground throughout her career as she rose up through the ranks from computer operator to chief information officer (CIO)—she was often the first female in her roles. She encountered great opposition as she challenged the status quo of this male-dominated industry. According to Valerie:

My whole career has been in this man's world of IT. In 1975 when we were in class, 90% of the students in my college programming classes were men. When I was in computer operations, I was the first female computer operator they ever hired, because they didn't think a woman could do the job. I was 19 at the time. I was a real threat, because they realized *Oh, a woman can do the job. Now we have to hire other women?* They didn't like that. They wanted me to come in to fail so they could prove women couldn't do that. It didn't work.

Recognize it's not just men who resent our upward mobility

Frequently women find themselves a threat to other women as much as they are to men. Often women are more comfortable working for men, and they resent it when a woman is promoted or hired above them.

When I moved to sales and marketing manager in a small company some years later, I was the first woman in a management role. There were female engineers at the company working on projects in different departments, and the other women were in support roles. I was surprised to find these women resented me and didn't like "taking orders" or doing tasks given them by another woman. I was again a threat to the status quo.

All the women I interviewed experienced almost as much resistance from women in the workplace as they did from men. Whether this is caused by jealousy or just plain discomfort with change, it affects us all.

Try to change long-held behaviors and culture

Many women find their role to be a direct threat to the status quo, because their job includes ensuring the company follows the law and keeps the work environment free from harassment and discrimination. These smart women in Human Resources and other departments often find themselves in the line of fire when they try to implement change or enforce rules within the company even though that is what they were hired to do.

When Karen moved from working in government consulting startups to working in Human Resources with a large automotive group with multiple dealerships, she faced a dramatic culture shift—and realized her services were greatly needed. She encountered many examples of sexual harassment and other unethical/illegal behaviors in the dealerships. Her role was to protect the company and its employees, and as a result, she advised the CEO to fire even top-performing, longstanding employees who were violating rules that put the company at risk. The very nature of her job was a threat to the status quo.

Pressing for change unsettles the status quo

Even if your role is not in Human Resources, you may find the workplace culture to be hostile to or uncomfortable for women. By insisting on being treated with respect and having your contributions valued, you rock the boat. If you further want to avoid hearing profanity or screaming or viewing inappropriate pictures on the wall or on someone's computer, you are threatening the status quo.

When Lynn, a smart and outspoken engineer, moved from the Navy to another government organization, she challenged the way

things were. She found the new environment full of “yes men” and women—which can be typical of organizations led by former military officers who are not used to being questioned. When she spoke up during meetings or questioned decisions being made, she was branded a troublemaker. “There’s a big “group think” thing going. If you don’t act or think like them, you are an island.” Lynn was more inclined to ask questions, discuss options, and generally help problem-solve on usual engineering practices. This did not go over well. When she was asked to work on a new project, she was told not to express her opinion. She had become a threat to the culture of the organization.

A successful woman must be a *strong* woman if she wants to keep moving forward.

How?

You begin by learning what to do and what not to do. In this book, you will hear our stories and how we have reached our own success in spite of the crap we have encountered in our careers. You can learn from our successes and our mistakes. You will learn what laws are there to protect you and how to claim your own personal power. You will see how we recover from defeat, negotiate around obstacles, and define our own paths forward.

And then you get to apply it to your own life. You look around and figure out if and where you have become a threat and how you can deal with that. You examine your own career successes and failures, and your strengths and weaknesses, and make adjustments as needed based on what you have learned. You start from where you are now, and you find a way to move your career in the direction you want. You are in control of how you deal with obstacles. You are in control of your own career. You have what it takes. Own it.

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