

Complex world of 'Queen Bee'

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Fact: Women working for a female boss are more stressed-out than when they work for a male, say Canadian university researchers. This research taken from a large sample of American businesswomen confirms a generally greater incidence of insomnia, depression, anxiety, headaches, back pain and fatigue. "Queen Bee" syndrome, they call it.

It's the "large sample" that somewhat surprises me. In my experience, this syndrome is relatively rare, though when it does occur, it is highly noticeable, memorable and, of course, stressful.

It could be, however, that my many contacts across the business world have been slow to report this particular problem - because there is no doubt that it can set up conflicting emotions. Enlightened, modern businesswomen are not meant to be slaves to old stereotypes about naturally dominant males in the workplace.

Yet, even these women often regard a male boss as some kind of traditional right and a female in charge, as somewhat unusual, if not extraordinary.

Natural instincts

And although the word "natural" is often misused when it simply describes yesterday's way of doing things, it genuinely applies here. This syndrome does actually have a lot to do with our natural instincts and responses - especially in this age of long hours, when the workplace is acknowledged to double up as a social arena. And this needs to be allowed-for in any stress management programme.

We have to allow for different human types. We cannot escape the demarcation between a "woman's woman", in whom females naturally confide, and a "man's woman" who instinctively regards other women as competitors.

In the UK, we had a high-profile case of the second type when Margaret Thatcher (quite accidentally) became the first woman Prime Minister, to the embarrassment of women's groups, with whom she had no rapport whatever.

When it comes to workplace promotion, you cannot officially classify women executives in these categories. But those qualities may still affect suitability for the job - either way. For example, there could be a mainly-female department whose male boss has become too indulgent towards them and which might very well perform better under an (unsentimental) female.

Looking again at that "Queen Bee" label, I realise that it may reveal something about the person using it. A woman boss is, of course, officially appointed as a "Queen Bee", or possibly the owner of the business, and those who complain about it might be seen as either envious or resentful.

Workplace pressure is not always something applied from above. It could well be that the assertive woman boss is herself experiencing every bit as much stress from her female employees as they do from her.

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