

Scenario #1: Too Aggressive

Amanda has been with ACME Technology for just over a year. She is the most junior engineer on an important project development team. In her first annual evaluation, Amanda was complimented on the quality of her work but criticized for being overly aggressive. Her supervisor told her that she makes other team members uncomfortable with her direct, forceful, and assertive presentations. He told her to be more deferential and less forceful - after all (he pointed out) she is not just a woman but the most junior engineer on the team.

You are a very senior executive at ACME, and Amanda has come to you for advice. She tells you that of the eight-member team, six are men with only one other woman (Sarah). Amanda thinks Sarah is pleasant, modest, and the model of what Amanda thinks her supervisor wants her to be. But Amanda sees Sarah as generally regarded as a low value member of the team. Sarah is frequently interrupted, her ideas are often ignored, and although she is generally well liked, she is not taken very seriously. Amanda tells you that when she supports Sarah's ideas, the men frequently say something like, "you girls always stick together". In Amanda's opinion, several of the men on the team have a far more "aggressive style" than she does, but (to her knowledge) they have never been told to tone-down their behavior.

Amanda worries that if she presents herself less forcefully, she will be regarded like Sarah is. On the other hand, Amanda recognizes that unless she modified her behavior in some way, she will continue to be criticized, may be financially disadvantaged, and is unlikely to advance at ACME as she wishes.

You think Amanda is very talented, and you want her to stay and succeed at ACME.
What do you advise Amanda to do?

Scenario #2: Advocating for Herself

Ashley has been with Super Software (SS) for six years. Only one of the six managers in her division is a woman. When a division manager position opened up last year, Ashley applied for it but it went to a man with a very comparable seniority and experience. During Ashley's interview for that job, she sensed it was going poorly. The vice-president who interviewed her was a man she had never met. He seemed to be confused by her presentation, impatient when she talked about her qualifications, and uninterested in her prior projects. At the end of the interview, he told Ashley she needed more confidence, experience, and seasoning before she would be ready to be a division manager.

This year, a division manager position has opened up again, and Ashley wants that position. The same vice-president will be conducting the interviews and making the decision.

Ashley has come to you for help in preparing her written application and personal presentation. Ashley has had no contact with this vice-president since her disappointing interview last year. This past year, Ashley has consistently received top scores on her

evaluations, led teams on two major projects this past year, and was awarded a sizable year-end bonus.

You know Ashley quite well. She is pleasant, helpful, very competent, concerned about her project team members, and modest about her accomplishments. She is soft-spoken, mild-mannered, and respectful of authority. You know Ashley would make a terrific manager, but you know she has an uphill battle. Two male contemporaries of Ashley's have applied for the position, both of whom have worked directly with this vice-president.

What advice would you give Ashley as to how she should go about applying for the manager's position?

Scenario #3: The Motherhood Penalty

After five very successful years as an engineer at Power Robotics (PR), Stephanie has recently had her first child. After returning full-time after a company-authorized maternity leave, Stephanie is finding her situation changed in subtle - and not so subtle - ways. Before her leave, Stephanie was on a fast track with a string of high profile projects, many involving substantial time commitment and extensive travel. Now, however, she's getting only routine assignments with little visibility or pressure. When Stephanie told her supervisors she would like more challenging assignments, they seemed surprised but have done nothing to change her workflow. Many of the senior men she closely worked with before her maternity leave are now quite stand-offish and no longer seem to be interested in her career. Stephanie is also aware that several of the people in her work group are critical of her for not spending more time with her child.

Stephanie has come to you for advice. You are a senior woman at PR who worked part-time while raising your two children and reentered the workforce full-time after your youngest child started the first grade. Stephanie tells you she is fully committed to her career at PR. She wants to move up as far as and as fast as her hard work, talent, and the right support network will allow her. Her husband, also an engineer, is very supportive of her career and is more than willing to do his share of childcare and domestic tasks. With their combined income, they have been able to hire a very experienced nanny.

What do you advise Stephanie?