

# The Games Organizations Play and What Women Don't Know About Them

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Cet article examine les règles de jeu des corporations: l'esprit d'équipe, le patronage, le pragmatisme, la confiance et la politique sexuelle. L'auteur affirme que les femmes ne peuvent jamais avancer aussi vite que les hommes si elles n'apprennent pas ces règles.

Women have been looking for equality for a long time. There has been a long historical movement towards eliminating some of the more extreme areas of discrimination. The right to have an education was fought for in the nineteenth century; the right to have a vote was fought for in the early twentieth century. Now women fight for the right to equal opportunity, training, and benefits in the work force. There are many aspects to the changes that have taken place, and people say that we've come a long way. But have we?

There has been progress, but at the heart of it is the fact that women's rights have had to be won from a male-centred society. *Men*, no matter how great, or how stupid, still have the power.

In organizations, this power is narrowed, especially in Canada and the United States. White males have the power, and their values and ideas dominate the policies and procedures of organizations. All the groups outside the white male power-structure—the Native peoples, the handicapped, the Blacks, the immigrants, and women—are affected by these dominant values and ideas. Women are a peculiar group amongst these outsiders. They are not a minority in the population; and they alone are denied access to opportunities and power within organizations because of their sex, and that alone. This leads to an ambivalent attitude, especially in young women who have been educated in the same institutions and the same professional skills as young men. They have been sold a myth, and the myth tells them not only that they do have the right to equality, but that equality itself exists.

Consequently, women in organizations find themselves in a situation full of contradictions and confusion. They believe in their equality to their male peers. They believe they don't need special treatment and that they can make it on their own. They view special treatment as an indicator that they are second-class citizens and know they are definitely not that. At the same time they see clearly that they do not advance in the organization as rapidly as their skills and experience warrant. Less qualified males continually overtake them on the promotional escalator to success.

Having been in organizations for some time, I know that women *are*, in a very vital way, second-class. Moreover, they had better learn very fast how to deal with this fact and how to deal with the truism that the gender of organizations and industrial society is male.

Women are politically naive in these male structures and organizations when they fail to acknowledge that organizations are built on male values and designed to protect and promote these values. What are some of these values and what are the games that organizations play? There are five main ground-rules:

- a) Team spirit
- b) Patronship/mentorship and power

- c) Pragmatism rather than perfection
- d) Trust—soft information rather than hard
- e) Sexual politics and male rules

## a) *Team Spirit*

Up to the time the young bright woman comes into the organization she has been an individual competitor. She has competed with other women for men and she has also competed with other men for prizes in her studies. In very few cases has she learned the nature of team sports. She has rarely learned that the team has more power than the individual; rarely learned about the ally structure; rarely understood that the team has many diverse functions and that each team-mate has a specific role to play in it. She commonly assumes that by shining individually she is going to make her impact in the organization.

Learning about teams and then deciding what role she is or ought to play on the team are very important starting-points for the woman in an organization. There are some critical pitfalls to avoid. If, having analysed the situation, a woman decides to play a supportive role, she is in danger of falling into the stereotyped support role that women have traditionally been allocated. If she wants to strike out alone without due regard for her other co-workers, she will be seen as an aggressive bitch.

It is important, then, that women assess the nature of the team structure of their organizations, observe it carefully, decide what role to play in full awareness of the pitfalls of certain roles, and only then make a deliberate move to assume the role that will lead them in the professional direction most suited to their skills and aspirations. This is not a natural process for most women. It has to be planned (learned).

## b) *Patronship*

Having made it on her own in most cases, a woman is largely unaware of the role of the patron (or mentor). Connecticut General, a big life-insurance company in the States, in trying to find out the keys to success among the male and female MBAs in its equal-employment program, discovered that the critical factor had little to do with intelligence or ability, but was the speed with which the young MBA selected a patron who spelled success. Needless to say, the males were better at this than the females. With men, it is a straightforward transaction. They have been used to being fostered through university and sports by a father figure. For women, finding a patron is a tough search. Her patron might want to over-protect her or s/he might not understand what she really needs in terms of political education in order to advance in the company. (The male patron might also try to seduce her.) The best patrons are likely to be liberals: men with daughters of their own at the same stage in their career planning, or young, aspiring executives who realize where the future in the organization lies.

As Daniel J. Levinson has noted, women rarely have the power and authority to be mentors to other women. They are usually too busy trying to make it themselves to provide support to their sisters. Sisterhood is not yet powerful in organization life.

Having found a mentor, a woman has to ask of him/her questions about how things really operate in her organization. She must be honest about her political naïveté and she must make clear what she needs to learn in terms of political awareness and gamesmanship.

This is one of the problems with women in sex-stereotyped jobs and, I think, one of the big dangers facing the young graduate coming out of university at present. In sex-stereotyped jobs there is no political information and no understanding of the power structure, precisely because these jobs are filled by women. If I were a young graduate, I would be very wary of taking a sex-stereotyped job in an organization just to get a foot in the door. It is an unwise move—even to start—and will almost certainly lead nowhere.

You should investigate the possibility of finding a patron/mentor in the organization before you accept a job. Does that sound really impossible to check out? Not if you ask when being interviewed if you can meet with people who have been in that job for two years and for four years. Find out how they feel about their work so that you can assess where the job has led in two and four years respectively. In this way you will get some idea of how much opportunity for advancement there is, what the nature of the managers is, what they are willing to do for their employees, and who might best serve you as a patron.

### c) Pragmatism rather than Perfection

Women's socialization emphasizes perfection. In contrast, the key word in organizations is pragmatism. The 'perfect' work lies wilting in a corner unnoticed. A certain amount of flash, a certain amount of doing just what is required—no more, no less—is what organizations are all about. Most men seem to know this instinctively. These remarks don't imply that all men are streets ahead of women, but if we take an average bright woman and an average bright man the average bright man has absorbed these rules of play as part of his early learning.

The best way of determining what the organization requires of its employees, rather than what you think it requires, is to ask your boss for a definition of the work to be done. Ask what the final report should look like; ask how long your presentation should run; ask how many other employees you should consult with in deciding policies; ask how much research is sufficient, how much is excessive. Go straight to the end result and get agreement from your supervisor on the appropriate methods to achieve this end as well as on the nature of the end expected.

### d) Trust

The issue of trust between employees of the same organization is complicated and difficult. In *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter points out that because the measures for assessing performance in managerial jobs are very subjective such jobs rely a great deal on the trust between different levels of management. She maintains that this is one of the reasons it is so difficult for women to assume managerial positions. Men trust men. They are uncertain of how women will react to certain situations. What would they do if a woman cried? What would they do if a woman failed to come through in a crisis? The element of trust lies at the very guts of career success or failure, because organizations do not evaluate job performance solely on the evidence of hard data. Your polished report with all its well-documented material will go for nothing if the VP or manager you're presenting it to has heard from his very well-respected friend in another division that, whereas the facts that you're outlining and so on are right, his gut feeling is that he would take the other direction.

There are no facts in any organization, but only perceptions of facts.

To deal with problems of trust, it's best to be very open and up front with your supervisor about them. The supposed emotionality of women, their dual role as mothers and business women, their loyalty to things outside the company—all put them at a high risk in this area of trust. In a recent article which interviewed the top women managers in American businesses, all the women reported that they had stayed with one company and worked their way up through the ranks. Typically bright young men of similar qualifications had hopped from one company to another in order to make their names and succeed. Few women follow this pattern because they believe they must prove their loyalty, their value in a crisis, and their knowledge of the nature of the industry. Women considering careers in organizations must weigh such reports of how successful business women have achieved their status against the patent unfairness of the fact that most men show little company loyalty but are trusted nonetheless. Acknowledge and discuss such issues with your supervisors, give them copies of Kanter's book or relevant excerpts as a part of your performance review. Airing your concerns openly is the most important and helpful way of dealing with them. (Recognizing that men's uncertainty and/or distrust of women often works against you also puts you on the inside track.)

### e) Sexual Politics

In organizations, there is a very narrow line drawn between being a woman and being a business woman. We all know that intimate relations between employees within an organization are much, much more damaging to a woman than to a man. Moreover, the number of seemingly bright and intelligent company presidents who question the propriety of the vice-president's travelling with a female executive still surprises me. The problem is not that the president assumes that the vice-president and the woman executive will get up to something, but that the president will have the vice-president's wife on the phone complaining about it. *That's life*.

However, there is a simple way of dealing with the whole femininity issue, and it has to do with the dress code. Although I was taken aback and somewhat resentful when I read John Milloy's article on how women should dress for business, I can now accept his advice. Although I resent publications of this type which argue women must conduct themselves according to prejudice and misassumptions men apply to women in business, I have heard male managers criticize female employees solely on the basis of their deportment: 'I didn't hire her because any woman who needs to wear that amount of make-up must be insecure,' or 'Anyone who dresses that far out must be very sure of herself, and I don't want to handle that.' Again, that's life, and we are naïve if we don't acknowledge these prejudices.

Having stated all these games of corporation play, I must confess that as a woman I feel a certain amount of anger about them. Here I am. I did extremely well at university. I work well and get promoted. But at the same time I know I still have a lot to learn. I often feel naïve and, worse, that I am still an adolescent in organization life. I've got more to learn. I have already made most of the mistakes there are about trust, power, and team spirit, but I've learned from these mistakes. My reason for writing this article is that I don't believe other women have to make these mistakes too.

'Politics' is not a dirty word for men in organizations, but most women don't even know it exists. We must learn the vocabulary of corporate politics and become fluent in its use before our voices will be heard in the board room where the corporate team captains call the plays.