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## Undermined at the Office? How Women Can Cope With Mistreatment From Female Colleagues

*Mistreatment can range from humiliating put-downs to intentional sabotage, experts say*  
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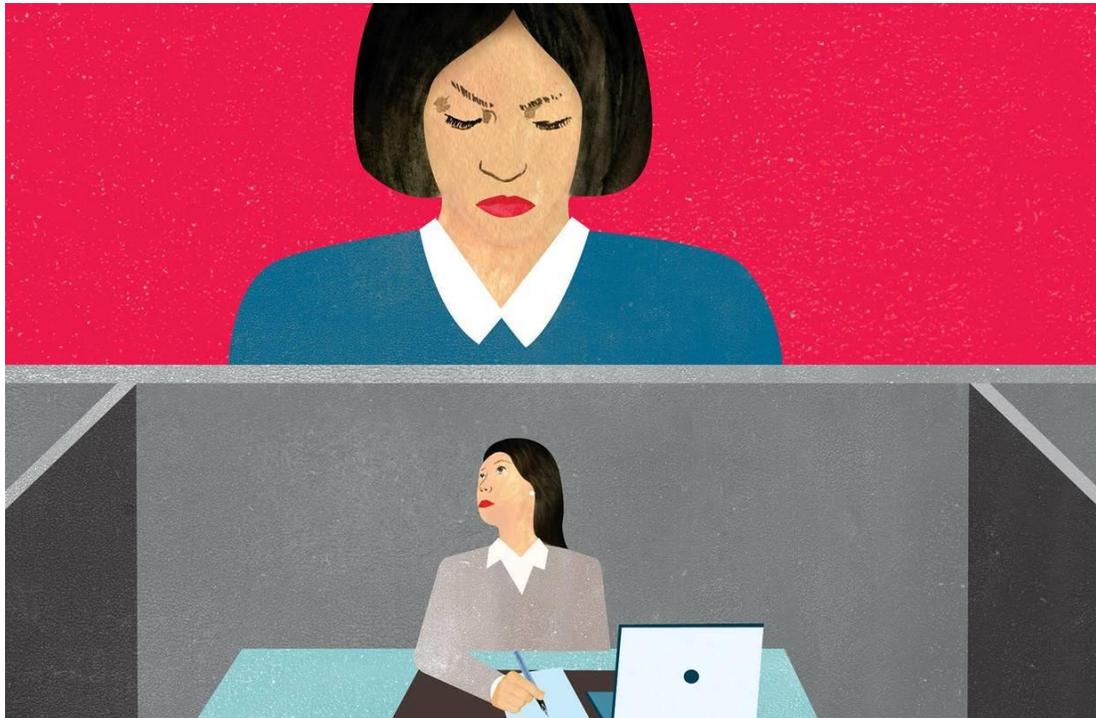


ILLUSTRATION: ELLEN WEINSTEIN



By Joann S. Lublin

Do some women undermine other women? It is one of the trickiest workplace issues.

Managerial women often hesitate to speak openly about female colleagues undercutting each other—and not just because doing so seems to reinforce a negative stereotype. Even those who have clashed with female colleagues say broader gender bias in pay and promotions pose bigger career obstacles. And such undermining appears less common than it used to be as more women reach higher management and actively mentor less experienced women.

Nevertheless, run-ins with undermining women at work can still happen, career advisers and recruiters say, and there are ways of coping. Among them: Find allies in the office who support you, says Gail R. Meneley, co-founder of Shields Meneley Partners, a career-transition firm for top executives.

“You must forge close enough ties that those allies can judge you and your work themselves,” she said.

Women who undermine other women sometimes do so when they feel precarious about their own position and view the other woman as a competitive threat, experts say. This attitude can stem from the belief that there are limited avenues for women to advance in an organization. In other instances, women who may be perceived as undermining could actually be trying to help by doling out the same tough advice given to them earlier in their career.

Mistreatment can range from humiliating put-downs to intentional sabotage, and targeted women tend to be outspoken and are often chided for making their voices heard, career advisers and university researchers say.

Leadership coach Perry Yeatman advises the female chief executive officer of a family-owned consulting firm whose board chairwoman belittles her in front of her management team, Ms. Yeatman said.

“My client’s boss makes her feel like she’s underperforming, and so she wonders if she really is as good as she believed and her results indicate,” Ms. Yeatman said. “Women shouldn’t tolerate bad behavior just because it comes from another woman.”

Workplaces, of course, abound with examples of supportive women helping other women succeed. Mary Barra became [the first woman to head a major car company](#) in 2014 when she was named chief executive at General Motors Co. Ms. Barra has several female executives reporting to her and is expanding that pool. Dhivya Suryadevara, GM’s vice president of corporate finance, will advance to chief financial officer next month.

There remains little agreement on the extent of the problem of women undermining other women, but recent research sheds some light on such misbehavior. Women are 14% to 21% more likely than men to report experiencing uncivil treatment from female co-workers, according to a study led by Allison S. Gabriel, an associate professor at University of Arizona’s Eller College of Management.

The study, which reflects three surveys covering 1,340 male and female employees in the U.S. in a variety of occupations and industries, defined incivility as being ignored, interrupted, mocked or treated disrespectfully. It found that women mistreated by female counterparts reported lower job satisfaction. “We are the first to help clarify that it [incivility] seems to be more of an experience women are experiencing from other women than from men,” Ms. Gabriel said.

Most women at a 2016 program on female rivalry hosted by the National Association for Female Executives reported that other women had undermined them, yet only a handful admitted to acting that way themselves, said Betty Spence, president of NAFE.

“Women don’t see themselves as undermining other women,” she said.

For some women who feel undermined, the only recourse is to change jobs. Kerry Jordan, a financial-services industry veteran, said a female executive she reported to in a past position repeatedly undermined her, including criticizing her public-speaking skills to their colleagues behind her back. When the female supervisor nixed Ms. Jordan’s request to accept an outside directorship on a board, she left the company.

Rayona Sharpnack, an organizational consultant, said she counseled a vice president at a Fortune 500 health-care company who told the consultant that another female VP stole customers and territory from her.

Ms. Sharpnack persuaded her client to signal the other woman's importance by occasionally praising her competitive prowess during meetings. The complimented vice president subsequently approached her colleague and "created a couple of things that they could collaborate on," Ms. Sharpnack said.

Such moves don't always work. An executive recruiter tried—and failed—to mend a strained relationship through respectful chats after placing a longtime friend in the highest human-resources job at an East Coast hedge fund. The friend soon turned on her, lambasting the recruiter's judgment and fees in front of the fund's CEO.

"I was being betrayed and undermined by the very person I had introduced to the firm," the recruiter said. During one face-to-face encounter about her mistreatment, the recruiter said the HR chief blamed work-related stress and said, "Don't take it personally."

A New York lawyer at an Asian bank curbed her female mentor's unsupportive behavior by divulging less. In 2013, the lawyer told her mentor that she planned to take advantage of their company's policy and work from home one day a week once she returned from maternity leave. Her mentor cautioned that "you really are giving up your career plans," she said, and mocked the altered schedule, joking sarcastically that she'd "love to work in my pajamas once in a while."

The lawyer stopped discussing her personal life with the executive. "I don't want to share things that can be used against me," she said.

Despite her mentor's dire prediction, the attorney advanced to director from vice president the year after her maternity leave ended.