

BREAKING THROUGH BIAS

– Discussion Scenarios –

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Advocating for Herself

Ashley has been in Commercial real estate at the DEF firm for many years. Several men with the same credentials and experience were made partners last year. But Ashley was told she needs more confidence, experience, and seasoning before she will be ready to become a DEF partner.

Ashley wants to be promoted this year, and she has come to you for advice about what she should do to assure she makes partner. You believe Ashley is qualified to make partner. She has consistently received highly favorable evaluations with respect to the quality of her work.

She is hard-working and talented. But she is also soft-spoken, mild-mannered, and very modest. You are concerned that she does not do a good job of advocating for herself.

- **What advice would you give Ashley as to how she should conduct herself during the coming year?**
- **How should she start thinking about preparing her next self-evaluation?**
- **What more should Ashley be doing?**

Too Aggressive

Amanda is an associate with the ABC organization. She is the most junior professional on an important office building leasing team. In her annual evaluation, Amanda was complemented on the quality of her work but criticized for being overly aggressive. The head of the team told her that she makes the other team members uncomfortable with her direct, forceful, and assertive style. He urged her to be more modest and less forceful.

Amanda has come to you for advice about what she should do. She tells you that of the six members on the

team, she is the only woman. In Amanda's opinion several of the men on the team are far more "aggressive" than she is, but (to her knowledge) they have never been told to tone-down their style.

Amanda worries that if she presents herself less forcefully, she will be disregarded.

- What do you advise Amanda to do?**
- What else might be done to help Amanda?**

The Motherhood Penalty

After five very successful years at XYZ Realty, Stephanie had her first child and returned to work full-time after a company-authorized maternity leave. Stephanie is finding that her situation at XYZ has changed in subtle – and not so subtle – ways. Before her leave, she was on the fast track, with a string of high profile projects, many involving substantial time commitment and extensive travel. Now, 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. (Stephanie is also aware that several of the people in her group are critical of her for not spending more time with her child.)

Stephanie has come to you for advice. Stephanie tells you she is fully committed to her career at XYZ.

▪ What do you advise Stephanie?

Networking, Mentoring & Sponsorship

ACME LLP, like the majority of mid-sized real estate firms in the United States, has a senior leadership team consisting of approximately 15 people, of whom only two are women.

Sarah is a senior associate at ACME. She is bright, ambitious, and hard working. She feels frustrated by her inability to advance and break out of her current projects.

Several of her male peers have been promoted in the past two years, despite their accomplishments being no different from her own.

Sarah believes that her difficulty in advancing is because she does not have access to ACME's informal, predominantly male support network: casual social activities (mostly sporting events and occasional drinks), active "watercooler" banter, an easy exchange of "war stories," and informal career advice.

Sarah knows that her male peers who were promoted had close relationships with at least one senior male partner, who exposed them to career-enhancing opportunities, and actively sponsored them for promotion to partnership.

Sarah tried to reach out to the two senior women for mentorship and advice. But, they don't seem interested in helping her, and she is not sure how powerful they are anyway.

Sarah is convinced she will not be promoted unless she can break into the informal men's network.

John, a senior executive who recently worked with Sarah, has been impressed with her work. But John feels it would be awkward, look suspicious, and upset his wife if he were to reach out and offer one-on-one career advice to Sarah.

- **What can ACME do to support networking, mentoring, and sponsorship of its women employees?**
- **What advice would you give John?**
- **What advice would you give Sarah?**