

Earning respect

Female managers must build rapport with male co-workers

Question:

I am a 27-year old female manager with responsibility for seven sales people and more than \$30 million in sales. My toughest negotiations are not with my customers, but with my peers. They are all male, twice my age and have worked for the company for at least 15 years. Is it possible to negotiate beyond the gender and age gap so I am accepted and treated with respect?

Answer:

It may take some time to earn the respect of your peers, but with the right awareness and deliberate action, you can direct their focus to your competencies as a strategic sales manager. Do not expect to change or control their behavior. The only thing you can do is change how you engage with them and hope that you can shift their behavior.

Communications

Begin by making an honest assessment of your communications. How do you engage at team meetings? Do you take initiative to facilitate conversation in a non-threatening way? Do you ask gentle questions to under-

stand each person's point of view? A simple comment like, "Jack, from what you are saying, it seems the issue we need to address is how to improve our response time from our key suppliers, do you agree?" Then go around the table and ask each person by name what they think. "Matt, I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on this situation." At a deeper level, each manager will appreciate your initiative to ask them to share their opinion with the group.

Refrain from being confrontational even when they're pushing your buttons. Instead, take the high road and out-smart them with your poise, cleverness and brilliance. Often, by asking a series of non-threatening questions, you can direct the conversation down the path you want to go. It makes them feel like they are mutually collaborating when in fact you are leading the horse to water. That's OK. You don't want to come across as a know-it-all but rather, build rapport.

Be mindful not to discount a team member – no matter how tempting – in front of others. A comment like, "Joe, I can see why you think that might work, however, it's been my experience that in this particular situation, that would be a disaster," could create a combative situation that might ultimately boomerang. Joe might very well feel that you embarrassed him in front of his peers and may decide to look for the first opportunity to return the favor.

How do you position your ideas? Are you apologetic when you offer a suggestion or comment? An apologetic suggestion sounds like, "I'm not sure this will work, but maybe we could. . ." An apology is an invitation for criticism. There is no way to recover because you have already, willingly, given away your power.

Lastly, recognize there is a difference between woman-speak and male-speak.

Woman-speak is about the background, context and details. Male-speak is about the bottom line. When working with men, be concise and to the point. Communicate in bullet points, not in full paragraphs. Males do not need or want to know all the details. If you left something out that they want to know, they'll ask. If you talk too much, you'll be tuned out.

In a negotiation, people see the world from their own vantage point. Successful negotiators understand that to build rapport and trust requires an acknowledgement of differing points of view and then the building of bridges between people and ideas.

Presence

How do you present yourself? Do you project confidence, arrogance or insecurity? Do you stand upright, shoulders back and head held high or do you slump? Do you look them in the eyes when you speak or do you look toward the floor? Do you speak in a neutral, almost curious tone? Or do you seem to have a chip on your shoulder or do you seem determined to prove your point?

Consider how you want to come across when you communicate and prepare for each and every interaction, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem. Yes, this is a lot of work. But everything you do and say matters. Be deliberate with the impression you create.

Relationships

Finally, take initiative to build a relationship with each team member. Ask each person to lunch and take them to a nice restaurant. Get to know them on a personal basis. What is their background? What brought them to this company? Have they held other positions within the company? What are the toughest challenges they've seen

this company overcome? What challenges are they facing right now? Do they have a family?

Do they have any daughters? How old are they? Are they professionals? Think about what you want to know and prepare your questions beforehand. Be warm and conversational. This will go a long way toward helping you build rapport and earn trust. It will be hard for them to chide you in a team meeting if they've developed a personal relationship with you and, in fact, like you.

Ask each person for advice if it seems appropriate. Their response to a simple question like, "Do you have any recommendations to help me succeed?" will help you learn a lot about who they are, what their agenda is. When you are willing to be vulnerable, you become real and less threatening.

You cannot change other people's behavior, but you can change what you do and say, and this can and will influence how others respond to you. Small changes can make a big difference. Think about changes you can make, try something and assess the reaction you receive. If the situation improves even slightly, you are on the right track. If it doesn't, try something different. At the very least, you will gain a lot of feedback and become wiser in how you interact.



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