

the babe or the mom?

The Challenges of Being a Powerful Woman *By Gail Golden, MBA, Ph.D.*

Josh Stewart is a powerful business leader. Close your eyes and picture him: tall, fit, handsome, a little gray at the temples. He has a powerful presence and a keen intelligence. When he speaks, people listen. He has a firm handshake and stays calm in a crisis. He golfs, sails, skis and drinks scotch, but not too much. You get the picture.

Emily Warner is a powerful business leader. Close your eyes and picture her... Good luck. It's likely that no clear picture leaps to mind. What does she look like? How does she wield power? How does she connect with people? What does she do for fun? We just don't know that many Emilys.

This is one of the challenges women business leaders face, both those who are already established in senior roles and those who are on their way up. What does a powerful woman look like? How does she exercise power in what can still be perceived as a feminine manner?



THE BABE

If you're an attractive woman, especially if you're young, you can be sure that many of your co-workers are seeing you as the Babe. Men typically admire the Babe for her physical attributes and imagine her as a social and/or sexual partner. They often enjoy her company and include her in fun events. Older men may react to the Babe as a daughter and take an affectionate, protective stance with her.

So what's wrong with that? Well, for starters, the Babe image is not particularly intelligent. The Babe's power rests in her physical attractiveness and youth, which can result in her male colleagues treating her in a subtly (or not-so-subtly) sexualized and demeaning manner. The Babe is not likely to be invited to a seat at the table where serious business

matters are being discussed.

The Babe also has a challenge interacting with other women. They may admire her for her beauty and style but also resent her. They may attribute her success to favoritism rather than to her leadership, talent and hard work. The Babe is likely to be more popular with men than with women.

So what do you do if others see you as the Babe? Make it harder for them to typecast you.

- Adopt a more formal, buttoned-up interpersonal style.
- Speaking of buttoned up, wear clothes that are attractive but professional and unrevealing. No cleavage, no stilettos and not a lot of thigh.
- Be friendly but not flirtatious.
- Be careful about whom you touch, and how.
- Speak with confidence, maturity and assertiveness.
- Deliberately build support networks with other women, both to give yourself a safe zone and to counteract the image that you just want to hang out with the boys.
- Use humor to deflect inappropriate remarks. But remember that no one has to put up with sexual harassment. Establish clear boundaries, communicate them firmly, and take swift action if someone transgresses them.

Although there are more positive images of powerful, effective women than there used to be, we still have relatively few role models. If you're fortunate enough to know and interact with some high-powered women, you are ahead of the game. You have the opportunity to watch them and adopt those elements of their style that will work for you.

However, in the absence of experiences with real women leaders, people create stereotypes. We over-generalize from a few limited experiences. We put too much credibility in fictional images from the media. And then these stereotypes become lenses through which we look at and judge real-life women, often resulting in a seriously distorted picture of who they really are.

Two of the most common stereotypes of women in business are the "Babe" and the "Mom." Each image has a certain kind of power, but each one also creates serious limitations to how women can lead and have impact.



THE MOM

Older women business leaders are more likely to be typecast as the Mom. At first glance, this doesn't seem like such a terrible role. After all, mothers are indeed very powerful figures in our lives.

They take care of us, and they know about all kinds of stuff that we don't know. They teach us about life and have a lot of influence over how we grow and develop. So why shouldn't a woman leader be happy to be the Mom?

The problem with the Mom role is that co-workers, both male and female, often project onto you their experiences, feelings and unresolved issues with their own mothers. So if their mother was supportive and nurturing, that's what they expect from you. If their mother was harsh and controlling, they read that into your behavior. Even if colleagues have good relationships with their mothers, their expectations of you will hardly be appropriate for a business relationship.

If you are in danger of being seen as the Mom, once again the goal is to act against type.

- Maintain a youthful, modern attitude.
- Be open to new ideas.
- Don't badmouth the younger generation of leaders.
- Balance nurturing others with challenging them.
- Be irreverent. Don't take yourself too seriously.
- Never complain about problems with your eyesight.

As more women move into senior leadership roles, we will create new images of power that will make it easier for women to develop and express their individual leadership styles. In the meantime, being aware of stereotypes that limit and diminish women will enable us to challenge those stereotypes and be the leaders we are capable of being. ■

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