

# 7 Pieces of Bad Career Advice Women Should Ignore

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Illustration by Lan Truong

Young women entering the workforce are typically inundated by a wide range of career tips to help them succeed. Although most of this advice is probably well intended, that doesn't necessarily make all of it helpful. In fact, many suggestions are more likely to perpetuate than reduce gender bias, by legitimizing the status quo, focusing on fixing women rather than the system, and blaming women for not behaving like incompetent men.

With so much advice out there, it's hard to know what to follow and what to ignore. So, we wanted to provide a list of popular suggestions that we believe are best neglected: things women often read or hear that in our view can cause them more harm than good.

The best career advice we have is to simply avoid following any of the following suggestions:

## 1) Find a mentor.

We encourage you to strike the word "mentor" from your vocabulary and replace it with "champion." Mentor is a warm and fuzzy term that suggests amenable chats, advice, and a shoulder to cry on. A champion is someone who makes things happen for you. Women don't need mentors. Women need what men get all the time – someone prepared to go out on a limb for them. A champion is someone who, behind closed doors, slams

their fist on the boardroom table and says, “If there’s only room for one bonus in the budget, it’s going to Jane, not John.” In other words, a champion is a committed sponsor who has the agency to influence people at the top and will use it to help you, someone who will be your loyal brand ambassador and push for you to get ahead — even if it means jeopardizing their reputation by disrupting the status quo.

To find a champion, pick a person in a position of power who is not sexist and especially not afraid to challenge the status quo. This can (and in a perfect world would) be a woman, but the numbers tell us that, right now, it is more likely to be a man. Why? Because in the corporate world, there is still a huge power gap between the sexes, and statistically speaking, men still get promoted more and occupy more higher level roles than women. Moreover, while it is absolutely essential for women to support and lift each other up, research shows that women who do make it to the top still have to overcome biased stereotypes to stay there, or are pressured to conform, which can make it difficult to speak out and be heard.

To change these bogus and outdated power dynamics, we believe the answer is to get more women in leadership roles, in boardrooms, and in the C-suite. But, as backwards as it sounds, we will likely need the support of men to do this.

Once you find a champion you trust, turn them into your ally. Showcase your talents, your drive, and commit to making an impact – make them feel proud to speak up for you. Just as research shows that CEOs who have daughters tend to pay women more (a finding we find depressing, since in a logical world men should not need to have daughters to value women), there are many non-sexist allies out there who are willing to help you, but if you don’t ask, you don’t get.

## 2) Change the way you speak.

Women are constantly told to change their vocabulary — to make it less apologetic and more assertive. “Don’t use the word ‘just’ as a qualifier.” “Stop saying ‘sorry’ all the time.” “Don’t ask for permission,” and so on. But guess what? The world would be a much better place, and the workplace a great deal happier, if instead of telling women to say sorry

less, we told men to say sorry a whole lot more. The truth is, we need to worry less about editing women, and more about editing incompetent and inappropriate men.

Most of the problems organizations and nations have (e.g., corruption, bullying, harassment, and toxic or destructive leadership) are the direct results of our failures to restrain or inhibit powerful men, yet we are perpetually worried about censoring women. A better piece of advice for women? Speak freely and speak in any way that you like.

### 3) Be more confident.

A vast number of advice columns are devoted to encouraging women to gain more confidence, when the problem isn't women's lack of confidence, but men's oversupply of it. Lacking confidence to the point that you are holding yourself back, or too anxious to take risks, is obviously not great. But a surplus of confidence is equally problematic. The right amount of confidence is that which aligns with your actual competence. If you are equally realistic about your talents as you are about your limitations, then you will be able to close the gap between how good you are and how good you want to be. Self-deception is the enemy of personal development. You only get better if you are aware of your flaws and are willing to mitigate them.

That said, it is important to note that the overlap between people who feel confident and people who are actually competent is a mere 9%, meaning the two characteristics are barely related. In any area of life, we are better off when we bet on competence rather than confidence. For instance, would you rather have a heart surgeon, a financial adviser, or an airplane pilot who is confident or competent? As the pandemic has highlighted, there are devastating consequences to picking leaders based on their confidence, when they don't have the competence to back it up.

The world already suffers from a surplus of overconfident leaders (no prizes for guessing their gender). Plus, as we all know, confidence in women is not received the same way as confidence in men. Men often blame women for not being assertive, but when they do indeed "lean in" they are punished for not behaving in stereotypically "feminine" ways. So, don't let the internet tell you that you are doing something wrong if

you don't *feel* confident. The standard you're being compared to is most likely one of overconfidence — something too many people, and especially men, tend to feel. You are probably doing just fine.

Remember that self-awareness will always be a stronger asset than self-belief, and one many more men should emulate. It is ironic that we tell women to get rid of their imposter syndrome when many corporations have a problematic history of putting overconfident and under-competent men in positions of power.

#### 4) Find work-life balance.

Men are rarely told to find work-life balance, so why should women be told this? Instead, find somewhere to work that cares about you. Seek out a workplace where those in charge of setting the rules and creating the culture know what really matters. Work somewhere where people trust you and your talents, so there's no micromanagement and over-focus on where you are, what you're doing, or how many hours you're putting in.

One benefit of the pandemic is that it forced employers to focus on results not the process — or what's delivered as opposed to where you are located or how much overtime you're putting in. Make work fit your life versus the other way around. And if your employer doesn't get it, then perhaps that's a signal that you should work somewhere else, where people value your quality of life.

The easiest place to start: Look for female-founded or female-led companies, or companies with leadership and senior management ranks that are more female- than male-heavy. You may already know that startups with more women leaders outperform their competitors, and female founders are more successful than male founders despite getting less funding. But in addition to this, a global study found that employees at women- led companies “enjoy more autonomy and are specifically more satisfied with work-from-home policies when compared to male-led companies.”

Since women are often forced into entrepreneurship by the glass ceiling and other pervasive gender biases in their employers, they are more motivated to employ and help women, for they have been through the same experience.

## 5) Fake it till you make it.

Don't fake anything. Instead, do yourself justice. This simply means talking up your accomplishments, your intention, and your vision in a way that gets you recognized. These are mere statements of fact. All you have to do is start saying them aloud.

Of course, things would be different — and perhaps more rational— if we lived in a world that rewarded actual talent and hard work, promoting people on the basis of merit rather than gender.

## 6) Just be yourself.

Easier said than done. Unfortunately, in many work environments, career success depends on understanding how others expect you to behave, and conforming to existing roles and conventions — and, again as we all know, being yourself as a woman is received differently from being yourself as a man.

What should you do instead? Seek out a work environment that understands and delivers what Google identified back in 2015 as the number one characteristic of high-performing teams: psychological safety (which, incidentally, our colleague Amy Edmondson had found many years prior to Google's "discovery"). Psychological safety — the ability for team members to make themselves vulnerable in front of each other, to be able to be truthful and honest with no fear of repercussions — is what drives performance success, and what enables you to really be yourself.

.How do you find a workplace that values and delivers psychological safety? Simple: just ask your interviewer, or better yet, someone who works there:

- Do you feel your organization is one where people feel really able to speak up and share their opinions freely?
- Do people with diverse backgrounds work at every level of your company? (You can also check this by researching the people who sit on their leadership team, or by looking into their

current employees on LinkedIn.)• Do diverse candidates feel that they belong?

- Are different opinions and views represented throughout the organization, and on your team?
- Do you feel your teammates and manager have your back?
- How often do people in the organization apologize to one another?
- How are employees with families to take care of, particularly mothers, treated?

Their response will tell you what you need to know. There are also sites, such as Glassdoor, that enable you to get a sense of a company culture before you apply or accept an offer.

## 7) Ask for advice.

Why? Your intuition and gut instinct are far more valuable than any advice, and unfortunately, all too under-used in a business world where women are constantly the recipients of excessive amounts of advice, sought out or not. Do something you're never encouraged to do — less asking advice, more listening to your gut.

To do that, you need to stop caring what other people think. Fear of what other people think is the single most paralyzing dynamic in business, and in life. Instead, look within. When faced with a challenge, pay attention to your response. What do you want to do? What do you think the right next move is? Now, try it out.

If you make a mistake, learn from it. If you succeed, you will have done so by your own standards. We believe you will find that the more you follow your intuition about what is right or wrong, when to act and when not to, what to fight for and what to let go, the more valuable your successes will be, and when you fail, you will have failed by your own standards too.

Trust your own instincts. They represent the advice of someone who will always have your best interests at heart — you.

This last point applies equally to what you think of our suggestions. We'd just say that as a general principle, doing the opposite of what the corporate world tells women to do is likely to get you better results. While this may seem counterintuitive, there is little evidence of progress around gender equality after years of media publications and business gurus telling women to be more confident, lean in, find a mentor, or ask for more advice. To be sure, in the short term you may be better off playing nice and conforming to the status quo — but progress does not happen if we perpetuate an unfair and unmeritocratic system. It's time to take a different approach.