

Mentoring: The Rationality of Fear

A few months ago, Lean In published the results of a survey by Sandberg and Pritchard showing a dramatic increase in the share of male managers who fear close interaction with female coworkers. Specifically:

60% of managers who are men are uncomfortable participating in a common work activity with a woman, such as mentoring, working alone, or socializing together. That's a 32% jump from a year ago.

The survey's creators were dismayed:

This is disastrous. The vast majority of managers and senior leaders are men. They have a huge role to play in supporting women's advancement at work—or hindering it...

There's not a company in the world that can afford to leave talent on the sidelines because that talent is female. But that's what will keep happening unless all of us—especially men—commit to doing better.

Most commentators found male managers' reluctance to mentor women especially reprehensible and irrational. Male managers aren't just undermining gender equality; they're paranoid. How so? Because innocent men have nothing to fear except false accusations – and these hardly ever happen. Thus, Prudy Gourguechon remarks:

The implication of the surveys is that men are afraid of being falsely accused. But false accusations of sexual impropriety are actually very rare.

Mia Brett tells us:

Despite the framing of this story, male managers refusing to mentor women started long before #MeToo. Furthermore, fears of false accusation aren't supported by statistics.

Andrew Fiouzi:

[D]ealing with men's unrealistic fears around false accusations will require unfamiliar amounts of self-reflection on the part of the men in question.

Emily Peck:

Some men also like to claim that women are fabricating claims. Those fears are largely unfounded, Thomas said. She points out that the same myth surrounds sexual assault. False accusations make up a very low percentage of reported rapes, according to several studies — in line with other types of crime.

While it's dauntingly hard to credibly estimate the rate of false accusation, I suspect all the preceding authors are correct. Human beings rarely invent bald harmful lies about others.

On reflection, however, this hardly implies that male managers are paranoid or otherwise "irrational." For three reasons:

1. You have to multiply the probability of a false accusation by the *harm* of a false accusation. Since the harm is high, even a seemingly negligible probability may be worth worrying about. Consider this passage in Fiouzi's analysis:

But according to Richard J. Reddick, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Texas at Austin, there is, practically speaking, no evidence to justify the Pence Rule [not dining alone with women other than your wife]. "You often hear about men being falsely accused of sexual harassment," he says. "[But] the University of California, San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health conducted a study recently that revealed that two percent of men and one percent of women had been falsely accused of sexual harassment or assault, so in fact, accusations, and particularly false ones, are exceptionally rare."

Taking these estimates at face value, it's hard to see the paranoia: A 2% chance of severe career damage is a *serious* risk, especially given the low personal benefits of mentoring. Furthermore, managers are far more tempting targets for false accusation than ordinary co-workers, so their probability of being falsely accused plausibly rises to 4%, 6%, or even 10%.

2. In any case, a low *rate* of false accusation multiplied by a *long* mentoring career could still readily lead to *multiple* false accusations. So it's hardly imprudent for many male managers to respond with great caution. Remember: The chance you'll die in a car crash today if you don't wear a seat belt is a rounding error. The chance you'll eventually die in a car crash if you *habitually* don't wear a seat belt, however, is nothing to scoff at.

3. As I've explained before, truly malevolent actions – such as falsely accusing others – are far less common than *misunderstandings*. Misunderstandings are a ubiquitous unpleasant feature of human life. One common way to avoid this unpleasantness is to avoid social situations likely to lead to misunderstandings. This strategy is especially tempting if, in the event of misunderstanding, others will presume you're in the wrong. So again, it's hardly surprising that many male managers would respond to changing norms (#BelieveWomen) by playing defense.

What then should be done? The emotionally appealing response, sadly, is to fight fear with an extra helping of fear: “You're too scared to mentor? Interesting. Now let me show you what we do to those who shirk their mentoring responsibilities.” If this seems like a caricature, carefully listen to what the authors of the original survey have to say:

Ugly behavior that once was indulged or ignored is finally being called out and condemned. Now we must go further. Avoiding and isolating women at work—whether out of an overabundance of caution, a misguided sense of decorum, irritation at having to check your words or actions, or any other reason—must be unacceptable too.

The problem, of course, is that mentoring is too informal to easily monitor. Unless someone loudly announces, “I refuse to mentor women,” there's not much you can do to him. Mentoring quotas are likely to flop for the same reason.

The alternative is obvious, but unpalatable for activists: *Put the frightened people whose assistance you need at ease*. Be friendly and calm, gracious and grateful. Take the ubiquity of misunderstandings seriously. Don't zealously advocate for yourself, and don't rush to take sides. Instead, strive to de-escalate conflict whenever a misunderstanding arises. This would obviously work best as a coordinated cultural shift toward good

manners, but you don't have to wait for the world to come to its senses. You can start building your personal reputation for collegiality today - so why wait to get potential mentors on your side?

If you're tempted to respond, "Why should *I* have to put *them* at ease?," the honest answer is: Because you're the one asking for help.

If that's the way you talk to others, though, don't expect them to give you honest answers. Intimidation is the father of silence and the mother of lies. If you have to use threats to exhort help, you'll probably just get a bunch of empty promises.