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September 3, 2008

Working with the enemy

By Melinda Finch

SABOTAGING BEHAVIOUR, such as not sharing information, backstabbing and bullying, is more common among women in the workplace, according to Australian corporate leaders.

"Women working together can be very powerful but it only takes the actions of one to taint the group [in the eyes of male colleagues]," said Maureen Frank, head of mergers and acquisitions for Aon. "I think women tend to make it more personal than men do. When there is that conflict between women about a business issue it moves then into the personal which I think is unfortunate."

Speaking at a Women in Leadership forum in Sydney organised by the Workplace Training Advisory Australia (WTAA), Frank said that, unlike other forms of antisocial or unacceptable workplace behaviour such as discrimination or physical violence, many women are at a loss about how to handle sabotaging.

"I think that people recognise it, [but] they just don't know what to do about it. It's either fight or flight and there's very little actually dealing with it. Rather than sort of sitting down, strategising and knocking it on the head, you tend to get people leaving jobs over these sorts of issues or asking for transfers or really just feeling very uncomfortable within their own roles."

In Frank's book, *You Go Girlfriend*, Gina McLellan, Queensland general manager of Hudson, argued that part of the problem is that when women have a disconnect, they tend to make it personal, whereas men don't. For example, in the architecture industry she said women "were primarily more mature age women. I achieved recognition quickly. I was surprised to find that the older, more mature women that I dealt with ... were not as welcoming and encouraging as I would have expected them to be."

It is for reasons of retention that HR departments need to be more proactive about recognising and resolving sabotage issues, Frank said. "In many instances HR managers wouldn't know about it, because if you have got someone who is superior to you who is bullying you, you have to be fairly brave to actually be quite outspoken about it. However, having the ability to confidentially get some advice or advice on how to mediate those sorts of issues would be greatly beneficial for an HR department to be able to do."

The first step is to get a discord out in the open, she said. "If you're a manager and this was happening to one of your staff members, it's not really an issue that you can put your head in the sand over."

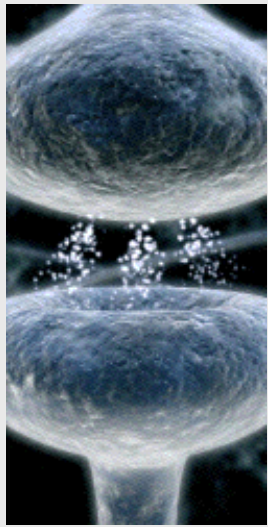
"I have sat down with the person concerned and said, 'Well what's going on and how did this happen?' Let the person who is the saboteur be aware that you are onto them. But in a non-aggressive way, really say that we want to work as a team and we don't want this to continue."

14 December 2005

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