How to Avoid Social Backlash in the Workplace

by David Maxfield

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Research shows that women who speak up at all are risking more than men. Something as minor as telling observers that a CEO “tends to offer his (her) own opinions as much as possible,” and that, “Compared to other CEOs, Mr. (Ms.) Morgan talks much more than others in power,” caused observers to respect Mr. Morgan more and Ms. Morgan less.¹ This approval or disapproval was based on gender alone. It isn’t fair.

Speaking up in forceful, assertive ways is even more risky for women. They are burdened with cultural stereotypes that typecast women as caring and nurturing.² Speaking forcefully violates that cultural norm

"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to
and women experience a more punishing backlash than men.

In a landmark study, Victoria Brescoll and Eric Luis Uhlmann asked the question, “Can an angry woman get ahead?” Their study documented the unequal penalty women experience for showing anger at work, but then went further to explore the reasons behind this gender effect. Their results suggest that the penalty occurs because observers attribute women’s anger to internal characteristics (“she is an angry person,” or “she is out of control”) while attributing men’s anger to external circumstances (“he’s having a bad day,” or “things were out of control so someone had to take charge”).

What this previous research, along with our own, confirms is that emotional inequality is real and it is unfair. And while it is unacceptable and needs to be addressed at a cultural, legal, organizational, and social level—individuals can take control. We wanted to develop specific skills women can use on the job to be forceful, assertive and honest—without experiencing social backlash. Our first step was to recreate the social backlash and emotion-inequality effects in a controlled laboratory setting. We wanted to demonstrate the effects in a reliable way, so we could test ways to reduce them.

We created videotaped interactions so we could control what observers would see. The videotaped interactions featured either a male or female actor and took place in a meeting room seated at a table. The actors used identical scripts and we coached them so that their performances were as similar as possible. The only difference was that one actor was male and the other was female.

In this first study, 4,517 participants played the observer role. Each saw a single 30-40 second performance, and then rated the “manager” using a 20-item survey. The chart below illustrates the social backlash and emotion-inequality effects we observed. The bars represent the percentage drop averaged across status, competency, and worth, in that order.

Editor's Note

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Next, we decided to test whether brief framing could reduce the emotion-inequality effects. We tested three frames: a Behavior Frame, a Value Frame, and an Inoculation Frame.

- **Behavior Frame:** The actors described what they were about to say before saying it: “I’m going to express my opinion very directly. I’ll be as specific as possible.”
- **Value Frame:** The actors described their motivation in value-laden terms before making the statement of disapproval: “I see this as a matter of honesty and integrity, so it’s important for me to be clear about where I stand.”
- **Inoculation Frame:** The female actor suggested it could be risky for a woman to speak up the way she was about to: “I know it’s a risk for a woman to speak this assertively, but I’m going to express my opinion very directly.”

In this second study, 7,921 participants played the observer role. Each saw a single 35-45 second performance, and then rated the “manager” using the 20-item survey from Study 1.

Each of the frames worked. The chart below illustrates the positive impacts of the different frames.
This study shows that framing statements can help to solve social backlash and emotion-inequality effects. We believe that each frame works in a different way.

**Behavior Frame:** “I’m going to express my opinion very directly. I’ll be as specific as possible.” We think the Behavior Frame works by setting an expectation. It makes sure the statement that follows doesn’t come as a surprise. Without the frame, observers are blindsided by the force of the emotion and may assume the worst—that the person has lost his/her temper. The frame works by preventing this negative conclusion.

**Value Frame:** “I see this as a matter of honesty and integrity, so it’s important for me to be clear about where I stand.” We think the Value Frame works by giving a positive reason for the emotion. In fact, it turns the emotion into a virtue by turning it into a measure of commitment to a shared value.

**Inoculation Frame:** “I know it’s a risk for a woman to speak this assertively, but I’m going to express my opinion very directly.”

We think the Inoculation Frame works by warning observers that they may have an implicit bias. It causes them to try hard to be fair, or to adjust their judgment in an effort to be fair.

We were a bit surprised at how well it worked and we are skeptical that the Inoculation Frame will work if used repeatedly. It could be seen as “playing a card”—in this case the “gender card.” Our concern is that it may create short-term benefits, but damage a user’s reputation.

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Speaking forcefully creates a social backlash for both men and women...
—though it’s more severe for women. This backlash occurs when observers use the emotion to draw negative conclusions about the speaker’s intent. The backlash is reduced when the speaker takes a few seconds to explain his/her positive intent before stating the content.

We tested three of the statements a person could use to explain his/her intent—Behavior, Value, and Inoculation Frames. We can conclude that the Behavior and Value Frames are effective and are safe to use repeatedly. The Inoculation Frame works in the short term, but we won’t recommend its repeated use until we’ve tested it more thoroughly.

If not acknowledged or managed well, emotional inequality and social backlash can adversely affect an individual’s career and can prove costly to an organization’s effectiveness. We believe the implications of this research will empower individuals and leaders to engage in and encourage candid discussion while minimizing negative impacts.

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