



UNLEARNING THE LESSONS MOM TAUGHT YOU

Ask a woman to rattle off several profound "Momisms." She'll comply with pronouncements like: "Never leave the house without clean underwear on; you never know when you might be in an accident." "A lady doesn't play in the mud." "This car doesn't leave the driveway until your seat belt is buckled." "Momisms." The good news about these previous pearls of wisdom is they won't derail your career. However, there are many more lessons we learned at our mother's knee that can wreak havoc on our workplace behavior. Don't get all huffy; this isn't an article about mother bashing. I have a mother and I am a mother, so it is not my goal to heap any more abuse on the already beleaguered mothers of the world. Yet we must acknowledge that those childhood learnings live deep within each of us.

Let's look at a few deeply embedded messages that many of you heard growing up, messages that hang on like English ivy on a brick wall. These are the undercutting messages that can put you, as a woman, at a distinct disadvantage in the workplace. Mother isn't the only culprit; they've been driven into us by our third-grade teacher Miss Crabtree, by Reverend Brown from the pulpit, and from the teen magazine that appeared in our mailbox every month. On the surface these messages may seem quite innocuous, even laudatory, but when mixed with the realities of work, they form a lethal combination. Gloria Steinem once said, "The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn." Let's look at some Momisms that we may need to unlearn.

MOMISM #1 **To Have a Friend, Be a Friend**

Sounds great, right? "To have a friend, be a friend." What could be problematic about this? From birth, most females are coached on the importance of their relationships. Relationships become the barometer of a woman's life: family, friendships, neighbors, intimate relationships, and co-workers. When relationships are out of whack, women often feel out of whack. Not that men don't care about relationships; they do. It's in the degree and emphasis of importance in our lives that the difference shows up. Studies at UCLA indicate that friendship for women has a physiological impact. When women are under stress, they release the hormone oxytocin, which produces a calming effect. Befriending and gathering with other women causes additional oxytocin to be released. Men react differently, due to testosterone. So if friendship is so important to women and it even has physiological benefits, why in the world could this be a negative factor in the workplace?

Problem A: Every day in the workplace you are competing: competing for the promotion to director of training; for the assignment in London; for the few raises that will be doled out this year. Males have learned from an early age that business is business. The significant difference is men are friendly with their coworkers and women expect friendship with their co-workers. There is a world of difference between being friendly and friendship. When your greatest desire is to preserve friendships, you can't possibly compete at the highest level.

Problem B: Competition isn't the only issue here, is it? When you are in a position of decision making, power, and leadership, your choices must be made based on what is best for your organization. I can hear the groans from some of you already, fearing the recommendation is to be more like a man. In the words of Dr. Sally E. Shaywitz, American pediatrician and writer, "To be someone, a woman does not have to be more like a man, but she has to be more of a woman." In other words, you are not going to let go of the importance of friendships in your life, nor should you. These friendships are like the connecting threads that keep you from unraveling.

What's a woman to do? Truly you have a dilemma, don't you? Here are two choices:

1. Become the Teflon woman! Learn to take business situations less personally. Let actions of co-workers and colleagues slide right off. This may take a significant re-examination of your reactions to perceived personal slights. Are your co-workers really out to destroy you, or are they merely doing the work of the workplace? You will need to be prepared for some negative reactions from others. Remember the people you work with went to the same school of Momisms that you did. You may

find that some perceive you as cold and cutthroat. You may feel a sense of loneliness or isolation for a while. It takes courage and guts to pioneer new territory. One of the hallmarks of an evolved soul is she reframes situations and has new insights all the time. The successful woman is constantly adding not just new technological, business, and leadership skills, she is also adding "ahas" about her personal reactions and behavior.

2. Put your eggs in other baskets! Friendship eggs that is. If you acknowledge that both the psychological and physiological benefits of friendship are key to your survival, then hold on to them — tightly. Just recast where those true friendships take place. That may mean that the deep friendships need to be in other arenas than the workplace. This suggestion may cause mild panic to set in for some of you. If 90 percent of your life were spent in the workplace, when would you have time for friendships other than at work? This may be the wake-up call you need. A balanced life is like a pie made up of six pieces: Financial/Career; Physical/Health; Mental/Education; Family/Home; Spiritual/Ethical; Social/Cultural (read friendships). How does your pie look? Are certain pieces significantly larger than others? Are some pieces nearly nonexistent? Not only do you put yourself at a career risk by relying on the workplace as your friendship pool, but you also put yourself at life risk. What if you lost your job tomorrow? Where would your support system be? Gone! Rethink the safest place for your most profound friendships.

MOMISM #2 **Wait Your Turn and Don't Interrupt**

Some of you may be taken back to memories of childhood when your parents were on the phone or talking with other adults. Some of you really were rather obnoxious, weren't you? You did interrupt in the most irritating ways. So you may not fault mom too much for extolling this message. For girls, however, the messages of not interrupting and taking turns took on epic proportions. Read the 1992 study conducted by the American Association of University Women: *How Schools Shortchange Girls: A Study of Major Findings on Girls and Education*, which studied 3,000 students, fourth through 10th grades. You can see the power of this message in our school systems. Boys consistently report being reinforced for speaking out, even out of turn. Girls are reinforced for raising their hands and responding when called upon. This is an interesting fact, especially since women are purportedly the "talkers" of our society. Perhaps it is true in our personal lives, but it does not seem to carry over into the workplace. There are some studies that report that when men and women are speaking in the workplace, when there are interruptions, 96 percent are made by men. This behavior is a strong reflection of the worlds we represent. Men traditionally have been schooled in the world of hierarchy — pecking order, top dog, and all that jazz. Women have been schooled in the world of consensus. The critical question is whether this behavior is working for you or against you? That is the real question in regard to all these Momisms, isn't it? Let's look at two potential problems.

Problem A: This is a problem of perception — others' perceptions. If you are consistently interrupted or wait your turn to speak up in meetings, how do your co-workers and bosses see you? I'll bet money that you are being viewed as weak, not a "player," or as someone with little to offer. You know that's not true. Alas, perception is key! A perceived position of weakness may cause you to be eaten for lunch. Once you get branded as vulnerable, the vultures begin to circle. It won't just be this time that you get chewed on; you may be the main course for a very long time. If the choice is between being seen as courteous versus being respected, respected wins hand-down for career success.

Problem B: This is a perception problem, too — your perception of yourself. Words like *frustration*, *disappoint*, *waning confidence* come to mind. Being consistently interrupted and overlooked takes a hit on your sense of self. No one likes to feel that she is invisible or she doesn't count. It reminds me of the song from the hit movie *Chicago*, "Mr. Cellophane." The words go something like this: "You can see right through me, and nobody knows my name." This person you do not want to be. Something peculiar happens when you begin to feel invisible: It causes a spiral downward. You begin to second-guess yourself and question the value of your ideas. We're talking vicious cycle here. No doubt if you are feeling wary of your own expertise and value, that is bound to cause you to edit your contributions.

Don't despair. You can squelch the voice of this Momism with some work.

1. Be a human stop sign. Think about how you will use your verbal and nonverbal communication to your advantage. First, think about where you will position yourself when you attend meetings. Make sure to avoid the "invisible spot" directly to the right or left of the person conducting the meeting. Situating yourself where you will more easily be seen by the person in charge will set the stage for your next steps; their eyes are more likely to stop on you. Second, when interrupted, either keep on

their eyes are more likely to stop on you. Second, when interrupted, either keep on talking and use a hand motion (think school crossing guard here) or couple it with one of the following comments: "Just a minute." "I'm not finished." "Please hold your comments until I am done."

2. Be a Girl Scout. Be prepared! My daddy had a saying when I was growing up, "You're talking to hear your head roar." Translation: don't just talk; make your words count. Know what you are going to say, say it with power, say it concisely, and practice saying it beforehand. Edit out weak statements like: "I think" and "I feel." Use descriptive, meaningful words like: *essential*, *critical* and *vital* versus weak phrases like "so very important." Don't ramble. Say what is crucial and shut up.

MOMISM #3 **Smile, You Have Such a Pretty Face**

A smile is a beautiful thing. It can make a dismal day better. Yet the messages males and females receive in childhood regarding smiling are quite different. Have you heard of any movies entitled *Mr. Congeniality*? You get the point. Research on smiling indicates that women have historically been taught to smile as a tool to glean favors. The mere word *favor* says it all. When you are in a less powerful position, the smile mirrors that position. Think back over your lifetime and remember the admonitions to smile. Where did they come from? Most likely they came from people you perceived as having more power than you. Often a woman's smile reflects a sense of vulnerability. The smile may be pulled out as a tool of protection for us. The real key here is motivation for the smile. If you are smiling because you are joyful or truly pleased with something, then the smile is appropriate. If, however, you smile because you believe it is your burden to light up the world, that's a heavy responsibility. Let's consider two disadvantages in the workplace for women regarding smiling.

Problem A: Individuals in positions of power smile less. Notice as you move up in the ranks the shift in this behavior. This doesn't mean the people who have reached these levels are miserable (of course some are); it means there is an accepted demeanor in these ranks. Less effect equals more inscrutability. It's about not tipping one's hand. If the entire world can read your face, you are certainly at a disadvantage. Just as there is a code of dress, there is a code of demeanor. You don't want to stand out like the new kid on the block, now do you?

Problem B: Mixed messages. People around you will not take you seriously if you convey serious messages while smiling. If you are displeased, your effect needs to reflect that message. Clarity is one of the hallmarks of great leaders. Your message will be laser focused if the message and the body language are the same. The prescription is relatively easy.

1. Get crystal clear! Get clear in your own mind the message to be conveyed and choose the effect that best delivers that message. This needs to be a conscious decision. If you need to practice in front of a mirror, do so. Get familiar with your repertoire of facial expressions and add to them.

2. Monitor your face. Spend the next three weeks paying attention to your effect. Keep a log of your findings. You may realize that you are right on target or that you are sending out smiles galore. Momisms die hard. Then work diligently to show up with the face that will garner success.