

PROGRESSIVE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PRESENTS:

# NO BACKLASH:

LEAD AGGRESSIVELY  
 & GET RESULTS



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WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

# **NO BACKLASH:**

*Lead Aggressively and Get Results*

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# **NO BACKLASH:**

## **Lead Aggressively and Get Results**

*You take the floor to explain a new company-wide policy directive, but you're finding it hard to talk above the people chatting in the back row.*

*You've taken the lead in a time-sensitive deadline situation, but you later find out your co-workers view your directives as "too bossy."*

*You've been selected from a group of managers to collaborate on a big project, but when you interject your ideas, your (mostly male) counterparts question your expertise.*

Remember that high-school cheer: “Be ... Aggressive!!! BE BE AGGRESSIVE!!!”

That's fine for the gridiron. But what about real life? Do we encourage this as cheerleaders for others but strive to avoid it ourselves when on the job?

In this Leadership Handbook, we'll show you how to anticipate challenging situations and formulate the right message that will be respected and acted on, without the backlash that sometimes plagues women leaders. We'll help you approach common communication situations that allow us to tap our aggressive leadership skills, and the positive solutions that ensure we'll be heard and understood.

## "There's No Need to Shout!"

Effective leadership through powerful language isn't the sole domain of men. Knowing when to use forceful tones and the right words can help women leaders ensure their ideas and suggestions are taken just as seriously as men's.

There are times when it's not only OK, but also the best course, to lead with a more aggressive side. But fear of being seen as angry or bossy can make us overly conscious of what we say and even how we say it.

**To fully reach potential as successful leaders, we still need to overcome the fear of being labeled.**

When a strong voice is needed, there's a proper way to strike a balance. Successful women leaders know the language we use and our communication skills are of top importance for our words to be understood, accepted and acted on.

The good news is, with some slight adjustments to your communication style, you can aggressively take charge and drive strong results without having to fear backlash.

## *Keep It Aggressive, Not Angry*

As women have made advances to boardrooms and corner offices, more employees are accustomed to seeing us at the head of the conference table. We're now project managers, team directors, vice-presidents of departments and top bosses more than ever before.

Despite this, we're often wary of being seen as inflexible or uncompromising when giving direction. To put it more bluntly: We're still concerned about giving orders without sounding like a b\*\*\*\*.

When male colleagues get aggressive, they usually aren't perceived as peevish or shrill. It's not because they choose different words or modulate their tone of voice better than we do. It's mainly because a raised voice or emphatic manner seems more "normal" coming from a man.

What follows are some common situations you may face on the job that call upon your leadership instincts. We'll give you four communication challenges you'll most likely face when leading and managing effectively. We'll present

## *Angry Women and Trust: The Jury's Still Out?*

Research published in 2015 in *Psychology Today* seems to support the notion that when women are perceived as angry, they're more likely to face backlash than their male counterparts.

Psychologists investigated what happens when women and men become angry during jury deliberations. Participants (210 students; two-thirds female) met for "deliberations" and received "evidence" that lead them to vote for conviction; 43% supported a guilty verdict. After deciding the verdict, participants read scripts in which one "holdout" refused to go along with the majority opinion. The holdout was identified as either male or female, and their arguments contained anger ("This just makes me angry"), fear ("It scares me to think about how..."), or no emotion at all.

The team's findings showed that men and women have differing influence when they express opinions in an angry manner. Participants were more likely to doubt their initial judgments after hearing what an angry male holdout had to say, but were more confident in their judgments after reading the angry woman's arguments. Participants seemed to regard an angry woman as more emotional, the researchers said.

So does this necessarily translate to the workplace? "The results lend scientific support to a frequent claim voiced by women: that people would have listened to her impassioned argument had she been a man," the researchers said.

workable solutions to maintaining an appropriate level of aggressive leadership style—without fear of being judged. And we'll provide some easy and fun exercises you can do to keep yourself confidently on your leadership toes.

## *Pushing Others (Without Being Pushy)*

You're in charge, so this means you have to get people to do what you ask (or more pointedly, tell) them to do.

Depending on the importance of the situation, what language you use to get results could swing anywhere from begging to cajoling to demanding.

Telling people what to do without having them feel you're bossing them around can be done just by using mutually respectful language. The key is to maintain the proper sense of urgency behind your demands with an even-keel approach, without dissolving into wishy-washy.

When you're telling someone what needs to be done, it's tempting to say "do this!" But employees may hear this and feel like you're telling them how to do their jobs.

It's far more effective to flip things around and tell them how you're thinking.

For example, your department has a certain number of goals to accomplish within a certain amount of time. You've been around long enough to know that while your team is thorough, they tend to waste time on unnecessary details. So you want to make sure they don't start dragging.

## *Communication Challenge #1: Giving Orders*

### **The Solution: Use Directives With a Non-Confrontational Style**

The image of a boss at his office door barking orders has long been outdated. Employees accept orders from managers who they trust and respect. You don't need to convince them you're in charge; they get it. So you can safely avoid phrases such as:

#### **"You have to ..."**

Reserve this only for very pointed directives; if there really is only one way to complete a task, remind your employee how to get it done and then trust him to get to it. If you ask an employee to do something general ("Make sure you communicate with the logistics department about our needs for the week.") there's no need to spell things out in detail. If you have suggestions, use phrases like: "It'd be better if," or "Please do..."

#### **"You should ..." "You shouldn't ..."**

If there's a universal rule about orders, it's that no one likes to be "should" on. Giving someone a directive then telling them what they should or should not do isn't helpful. Again, reserve directives like this for when they're really needed. If you want to give more direction without sounding like you're stepping in, say "please consider doing" or "do this for this reason."

#### **"That's not a bad idea, but ..."**

While it's fine to be encouraging, being too wishy-washy about how your team follows orders won't help in the long run. Get a little more "aggressive" in pointing out the ideas that are workable and those that aren't: "You all have a lot of ideas, and that's great. But make sure you're mindful of time—we can't afford to keep moving deadlines."

## *Exercise: How to Use Inclusive Language*

Your supervisor has just outlined an exciting new project for your department. The added work and likely extra hours will be hard, she said: "We've got a tight deadline of about five months to get this up and running, but I know we can get this done!" She has your team so energized that you almost didn't realize—you now have double the amount of work to do and specific orders about how and when to do it.

How did your boss make more work and deadlines sound so—exciting? She used inclusive language. It sounds like a trick but it isn't. One surefire way to get others to do what you want them to do is to make it sound like you're also a participant. Sure, direct imperatives can work—"Go there!" "Do this!" But surrounding them in team-spirit "we" language takes the bluntness and intimidation out of direct orders.

Making orders sound more like a team effort is just one way to use inclusive language when you're in charge. You can also:

- Turn your order into a question: "Can you do ... ?"
- Politely ask for a favor: "Please finish ..."
- Be a helpful reminder: "Remember, you've got to do ..."

Using any one or more of the 4 suggestions above, turn these commands into inclusive-language statements:

"I want your report on my desk now!" \_\_\_\_\_

"I thought I told you to prioritize this task." \_\_\_\_\_

"Do it this way; you'll get it done faster." \_\_\_\_\_

"This really is the way it should be done." \_\_\_\_\_

"You shouldn't do it that way; do it the way I taught you." \_\_\_\_\_

"I don't care how, just make sure it gets done." \_\_\_\_\_

"I need you to make sure this happens." \_\_\_\_\_

"Whatever you need to do, just do it." \_\_\_\_\_

## *She Said It: REALLY Listening Can Help Avoid Aggression*

“ How much time do you (really) allow for listening to others and what they want to discuss? When you...listen with an open mind, you bring out others' confidence and encourage them to share their questions, needs and ideas. And as you learn more about their mental models, you can frame your ideas more effectively. ”

-Elizabeth Doty, founder of Leadership Momentum, a consultancy that focuses on keeping organizational commitments

## *Responding vs. Reacting (Resist the Urge to Take It Personally)*

You sit down with your team at a planning meeting and ask if they've got any questions about the assignments you've distributed. Everyone seems fine—until one employee corners you on the way out: *“Nobody wanted to say anything but ... we think you're being a little unfair by giving Diane less to do on the project than the rest of us.”*

You think, “Unfair?! ME? That's the last thing I am!”

This is largely why some situations go from 0 to “aggressive” in a few short minutes. Many subordinates, both men and women, jump to taking critical comments personally, even when the “personal” should be left out of the conversation. And this can sometimes prompt us to do the same.

It's important when listening to criticism to concentrate on what's said, not necessarily how it's said. This goes a long way in helping you avoid taking comments to heart. Just as you would with any non-work encounter, be mindful of several points:

**Respond, don't react.** Take a moment before you respond: “How can you say that?!” Instead, ask, “How so?” This shows you're acknowledging the accusation (being unfair) but asking for details. Be extra careful to respond to the *reason* for the accusation (Diane got less to do on the project), not the word itself (unfair).

**Choose the high road.** Remember that when people express an opinion, they often use words they really don't mean. In the above situation, calling you “unfair” in your treatment of your employees is probably a reach. But your employee was trying to get a point across: the team is unhappy that Diane got less to do than they did.

**Calculate your response.** Do some mental math to move yourself from emotional processing to logic and reasoning. Make your answer focus on the specifics of the issue, not more name-calling: *“I've given each of you three tasks to complete for the project. Diane got only one because she's busy helping me on another job.”*

## Communication Challenge #2: Deflecting Personal Aggression

### The Solution: Resist the Temptation To Join In

Don't let what began as a level-headed meeting veer into an argument. If a resistant co-worker resorts to accusations and insults, avoid responding in kind; this will drag the situation from professional into personal territory. Even if your employee or colleague starts blaming you for part of a problem, resist the urge to do it back. Instead, if you sense attitude, adopt an objective approach with these tips:

**Listen for unspoken fears.** Someone who is vehemently disagreeing with you and starting to get personal ("*You're wrong and you have no idea what you're talking about!*") might have underlying reasons for jumping from professional to panic mode.

**Avoid finger pointing.** If possible, force both you and the employee out of the situation entirely: "*I think this problem is bigger than us.*"

**Be wary of backhanded compliments.** Phrases like "with all due respect," might cause people to get more defensive: now you've made it about them and not their point of view.

**Go ahead and interrupt.** If it salvages the conversation, it's acceptable. You can be aggressive about it too: Hold up a hand and say, "*Please let me finish. I want to explain exactly why I called you in. I will absolutely let you address my concerns.*"

**Ask yourself, is this really about you?** Underneath the argument, the other person could be voicing concerns about something other than your opinion. For example, a co-manager disagrees with your department change proposals and won't budge. Has she been through similar changes in the past only to see things turn out badly? If she's adamant that you haven't got a clue, and is starting to get abrasive, it could be that she just needs to be asked "why?"

## *Exercise: Don't Confuse a Question With Aggression*

You might think you hear resistance when others counter your ideas with forceful-sounding statements. But those statements could be a front for what really are underlying questions. So rather than escalating an argument that goes nowhere, you're better off stating: "I understand you have questions—fire away." Effective listening to others' suggestions is critical to good leadership (it's what noted leaders call "intellectual curiosity"). Not only that, being approachable when someone comes forward with questions can disarm aggression from the start. Questioners feel respected—they've got your attention and don't have to fight to be heard.

For a short exercise, translate these aggressive statements into questions to help diffuse potentially touchy encounters.

### *Statement:*

"I don't think you understand what I'm saying."

### *Question:*

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"That's not the issue ..."

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"I beg to differ ..."

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"Now, just wait a minute ..."

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"I've got a problem with this."

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"You don't seem to be listening ..."

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"Nobody is considering my ideas."

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## ***She Said It: Find the Right Reaction***

“A mentor told me early on that because I was so invested in the work, people sometimes had the perception that I could fly off the handle... she said I didn’t want people to have that perception, because perception is reality. So I created a process. Instead of reacting right away, I’d type a response instead of calling someone to get it off my chest. Then I’d step away, come back after an hour, look at it again, and say, “Now that my emotions are down and I’m not as heated, does this still make sense? Should I go this route? Two-thirds of the time it was probably still the way to go. But with the other third, it wasn’t.”

-Tricia Clarke-Stone, CEO of Narrative, a marketing and technology firm  
(from The New York Times)

## ***Work The Room: Taking Command of Your Space***

“Territory” is often defined as the space we claim between ourselves and others: public space, social space, personal space and intimate space.

Confident women take advantage of territory. We enter rooms without asking permission, sit in prominent seats if they’re free, sit close to others, gesture frequently, and can stand close to others without invading their personal space.

But sometimes, we’re tempted to hesitate, sitting in the back and avoiding others. Unlike many men, women can shy away for fear of being seen as domineering or pushy.

Taking advantage of a “power” position when giving directives actually works in our favor. Our willingness to command space in a large office or conference room, or at a podium, helps others form the conclusion that we’re competent and in charge. If you’ve got important directives to get across to your team, you’re not going to take the last chair in the back row to make your case, right?

Even going into a room full of relative strangers (say you’re meeting new employees for the first time) and taking command of the space sends the message that you’re not only the boss, but a confident and capable one at that. Rather than being seen as aggressive, you’re seen as someone who isn’t afraid to take the reins.

## *Watch Your (Hidden) Language: Nonverbals Speak Loudly*

It's what we all say before we say it: Our non-verbal communication cues can carry a lot of weight, moreso when we're in charge. How you say what you say telegraphs an attitude behind your words.

While words deliver our messages, nonverbals, which include our body language and vocal delivery, deliver our feelings and attitudes. You might think you're saying something that's diplomatic and non-confrontational—but if your hands are fisted and you're standing on your toes, your listener will understandably get the impression you're about to explode.

Men and women also project and read nonverbal communication differently. **The good news is, women have an edge**—research shows we are wired to better sense feelings and attitudes. Studies show:

- 55% of the emotional impact of a message is communicated nonverbally;
- 38% of that nonverbal emotional impact is communicated through **tone of voice—especially important for women leaders;**
- Just 7% of emotional impact is communicated through words.

When properly used, nonverbals *should* project a clear message, competence, credibility and an assertive, take-charge demeanor. When misused, they can project aggression or arrogance, passiveness or aloofness, invasiveness, and a lack of confidence and/or competence.

## *That Fake Smile? It Doesn't Help*

When you're facing what you know is a potentially unpleasant encounter, do you snap on a fake smile to help you cope?

Research says that over time, putting on a fake smile actually contributes to "internal cognitive dissonance," causing people to associate smiling with feelings of unhappiness, confusion and unease. This could potentially make calm situations lead to more aggressive ones.

In a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, researchers asked people questions on how happy they are with their lives, how much they smiled that day, whether they thought people smile to feel good or to try to feel good, and scenarios in which they recall smiling from happiness. They concluded that those who smile when happy do feel better as a result, while those who smile when they're not happy—just to mask their low feelings—often feel worse. "Smiling [in and of] itself doesn't increase well-being," they wrote.

The better option? When faced with an unpleasant situation, keep a neutral expression and hold your smile until whatever negative emotions arise subside.

## *Communication Challenge #3: Silent Signs You Might Be Getting Aggressive*

### **The Solution: Understand How Nonverbal Communication is Misinterpreted**

Since nonverbals are complex, they're often misinterpreted. This can cause communication static—and even create the idea that we rely on subtle aggression to get our points across.

In her book, *No One Understands You and What To Do About It*, Heidi Grant Halvorson tells a story about a friend who started a new job as a manager and wanted to communicate to his team that he valued their input. At meetings, as each member spoke about whatever project they were working on, he made sure he put on his "active-listening face" to signal that he cared about what each person was saying.

But his team got a very different message from the one he intended to send. "After a few weeks," Halvorson says, "one team member finally summoned the courage to ask him the question that had been on everyone's mind: 'Are you angry with us?' When he said he wasn't angry—that he was just listening intently—his colleague gently explained that his active-listening face looked a lot like his angry face."

It's important to remember that we can sometimes suffer from what psychologists call "the transparency illusion"—a belief that what we feel, desire and intend is crystal clear to others, even though we've done very little to communicate clearly what's going on inside our minds.

## *Exercise: The Woman In the Mirror*

Nonverbal language can reveal a lot—even what we think of our relationships within the workplace. These looks or gestures could be conscious or unconscious, but still send out a distinct message.

Let's say you don't get along with a coworker. No concrete reason, just a conflict of personalities. Your interactions with this coworker could be more telling than you know. Do you:

- Avoid eye contact, or even avoid looking up, when this coworker is speaking to you?
- Busy yourself with something else (papers, your phone) when speaking with this coworker?
- Cross your arms or shift from foot to foot when the coworker is speaking?

Try this exercise: Jot down some familiar encounters you have with people or situations that cause angst. Write out the possible "dialogue" you could have with the person/situation. Then in front of a mirror, read your "lines" as if you were speaking directly to the person.

## You've Got to Disagree—and Your Word Rules

Let's face it, sometimes people are just wrong. But when you tell them so, they never seem to take it well. While some mistakes can be overlooked, others must be corrected immediately—before you lose work, customers, or relationships.

So how do you say “**you’re wrong**” without stepping on any toes and sounding aggressively arrogant?

### *She Said It: Do Women Need to ‘Act Like Men’ to Take Charge?*

“The quick answer is no—except when it comes to confidence. Women need to declare themselves and become their own advocates—speaking and acting confidently mentally promotes [us] to a future-focused role. With this mindset, our behaviors change, [our] impact is strengthened and [this] improves our ability to get that seat at the table.”

*-Tacy M. Byham, PhD, CEO of Development Dimensions International*

The common approach to disagreements that you want to keep civil is “agreeing to disagree.” But in this case, your word is the final say—you’re in charge, and the disagreement your subordinate(s) might have can be noted, but doesn’t count in the end.

Your judgment is final, and the results fall on you as the leader. If you thank your employees for their input and effort, then explain the reasons you disagree as transparently as possible, you’ll leave little room for discomfort. They may still think their way is best, but it’s now your mistake to make.

### *Communication Challenge #4: Pulling Rank Without Being Obstinate*

You’re the type of leader who doesn’t give “orders” as much as directives—most of the time, your people know what needs to get done and get to it. But some circumstances dictate that you’ll need to purposefully tell them to do something, rather than just ask.

In cases like these, transparency can be an incredible motivator. When everybody knows the reason behind an instruction, they take more ownership of the decisions made—even if they’re your decisions.

When you give employees the facts, they can follow your logic and understand your conclusions. If something has to be done a specific way, use less demanding phrases than “should” and “have to,” such as: “I’d like you to ...”; “The project requires ...”; or “Please consider ...”

## *Exercise: What Would You Do When...*

Finish these scenarios by describing how you'd approach your department with directives to solve each problem. This exercise can be done either alone or in a group. The idea is to brainstorm how much transparency you'd reveal to your team members and how aggressive your approach should be.

**A valued customer relationship is on the line:**

"If we don't resolve this customer's issue, we'll lose their business ..."

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**Business operations are stalled entirely until an issue is resolved:**

"Our other teams can't continue their work until this bug is fixed ..."

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**You're up against an unmissable deadline:**

"Unless we hit this deadline, work will be wasted on an outdated product ..."

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**Your company is facing an unforeseen crisis management situation:**

"We've got to formulate a solid message to respond to these charges ..."

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# How Channeling Aggression To Take Charge Helps You Be a Better Leader

Whether you're comfortable or not with your own level of assertiveness on the job, how you're perceived by others in your field affects not only your career, but could also impact women's leadership progress overall.

Research by Development Dimensions International (DDI), a global leadership development consultancy, released study data from 10,000 leaders and found no difference in the battle of the sexes for leadership skills. Men and women were *equally* qualified in both hard and soft business skills.

However, the study *did* identify three personality differences between the sexes:

- ***inquisitiveness*** (men moreso than women);
- ***impulsiveness*** (men moreso than women), and
- ***sensitivity*** (women moreso than men).

These three traits were combined in the data to create what researchers called a "confidence quotient" of sorts. The results reflect, according to the researchers, **that men tend to exhibit more confidence in their abilities** (they're less afraid to ask questions and to make decisions quickly) **than women do** (who are more sensitive to asking questions and to making decisions quickly).

So what are the implications? The study seems to say that, all other factors being equal, getting that promotion or leadership opportunity could come down to how managers think your confidence stacks up to a male counterpart. And asserting power and influence in the workplace—i.e., being a bit more aggressive—is often a precursor to climbing the leadership ladder.

## *The take-home message:*

***Being conscious of how we can channel aggression and turn it into a take-charge approach is key to women's future success in leadership. Don't let the fear of being labeled "aggressive" be an unintentional way you're holding yourself back.***

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