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Sunday, Oct. 29, 2006

Nice Girls Get Even

**ADVICE GUIDES SAY THAT WOMEN DON'T HAVE TO BE MACHO IN THE
WORKPLACE ANYMORE**

By ANDREA SACHS

Your career comes down to chocolate, it seems. "Unless you're Betty Crocker, there shouldn't be home-baked cookies, M&M's, jelly beans or other food on your desk," advised *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office* (Warner Business), a hit career guide of a few years back. Equating feeding with nourishing and deriding it as "a stereotypically female attribute," author Lois Frankel, a career coach, advised women to leave their girlishness in the parking lot and arrive for work as gender-neutral adults. She cites such tough-minded women, not girls, as Meg Whitman and Anne Mulcahy, the CEOs, respectively, of eBay and Xerox. Girls, she wrote witheringly, are "nice to be around and they're nice to have around--sort of like pets." In case anyone missed the message: "Quit bein' a girl!" Frankel commanded.

But caustic Carly Fiorina got canned from Hewlett-Packard, didn't she? So here comes a vastly different philosophy for corporate women that tells them to enjoy being a girl; they can still boss the boys effectively. "Offer a sweet," counsels *The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness* (Doubleday). "Keep a stash of fun-sized candy bars on your desk or nearby. When the people who come to see you seem tense, tired, or cranky, pop open your drawer and pass out the Snickers. (Note: Extra credit for homemade cookies.)"

So who are you going to be: Betty the B or Betty Crocker? What's at stake is the definition of appropriate behavior for women in the workplace. The emergence of *The Power of Nice* philosophy signals that traditional female attributes such as niceness, cooperation and intuition are finding their place as respected attributes. Reason: the greatly increased presence of women in the workplace is inevitably exerting its influence on the alpha-male behavior that once ruled. The number of women in the workforce has more than doubled since 1970, chipping away at the "tough girls get the executive suite" ideal, at least in the attitudes of influential corporate career coaches and advice authors.

Just as the starchy, bow-tied, dress-for-success suit is an artifact of an earlier age, *The Power of Nice* argues that the bossy broad that early self-help authors championed is outdated. Nice is the new mean, insist co-authors Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval. They bravely--and persuasively--endorse a more traditional feminine style. Says Koval: "The business world has developed in a male culture, where the worst thing that a man could say to another man is, 'You're a wimp. You're not tough enough.' As women came into business, a lot of them felt they had to emulate that. No one stopped to think that you could do it a different way."

While paying due respect to talent and toughness, the authors argue that it is often the small kindnesses--the smiles, gestures, compliments and favors--that take

women to the top, women such as eBay's Whitman and of course Xerox's Mulcahy. Yes, both authors claim these women for their teams.

Don't be fooled by the sugarcoating. This book is a blast fired at Frankel and the tenets of first-wave feminist work advice. Whereas Frankel advises women to strengthen their business muscles by learning to play sports ("Business is a game and you can win it"), the Nice authors counsel women to help their enemies and compliment the competition: "We completely disagree with the conventional wisdom that 'nice guys finish last' and 'no good deed goes unpunished.' Our culture has helped to propagate the myth of social Darwinism--of the survival of the fittest--that the cutthroat 'me vs. you philosophy' wins the day." (Alas, it may be that neither style will prove effective. A 2004 Stanford Graduate School of Business study found that "women who enact stereotypically supportive feminine behaviors may be liked but seen as less competent, while women who enact aggressive behaviors risk being disliked and disqualified for gendered leadership roles." Who triumphs? Traditionally masculine men, say the authors.)

Who are these nice ladies? They're the powers behind the Kaplan Thaler Group, a hot New York City ad agency that had \$900 million in billings last year. The duo created the iconic AFLAC duck, and clients include Procter & Gamble, Continental Airlines, Pfizer, Revlon and Office Depot. Thaler and Koval attribute their success in part to practicing what they preach in their 195-employee office. (Of course, having terrific creative work helps too.) At Kaplan Thaler, everyone gets a callback, and every résumé gets answered. "We may not have a job for somebody," says Thaler, "but everybody deserves the respect of not having their résumé thrown in the garbage."

What are the notions of niceness? Everything your mother told you: smile more, pay attention, cooperate, fine-tune your listening skills, collaborate and share credit. Being nice doesn't conflict with being a leader or making difficult choices. It's a question of style: "In the end, being a cheerleader is far more effective than being a drill sergeant," the book advises.

The pair are keenly aware they are bucking the long-standing baseball-and-business axiom that nice guys and girls finish last. Says Thaler: "We couldn't find one marketing book anywhere--and we combed through all of them--that had one sentence about the fact, 'Oh, and by the way, you should give a client a more comfortable seat, pick up their bags at the airport, compliment them on their ties.'" That's why the authors dismiss old think about office demeanor: "'Mean' to us is so last millennium."

Nice has company too. Another new book preaching kindness is *The Girl's Guide to Being a Boss (Without Being a Bitch)* (Morgan Road), by marketing professionals Caitlin Friedman and Kimberly Yorio. As the title trumpets, the B-word is the dreaded description to have hurled at you in anger. In an amusing chick-lit, women's magazine patter (the boss is the "chick-in-charge"), the authors counsel being your authentic, feminine self. "Were our mothers and grandmothers fighting for us to go to college and get jobs we enjoy so we could be forced into sensible shoes and rayon business suits? We hope not." Says co-author Friedman: "We really think that if women are themselves in business, then that is a huge strength. If you're a feminine person, being comfortable with that femininity, bringing it to the office, can be a strength."

Likewise, Elinor Stutz, a sales coach and the author of *Nice Girls Do Get the Sale (Sourcebooks)*, takes it to the nth degree. She points to her own

experience as an example. After 15 years as a stay-at-home mom, she took a job in the early '90s selling copiers. At first, Stutz says, "I was always looked at as weak because I cared too much about the client." By the fourth month, she was the top rep. One of her male colleagues grilled her about the secret of her success. "I said, 'I do one thing none of you do. I'm actually nice to my clients.'" The boys were busy backslapping themselves about how they were ripping off their clients. "That must come across to the client. I used to get to know the person behind the title and get to know them well," says Stutz, although perhaps that's properly filed under "great customer service" rather than "nice."

There are skeptics who still say nice can be a negative. Debra Condren, a psychologist and business coach, is one. "Sometimes women are too nice and let other people in the workplace steal their credit. They don't know how to stick up [for themselves]." In her new book, *Am•BITCH•ous* (Morgan Road), out in December, she views the bitch label as a component of admirable ambition. Her definition of ambitious: a woman who "makes more money, has more power, gets the recognition she deserves, and has the determination to go after her dreams with ... integrity."

She too reaches for fashion terms to make her point about how female ambition is thwarted: "A staple of movies, novels and TV: the hard-charging female executive in her Armani power suit and Manolo heels. She's smart, aggressive, successful--and most people can't wait to see her get her well-deserved comeuppance."

There is another common problem for female executives: commonly known as men. They tend to show up in a lot of companies, exhibiting varying levels of bad behavior. Another new book, *Alpha Male Syndrome* by executive coaches Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson (Harvard Business School), says that uncontrolled alpha is out. Just as sheer numbers are allowing female executives to release their stifled femininity, women's increased presence in the workplace appears to be taming the corporate caveman in male colleagues. When they are brought in as consultants, say the authors, newly emboldened employees tell them that autocratic alpha managers are abusive and unwilling to listen.

The authors praise the appearance of dominant, creative alpha 2.0 (alpha beta?) men in the office but warn of the dangerous excesses attached to the personality type: "The other half consists of a package of not-so-positive symptoms that leads to everything from minor business problems to full-fledged organizational catastrophes and personal disasters." The last years of Disney CEO Michael Eisner's reign is cited as a perfect example of a misguided alpha tenure disintegrating into "paranoia, backbiting and civil war." The authors have great faith, though, in alpha consciousness raising: "Alpha males who face up to their risks often learn with experience how to rise above them."

Even manners have improved as a result of greater female presence, reports Barbara Pachter, a business etiquette coach and author of *New Rules @ Work: 79 Etiquette Tips, Tools, and Techniques to Get Ahead and Stay Ahead* (Prentice Hall). Says Pachter: "There are a lot fewer sexual jokes and sexual innuendos, which has made it nicer. Technology has also made it easier to be nice because you can very quickly write an e-mail thank-you note. On voice-mail, you can practice what you want to say before you say it. So technology has helped make us nicer--or potentially make us nicer."

Niceness is on the march, darn it. Power of Nice's Thaler and Koval are exporting

their philosophy with printings in such countries as New Zealand, Brazil and South Korea. All the female theoreticians need now is to get men to listen. That's an area where Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office's Frankel and The Power of Nice authors enthusiastically agree. Says Frankel: "I spend half my time working with men, teaching them to be more like women. I talk to them about the importance of things like listening, collaborating, motivating and seeing the human side of their staff." Koval too is hopeful that male executives will join their collegial team. "There are a lot of closet nice guys out there, who actually would like to be nicer in business

Heather Moore
Publicity Manager
Sourcebooks, Inc.
630.961.3900 ext. 334
630.961.2168 (f)
heather.moore@sourcebooks.com
www.sourcebooks.com