



How to Avoid “Mean Girl” Syndrome

Women leaders must learn to accept and offer criticism when appropriate

BY ERIN FAHEY-CARRIER

For so many women, memories of that teenage “mean girl” whose put-downs, snide comments, and snarky retorts made high school a nightmare live just below the surface and still impact how we conduct our professional lives.

I can still see the way she flicked her hair and the smile she wore while delivering her jabs. My younger self knew that what she was doing was wrong and that she was not the person I wanted to be, but still I envied one thing: No matter the situation, she exhibited the strength and confidence of a lioness—and I was easy prey.

Now, I’m sure a few readers are thinking that I shouldn’t have thought that this mean girl was confident. Certainly the adults around me thought that her corrosive nature and judgmental tone were the products of insecurity and jealousy. But what if they weren’t?

In *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance*, authors Katty Kay and Claire Shipman tell us that nothing builds confidence like taking action. Action separates the bold from the timid and the lioness from the prey. In high school, there was no bolder move or bigger action than a public put-down.

With each remark, each manipulation, and each backhanded compliment, that mean girl in my past was taking action—and her slow, steady destruction of those of us unlucky enough to be in her path was building her up. What if her mean-girl status was merely a precursor to her becoming a confident woman?

Meanness or Confidence?

Fast-forward several years to when I was a first-year school administrator trying to develop my own leadership style and figure out who I was as a woman. I quickly realized that the mean girls popularized in Rosalind Wiseman’s *Queen Bees and Wannabes* had grown up to be adult mean girls. I also knew that I wanted to be a strong and confident lioness in my own right. How could I do this without using the pain of others as building blocks?

Through trial and error and over many years, I feel that I have successfully navigated the line between mean girl and confident woman. But it is a thin line—confidence can easily become overconfidence and quickly turn a leader into a queen bee. Here’s how you can ensure that you land on the leadership side of that dichotomy:

Seek out and process feedback.

In *The Confidence Code*, Kay and Shipman talk about how boys’ resiliency is built on the playground with roughhousing and teasing, while

women are culturized to seek praise and run from criticism. They theorize that the playground mentality of boys allows them to deflect tough remarks more easily, which can serve them well in a cold, professional world.

As a confident adult, I look for feedback and respond accordingly. Critiques from a valued peer or respected supervisor point me in the direction of growth. But I have also learned to allow criticism that has no basis in the factors I control to slide off my back. That resiliency is crucial. It keeps the words of adult mean girls from affecting me, and it keeps me from reacting in kind.

Have hard conversations.

Wiseman suggested in a 2019 article in *The New York Times* that because women are raised to express anger indirectly, we often exhibit certain destructive reactions such as the silent treatment, blowups over small things, destructive venting, talking behind people's backs, and ridicule. This paints us either as victims or villains.

For those of us in leadership positions, it is easy to be viewed as a villain when a confrontation occurs. Taking the time to get past our initial feelings of frustration and understand where our anger comes from is the first step; processing the situation and examining its roots is how we prepare to have a conversation.

Sitting down with the person and talking is the final and arguably hardest part. As a leader, we have to be vulnerable, which does not seem like a marker of a confident woman. But having a hard conversation and

It is easy to be viewed as a villain when a confrontation occurs.

coming out on the other side feeling respected and understood without being labeled petty, overbearing, or just plain mean is definitely a confidence-builder.

Avoid entitlement. Whether it was the way “the Heathers” owned every inch of the hall as they walked through Westerburg High School in the 1989 film of the same name, or how, by their very presence, the Plastics dominated the cafeteria of North Shore High in Tina Fey’s 2004 *Mean Girls*, a sense of entitlement is one trait that’s synonymous with the mean girl.

People in leadership roles can often exhibit a sense of entitlement—an expectation that something will happen simply because of one’s position. But confidence is the opposite, *The Confidence Code* says; it is built on action or doing. Confidence is the belief that we can succeed at things and make them happen.

When I walk the halls of Powder Mill School, my trademark high heels clicking with every step, it is not with a sense of entitlement as principal, but rather a sense of duty. As principal, I have an obligation to create positive outcomes for students and confidence in my ability to act on their behalf.

A young principal might feel that with the job title should come respect, while many years in the same leadership role can lull one into a sense of complacency that borders on entitlement. Don’t fall into either trap. They take you into mean-girl territory.

For us as school leaders and women, faith in our ability to make things happen for our students is more important than ever. We need to be ready to take risks, fail, learn, and try again and again and again. We need to be confident leaders. But the thin line between confident woman and mean girl is always there.

Be aware. Seek out feedback, but have a thick skin for undignified comments. Prepare for and have difficult conversations instead of letting your anger and frustration grow. And finally, remember that as leaders, we are there to serve and are entitled to nothing. ●

Erin Fahey-Carrier is principal of Powder Mill School in Southwick, Massachusetts.