

# Self-Advocacy & Confidence for a Fearless Career

Netta Jenkins



NETTA JENKINS

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# **SELF-ADVOCACY & CONFIDENCE FOR A FEARLESS CAREER**

Self-Advocacy & Confidence for a Fearless Career

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# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

„Netta Jenkins is an accomplished author, global speaker, wife, mother of a 4-month-old baby boy and a 6-year-old bonus son. She’s also Vice President of Global Inclusion for Mosaic Group and Ask Applications, an IAC/InterActiveCorp (NASDAQ: IAC) company, part of a family that includes many of the most successful media and internet brands in the world, including Match.com, HomeAdvisor, Vimeo and more. Netta Jenkins leads the charge on the company’s mission to foster an inclusive, collaborative and forward-thinking workplace. She is currently running a career switch program for (Women, People of Color, LGBTQ, and Differently Abled); free tech classes; diverse mobile innovative incubator; and bridging global cultural gaps. Netta is also Co-Founder of a game-changing company called “Dipper”, a data technology platform empowering companies to tackle diversity and inclusion that also is digital safe-place and community guiding professionals of color to a better workplace one review at a time, whether good, bad, or indifferent.

**Forbes** said, “*Netta Jenkins has a strong understanding of what empowering people in the workplace can do for the growth of the company*”. Under Jenkins’s charge, **Google** said “*IAC Apps (now known as The Mosaic Group and Ask Apps) is a star example of a company pushing towards gender equality as well as overall cultural equality.*” The Mosaic Group and Ask Apps (formerly known as IAC Apps) was named one of the **2018 Top Company’s Worldwide for Millennial Women by Mogul** and **2017 Profiles in Diversity Journal Excellence Award Winner**.

**OnlyGood.TV** created a show called “*Netta D.I.*” about Jenkins transformational work. On this show, Jenkins offers solutions to clients and individuals that are facing challenges at their company. Most recently, she has spoken at the Barclays Center before the Spurs and the Nets played in honor of Becky Hammon (the first female assistant coach in the NBA) on how women are creating change in society. She was a finalist for the prestigious “Advocate of the Year” award by Women in Internet Technology.

Prior to Mosaic Group and Ask Apps, Jenkins was the CEO and Founder of Global Glamour Casting for nine years, where she created a safe space for women to model and act in a male-driven industry. Jenkins holds a BA in Communications and concentration in Leadership from the University of Rhode Island and an **MBA** from Cambridge College, where she was the *2014 graduate commencement speaker*.

[www.nettajenkins.com](http://www.nettajenkins.com)

# INTRODUCTION

It's not news that sexual harassment, equal pay, and discrimination after pregnancy and maternity are still common challenges faced by many working women today despite the fact that organizations are taking initiatives to improve diversity and inclusivity in the workplace.

For example, a study commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (ECHR) with the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills has found that 75% of pregnant women and new mothers face discrimination at work.

In addition, women hold only 10-15 % of high-level management positions in the technology sector while innovation hubs have less than 10% participation by women.

## **A Deeper Look At The Challenges Faced By Women In the Workplace**

Many of these challenges stem from deep-seated social and cultural “norms” and expectations that are subconsciously affecting how women behave (which could lead to a “self-fulfilling prophecy”) and how leadership perceives the role of females in the workplace.

The many discrimination problems we have today are symptoms of deeper issues that working women face:

- Stereotyping that draw conclusion about a woman's ability or character without substantial evidence.
- Lack of sponsorship for highly qualified women from leadership that are willing to speak up on their behalf.
- Women perceiving self-advocacy and negotiation in a negative light, which prevents them from stepping up to demand changes.
- Insufficient awareness and education on the policies that support women's rights in the workplace.
- Women not having enough role models to show them how to behave and stand up for themselves in the workplace.
- Subconscious acts of exclusion, e.g., the unintentional use of language that implies a discriminatory mindset, which diminishes women's voice.
- Lack of support from female colleagues. In fact, jealousy, rivalry, and competition from other women are the major hurdles to advancement.

## **Understanding Our Challenges Creates Opportunities For Change**

These challenges present us with the opportunities to create changes at the foundational level.

It's time to go deeper than paying lip service or making cosmetic adjustments to isolated issues. We need to do more than just hiring more women.

We have to change our mindset on how we see and treat each other in the workplace.

We need to address systemic prejudice that leads to fears and preconceptions, which prevent us from stepping up and speaking out.

While there have been numerous studies done on gender biases and discrimination in the workplace, we can't affect changes if we don't act.

As we change our mindset, we also need to support it with the right action – turning the issues we have at hand into opportunities for advancing inclusion and diversity in the workplace.

We need to see ourselves as problem-solvers and agents of change. We have to be agile without compromising our integrity. We need to erase the “zero-sum game” mentality so we can support other women and lift each other up.

We, as individuals, have the power to act and create changes where they matter.

## **5 Key Areas We Can Create Substantial Changes To Make a Big Difference**

Yes, we want to break the glass ceiling. But have we been going about it effectively?

Are we changing how we perceive and present ourselves to change how others treat us? Are we interacting with other women to drive the conversation in the right direction?

To create impactful and lasting changes for women in the workplace, we need to make fundamental shifts in these 5 key areas:

- Self-Advocacy: it isn't being “aggressive”
- Negotiation: it isn't about pushing others over
- Navigating work relationships: it isn't the same as being a “bitch”
- Sisterhood: it isn't about sacrificing your own success
- Personal branding: it isn't bragging

In the rest of this book, we'll explore these 5 key aspects of empowering women in the workplace and how you can take action.



## **Let's Start Today**

“What would you do if you were no longer afraid of speaking up, being seen as ‘aggressive,’ asking for a promotion, or advocating for your work-life balance?”

What opportunities could open up and what could be achieved in the workplace if women are no longer held back by the fears of the unknown?

The “what-if’s” have been keeping us in place for many decades... what if I self-advocate for my growth track; what if I’m seen as aggressive; what if I speak up for a raise; what if I ask for more time on a project because my child was sick...

But, WHAT IF we have a fearless voice?

Let's find out...

# 1 SELF-ADVOCACY ISN'T AGGRESSIVENESS

Without the ability to steer your life toward where you want to go, you won't be able to achieve your career goals.

Practicing self-advocacy is the first step in taking charge of your personal and professional life. It allows you to effectively communicate what you want, develop the abilities to get yourself there and create meaningful changes in your career.

## 1.1 WHAT'S SELF-ADVOCACY?

Self-advocacy is the act of speaking up for yourself, acting on your own behalf, asking for what you want, negotiating for yourself, communicating your needs, and making independent decisions about your own life.

It starts with empowering yourself with the right information, developing your expertise, and owning your strength. It continues with identifying people who have the ability and willingness to support you in realizing your goals.

Self-advocacy is about claiming your rights unapologetically. Along with that, you also have to step up and own your responsibilities.

Self-agency is about problem-solving, listening and learning, and building lasting relationships with those you can count on for support.

Self-determination is about believing that you can control your own destiny, having the right attitude, acquiring the abilities, and making the right choices to reach your goals.

In short, self-advocacy is the ability to make decisions and choices for your own life. If you don't make a choice for yourself, others will choose for you... and you may not like what you get.

## 1.2 WHY'S PRACTICING SELF-ADVOCACY IN THE WORKPLACE SO CHALLENGING?

Women have come far in the workplace. Many are well educated, making key decisions, and having a seat in the boardroom.

However, why are we still not speaking up enough as individuals even though there are so many movements and initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality?

The truth is, no matter how many policies and guidelines are put in place, they won't create long-term changes in our society if we don't step up, be empowered, and act with self-determination.

We have to walk our talk.

In order to turn words into action, we need to understand what's holding us back – taking the responsibility to be our own advocates.

So, why are we the bottleneck?

The hurdles are mostly in our heads. We need to change our mindset in order to effect changes in our behaviors.

For many women, advocating for oneself isn't comfortable.

We grew up hearing people criticize women who speak up as over-confident, full of themselves, or self-absorbed. Speaking up is taboo.

Our fear of being judged has been telling us to stay quiet and blend in. Gender stereotypes expect us to act in ways that society would perceive as selfless, caring, and submissive.

When a man acts assertively to self-advocate, he gets what he wants. When a woman takes the same action and speaks the same words, she's often judged as aggressive or lacking modesty.

Once in a while, when a woman steps up, we saw her assertiveness backfire – creating a catch-22 situation that makes many women feel like “damned if you do, damned if you don't.”

Gender stereotyping has been sending us mixed messages on how to behave and as a result, the internal conflict creates confusion that deters us from taking courageous actions.

Not to mention, it takes a lot of awareness and effort to go against the grain. Without the right support, many women would back off when they feel misunderstood, criticized, and isolated by their peers.

As such, women shy away from taking up positions that require self-advocacy to succeed because it's an uncomfortable uphill battle.

### **1.3 HOW TO PROMOTE SELF-ADVOCACY IN THE WORKPLACE**

Self-advocacy isn't the same as being aggressive, self-serving, or narcissistic. We have to first redefine our own mindset, beliefs, and perception before we can act differently.

How we perceive and talk about actions related to self-advocacy affect how we behave and how others interact with us. We have to walk our talk and act in alignment with how we believe women should be treated in the workplace.

“Self-fulfilling prophecy” is powerful. If we act in a way that expects others to treat us unfairly, then we'd be more likely to be treated as such.

So, how do we reframe the conversation and turn the table?

To start, you have to recognize your value and contributions. You have to get over the fear of being judged so you can get comfortable with vocalizing your self-worth.

And we have to send the collective signal that it's ok for women to speak up in the workplace.

We can create changes by helping each other get comfortable with the concept of self-advocacy. We have to start speaking up for other women in our workplace instead of judging and putting labels on those who have the courage to step up.

Advocating for other women (“other-advocacy”) also helps us overcome the initial discomfort that comes with speaking up for ourselves because it wouldn't be perceived as self-promotional or aggrandizing.

Supporting others and speaking up on their behalf offers a practical and constructive intermediate step to helping ourselves realize the power of self-advocacy.

It gives us the evidence that when we, as a collective, highlight our own achievements and ask for what we want, we're rewarded instead of being penalized.

Here are some practical steps for creating a supportive environment and advocating for yourself and other women:

### **Change Your Mindset**

- Seek examples and role models that demonstrate success through self-advocacy. The evidence can challenge your assumptions and prompt you to rewrite the story you have been conditioned to believe.
- Examine your fears of being criticized or judged so you can work through any preconception that's holding you back from being seen and heard.
- Cultivate the awareness that much of our discomfort with self-advocacy is caused by gender stereotyping ingrained in our society. It's not your fault and it's nothing personal. When you approach the issue objectively, you can prevent it from clouding your judgment.
- Ease the discomfort when you speak up by naming the sensation. Doing so gives it an objective perspective and the distance you need to "tame" it.

### **Reframe Your Perspective**

- Overcome fears or reluctance by finding your bigger "why" and making your request about something bigger. Not only does it give you more motivation but also alleviates self-doubts about being "self-serving."
- Build self-confidence and cultivate self-esteem by recognizing your own achievements and believing that you deserve what you're asking for. It could be as simple as listing out your accomplishments on a piece of paper and read it once in a while to remind yourself that you have the power, skills, knowledge, and expertise that deserve to be acknowledged and respected.
- Overcome gender stereotyping and encourage others around you to do so by acknowledging your strengths regardless of whether they reinforce any preconceived notion of what a "woman" should excel at.

## **Walk Your Talk**

- Align your words and actions with how you want yourself and other women to be treated in the workplace. If you talk negatively about other women for speaking up, you're deterring yourself and others from taking charge.
- Don't compromise or dilute your request just to increase the chances of "getting something." If you ask for less, you'll certainly get less!
- See something, say something – call out biases as soon as you see them and be objective when expressing your opinions and observations.

## **Communicate Effectively**

- Don't tone down your words or water down your intention. Don't put yourself down or trivialize your words. Be clear about what you want and use straightforward language to communicate your needs.
- Be specific when expressing what you want. Not only will it make your request actionable but also helps eliminate any misunderstanding that could derail the outcome.
- Stay objective and keep your emotions out of the conversation when stating your requests. Stay calm and focused, especially during a difficult negotiation so you can be clear, concise, and professional.
- Tailor your conversation to the audience for effective communication. It also shifts the focus from yourself to how your request can benefit the rest of the organization.

## **Empower Yourself**

- Set yourself up for success – if you want to get a certain promotion, you need to have the right skills and knowledge to do the job. Besides communicating what you want confidently, you also need to back up your request with what's needed for it to turn into reality.
- Seek out mentors and role models to guide you through the journey. We don't know what we don't know so it's important to seek out people who have been there and done that to help us avoid pitfalls and shorten the learning curve.
- Network with others who also aspire to promote self-advocacy for women in the workplace. There's strength in numbers and doing so will help reinforce your point-of-view on gender equality in the workplace.

### **Practice “Other Advocacy”**

- Leverage the power of “other-advocacy” by asking others to advocate for you when appropriate (e.g., nominating you for a promotion or being a speaker in a professional event.)
- Promote changes in the administrative process. For example, by creating opportunities for women to advocate for their peers (e.g., nominating others for recognition.)
- Motivate yourself with the bigger picture and become a role model for other women. What you do to speak up for yourself and advocate for others will not only impact your own career but also the professional lives of others, for generations to come.

### **Stick With Your Vision**

- Be persistent about what you’re asking for and follow up on your request. If you get turned down, have an objective conversation about the reasons so you can improve results. You may need to take the request to another party that may be in a better position to make a favorable decision.
- Don’t give up! If you get turned down the first time, step back and evaluate the situation objectively instead of blaming yourself, others, or the circumstances. Empower yourself by planning out what you can do next to get you there – e.g., taking smaller steps, acquiring the necessary skills, or seeking support from a mentor.

## **1.4 A RISING TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS**

Practicing self-advocacy is more than just getting what we want.

It creates a virtuous cycle that builds awareness and eliminates gender stereotyping in the workplace. More women will benefit and be in a position to help other women advocate for themselves.

We need to practice self-awareness, build our confidence, and make advocating for others and ourselves a normalcy in our society.

## 2 NEGOTIATION ISN'T ABOUT PUSHING OTHERS OVER

The vehicle to self-advocacy is having the ability to negotiate effectively so you can turn what you want into reality.

Negotiation is an essential skill in the workplace. Whether it's about getting a raise or a promotion, the opportunity to lead a high-profile initiative, or the right resources for your project – you need to navigate the various obstacles and objections so you can achieve the desired outcomes.

However, many women find negotiating effectively in the workplace to be challenging.

No doubt, we have come a long way in getting recognized in the workplace and many things that our predecessors needed to negotiate have now become the norm.

Yet, many of us are still holding ourselves back in situations where we need to negotiate in order to achieve our objectives.

Why? What's really holding us back and how can we overcome these obstacles?

### 2.1 WHAT'S NEGOTIATION?

Before learning how to negotiate effectively, you need to understand what negotiation really is.

Negotiation is a process by which people settle their differences by making compromises and reaching an agreement while avoiding argument and dispute.

It's a skill that allows you to achieve the best possible outcome for your position by practicing the principles of fairness, seeking mutual benefits, and maintaining a constructive relationship.

According to the authors of *Getting to Yes*, negotiation is a “back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement when you and the other side have some interests that are shared and others that are opposed.”

In *The Mind and Heart of the Negotiator*, Leigh Thompson defines negotiation as an “interpersonal decision-making process” that is “necessary whenever we cannot achieve our



objectives single-handedly.” And *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, Max H. Bazerman and Don A. Moore write, “When two or more parties need to reach a joint decision but have different preferences, they negotiate.”

We can glean from these various definitions that negotiation is about properly communicating with another party, reaching an agreement, and making a joint decision despite the presence of different opinions or ideal outcomes.

If we look at the emphasis on interpersonal process and communication, you would think that women should be pretty good at negotiation! After all, it taps into our strengths in relationship building and facilitating interpersonal interactions.

So, what’s the disconnect?



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## 2.2 WHY'S EFFECTIVE NEGOTIATION IN THE WORKPLACE SO CHALLENGING FOR WOMEN?

Many of us are holding ourselves back in negotiation situations because we have been taught a “skewed” view of negotiation – thinking that when we negotiate, we have to be aggressive, push other people over, and disregard their interests.

Due to this misconception, many women hold themselves back in negotiation situations and end up making unnecessary compromises that are detrimental to their own interests.

In addition to this fundamental mindset hurdle, most women find negotiation challenging because:

- We don't question the authority enough: oftentimes, when we're presented with a proposal by our seniors (e.g. regarding a raise,) we often assume and accept that it's a definitive position. By default, we don't challenge the facts and are reluctant to push back.
- We don't ask for what we want: women have the tendency to dial back on our requests to avoid confrontation or criticism. For example, we don't want to be seen as greedy, aggressive, demanding, etc.
- We don't aim high enough: whether we're afraid of being judged, fear that we won't get what we ask for, or simply don't have a right role model to learn from – we make compromises before we even start the negotiation.
- We confuse adapting to different situations with being “disingenuous”: successful negotiation requires that we meet the other party halfway. It often means that you have to adjust your negotiation style to get the point through. Yet many women are reluctant to do so because they're afraid of being called “disingenuous” or “shallow.”
- We don't want to say “no”: many women are conditioned to be “nice” and not to say “no.” Our empathetic and cooperative nature can hold us back from taking a stance in negotiations or disagreeing with others about their points-of-view.
- We were not taught the right language: most women grew up being taught to use language that is indirect and not geared toward reaching a resolution. While such a style could be beneficial in establishing rapport and gathering information, it could impact the effectiveness when we're trying to communicate what we really want.
- We lower our expectations: many women lower their expectations when walking into a negotiation. This makes them more likely to compromise and settle with an agreement that may not be what they want.

- We're held back by gender roles: since the corporate environment is still very much skewed toward the "male" way of doing things, we often feel that we have to conform with how men negotiate in order to be successful. However, since that's not compatible with our strengths and communication style, the inner conflict often ends up preventing us from negotiating effectively.
- We don't have the right role model: we tend to look around us for "clues" when entering a negotiation situation. Unfortunately, most women actually have challenges with negotiation so simply conforming to the "norm" may not be in our favor.
- We're hindered by social role or behavioral expectations: society has a greater expectation of "niceness" from women than from men and many of us don't feel comfortable about taking an assertive stand.
- We have been taught not to talk about money: this prevents us from effectively entering negotiations that involve financial issues (e.g., salary negotiations.) In addition, many women don't have enough awareness that'd allow them to discuss these topics comfortably.

## **2.3 HOW TO EFFECTIVELY NEGOTIATE FOR WHAT YOU WANT IN THE WORKPLACE**

While societal pressure and conditioning can it more challenging for women to negotiate effectively, these constraints aren't set in stone.

In fact, when you understand the challenges that we face and change how we think about negotiation, the solutions will naturally emerge:

### **Up Your Inner Game**

- Change your mindset and how you perceive negotiation. If you have negative connotations about negotiation (e.g., equating it with pushing others over,) then you won't invest the effort in mastering the skills. Instead, view negotiation as a collaboration and communication opportunity to settle differences and create a win-win situation for everyone involved.
- Be mindful of gender triggers and don't let others' reactions affect how you negotiate. For example, if people make the assumption that women tend to undervalue and underbid themselves, they could frame the conversation that way and we might subconsciously react by undervaluing ourselves.

- Realize that both empathy and assertiveness have their place in negotiation. Women often value human relationships and empathize with others' feelings. However, in certain situations, they may need to be more assertive in order to have their own points-of-view acknowledged.
- Change your self-perception. If you don't value yourself, how can you convince others to value what you can contribute? Do the inner work on your own self-image so you can become a competent, capable, and confident negotiator. This will help you project an image that commands respect and cooperation from others.

### **Be Ready To Step Up**

- Be an advocate for yourself and other women by practicing "other advocacy." As we discussed in the previous chapter, women tend to be better at advocating for other women than for themselves. You can get your colleagues to back you up in negotiations and do the same for other women in your organization.
- Learn to say "no" when your terms aren't met. For example, be prepared to walk away if your proposed budget isn't met or if the other party doesn't adjust their expectations.
- Consider other aspects you can negotiate to structure an outcome that works for you. For example, in certain hiring situations, the salary isn't negotiable (e.g., government jobs.) However, you can negotiate for more flexibility, being placed on high-profile projects, or getting an educational stipend so you don't feel short-changed.

### **Hone Your Communication Skills**

- Listen carefully to what the opposite party says and how it's said to gain insights into their psychology. Read between the lines, find out what's most important to them, and speak to their concerns.
- Understand the cultural background of the other party so you can enter the interaction with respect and cooperation instead of inadvertently offending them.
- Look for alternative ways of framing your disagreement. For example, you can reject the other party's proposal by thanking them for the suggestions and propose an alternative, which incorporates some of their ideas but also your ideal scenario.

## **Be Prepared**

- Define your limits before a negotiation, stick to them, and prepare to say “no” if they aren’t met. Do the necessary research to back up what you’re asking for and understand the value you bring to the table so you can present your requests confidently.
- Do the math before you walk into a negotiation. Whether it’s a salary or a budget discussion, you need to do your homework, investigate various scenarios, and understand how the numbers add up so you don’t undersell yourself.
- Have a “throw away” item in your back pocket. Make a big ask and include something you can take out when the other person is unwilling to accept all your requests. Then you’ll get your terms met while creating a win-win situation.

## **Boost Your Confidence**

- Be prepared, gain a robust skill set, understand your strengths, own your accomplishments, and research about the other party. This helps you clearly grasp what you can bring to the table, how others can benefit from it, and what you deserve to get in return.
- Practice your negotiation skills with close confidants so you feel more calm and confident in actual negotiations. Doing so can help you work through your fears and hone in on your communications to feel completely comfortable about what you need to say.
- Establish power and authority through your actions. For example, taking a seat at the head of the table, maintaining eye contact, using the right intonation, leaning over the table, or claiming your territory by taking up space with your materials are often interpreted as signs of taking control.

## **Create Awareness At the Organizational Level**

- Address potential biases in situations where negotiation is common. For example, during a hiring process, gatekeepers should be made aware of the possibility that they could have gender biases during both the formal hiring process and informal screening activities.
- Make a conscious decision to challenge gender stereotyping, how things are presented to us, and assumptions of “how things are done.” This may not be easy at first but if enough women are challenging the status quo, we can effect changes at the fundamental level.

## **2.4 NEGOTIATION: A PATH TO CREATING VALUE**

Negotiation can be uncomfortable. Negotiation can be challenging. Negotiation can be tough. But it's not impossible to become a smart, resilient, articulate, confident negotiator.

We need to change our mindset, hone our skills, be prepared, and develop the courage so we can enter any negotiation situations with confidence, self-assurance, and self-agency.

Negotiation isn't a zero-sum game. It doesn't have to be about taking something away from others solely for your own benefits.

If you can focus on creating a win-win situation and bringing value to the table, you can get what you want while maintaining meaningful relationships with those you negotiate with.

## 3 NAVIGATING DIFFICULT PEOPLE DOESN'T MEAN BEING A BITCH

You can't avoid dealing with different kinds of people at work and some interpersonal relationships are simply more challenging to deal with, especially for women.

Not only do these situations take up a lot of our attention and energy but they also trigger the fear that one mishap or misunderstanding could ruin a relationship, burn bridges, and/or negatively impact our career.

Yet, conflicts in the workplace are often unavoidable. We all have different belief systems, which are a combination of our culture, background, upbringing, and experiences. These different points-of-view could lead to disagreements that develop into challenging interpersonal relationships.

However, if you can't manage difficult interpersonal relationships effectively, it'd be more challenging to advocate for yourself or others and negotiate for your own best interest.

Before you can devise strategies to tackle difficult situations, you need to first understand the root causes of the challenges...

### 3.1 WHY WOMEN FIND DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE AT WORK CHALLENGING?

While women tend to be empathetic and good at connecting with people, our sensitivity can also become a hurdle that prevents us from successfully navigating certain situations.

Many of us are conditioned by society to be "nice," which causes us to step back instead of stepping up in difficult situations. However, that's generally not the best course of action for the long-term since it often means you're sweeping the challenging relationships under the rug and letting it fester rather than resolving the root cause.

Not to mention, many women are taught to avoid confrontation and conflict. Many of us shy away from these challenging scenarios simply because we're afraid of entering a confrontational situation.

We also fear the “what if” – what if we speak up and not being liked? What if we get criticized? What if we confront the situation and offend other people? What if others label us a “bitch” behind our back? Such fears often lead us to stay quiet instead of navigating difficult situations courageously.

In addition, many women struggle with boundary issues, which hold them back from putting themselves in an empowered position so they can proactively deal with difficult relationships.

Women are also more susceptible to gossips in the workplace, which can worsen difficult situations by skewing facts and turning half-truths into personal attacks that prevent a resolution to be reached.

Last but not least, many women are struggling with gender stereotypes that encourage the perception that men “take charge” while women “take care.” Women leaders are either seen as “competent” or “liked” but rarely both – leading to the misconception that being assertive in a difficult situation almost always precludes women from being “liked” by others.

## **3.2 HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS**

Keep in mind that when you’re resolving difficult interpersonal relationships, you can be assertive and communicate with clarity without being a “bitch.”

Sure, people can put labels on you but that isn’t something you can control. Instead, spend your time and energy on refining your communication skills so you can get the point through while defusing the situation.

If you’re confident that your approach is unbiased and your requests are fair, then you should have the confidence to enter difficult conversations without self-doubt.

With an empowered mindset, you can then apply the proper communication tactics to steer the conversation in the right direction:

### **Enter the Conversation With the Right Attitude**

- Stay cool and take your emotions out of the equation. Before entering difficult conversations, take a deep breath to get centered and focus on the outcome.
- Keep personal or snarky comments at bay. Focus on the facts and avoid attacking the other party personally.




- Adopt a compassionate and empathetic approach, which can often put the other person at ease while getting both parties onto a common ground to start the conversation.
- Conduct the conversation in a friendly and non-accusatory tone. Utilize “I” messaging to describe how you see the situation instead of accusing the other party of her actions.
- Be aware of gender stereotyping that equates women who are proactive in seeking a resolution and assertive in difficult situations as not “likable.”
- Build alliances so you can draw support from positive coworker relationships when you have to deal with difficult people and situations at work.

### Find the Right Angle For Your Communications


- Frame the situation to show that you respect the opinions, perspectives, and abilities of the other person.
- Start the conversation by finding common grounds so you can build rapport before introducing the subject that you disagree on.

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- Acknowledge the other party's ego by complimenting her accomplishments or showing your gratitude before segueing into the issues. This can avoid triggering emotions that can cause the other party to become emotional and defensive.
- Position the conversation to show that you're all working toward a common goal or a win-win outcome. This will help the other party see you as an ally, defusing animosity that could derail the discussion.
- Take a solution-focused approach to gear the conversation toward what you can do together to reach a common goal.

### **Focus On the Facts and the Objective Situation**

- Take a fact-finding approach and uncover different perspectives by listening intently. Don't assign blame, jump into criticism, or draw conclusions prematurely, all of which can create resistance.
- Arm yourself with facts, research data, and other quantifiable information (e.g., your job performance) to help both parties stay objective so emotions can't derail the conversation.
- Be specific with your input, feedback, and opinions so you can focus on the objective information and lower the chances that the other party will perceive the conversation as a personal criticism.
- Initiate a conversation as soon as a difficult situation arises so your feedback and opinion can be tied as closely to the event as possible, helping everyone stay focused on the facts.
- Don't play the blame game, which can lead us to wrongfully accuse others of mistakes that may not even be caused by human errors in the first place!

## **3.3 HOW TO NAVIGATE THORNY SITUATIONS WITHOUT BURNING BRIDGES**

Another reason why women are reluctant to stand up for their own interests in difficult situations is that they're afraid of burning bridges.

We care about how others feel and we want to maintain harmonious relationships in our environment. However, we may also have the misconception that resolving difficult situations equals creating a confrontation that will ruin a relationship.

In fact, when handled well, a thorny situation can turn into an opportunity for building a more trusting and strong relationship through candid conversations.

If we're equipped to handle difficult situations and relationships in a way that doesn't burn down bridges, we'd more likely be proactive in confronting these scenarios before they fester or get blown out of proportion.

### **Evaluate the Situation**

- Assess the chain of events to understand what led to the difficult situation. This allows you to figure out what the root causes are so you can figure out how best to reverse or resolve the situation.
- Evaluate the situation to see if it's a personality and communication issue or if there are more serious ramifications, such as legal actions or financial impacts. You may need to adjust how you interact accordingly to create the best outcome.
- Orchestrate the timing for presenting your point of view and avoid rushing into an emotionally charged discussion. Take the time to document necessary facts so you can enter the conversation with an objective perspective.

### **Be Candid and Transparent**

- Share your thought process and show consideration for everyone involved in the situation, which can often open up a candid conversation that leads to favorable resolutions.
- Maintain honesty and integrity throughout the negotiation. When you approach the conversation with the best of intention, the other party is more likely to reciprocate, helping reach a resolution that is acceptable to both parties without either one feeling resentful.

### **Strive To Preserve Relationships**

- Analyze the pros and cons to understand what you can do to make the situation work for you without putting the other party in a bind.
- Weigh the risk of cutting ties versus the benefits of entering a negotiation, which can often preserve the relationships when done right. Of course, you may need to make some compromises but the long-term benefits may be worth the initial sacrifice.

- Restrain from badmouthing or gossiping. Not only is it unproductive but also likely to worsen the situation and negatively impact others' impression of your personality and integrity.
- Don't attack the other party personally. You don't know when you'll cross paths again and under what circumstances. If you keep the conversation focused on the objective situation, the animosity is more likely to be temporary and less likely to affect your future relationships.

### **Stick To the Facts and Stay Professional**

- Be prepared that you may have to stand firm to protect your values and interests. When you're severing a relationship, communicate the reason in a factual manner so you can keep the conversation objective – focusing on the specific circumstances instead of making it personal.
- Communicate your reasons and intentions for severing a relationship in a courteous manner. If you have a personal and professional relationship with the other party, set the stage by communicating that the issue is purely professional so you don't have to worry about ruining your personal relationships.
- Work with a lawyer if the situation and actions may have legal implications. While doing so may seem “cold” at first, it can actually give you the distance you need to focus the conversation on the specific circumstances instead of making it about the other person.
- Don't take other's actions, decisions, or comments personally. There are many factors affecting a certain decision in the workplace and chances are that they aren't personal. Don't become reactive when you're dealing with difficult people or situations to avoid unnecessary conflicts that could prevent a resolution to be reached.

## **3.4 TURNING DIFFICULT SITUATIONS INTO CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

Sometimes by taking others' comments and actions personally, we create “difficult people” out of situations that are simply complex due to the many factors involved.

If we stick to the facts, consider the circumstances objectively, and refrain from attacking the other party personally, we can keep a healthy distance and defuse many thorny situations.

We can avoid creating difficult interpersonal relationships that will not only hinder our effectiveness to negotiate effectively but also affect our ability to speak up for ourselves.

In addition, when you handle a thorny situation mindfully, it can help you get clear on your own values and uncover hidden opportunities that can benefit everyone involved.

By defining your boundaries, examining all the facts, analyzing the pros and cons, and communicating with honesty and integrity – you can turn challenging circumstances into relationships-building opportunities in the workplace.

## 4 SISTERHOOD DOESN'T REQUIRE SACRIFICING YOUR OWN SUCCESS

Recent events, such as the #metoo movement, have encouraged and inspired women from all walks of life to speak up for themselves and for other women.

The Dalai Lama once said that women are the leaders of the future. In order for us to rise to the occasion, we must stand together and lift each other up.

Yet, “standing together” is often easier said than done. After spending all these years advocating for our rights in the workplace, we’re still seeing women behaving abrasively toward each other and even sabotaging their female co-workers’ success.

Changes need to happen at the fundamental level...

We need to create a sense of sisterhood in the workplace, which gives us the solidarity we need to support each other, advocate for each other, and develop the confidence we need to navigate difficult situations.

Sisterhood is, in fact, an empowerment model that will allow us to discover our inner power and support one another in creating meaningful changes in society.

### 4.1 WHAT'S "SISTERHOOD?"

Sisterhood is a social, ethical, and emotional pact among women. It crosses the boundaries of class, religion, and ethnicity and is built upon the understanding that we're stronger together than we are as individuals.

Sisterhood is a kind of empowerment made possible when we come together and treat each other as sisters and allies, not opponents. It's built on relationships developed based on our value as a collective. It allows us to initiate profound changes in our society in a way that can't be achieved by individuals.

Sisterhood is built on generosity, kindness, and compassion. It activates the strength we have within us and helps us realize that we don't have to internalize our struggles. It's about creating a support network so we can create real and lasting changes in the workplace and in our society.

## 4.2 WHY'S CULTIVATING SISTERHOOD SO CHALLENGING IN THE WORKPLACE?

Unfortunately, there are many hurdles holding us back from cultivating a genuine sense of sisterhood with our female coworkers so we can lift each other up and help other women shine.

Women can be rather harsh to each other in the workplace. Snarky comment or workplace sabotage is everywhere and mean-girl shunning or lie-spreading isn't uncommon either.

With all the efforts we have invested in empowering females in the workplace, these behaviors are making our progress feel like “three steps forward two steps back.”

Unless we understand the real challenges that are holding us back from supporting each other, we'll stay divided instead of living up to our highest potential.

Here's why we're still facing so many challenges:

- We're conditioned to have the misconception that we're in a “zero-sum” game in which if we are to advance, someone else has to lose out.
- We don't have the right role model to learn from and follow. Most women are taught to act like their male counterparts in the corporate world, negating our strength in being compassionate and empathetic.
- We grew up considering other girls or women as rivals or competitors. For example, it's common for girls to be criticizing or being mean to each other in school.
- We're not encouraged to practice “other advocacy” and have been conditioned to survive in an “every man for himself” corporate environment.
- We have been led to think that gossiping about, being mean to, or trash-talking other women's appearances, parenting, behaviors, or achievements is the “norm” (e.g., in movies, TV shows, etc.)
- We are held back from connecting with others honestly and genuinely because of our fears. For example, we may be afraid of being criticized if we share our vulnerability or we fear that we appear to be not good enough if we seek help and support.
- We were not taught how to express emotions, such as anger, in a constructive way. Many of us were simply told to disown negative feelings – equating them with shame, guilt, powerlessness, and fear – instead of using them as opportunities to inspire action, recalibration, and re-alignment.

### 4.3 SISTERHOOD IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT STARTS WITH YOU

Sisterhood in the workplace starts within each of us. If you want to create meaningful changes in the work environment, you need to first get your ducks in a row:

#### Change Your Mindset

- Develop the self-confidence you need to step into your own power. When you do, you won't give in to jealousy or self-doubt that will make you feel that you need to diminish other people in order to "look good."
- Understand that we don't have to tear other women down in order to build another woman up.
- See the positive in others and believe that everyone is capable of change, compassion, generosity, and success. Then you'll act in a way that'd actually trigger those behaviors in others.
- Overcome your fears and share your vulnerability to build a genuine network that will have your back and cheer you along.
- Develop the self-awareness and the courage to call yourself out when you question or doubt other women. For example, by thinking that a coworker got a raise by doing "something" other than good work.

#### Empower Yourself

- Develop an awareness of your own identity, morals, values, and integrity. Step up to own what you deserve. Only after you develop the ability to stand up for yourself can you then advocate for other women in the workplace.
- Be a superstar and focus on doing amazing work, knowing that you can express your own brilliance without having to tarnish someone else's.
- Change from a victim mentality to realizing that you have the power to choose, which gives you more power and control over your life. You don't have to turn others into victims in order to feel good.
- Take time for yourself – slow down, breathe, and nurture your wellbeing. When we are tired, drained, and burned out, we don't have the capacity to support other women around us.



## Upgrade Your Behaviors

- Gossiping and snarky talks are destructive. They won't make you feel better and in fact, they'll diminish the respect and opinions others have of you.
- Applaud other women when they share their success with you. Remember, your wings aren't clipped just because another woman soars!
- Be courageous and connect with other women on a deeper level by being honest in your interactions.
- Shift your word choice from using judgmental words to neutral words. This will not only change how you interact with others but also create a positive feedback loop that will upgrade your mindset.
- Examine your own feelings and behaviors, since sometimes other's behaviors are actually reactions to the conscious and subconscious signals you're giving off.

## Initiate Changes In Your Workplace

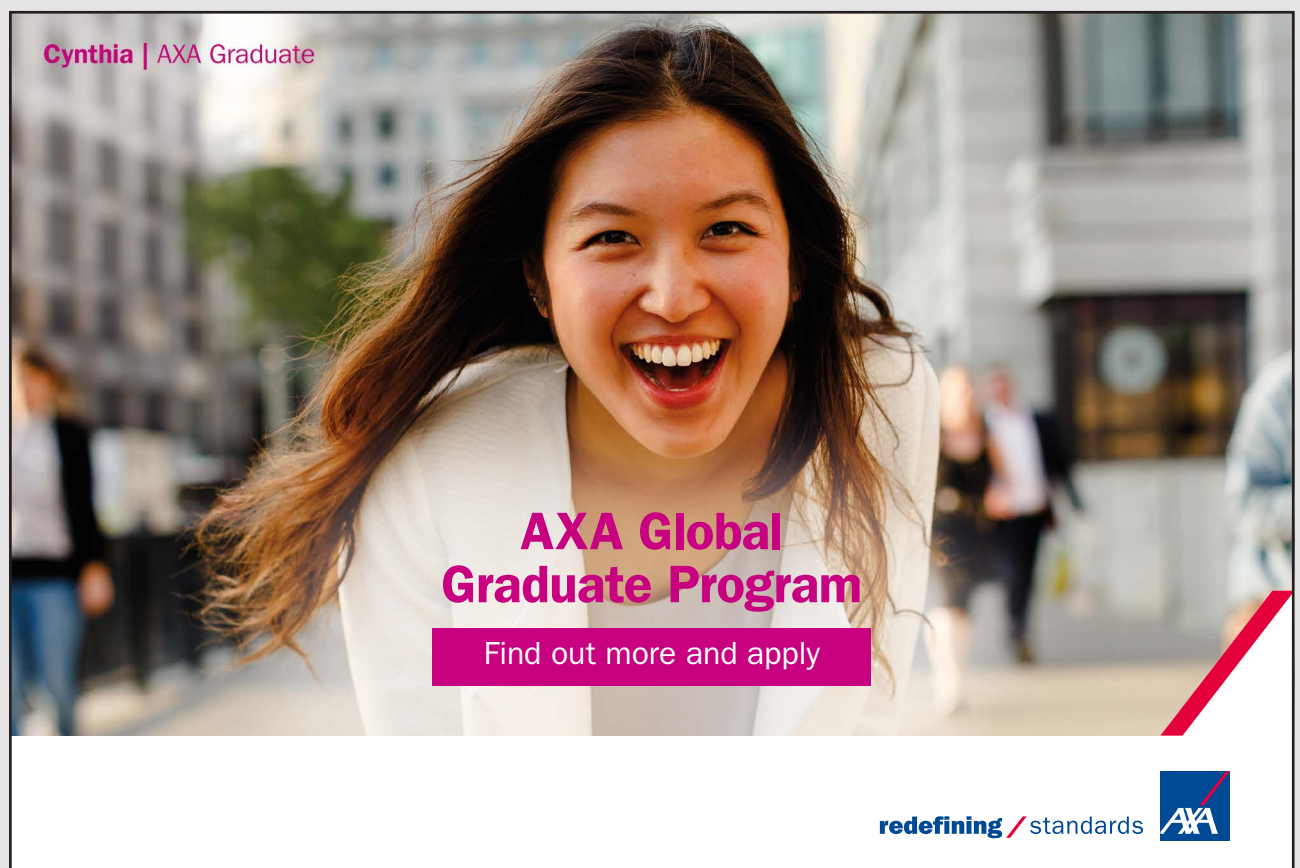
- Start having candid and game-changing conversations about how women need to our interactions with each other in the workplace.
- Advocate zero tolerance for abusive talk and behaviors against other women. If you see something, say something. If you're a manager or in a leadership position, enforce anti-bullying policies.
- Engage the law of reciprocity by taking a few minutes every day to check in with your colleagues or perform a small act of kindness so others will do the same for you and others. These small gestures can add up to create a harmonious work environment in which we'll be more likely to take care of each other.
- Advocate for yourself and other women for opportunities in leading high-profile projects to demonstrate their skills and the power of solidarity.

## 4.4 HOW LEADERSHIP CAN EMPOWER WOMEN AND REINFORCE SISTERHOOD IN THE WORKPLACE

If you're in a leadership position, it's all the more important that you set the tone for a supportive environment in which women can support each other to grow and lift each other up.

## Foster a Collaborative Environment


- Create a non-competitive atmosphere in which women can work together and support each other to experience the synergy that's possible when they're working toward a common goal, instead of trying to undermine each other.
- Make teamwork a priority to encourage collaboration by incorporating it as part of the performance management system so you can set the right expectations.
- Celebrate and reward great teamwork to encourage collaboration and reinforce the need for women to support each other.
- Incentivize collaboration to show that better work relationships lead to improved performance and productivity of everyone involved.
- Appreciate and recognize collaborative behaviors to demonstrate that “a rising tide lifts all boats.”
- Provide training on communication skills so women can speak up for themselves, advocate for others, and build alliances effectively.
- Encourage women to showcase their leadership by giving them high-visibility initiatives and the opportunities to lead other women.



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### **Help Employees Resolve Differences**

- Encourage employees to work with each other to resolve differences. While some employees may feel “safer” by resorting to authority when there’s a conflict, it’s often more constructive for them to work through the differences through a candid conversation.
- Pay attention to problematic behaviors, such as snarky comments, abrasive actions, or unconstructive criticisms so you can nip negativity in the bud and prevent it from sabotaging a supportive work environment.

### **Encourage Employees To Build Relationships**

- Encourage employees to get to know each other outside of work and develop relationships that will help them appreciate each other’s perspectives so they can work together more effectively.
- Listen and learn about employees’ challenges if they have difficulty in building meaningful relationships with their co-workers. While sometimes it’s a personality issue, it could also be a symptom of being put in the wrong job or not having the right training they need to succeed – which in turn impacts how they interact with their colleagues.
- Develop a mentoring program in which women can help other women overcome barriers from within the system to foster a sense of solidarity.

## **4.5 SISTERHOOD: THE GOLDEN THREAD THAT TIES US TOGETHER**

Sisterhood brings us together, giving us the support we need to excel in the workplace and the opportunities to stand by other women. This is the foundation for creating positive changes in this world.

While we are all individuals with our own background, goals, perspectives, and experiences, sisterhood gives us the solidarity that unites us so we can have the strength to step up and advocate for ourselves and other women.

The power of sisterhood manifests the concept of “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” It’s a commitment to success by being independent as individuals while having the ability to connect with each other to tap into our collective strengths.

Fostering sisterhood starts from ourselves. We need to cultivate self-awareness and change our mindset so we can be confident about our abilities and feel secure about supporting other women instead of taking them down.

Sisterhood is built on every word we say and every action we take. Simply paying lip service isn't going to create meaningful changes.

Now is the time to step up and take action. Do one thing, no matter how small, to reach out and connect with your sisters – today.

# CONCLUSION: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHANGE

In order to overcome the challenges women face in today's workplace, we need to get to the bottom of the issues that are holding us back instead of applying Band-Aid solutions or cosmetic quick fixes.

From gender stereotyping and the shortage of role models to subconscious exclusion and the lack of solidarity, these root causes are calling for a fundamental overhaul in how we think, present ourselves, and interact with others in the workplace.

The first step to making changes is to cultivate awareness and understand the roles we play in these issues. While women are the ones being affected, they are also often the ones perpetuating the biases or misconceptions that create the challenges.

There's no one else to blame if we don't step up and advocate for ourselves and others.

There's no one else to blame if we don't empower ourselves with the confidence and skills we need to negotiate effectively or navigate difficult situations.

And there's definitely no one else we can blame if women are attacking instead of supporting each other.

The good news is that we don't have to rely on anyone else to empower us. We only need to decide to step up and take responsibility ourselves.

We have to let go of the victim mentality and trust that when we build the solidarity to lift each other up, we'll all benefit.

We can cultivate awareness and change our mindset so we can take empowered actions.

We can effect changes by stepping up and speaking up.

We can turn challenges into opportunities to advance inclusion and diversity in the workplace. And we can choose to build each other up.

I hope this book not only inspires you to become empowered as a woman in today's dynamic workplace but also motivate you to support and/or become a role model for other women who are trying to find their place in the professional world.

If you'd like to share your thoughts or explore opportunities to advance this conversation, I'd love to connect:

Website: [www.nettajenkins.com](http://www.nettajenkins.com)

Email: [netta@nettajenkins.com](mailto:netta@nettajenkins.com)

Linkedin: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nettajenkins/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nettajenks/>

Twitter: @nettajenkins

Netta Jenkins