

# TEXAS LAWYER

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### Gender Assumptions: Asset, Not Liability?

Sometimes, it's hard to be optimistic. Women's progress in the legal profession, corporate America and politics seems to be stagnant. Whether because of corporate cultures and policies that discourage work/life balance, outdated gender stereotypes that put women in a no-win bind or blatant sexism, it seems that women's progress has plateaued at a frustrating level.

So, where does a would-be optimist go for inspiration about the future? Back to college, of course — or at least to college students, some of whom may be shedding the outdated double standards that hold women back.

#### ON THE LEVEL

An article in the Harvard Business Review titled, "How Female Leaders Should Handle Double-Standards" reminded me of the fix in which most women professionals find themselves: If we're nice enough to be liked, we're judged as incompetent. If we're competent enough to be respected, we're considered unlikeable.

There doesn't seem to be any sweet spot where others perceive women as both competent and likeable, at least among my generation and those who came before me. That has resulted in a negative correlation between success and likeability for women, i.e. the assumption is that the more successful a woman is, the less likeable she becomes.



But college students who participated in two Duke University studies didn't seem to hold that attitude. Rather, they seemed to make assumptions in women's favor based on traditional gender stereotypes.

In the first study, students' responses indicated their beliefs that women who reach the CEO level of success must be both likeable and competent. Apparently,

the perception that the women CEOs had overcome barriers and faced down the success vs. likeability double standard worked in women's favor — at least it did among these study participants.

I should note that a follow-up study involving 100 students found that the students only evaluated females more favorably than males “when they were in top-level positions.” So, the students didn't perceive mid-level women more favorably than mid-level men — just women CEOs.

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Furthermore, the participants in the second study rated women as more “relationship oriented.” Here, too, traditional gender stereotypes worked in women's favor. The students assumed top women would “engage in a more traditionally ‘feminized’ type of leadership, an employee-focused leadership style that is increasingly viewed as effective.”

Granted, these were two individual studies using college-age participants. But that's OK. I'd be beyond discouraged if the Duke studies showed today's college students blindly continuing the same old attitudes. The knowledge that the next generation coming into the workplace is more enlightened fills me with hope.

## Moving Forward


What can we do in the meantime to help the women who are already stuck in the middle of the likability/competence conundrum?

For women who find themselves being held to outdated stereotypes, it's important to put competence before likability. That doesn't mean it's OK to be abusive, but it is OK to be direct and unapologetic for having the same high standards as a male colleague would.

The bigger problem is among those holding women to the double standard (including other women). Firm leaders, including decision-making committees, need to be alert to the double standard and make sure they're judging women lawyers by the same yardstick they're judging men. That requires a high level of self-awareness, but lawyers are educated people. We can handle it.

Of course, I'm not saying that the double standard is the only thing holding women back. The United States lags behind the rest of the developed world in terms of offering ways to help workers successfully combine their work lives and their home lives. And there's still plenty of good old-fashioned sexism, even though it's not as blatant as it used to be.

But ambitious women looking to make their mark shouldn't be impeded because they're being judged by outdated, uninformed stereotypes.

And if the youngsters have their say, perhaps they won't be for much longer. 



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