

Friendship Rules for Adult Women

Collected excerpts from annelitwin.com

“The participants in my study confirmed what scholars have found about women’s friendship expectations: there is a core set of rules or expectations.”

Common friendship rules for adult women

Show unswerving loyalty and trustworthiness.

Give unconditional acceptance, affirmation & sympathy, while seldom disapproving.

Keep confidences.

Share gossip and air problems.

Be a good listener.

Self-disclose.

Practice equality.

Don’t discuss/negotiate friendship rules or expectations.

Cultural differences and other factors make it unlikely that all women share the exact same friendship expectations. [Unfortunately], the last friendship rule is the “mother of all friendship rules.” This taboo against discussion means that mismatched assumptions may not be discovered until damage has been done to a relationship. For many of us, when another woman does not behave in the way we expect [according to our unspoken rules], our reflex is to stop speaking to her or withdraw from the relationship rather than to talk about what happened. We become distant or cold without explaining why. Or in relationships outside of work, we may stop returning calls and just disappear without an explanation.

I have heard every excuse in the book about why women withdraw rather than confront an ex-friend (and yes, I have done this myself). The excuses sound something like this:

- “She should know what she did.”
- “I shouldn’t have to say anything. She should be able to figure it out.”
- “There isn’t any point in bringing it up because she would just get defensive.”
- “I can’t trust her now so what’s the point?”

We must learn to articulate and negotiate our friendship rules and develop relational courage so that we can stay present and in relationships when other women do not meet our expectations. Imagine if we could really sit down together and say, "How do you see the world? This is how I see it. This is what it means to me when people say and do these kinds of things. It offends me because And that's not how it is for me."

If people could get curious, really engage with each other, listen, have an open mind and know that we don't all have the same assumptions or friendship rules or experiences in life that have shaped us. Understanding friendship rules can be a pathway toward strengthening our relationships and supporting each other to make change.

Myths about Women's Relationships

Collected excerpts from annelitwin.com

One of the most enduring myths about women is that women are mean to each other and undermine each other at work because of the Queen Bee Syndrome. (Men can also be quite mean to each other, though their behavior is often viewed as healthy competition and has no name equivalent to Queen Bee.) Some women do have stories of sabotage by another woman at work. My research, published in my book, *New Rules for Women: Revolutionizing the Way Women Work Together*, found examples of this type of behavior between women but also identified ways that organizational systems set women up against each other.

In fact, this behavior between women is no different than the same behavior reported by all marginalized groups. All oppressed groups, or groups that experience systematic exploitation, exclusion, and devaluing, act out against members of their own group because they internalize the negative stereotypes about their group and feel powerless to change things. This behavior is not unique to - and does not reflect something that is "essential" about - women. Token representation also sets marginalized group members against each other to compete for limited opportunities in environments controlled by dominant group members.

For the most part, "Queen Bee" stereotypes are not true and definitely not the whole story. Several new studies, reported by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant in the *New York Times*, confirm that strong evidence exists to knock a hole in "the myth of the catty woman." Here are some of the findings from those studies:

- When researchers studied the top management of the Standard and Poor's 1,500 companies over twenty years, they found that when the chief executive was male, it was unlikely that more than one woman would make it onto the senior management team. *When the chief executive was a woman, more women joined senior management.*
- On corporate boards, women are less likely than men to be mentored or promoted to senior management positions—*unless there is already a woman on the board.*
- In Latin American politics between 1999 and 2013, *female presidents appointed 24 percent more female ministers* to their cabinets.
- When women negotiate on behalf of other women, they are able to boost their own salaries, too.

[Women can transform sabotaging behaviors](#) by becoming aware that career aggression is a response to our environments, and by developing a code of conduct and a positive shared vision about how we want to be in relationship with each other.

[We can learn to both compete and support each other while staying in relationship.](#) Here are some ways that women can continue to support each other:

- By mentoring each other and being role models for supporting women.
- By celebrating each other's accomplishments, especially when they are overlooked.
- By helping each other get heard in meetings.
- By talking with each other and agreeing to compete *and* have each other's backs.

Yes—we really can do this!

How Do Women's Friendship Rules Create Confusion at Work?

Collected excerpts from works of Anne Litwin, PhD

Relationships at work are important for getting things done, and they increase our ability to enjoy our work. My research shows that women often have different relationship expectations of their female colleagues than of their male colleagues. We don't just show up in the workplace as a blank slate. We carry with us all the things we have learned, including the set of filters I call friendship rules. It is through the filters of our friendship expectations that we interpret the behaviors of other women at work and decide whether or not we trust or like them, along with a range of other expectations that can create misunderstandings.

Men have friendship rules, too, but because of differences in gender socialization, theirs are not the same as ours. Boys learn through games to care about winning and losing, to be more conscious of status and to be more transactional. If I don't choose you for my team, it is just a transaction - it is not about whether I like you or not. Girls' games are still teaching about getting along, about being nurturing. In girls' games, the relationship matters more than winning or losing. Role models are still socializing the girls and the boys to expect different behaviors.

Men can have a vehement disagreement at a team meeting, then go out for a beer after work because it is just a win-lose kind of [transactional] thing and not about the relationship. But when women disagree at work, it can be the end of the relationship forever. For women, it feels personal and they don't know how to recover from that. Men just walk out and have a beer.

[Women's friendship rules are often at odds with workplace norms and can create confusion between women colleagues about what to expect from each other in the workplace environment.](#)

Unspoken (and often unconscious) friendship expectations can become filters for interpreting the behaviors of another woman. Many women expect more relational behavior from female bosses [than from male bosses]. One participant explained, "I had a lady that I worked for who was more [task focused], and it did drive me away more. With a guy I would have expected it, but I expected a little bit more of a relationship from her. It was all she could do to say, 'How was your day?', and that made it real uncomfortable for me. If a guy did it I guess it wouldn't bother me as much." (Sheri – High Tech)

These expectations create problems for women who do not have a feminine leadership style and who are subsequently evaluated as "difficult to work with." A participant with a masculine style explained that, "It can be a disadvantage, too, because if you are around people who value chatting, and you just come in, you can seem too cool and not interested and that can be a disadvantage. More women seem to value the personal relationship, even if it's not that deep [laughs], than men do." (Shantel – High Tech)

[Fluid boundaries might create confusion and feelings of betrayal when friendship expectations are not met, and not discussed ... especially in the context of different roles.](#)

This same participant goes on to explain the difficulties she is having now that she is the boss because of expectations that male bosses do not face: "My women staff will come to me and say,

‘How’s your boyfriend?’ They feel like a relationship with me should be all access, and I don’t want to set up a situation where like I’m becoming this kind of friend with them. Not just a friend, but an intimate friend. We tell all. Then all of a sudden I’ve got to be the person who says, ‘Get that done. Get it done tonight.’ Then that’s a betrayal of womanhood to assert that authority where it’s going to cost them something.” (Penny – Higher Education)

It becomes even more imperative to be able to name and discuss our friendship rules in the workplace, because of this potential for boundary and role confusion. One participant gave this example: “Women, though, if you criticize them for something or point out a problem, the first reaction is, ‘I thought she was my friend!’ Women tend to get mad at who they thought was their friend criticizing them for anything.” (Alice – High Tech)

In order to stop explaining our negative experiences with other women as the result of interpersonal or personality issues, it’s important to:

- Become aware of friendship rules as filters
- Acknowledge the impact of internalized negative stereotypes on our relationships
- Acknowledge the way systemic forces and contexts set women up to be confused and disappointed by each other

We can resist being affected by those forces and can strengthen our ability to support each other.

Women can develop skills to discuss and agree about what they expect from each other in different roles (both inside and outside of work), make their friendship rules explicit, and negotiate them so that their relationships can survive the need to *compete and differentiate* as they advance in their careers.

Women need these skills for naming and negotiating friendship rules and role boundaries (a) when they are the boss, as well as (b) in peer relationships and (c) when reporting to female bosses. Negotiation skills will enable them to be explicit about whether they are wearing the hat of “friend”, “teammate”, or “boss” during interactions where expectations from each other may need to vary. Women can clarify when they are stepping out of a “colleague” role and into a “friend” role where they need empathy, instead of challenge, on a professional level by naming the role switch they are making.

Many women have difficulty with these conversations, but talking gets easier with practice. I suggest you talk with some women friends, either at home or at work, and try to identify and name the friendship rules you share and the ones you don’t. Once you are aware of your own and have some practice describing them to someone else, you will be better prepared to talk about friendship rules at work with women colleagues to prevent misunderstandings. Naming and discussing our relational expectations with our women colleagues can go a long way toward strengthening our ability to help each other thrive and prosper at work.

Sources:

“Women Working Together: Understanding Women’s Relationships at Work”, Litwin, 2011, Center for Gender in Organizations
<https://www.annelitwin.com/blog/>
<https://womenspress.com/Content/Features/Featured/Article/Friendship-rules/1/233/4246>

Sample vision statement and code of conduct

by Anne Litwin, PhD

Vision statement

The women of [this organization] are a community of high-performing women who support each other to realize our own potential and the potential of our teams and to provide exceptional service to our clients.

Code of conduct

To realize our vision, we

- Surface our friendship rules—we talk about our expectations
- Stay present and engaged with each other, even in the face of disappointment
- Give each other feedback about the impact of our behaviors
- Are trustworthy—we transknit*, but we do not gossip
- Maintain confidences when asked to do so or else say we cannot
- Celebrate and acknowledge each other's achievements
- Compete for rewards and resources while affirming our relationships
- Engage in meaningful disagreement and listen to each other
- Challenge ideas, not people
- Help each other feel heard in meetings
- Self-disclose to the degree we are each comfortable
- Are authentic—we share where we are directly to each other
- Ask ourselves, “What else could be true?” when we feel judgmental of another woman

** The term “transknitting” was developed by Anne Litwin to describe information sharing with positive intent that can strengthen teamwork. This positive talk is the transfer of information (trans) for the purpose of looping in (knitting) information about others to form or maintain a sense of community.*