

# Emotional Inequality: Solutions for women in the workplace

By David Maxfield, Joseph Grenny, & Chase McMillan

*What if your colleagues discriminated against you, just for being assertive? Unfortunately, gender bias is a reality in today's workplace. This study reveals women's perceived competency drops by 35 percent and their perceived worth by \$15,088 when they are equally as assertive or forceful as their male colleagues. Assertive men are also punished, but to a much lesser degree.*

*Emotional inequality is real and it is unfair. And while it is unacceptable and needs to be addressed at a cultural, legal, organizational, and social level—individuals can take control. Those who use a brief framing statement that demonstrates deliberation and forethought reduce the social backlash and emotion-inequality effects by 27 percent.*

## Introduction

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We at VitalSmarts have worked for the last thirty years to help teams and organizations eradicate undiscussables. We've developed models and skills to help individuals voice their concerns. Over the past few years, we've become increasingly interested in the special challenges women face when they speak up in the workplace.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

For example, imagine you get to see a manager in a meeting, working with other managers. You already know this manager has been hired by your organization and will soon become your peer. You watch as your future

colleague speaks up in a forceful way that borders on anger: *"I'm not on board with the direction this decision is going—no, I'm not finished. I won't back down from this position and I'm not going to commit my team and resources to this project until we have more conclusive evidence to work with. Period."*

It's a bold, brash, and emotional statement that doesn't demonstrate much listening or patience. What do you think of your new colleague?

Observers who hear this interaction think less of their new colleague. There is a social backlash against people who voice this kind of strong disagreement. But it turns out the gender of the colleague is also hugely important. This study begins by replicating what others have found: *women who disagree in forceful, assertive ways are judged more harshly than men who do so.*

Today's workplaces cannot thrive if employees—regardless of gender—don't speak up, so we need ways to decrease the social backlash people experience when they do. And, because women unfairly suffer this backlash more than men, we especially need solutions that work for women.

## Hazards of Speaking Up

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When it comes to speaking up, people's fears are well founded. A survey of eighty-seven whistle-blowers revealed that all but one had experienced retaliation.<sup>4</sup> But the usual punishments for speaking up are far more subtle and insidious.<sup>5</sup> People learn to watch out for the raised eyebrow, the dismissive frown, and other signs of disapproval or loss of respect.<sup>6</sup> These signs of social backlash warn that the working relationship or career is at risk.

For example, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, General Jay Garner explained his failure to share three major concerns he had with the war in Iraq during a debrief with the President by saying, "If I had said that to the President in front of Cheney and Condoleezza Rice and Rumsfeld in there, the President would have looked at them and they would have rolled their eyes back and he would have thought, 'Boy, I wonder why we didn't get rid of this guy sooner?'"<sup>7</sup> A retired general with nothing to lose was silenced by the fear of an eye-roll.

Subtle disparagement causes unhealthy silence, and research shows women risk this disparagement any time they open their mouths. For example, in one study subjects were given a description of a hypothetical CEO with the surname Morgan. Morgan, they were told, "tends to offer opinions as much as possible," and compared to other CEOs, "Morgan talks much more." In some cases, the sketch described *Mr. Morgan* and in others *Ms. Morgan*. The exact same characterization caused observers to respect *Mr. Morgan* more and *Ms. Morgan* less.<sup>8</sup>

Speaking up in forceful, assertive ways is even more risky for women. A woman's forcefulness is more likely to be seen as anger<sup>9</sup> rather than strength. This judgment costs women both prestige and influence, as showing anger in the

workplace is usually seen as inappropriate for both men and women.<sup>10</sup> In fact, our research shows women's perceived competency drops by 35 percent and their perceived worth by \$15,088 when they are assertive or forceful. Men who spoke up equally aggressively were also judged, but to a much lesser degree. It isn't fair.

Women are burdened with the additional assumption that they will conform to cultural stereotypes that typecast women as caring and nurturing.<sup>11</sup> Speaking forcefully violates these cultural norms, and women experience a more punishing backlash than men. As a result, women are victims of *emotional inequality* in the workplace.<sup>12</sup>

In a landmark study, Victoria Brescoll and Eric Luis Uhlmann asked the question, "Can an Angry Woman Get Ahead?"<sup>13</sup> Their study documented the unequal penalty women experience for showing anger at work, but then went further to explore the reasons behind this gender effect. Their results suggest that the penalty occurs because observers attribute women's anger to internal characteristics ("she is an angry person," "she is out of control"), while attributing men's anger to external circumstances ("he was under a lot of stress," "things were out of control so someone had to take charge"). While this bias against women is unfair, it is often unconscious/unintentional, which makes it even harder to address.<sup>14</sup>

## What can be done about emotional inequality? The Research

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While unacceptable, gender bias does exist and learning more about the nuances of its pervasiveness is the first step toward igniting change. Part One of our two-part study was done with that information-seeking mission in mind. Based on our own and others' research, we acknowledge that ultimately, eliminating bias altogether will require changing the cultural, legal, organizational, and social influences that make it costly for employees—especially women employees—to speak up. It is time these efforts were set swiftly in motion.

And while society and systems slowly turn the wheels of change, individuals can gain control by being both aware of and equipped with skills to minimize the pernicious effects of this toxic cultural norm. We believe people need strategies they can use today to express strong opinions while minimizing social backlash. Part Two of our research was done with this goal in mind—to develop specific skills women can use on the job to be forceful, assertive, and honest without experiencing social backlash.

## Part One

Our first step was to recreate the social backlash and emotion-inequality effects in a controlled laboratory setting. We wanted to demonstrate the effects in a reliable way, so we could test ways to reduce them.

We created videotaped interactions to control what observers would see. The videotaped interactions featured either a male or female actor seated at a table in a meeting room. The actors were rated as equally attractive on a ten-point scale by unbiased observers, used identical scripts, and were coached to deliver near-identical performances. The only difference was that one actor was male and the other was female.

In Part One, 4,517 participants played the observer role. Each saw a single thirty- to forty-second performance, and then rated the “manager” using a twenty-item survey. This study confirmed the risks involved in speaking up when differing opinions, high stakes, and strong emotions are involved. In every case, observers rated forceful, assertive actors as lower in status, competency, and worth.

However, the social backlash and emotion-inequality effects we observed in relation to the gender of the actor were particularly jaw-dropping. Specifically, women who spoke just as aggressively as their male counterparts were punished with a 16 percent greater loss in status and a 13 percent greater loss in perceived competency. And startlingly, their perceived worth (what observers felt would be a fair salary) dropped by more than twice that of the perceived worth of men. Summary:

- What happens to status when a person expresses a high-stakes emotional disagreement:
  - › Men’s status drops by 25 percent
  - › Women’s status drops by 41 percent
- What happens to perceived competency when a person expresses a high-stakes emotional disagreement:
  - › Men’s perceived competency drops by 22 percent
  - › Women’s perceived competency drops by 35 percent
- What happens to perceived worth when a person expresses a high-stakes emotional disagreement:
  - › Men’s perceived worth drops by \$6,547
  - › Women’s perceived worth drops by \$15,088

## Part Two

Next, we decided to test whether brief, framing statements that demonstrate deliberation, forethought, and control would reduce the social-backlash and emotion-inequality effects.

Using the same video method, we tested three frames: a Behavior frame, a Value frame, and an Inoculation frame.

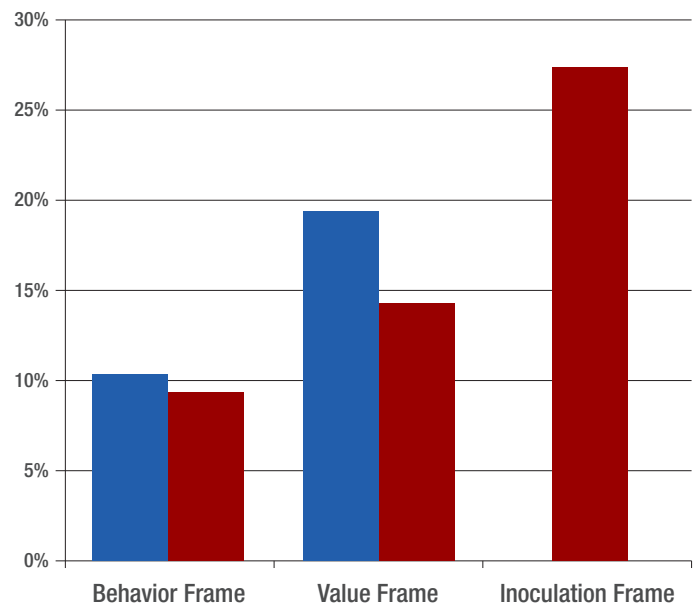
**Behavior Frame:** The actors described what they were about to say before saying it: “I’m going to express my opinion very directly. I’ll be as specific as possible.”

**Value Frame:** The actors described their motivation in value-laden terms before making the statement of disapproval: “I see this as a matter of honesty and integrity, so it’s important for me to be clear about where I stand.”

**Inoculation Frame:** The female actor suggested it could be risky for a woman to speak up the way she was about to: “I know it’s a risk for a woman to speak this assertively, but I’m going to express my opinion very directly.”

In this second study, 7,921 participants played the observer role. Each saw a single thirty-five- to forty-five-second performance and then rated the “manager” using the twenty-item survey from Part One.

Each of the frames worked. The chart below illustrates the positive impacts of the different frames.



This study shows that framing statements can help to reduce social backlash and the negative effects of emotion-inequality. We believe that each frame works in a different way.

**Behavior Frame:** *“I’m going to express my opinion very directly. I’ll be as specific as possible.”*

We think the Behavior Frame works by setting an expectation. It makes sure the statement that follows doesn’t come as a surprise. Without the frame, observers are blindsided by the force of the emotion and may assume the worst—that the person has lost his or her temper. The frame works by preventing this negative conclusion.

**Value Frame:** *“I see this as a matter of honesty and integrity, so it’s important for me to be clear about where I stand.”*

We think the Value Frame works by giving a positive reason for the emotion. In fact, it turns the emotion into a virtue by turning it into a measure of commitment to a shared value.

**Inoculation Frame:** *“I know it’s a risk for a woman to speak this assertively, but I’m going to express my opinion very directly.”*

We think the Inoculation Frame works by warning observers that they may have an implicit bias. It causes them to try hard to be fair, or to adjust their judgment in an effort to be fair.

We were a bit surprised at how well it worked, and we are skeptical that the Inoculation Frame will work if used repeatedly. It could be seen as “playing a card”—in this case the “gender card.” Our concern is that it may create short-term benefits but damage a user’s reputation in the long run.

## Explain your intent before stating your content.

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Speaking forcefully creates a social backlash for both men and for women—though it’s more severe for women. This backlash occurs when observers use the emotion to draw negative conclusions about the speaker’s intent. The backlash is reduced when the speaker takes a few seconds to explain her positive intent before stating her content.

We tested three of the statements a person could use to explain his or her intent—Behavior, Value, and Inoculation Frames. We can conclude that the Behavior and Value Frames are effective and are safe to use repeatedly. The Inoculation Frame works in the short-term, but we won’t recommend its repeated use until we’ve tested it more thoroughly.

## Skills for Speaking Up

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If not acknowledged or managed well, emotional inequality and social backlash can adversely affect an individual’s career and can prove costly to an organization’s effectiveness. We believe the implications of this research will empower individuals and leaders to engage in and encourage candid discussion while minimizing negative impacts.

### For Individuals:

When an individual expresses a strong opinion, safety may break down if the listener negatively interprets the speaker’s intent. When this happens, communication suffers and the speaker loses influence. Here are a few recommended actions:

**Use a Behavior or Value Frame:** Use one of these frames before stating your disagreement. The Behavior Frame demonstrates you are in control of your emotions. The Value Frame demonstrates commitment to a shared value.

**Share your good intent:** Quickly and clearly explain your positive intent before you share your strong opinion. It may also be useful to explicitly state what you do not intend. For example, “I came to speak with you to try to find the best way to solve our inability to match specs, I didn’t come here to finger point or blame.”

**Learn additional skills to create safety:** High-stakes, emotional, disagreements require special skills, but these are skills anyone can learn. Begin by reading a book, participating in a webinar, or taking a course. VitalSmarts offers all three with our *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Accountability* books, webinars, and training courses. There are many other excellent options as well. Regardless of what you choose, make sure to build in realistic practices, so you’ll learn how to use your skills under pressure.

### For Leaders:

Social backlash can shut down even the best and bravest in your organization. Leaders need to make it safe for employees to speak boldly for what they believe. And leaders need to acknowledge that women experience this social backlash more than men, especially when they are forceful.

Our study focused on specific actions a speaker can take to reduce the backlash. We did not address the deeper problems—why observers punish forcefulness

as strongly as they do, or why observers judge women behaving forcefully more harshly than men who behave similarly. However, leaders will need to address these deeper problems within their own teams and organizations. Otherwise, they place the burden entirely on the speaker—disproportionately women—and this could perpetuate the deeper problems, or even make them worse.

With these caveats in mind, here are actions leaders can take:

**Open the discussion:** Shine a spotlight on the problems of social backlash and emotion inequality. Discuss the implications this research has for the day-to-day operations in your workplace. Identify times, places, and circumstances when these problems are likely, and cue people in those moments to guard against them.

**Lead the way:** Leaders should take concrete actions that show commitment to counteract the implicit bias women face in the workplace. For example, while we have reservations around using the Inoculation Frame discussed in this study, one tech company leader we interviewed thought it was an excellent tool for women leaders to use to combat bias. When expressing a strong position, this executive suggested, leaders might say, “I know I’ve said this before, but I’m going to say it again. It can be risky for women to speak assertively in many environments. I don’t want that to be the case here, so I’m going to lead out by expressing my point of view directly and I hope that others will do the same.” These actions would send a clear message: be aware that an implicit bias against women likely exists, it has no place in our organization, and I’m committed to eradicating it.

**Change the norm:** The norm in most organizations is to focus on the content of what people are saying and to avoid discussing any strong emotions they are showing. The problem with this norm is that, even though we don’t discuss the emotions, we guess at what they mean and assume the worst—that the person is out of control. A healthier norm is to ask about strong emotions whenever you see them. The results of this study suggest that when a person explains his or her forcefulness, it prevents observers from assuming the worst.

**Create times and places for speaking up:** Leaders can create times, places, and circumstances where speaking forcefully is expected—even required. For example, have an agenda item that asks people to speak forcefully—from their hearts—about the issue being

discussed. This approach would provide a clear external reason for speakers’ passion and would thus reduce observers’ tendency to assume they’d lost their tempers.

**Invest in skill building:** Training can be a powerful way to help others learn the skills they need in order to create conversational safety. This benefits both sides in a conversation and allows individuals and teams to discuss tough issues that affect organizational results across the board—from quality to safety to employee engagement and morale. To learn more about VitalSmarts training solutions, visit [www.vital-smarts.com](http://www.vital-smarts.com).

## About the Authors

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## About The Sponsor: VitalSmarts

Named one of the Top 20 Leadership Training Companies, VitalSmarts, a TwentyEighty, Inc. company, combines three decades of original research with fifty years of the best social science thinking to help leaders and organizations change human behavior and achieve new levels of performance. VitalSmarts has identified four high-leverage skill sets that, when used in combination, create healthy corporate cultures. These skills are taught in the Company's award-winning training programs and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles: *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Accountability*, *Influencer*, and *Change Anything*. VitalSmarts has consulted with more than three hundred of the Fortune 500 companies and trained more than one million people worldwide. [www.vitalismarts.com](http://www.vitalismarts.com)

## ENDNOTES

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