

Breaking Social Conditioning in the Workplace

Startup leaders, can we talk? Real talk? Do you know how the women on your staff are feeling? It's an understatement to say that it's been a stressful 2.5 years. But studies show that the pandemic and resulting recession were especially difficult for women. From February 2020 through January 2022, 1.1 million women left the labor force, primarily due to layoffs or to take care of children. Those who stayed at work reported significantly more burnout than their male counterparts, probably because they were trying to work while also schooling their children. As per usual, women stepped up to fill the gaps when needed.

In June 2022, 397,000 women accepted a job, increasing women's employment rate to 58.3%, one percentage point below the pre-pandemic rate. However, another recession looms, and it stands to reason women will again take the brunt of the hit. A recession is never easy and can harm staff well-being at a time when you need your employees to be more efficient and productive than ever.

Why does this happen to women? Social conditioning. Most of us demonstrate and experience social conditioning in every aspect of our lives. It gives us information about how society wants us to behave in certain societal conditions. That can be helpful, and it could be harmful. Case in point, the social conditioning of women in our work culture is often not conducive to a woman's well-being.

As HR leaders, you have the power to change the adverse effects of social conditioning on the women in your company. So, let's talk about it.

What is Social Conditioning?

First, let's fully define social conditioning. Social conditioning is the process by which people of a specific society are trained to think, believe, feel, want, and react in a way approved by the society or the groups within it. It begins at birth and continues throughout our entire lives. We are influenced by the causes, dimensions, beliefs, programming, and barriers interwoven into our societal norms.

Social conditioning affects a woman's perceived value. According to The American Association of University Women, a woman's habit of diminishing and undervaluing her skills and achievements develops in adolescence. We are taught that our role is as caretakers, not decision-makers. As adults, we're just playing the part we've been taught.

Why is this important for women at work?

At work, social conditioning for women often manifests in our tendency to take care of others before ourselves or to allow ourselves to be placed secondarily to our male counterparts. Whenever a woman offers to take notes at a meeting, clean the office kitchen, or pick up coffee, she is unconsciously responding to social conditioning. When a male counterpart expects a woman to do these things, he acts on social conditioning. Likewise, when a woman leaves her job to take care of children, her decision is, at least partly, a result of social conditioning. Social conditioning can result in women forgoing self-care when they need it. We treat stress, anxiety, or depression with unhealthy coping mechanisms like alcohol, prescription medications, overeating, or smoking instead of seeking help.

Whatever the cause, the fact is that many women tend to think they are “less than” and to put others before themselves, which can harm their ability to do their jobs and fully realize their potential at work. As a result, your business suffers.

Why is this important to company culture?

Workplace culture is created when employees make unspoken and unwritten guidelines for working together. These guidelines appear in practically every aspect of your organization, including your policies, procedures, people, and places. The life experiences of each employee can also shape your company culture. You can see how social conditioning feeds into any workplace culture. We bring these life lessons to work and then adapt them to fit the workplace.

A positive work culture drives employee engagement, reduces burnout, increases job satisfaction and performance, and attracts talent. Employee turnover is estimated to cost U.S. businesses roughly \$1 trillion annually. Over 50% of employees who quit their jobs say their manager could have prevented them from leaving if they had done things differently.

An interesting Great Place to Work study shows that companies with employee action groups for women, people of color, hourly employees, and other typically marginalized workers posted a 14.4% gain and thrived during “The Great Recession” of 2007-2009 and beyond.

Members of these key employee groups typically feel the strain of a downturn first. So if their work experience is positive, all employees’ overall experience is likely to be positive, signaling a reason for the companies’ gains. The members of these groups reported having positive experiences around innovation, equity, and integrity at work. They felt like full members of the organization, not just cogs in the wheel. They thought that management followed through on promises, they were offered fair promotions, and they were given a chance to contribute to change within the organization.

The researchers report that early research reflects similar results in these companies during this most recent pandemic-triggered downturn. The learnings gained from these companies can help your HR team support your employees, especially those who feel “less than” during

this next difficult period.

So, what should leaders do?

Job number one is ensuring your company culture is strong, healthy, and positive. And that is not something you can assume you know. Many employers don't understand what aspects of company culture are most significant to their employees. Remember that every one of your company's policies, procedures, standards, norms, communication methods, and hierarchy make up company culture and affect the day-to-day lives of your workers. Often, social conditioning norms are wrapped up in those aspects.

Ask your employees what is important to them and review exit interviews from employees who have voluntarily left to glean insights into why. Then, put a cross-functional team together to work on enhancing the policies or programs that are working and adjusting the things that are not. Allowing employees to be a part of creating solutions will increase their overall satisfaction and engagement.

Transparency is so important for a strong company culture. Prioritize open internal communication from the top down and bottom up. Uncertainty is a significant cause of stress for many employees and can lead to an unhealthy culture where employees are either not taking care of themselves or leaving altogether. Be transparent about the challenging business truths and your plans to address them, and your employees will appreciate you for it.

Also, an equitable workplace should be a priority. That starts with every leader in the company understanding that social conditioning exists. Empower all staff members to point it out and propose a change. An equitable workplace is achieved when every employee is compensated equally and has clear and achievable workloads and goals. Every employee has a chance for promotion and is supported similarly by their manager. Every employee has the same opportunities to achieve a healthy work/life balance. And no woman is expected to make coffee.

What about hiring?

Culture also affects your ability to hire new employees. According to the Robert Walters Group, 98% of employers and 97% of job applicants agree that cultural fit between employees and employers is essential. However, 67% of applicants reported feeling misled about the company culture in the hiring process. Disappointment over promised work/life balance not meeting expectations was a complaint for 45% of job candidates.

How can you communicate your culture to candidates during the interview process? One way is to involve more staff in the hiring process. By allowing candidates to meet future colleagues, you can gain valuable insights into if they will thrive within your company's

culture.

Again, transparency is key. Make sure applicants are aware of the health of the company and the long-term strategic plan. Offer vital stats like your retention rate, promotion rate, work-from-home rate, and the percentages of women and POC in the current workforce.

At the end of the day, employees, especially women, want a healthy, productive, and inclusive work environment where their contributions are regularly recognized. And they aren't expected to play a specific gender role based on social conditioning. Your company would benefit from breaking those barriers within your company culture.
