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## Women in Management and Emotional Disequilibrium in the Workplace

Willia Glover

*Emotional Intelligence Coaching and Consulting*

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## Women in Management and Emotional Disequilibrium in the Workplace

Willia Glover, Emotional Intelligence Coaching and Consulting

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*Abstract: This exploratory study uses personal narratives from 5 women in senior management to explore the relationship, if any, between women in management and emotional disequilibrium in the workplace. The following questions are of primary interest: 1. Is the workplace a source of emotional disequilibrium for women in management?; and 2. If so, how are these emotionally challenging experiences being managed? This study reveals that many women in management encounter emotionally challenging experiences in the workplace confirming the workplace as a source of emotional disequilibrium.*

Humans are emotional beings; therefore, emotional equilibrium and emotional disequilibrium are inherent in the human experience. However, sustaining the desired emotional state of equilibrium and stability requires emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence as defined by researchers Salovey and Mayer is “a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action” (Cherniss, 2000, p. 1). Much has been written about emotional intelligence and its increasing importance to effective leadership in the workplace. According to Cooper (1997, p. 38), “one of the foremost challenges facing leaders and organizations [is] how to learn and lead through emotional intelligence and reasoning instead of abstract ideas and analysis.” However, little is written about *emotional disequilibrium* in the workplace, especially among women in management.

Emotional disequilibrium, which Goleman (2005) describes as “emotional hijacking” (p. 26) is a state of emotional distress represented by a disturbing emotion such as anger, fear, or frustration that short circuits rational thought and hurls the individual into a state of disequilibrium. Although this emotional state is temporary, it can greatly impact productivity.

This study seeks to determine if there is a relationship between women in management and emotional disequilibrium in the workplace. Personal narratives are used to recount emotionally challenging experiences in the workplace and explore the following questions:

1. Is the workplace a source of emotional disequilibrium for women in management?
2. If so, how do women leaders cope with these emotionally challenging experiences?

### SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature provides little insight into the experience of emotional disequilibrium in the workplace and women in management. However, it exposes gender and power issues in the workplace that could trigger emotional challenges for women in positions of leadership.

For instance, Fletcher writes about a phenomenon in the workplace called ‘disappearing’ where one is ignored and becomes invisible. Fletcher asserts that ‘disappearing or getting disappeared’ by the

organization or colleagues can produce emotional disequilibrium as a result of feeling dismissed, devalued, exploited, and misunderstood. This phenomenon, according to Fletcher (1999, p. 113), “abounds among women in the workplace” and is “largely an undiscussable subject in contemporary management.”

In a study conducted by Catalyst that examined barriers facing women in the workplace, it was discovered that “gender-based stereotyping in business limits opportunities for women to advance in the workplace and achieve their potential” (Catalyst, 2005, p. 3). This “obvious but unspoken” practice, according to Catalyst, continues to maintain gender disparities in corporate leadership (Catalyst, 2005, p. 3).

Catalyst (2000, p. 13) revealed that myths “held by both men and women” fostered gender stereotyping in the global business world and are the reason why “women currently make up only 13 percent of expatriates in U.S. corporations,” but comprise 50 percent of the labor pool (p. 2). Catalyst also discovered that gender stereotyping frequently puts women leaders in “double-bind, ‘no-win’ dilemmas” (Nierenberg & Fong, 2007, p. 1). If women business leaders are focused “on work relationships” and express “concern for other people’s perspectives,” they are considered “less competent” (Belkin, 2007, p. 3). If they “act assertively, focus on work task, display ambition”—they are seen as “too tough” and “unfeminine” (Belkin, 2007, p. 3).

Nierenberg & Fong (2007, p. 1) concluded that “women leaders face higher standards than men leaders and are rewarded with less” and “when women exhibit traditionally valued leadership behaviors such as assertiveness, they tend to be seen as competent but not personable or well-liked. Yet those who do adopt a more stereotypically feminine style are liked but not seen as having valued leadership skills.” The perception is that men are still viewed as “default leaders” and women as “atypical leaders.” As a result of this lingering perception, women “violate accepted norms of leadership, no matter what the leadership behavior” and “are perceived as ‘never just right’”.

The literature certainly suggests that the workplace can be a source of emotional disequilibrium for women in positions of leadership, but it does not address how women in management cope with emotional challenges in the workplace.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses personal narratives to access and explore deeply held experiences of emotional disequilibrium in the workplace among women leaders.

Participants in this study were self-selected by their response to the following primary question:

“As a member of management, have you ever had an interaction with members of your leadership team that triggered an emotion within you similar to feeling:

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| a. ignored       | b. exploited                                  |
| c. devalued      | d. dismissed                                  |
| e. misunderstood | f. disheartened                               |
| g. inadequate    | h. incompetent or                             |
|                  | i. damned if you do and damned if you don’t?” |

Five women from traditionally male dominated industries ranging from 35-59 years of age were identified. Each participant was interviewed in person or via the phone about personal experiences of emotional disequilibrium in the workplace.

Prior to collecting data, participants were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form agreeing to an informal, taped interview. To maintain anonymity, each participant was given an opportunity to select a pseudonym. The personal narratives were recorded, transcribed, and sent to participants for verification of accuracy.

## PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Below are excerpts from personal narratives in which participants recount emotionally challenging experiences in the workplace. Each participant shares her initiating workplace experience, the ensuing emotional disequilibrium, and her approach to regaining emotional balance.

### **Helen: A Senior Manager in the software industry recounts an experience in which she felt disappointed and betrayed.**

The incident that comes to the forefront is when a member of my team informed me that despite the fact that our key team experts were not available and all remaining team members were needed to work on certain issues, she did not want to work on those issues. She contacted me stating, "I told you I don't like doing these issues. Why are you having me do them? Reassign them to someone else." I responded by saying, "I can't reassign. As a team, we're just going to have to bear with it and get through this until our experts return."

When there was no further response from the subordinate, I assumed that this issue had been resolved. Within thirty minutes, I received a call from the top manager [the subordinate's friend] two levels above me with whom I had a good working relationship. The top manager is a woman who knows my management style and had given me accolades in the past. This top manager asked, "Helen, what are you doing? I heard that we're having problems and that our engineers are having to work on certain issues." She launched into . . . "I was not doing my job well and had not utilized all of my resources," all based upon the complaint of this one person.

In essence, I was reprimanded for it [assigning work that the subordinate did not find appealing]. My response was--"Yes, you're right. It's been really tough." I did not defend myself and I should have. Because I admire her, I was very disappointed with this manager. I had expected her to say--"I just received a grievance. Is there anything I can do to help"? It was like an emotional trigger for her and she reacted as a friend instead of an executive of this company. I did not think that she would let that relationship overrule her managerial perception in this situation.

*I was stunned and I felt betrayed* [italics added]. This kind of incestuous relationship is the thing that really, really left me disenchanted. That was really troubling and I'm still bothered by it today. I was so hurt that I actually had tears in my eyes.

For the next hour I lost all motivation for my work. I really did nothing but blindly move things around on my desk. I was near tears, but I didn't want to lapse into a weeping fit at work in the office . . . I'm glad I was not driving because I would have had to pull over. *That's how upset I was. Very, very, upset* [italics added].

It took the remainder of that week and over the weekend to get beyond that hurt. No matter how well you do your job you're always going to be suspect of being incompetent, unfair or unreasonable.

### **Tinkerbelle: A Director in the software industry shares an experience of feeling exploited, ignored, and frustrated.**

In a previous management chain, there were several women and multiple men at the senior director's level who would have been asked for information and ideas about future projects. Several times I submitted ideas, but many times my ideas were ignored, or what I would call almost dismissed. Yet, portions of my suggestions were included in the suggestions usually presented by men. This always made me feel that I was devalued and ignored for my ideas. For instance, in a discussion with my former boss who is not an American citizen, I presented an idea to resolve an issue we were having. He responded by saying, "Well, OK, that sounds like a good idea. Send it to me by email and copy two other male associates." So, I did that. Two meetings later my boss informed us that he had received several ideas some of which were exceptional and the exceptional ideas were the ones that he had decided to move forward with.

One of the exceptional plans provided by one of my male associates included two primary steps that I had already initiated in my team with very positive results. He [my boss] rolled out this exceptional plan and gave applause on the phone to my associate and his excellent plan and details--patting him on the back to the point that made you sick.

*I was emotionally crushed. I was mad* [italics added]. Once again I was not validated for my contributions. Everyone else was validated, applauded and recognized, but my efforts were never put into the same scope as theirs. I was so furious; I actually shut down for a period of time. I was not willing to offer too much information to anyone for the simple fact that I knew that once again . . . they would take my information, capitalize off of it, and I would get no credit. I don't say I want all of the credit, but I do want acknowledgement for that portion of the work that was mine.

It took me probably four to five months to recover from this emotionally challenging experience. During that four to five months, I no longer put my ideas out there for everyone to share. At the end of that four to five months, I began to share limited information that I could clearly show had been established and my track record with it.

Several years ago it was so frustrating for me that I would be frustrated for days. It wasn't just my frustration with me, but I would snap at my husband and snap at the clerk in the grocery store when these people had no impact upon my frustration. One day after a frustrating day at work, I found myself snapping at a clerk in a store. It was then that I realized that I had become very negative and went home and cried. That's when I started composing emails . . . to myself . . . saying exactly what I think, what the problems are, and what needs to be addressed. Then I close out the email and tell myself there is nothing more I can do. Carrying it around all day will not help my staff, my family, or anyone else. It feels good to be able to let that raw emotion out. So, by putting it in the email, it's a great release . . . but it doesn't address what I'm going to do to fix it going forward and I still struggle with that; trying to figure out a better way. Again I was working with my superior who is not an American citizen. It was one of the most frustrating times. I got to the point where I wanted to leave my job. I just didn't think I was going to be able to do it anymore.

I work in an organization that is almost all men and there are very few women on my team. Regardless of whether you are in your country or his country, my boss believed that women should act and present themselves in a certain manner. We had gone to a Middle Eastern restaurant for dinner one night. The conversation was good, but you could tell that some topics are softly spoken about when a lady is sitting at the table. At the end of the evening we all went out to the patio where they have the hookah pipes. The men were going to smoke the pipes. My superior went over and selected the tobacco and they all got their little mouthpieces, except for me. My superior, of course, was the one handing out the mouth pieces. They were all sitting there chatting and having drinks and I'm sitting there in the corner completely excluded from the whole event. I decided at that point that "I'm a big girl, over 21, and I can peddle my own bike. I'll get my own mouthpiece." I talked to the gentleman and I got my mouthpiece. He was reserved about giving it to me, however. It was obvious that I was breaking tradition and culture. But in America I have equal opportunity. So, I took my mouthpiece over and this time instead of letting them pass the pipe across me, I put my mouthpiece in and took a puff and the conversation absolutely froze. Absolutely froze as my superior was sitting there staring. I'm not sure if he was speechless or what, but he didn't say a word. Within five minutes, they were all ready to go. "We're done, let's go."

On another occasion this superior came to my city. I had to pick him up at his hotel because he didn't want to drive. I arrived at his hotel at 7:30 a.m. At 8:30 a.m. he shows up in the lobby and tells me he's going to have breakfast. So he sits there and has breakfast in front of me and when he finishes, he offers me a banana. He lays it on the table and says, "I thought you might want some breakfast." So, for five days I got a banana each morning and I could get to work anywhere from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. I never knew. Yet I needed to arrive at his hotel around 7:30 or 8 o'clock and wait for his arrival, wait for his breakfast, and chauffeur him to the office. One morning, I had had enough. I needed to write my email and refresh myself so I asked a co-worker on another team to take my superior downstairs and get him a cup of coffee because he didn't get his coffee at breakfast that morning. So my co-worker takes him to the cafeteria and he's standing in front of the coffee machine and he tells her, "I like the medium size cup with cream and one packet of sugar." My co-worker looks at him and says, "There's your cup, there's the cream, and there's the sugar. I'll wait at the register for you because you will need to pay for it."

My co-worker says that my superior stood there for probably ten minutes looking at the coffee machine. She said she was not sure if he did not know how to work the equipment or if he was so frustrated that he wasn't going to do it or what. I had to just chuckle at the look on her face when she brought him back up to my office. I had been feeling the same way for over two years of working with him.

**Esther: A Senior Director in the information technology industry shares her experience of feeling devalued, inadequate, incompetent, and damned if you do and damned if you don't.**

I work as part of a delivery organization and there are certain expectations to deliver certain projects within budget and on time. In this incident, part of being able to deliver a service is that my budget was cut midway through delivery while at the same time the scope was increased.

Initially, I shared with them [the client], “Here’s what I can do; here’s what my team can do.” I was asked to come back a couple of weeks later, basically, to see if there was any opportunity for me to accelerate the timeline or find ways to do something faster or with fewer resources. I think what they didn’t like is that the second report basically produced the same results. I think they expected that I would come back with some sort of out-of-the-box thinking to figure out how to do more within the revised budget guidelines and that has not been the case.

I’ve had one-on-one conversations with my manager . . . to get some sense of direction from him about how I should handle this situation. I know that he is also feeling some pressure from the business and is, therefore, coming back to me asking if there is anything else I can do. The lever I would be looking for is to change the date. If there are no more resources that can be applied, that’s fine, but I need some sort of buffer on the date and that’s not an option, at least right now, they’re willing to entertain.

There’s an expectation that not only will I deliver to the original scope, but deliver to the expanded scope with fewer resources. I’m made to feel like I should be smart enough to figure this out and that I shouldn’t take on the attitude of being a victim of a budget cut. I’m also made to feel if I can’t do it, then I am inadequate and that my peers or someone else could get the job done.

My way of responding is to try to present the facts and try not to get emotionally pulled into some of the accusations that are being presented. I’m trying to stick to the facts, but I can tell you that most people want to pull you into the emotional aspects of it because the delivery of this particular solution brings a lot of benefit to the company.

I am dealing with senior level executives in the company and this is a very high profile project. They don’t want to hear, “I can’t get the job done.” They want to hear how I can get that job done. So my approach has been, “Here’s where we are today, here’s what’s going to be required in order for us to finish the job, and then here’s how you can help me.”

It’s been frustrating to have doubt about your ability to deliver and frustrating because you’re spending so much mental energy trying to figure this out. You become tired and agitated. The energy level is low.

I make a conscious choice not to allow it to interfere with my ability to get back to the business at hand and function as the leader that I need to function as. But subconsciously, I’m still feeling a bit inadequate and a bit damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

I feel inadequate and frustrated and somewhat tired of having to go back multiple times to present the data. I’m frustrated with being asked to do the work again and again; inadequate when asked to come back with a different answer.

If I could really open up and openly share with my management or with the leadership team about what’s going on, without thinking about repercussions it would be very helpful.

**Jessica: A Senior Manager in the software industry. Her experience produced feelings of self-doubt, fear, and intimidation.**



I had a problem employee who had been transferred to my team. This was a situation that took place over the several months that he was working for me. I was very emotional during that entire time. I felt like the leadership team . . . left me alone to deal with all of his anger and harsh words.

He managed to bring me to tears several times based on what he said and put in emails. It was a very emotional time and I didn't feel able to handle the situation that was ongoing. I felt like there was no way to create a positive outcome, but I was being asked to push forward even though he had just been transferred to me.

He would accuse me of things and he threatened to sue. He sent out an email accusing me of lying to customers. He said essentially that I tried to get him to lie to customers the way I had lied to customers. I remember feeling very angry at that time with him for accusing me of things that he didn't have evidence to support. I felt not only angry, but a little bit worried about it and about how far would he go.

Although it wasn't valid . . . I was worried that this employee would end up suing me and I would be left out to dry by senior management. I didn't really feel supported.

One email from him was a page and a half long. I remember physically shaking while reading it and that made me cry [italics added]. In that situation it probably took a few hours before I decided to do anything with it. I was thinking about an appropriate way to address it . . . and who could I contact for help. I was wondering whether I should worry about my job. I was full of a lot of doubt and fear.

Finally, I forwarded it [the email] to HR [Human Resources] and talked to them by phone about it. I was advised to "Just keep it completely factual. Don't respond to everything that he said." I felt despair that the situation had gotten so out of hand. I felt a little incompetent that I couldn't deal with it and I was upset that I had let it upset me so much.

By not responding to it [the email], I spent less time thinking about it and less time trying to justify in my own mind why he was not correct. HR did reassure me that he could not sue me over something like that without factual information.

Coming to the point of being able to address it with HR and the employee took hours; the rest of the day, basically. The next couple of days . . . I was worried about it and thinking about it a lot. It was a good week before I could move on.

I knew I would get through it. However, every time someone mentioned his name or I would go back to his email, I would feel angry over again.

### **T. L. Barlston: President and CEO in the healthcare industry shares an experience of feeling devalued.**

I had a very, very, very successful event. At the event, I invited a prior senior member of the company to join me at the head table which made one of the directors of the company very angry. The following day, in an inappropriate and hurtful way he came to my office and devalued me when he said, "We just don't know if we value you and what you do because of this."

It was flabbergasting to me. You don't have to thank me; you don't have to pour accolades on me; but to say that you're devalued is probably the most crushing statement professionally I've ever had and it took several weeks to recover from the depression.

In response to his statement, I stayed very calm. I really did not let that person know how much it hurt me and affected me.

I spoke to my immediate boss after that. I let him know how hurtful it was to me; how it affected my mojo; how it was very difficult to do my job given those circumstances and that it would take me time to get my mojo back. He was supportive, if you will, and said, "Oh, well, we'll work through this," but gave very little direction or willingness to step in because the person who did this was his boss.

This experience lingered with me. It crushed my energy for what I do and so it took a few weeks and many sleepless nights during that time to rethink. *I felt completely unappreciated* [italics added].

It wasn't about the incident itself, it was about the bigger picture of what was said and about not feeling valued; about how I'd worked to change this company around and how successfully I'd done it over the past few years and how unappreciated I am; and nervous about whether they are trying to get rid of me.

[Nevertheless,] I did get up and come in on days I didn't want to. I canceled some of my big meetings during that first week knowing that people would be able to read pretty easily that I'm not myself. So, I stayed more in my office that week; a little more phone work than in person and . . . slowly kept reminding myself of my value and who I was doing my job for—not to impress the big guys, but I was doing it for my company, staff, and for our clients. That helped sustain me . . . and slowly helped to get my energy back.

[Also]--I would think for strong women leaders others would have experienced this as well. I have always intimidated other women and actually men as well at upper levels. So I have found myself really trying to temper my behavior and be liked more--to be so sweet and so kind because of that. Sometimes I get resentful of that. I look at the behavior of a male, for instance, it's perfectly acceptable for them. They'll say something that if I said it, it would not be accepted. So, sometimes it's frustrating.

I try too hard to be liked so that I'm not the witch; I'm not the ogre up there that thinks she knows everything.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Three key findings emerged from this study. First, the workplace is, indeed, a significant source of emotional disequilibrium for women in management. Second, women in management struggle to manage the emotional disequilibrium they experience in the workplace. This suggests that although women tend to have highly developed emotional intelligence, further development of emotional competencies is needed to better manage emotionally stressful workplace experiences.

Third, strategies used to address emotionally challenging experiences in the workplace varied widely among participants. Generally, the participants had no proven strategy for managing the emotional disequilibrium and regaining their emotional balance.

Two important observations were also made. First, without appropriate healing, an emotionally challenging experience can leave deep emotional scars that could take years to heal. For example, during one of the face-to-face interviews, I noticed that the participant's face became flushed. I assumed the experience happened recently. When asked if this was a recent experience, the participant responded with, "No. This happened about four or five years ago."

Second, the simple act of sharing the emotionally challenging experience with an objective, non-judging listener seemed to have a positive effect upon participants.

Developing one's *emotional competency* is the key to emotional intelligence and effectively managing emotional disequilibrium in the workplace. According to Cherniss (2000), "emotional competencies are linked to and based upon emotional intelligence"; and "a certain level of emotional intelligence is necessary to learn the emotional competencies" (p. 3).

This study exposes the rarely discussed phenomenon of emotional disequilibrium in the workplace among women in management. Hopefully this new insight will stimulate interest and generate additional research about this increasingly important topic to women in management and the organizations that employ them.

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