

# CONTROVERSIAL WOMEN

Dr. Helen Eckmann

In organizations that I work with, I keep running into women that seem to be embroiled in more of their share of controversy. These women appear to me to be lightning rods of heated conversation within their offices. They are often talked about and sometimes referred to as “pushy” (I rarely hear the B word anymore).

Although these women may be pushy, they still seem to garner way more than their share of animated office conversations. And whether I’m with the CEO or in the mailroom, I hear the same story over and over about these women. And the story I hear about these women seems to be more based on rhetoric and hyperbole than actual fact. It is as if the organization has made up its mind, reducing this woman to a single story—and that story is about how this woman is trouble.

What stands in striking contrast to this story is that these women are simultaneously viewed by the organization as competent and very good at doing their jobs. But their accomplishments are never the topic of conversation. Often these women are not getting promoted or taken seriously because they “don’t fit in, are not on the bus, or not a team player.”

When individuals (both men and women) tell the stories of these controversial women, the stories are told with a lot of energy and angst. When I watch people speak about these controversial women in organizations, I see an almost gleeful look in the eyes and a smile on the face of the storyteller, even though what they are saying is quite negative and hurtful. Even introverts seem to talk with their hands when describing a controversial woman.

It is almost embarrassing to address the quality of the stories I hear about these women. Sometimes it is about “her big legs.” Or, about how “she doesn’t like men” (or equally, other women) or, how she has a “nagging, complaining voice.” Sometimes, I hear that she is “the negative one, the Eeyore of every conversation.”

It seems to me that the actual accomplishments achieved by any of these women have been completely overshadowed by the hypothetical stories and hyperbole that surrounds them. A controversial woman becomes a lightning rod of conversation, and the topic (and language to describe it) is always the same.

For example, one of the organizations I work with has a woman who is highly respected for her work, but from the CEO down, when her colleagues speak of her they tell me “Oh, she complains a lot, she is always on the defensive.” “When she is in a meeting, she always takes charge, sometimes swears, and never brings new ideas to the table.” What is remarkable is how many times I hear the same exact words used to describe her. It is almost like I’m in an Ashram and this organization has found a mantra for this woman. All other conversations or words about her other than the mantra have become unnecessary. It is like her contributions (or lack of them) have been reduced to a sound bite.

This left me to wonder: What makes some women controversial? So I decided to interview three women that I identified as controversial. Then I decided to interview three women who I identified as being able to get their jobs done without creating such a firestorm in their organizations. Then I decided to interview three men that I have worked with who have demonstrated to me that they are committed to having women become more successful in organizations (because these men have helped me in the organizations I’ve worked in).

## **THE CONTROVERSIAL WOMEN**

The Controversial Women

I asked three women if they felt they were controversial within their organization. I gave them the above description of controversial and all three agreed that to some extent this described them. The following is a list of similarities I found out from the controversial women:

1. They love their jobs.
2. They enjoy working very hard and accomplishing tasks with groups of both men and women.
3. They are discouraged with their progress in their organizations.
4. They like to move fast (and don't like people who don't). Each of these women asked me in some way, "to get to the point."
5. They were all more concerned about doing a good job than getting credit for doing a good job.

## **THE NON-CONTROVERSIAL WOMEN**

Then I interviewed three other women that I identified as non controversial. I read the above description to them and they each agreed that they were not "lightning rods in their organizations" and they each could identify other women who were controversial within their current or past organizations.

This is what I found out from the non-controversial women:

1. They love their jobs, but they love something or someone else a lot more.
2. They enjoy working and accomplishing tasks with groups of both men and women, but they don't ENJOY working very, very hard.
3. They are not discouraged with their progress in their organizations.
4. They enjoy reflecting as much as they enjoy doing.
5. They are equally concerned about getting credit for doing a good job as they are about doing a good job.

## **THREE MEN SPEAK ON DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CONTROVERSIAL AND NON-CONTROVERSIAL WOMEN**

I described controversial women and non-controversial women to three men. Each of them could identify women in organizations they had worked with that were controversial and women who appeared to them to be non-controversial.

I asked these men to describe the differences in controversial and non-controversial women. This is what I learned:

1. Controversial women seemed to sometimes "want more than their share." The response from one man was, "She wants more than her share of the conversation time in meetings, more than her share of the budget allocations, more than her share of the office space. She wants to be the one with the good ideas and the one with the best people."
2. Controversial women seemed to be described as being "in a bigger rush." According to one man's description, they are "in a rush to get everywhere." The men all mentioned something about the controversial women being more likely to interrupt both men and women in conversation. One man told a story of a controversial woman who ran from her

office to the bathroom twice a day; she would actually bump into people and did not excuse herself.

3. They also agreed that the controversial woman was probably not as effective at networking, especially up the hierarchy in the organization. One man told a story of how the controversial woman he worked with liked to work with her own team. "Her own group adores her." But he said the other department heads at her level didn't like her and she wasn't well thought of in the boardroom. They were described as not being "political."

## REFLECTION POINTS

As I reflect on the men's responses to my questions about the controversial women they have worked with what I heard is that these women are highly competitive.

If you are wondering if you might be a woman who is controversial in the office, these appear to be the hallmarks of a controversial businesswoman:

1. Hardworking
2. Very concerned with outcomes
3. Competitive
4. Impatient
5. The subject of more than her share of office gossip

After these informal conversations with controversial women, not-so controversial woman, and discussions with men with a demonstrated interest in having women be more successful in the office, I offer the following advice to controversial women:

1. Learn to better separate Process from Content.
2. The appearance of always being in a rush is not working for you. It just isn't graceful, and like it or not we all need some grace.
3. Look at yourself from the balcony (Heifetz).
4. Watch other women in your organization who are getting work done without creating so much controversy and learn from them.
5. Don't embody the "I am my job" mentality (Senge).
6. Create a new story for yourself in your organization.
7. Utilize "Tension Thinking," not just about your accomplishments at work, but how you are perceived.

## SOME CLARIFICATIONS

**Process and Content:** Process is the way we do things and content is the thing we are doing. For example, when I go for a run, stretching, putting on my shoes, and drinking a glass of water are all preparation or process. The content of the run begins when my feet hit the pavement. For another example, when we are in a meeting the agenda, where we sit, and the people we talk to (or don't talk to) are all part of the process of the meeting. The content of the meeting is when we are "on task," discussing the items listed.

**Always in a Rush:** I asked my minister once why he always moved so glacially slowly among the congregation after church. It seemed to me that it took him ten minutes to go three feet. He told me that if he rushes from one person to the next, he might insult three other people in his rush. He told me that rushing past someone makes them feel unimportant. It appears that controversial women might be making others feel unimportant in their rush to get things done. One of the controversial women told me that she finishes other people's sentences. This is not an endearing quality. I

wonder if some of the controversial women are mothers and are trying to get as much done at work in the shortest amount of time so they can get home to their family. I also wonder if some women have become so accustomed to rushing that they are stuck in high gear all of the time, both at home and in the office.

Another controversial woman said, "I hate meetings, they go so slow. Everyone knows what needs to be done and they just endlessly poke along, hoping that someone will make a decision. Well, shit, in a vacuum I'll make a decision just so we can move to the next agenda item." This type of comment is at the heart of women who, even though they do their jobs, are branded as controversial within their organizations.

I wonder if these controversial women might be "used" by their organizations. I know that my husband is impatient if I ask him to go shopping with me. I know that if I show him three things that are outrageously expensive, then show him the one that I want (that is still pretty darn expensive) he will go for the pretty darn expensive one just so we can go home. I know how to use his impatience against him (and our family budget). I wonder if organizations are using these bright and yet impatient women to make controversial decisions so they don't have to.

I am confident that there are controversial men in the office—men who get branded with a sound bite—but I've been seeing more women in this position than men.

Advice to individuals who have controversial women working for them:  
It may be that these women are stuck in overdrive and they are creating more trouble than they are worth.

Or, it may be that these women are insecure and feel that they need to outperform everyone else to be taken seriously. It might be worth some time to try praising them instead of turning them into a sound bite.

Look at the ways that you describe people in your organization. If you are using hyperbole or sound bites, realize that this is just part of their characteristics. Try being more accurate and sophisticated in descriptions of employees. Stop office gossip (at least in your presence).

Listen and look—see if you have one of these high performers in your organization and see if you can slow her down. You might ask yourself if a man demonstrated these same characteristics how the organization would handle it.