BOOK REVIEW

What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know
Synopsis By: Erin Roth (Law Firm Committee).

To really understand the book What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know, one must believe that women face a bias in the workplace from both men and women. With a book brimming with anonymous testimonies, Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey have set forth convincing evidence that gender bias truly affects women in the workplace.

By researching hundreds of studies on gender bias, the authors have identified four patterns of bias against women in the workplace. The authors, with some help from the National Science Foundation, have interviewed 127 female executives for insight into these gender biases, with only five interviewees stating that they have personally never experienced or seen the identified gender biases at play in the workplace. The authors acknowledge the flaws in their research—the interviewees constitute a small pool of female executives, and all have achieved a certain level of career success. By acknowledging that a bias may be more subconscious, and thus more difficult to identify and handle, Williams and Dempsey lay the foundation that gender biases are very real and are experienced by, at a minimum, a significant number of participants in their study. Several other books marketed toward professional women (including some that the authors particularly note) simply give an all-out command to women regarding behavior, clothing, and how to handle a perceived bias. In contrast, Williams and Dempsey hope to not only identify the issues women face, but also provide a usable catalog of solutions. These solutions, they note, can be adopted as fits one’s own personality, and their advice is not a one-size-fits-all way to handle bias. It seems most of Williams and Dempsey’s directives involve pointing out the biased comment or behavior to the person committing the offense. Still, the range of solutions can likely fit the range of personalities among women, from passive to assertive to aggressive. The key, the authors note, is to find the solution that aligns with one’s personality.

Williams and Dempsey explain, in great detail, four biases faced by women in the workforce: (1) prove it again, (2) the tightrope, (3) the maternal wall, and (4) the tug-of-war. The book is broken down into four major sections addressing these four significant biases. In each section, Williams and Dempsey assist the reader in not only describing the way to recognize these biases but also by providing the reader with an action plan of potential ways to counter or address each. The reader is struck by the personal anecdotes demonstrating how the particular bias may play out in the workplace. While these narrations come from the anonymous interviewed individuals, they seem almost universal due to Williams and Dempsey’s ability to focus on the specific words and behaviors that highlight the nuances of each bias. This detailed depiction of the bias is followed by ideas on how to handle the biased behavior.

Williams and Dempsey acknowledge that the suggested responses will not necessarily appeal to all readers and that each reader can take the action that feels right for her. Williams and Dempsey eschew the idea that women should behave in one particular way or another in order to counter the biases faced in the workplace. While other books of this type seem to want to push women to behave in a more assertive manner, or to dress in a particular way, or to “never say sorry,” Williams and Dempsey admit that women, like men, are so diverse that an overall directive is not sufficiently helpful to individual women.

The bias of asking a woman to “prove it again,” Williams and Dempsey explain, is the way in which women are sometimes judged by a stricter standard than men. In order to be viewed as competent, or even good, women must consistently prove themselves to others. A woman’s mistake is often viewed as evidence of her lack of abilities, but a man’s similar mistake is frequently labeled as just a mistake and not indicative of the man’s competence. Williams and Dempsey pinpoint quite a few types of double standards that exist for men and women and further explain how women are regularly evaluated from a strict objective standpoint, while men are judged more leniently. To counter this bias, Williams and Dempsey advise the reader to keep
track of her accomplishments and to point them out when necessary. In some ways, the authors seem
resigned to the fact that the current professional world simply has a bias and that women must prove
themselves over and over again to be seen as competent. While this bias cannot be changed in an instant,
a woman can, in her own way, seek to push her evaluators to measure her performance in a fair, unbiased
manner.

The “tightrope” bias, as described by Williams and Dempsey, acknowledges that there is a fairly narrow
space for women to fit in in the professional world. Women cannot ignore the contradicting pressure to be
feminine, but not too soft, and masculine, but not too aggressive. In this way, the executive world tends to
push women into traditionally female roles. The feminine woman is selected to take notes at a meeting, to
fix the coffee machine, and to provide input on party décor. The masculine woman is criticized as too
aggressive. Williams and Dempsey acknowledge that there is a narrow role for women; women should
strive to be neither a doormat nor an angry monster, and to some extent, women have to find their own way
to walk this tightrope. The authors’ action plan directs women to not fall into either role—to refuse the
bimbo/passive role but to maintain balance by stopping short of being overly angry, competitive, and
aggressive. While Williams and Dempsey strive to provide an action plan that propels women above the
bias, the resolutions to walking the tightrope seem to be “don’t fall.” Perhaps the authors are conceding that
generally, successfully balancing atop the biased tightrope is the best that female executives can achieve.

The third bias identified by the authors is the maternal wall. Lest the title misdirect the reader, the maternal
wall bias affects women whether or not they have children. Though, of course, Williams and Dempsey note
that women with kids often have a greater wall to climb. The authors note that women face this bias
countlessly throughout their career—from interviewing, to starting a job, and especially after having children.
Just the possibility that a smart and savvy young female professional may have kids in the future is enough
to dismiss her from any hiring possibility, the authors note in some examples. The interviews conducted by
the authors revealed that a return to work from maternity leave regularly creates suspicion that the woman
is no longer committed to her job and would appreciate being passed up for opportunities that may take her
away from her home life. The advice here is simpler than in the other sections: Williams and Dempsey
encourage the reader to voice their commitment to work to their superiors upon returning from leave and
to draw attention to the matter when the same reader is held back from attendance at a conference due to
her motherhood status. Additionally, the authors advise women to marry a supportive partner who will not
assume she will handle the majority of the child-related issues in the household. The authors again make
the concession that this bias may always be part of being a mother, but that the reader can work to better
own experience with this bias.

The “tug-of-war” is the last bias outlined by the authors. Williams and Dempsey explain that a tug-of-war
exists between women who have seemingly “made it” and the ones who follow in their footsteps. Williams
and Dempsey note that sometimes the bias that women have against their own gender is the biggest
hindrance to other women. When a woman is a minority member of the top echelon, she may feel the need
to protect her space and position (and rightly so, say Williams and Dempsey). The result is that women
may be hardest on those who are trying to follow their lead and thereby take what they view as the only
seat for a female at the leadership level. While men work to promote themselves equally, women acting on
this bias may be harder on women trying to make it. To help alleviate the burdens created by this bias,
Williams and Dempsey direct women at all stages of their career to try to understand other women along
the path and perhaps even actively work to mentor, encourage, and promote other women. Williams and
Dempsey note that if the reader has personally felt that a female superior has tried to stall her career, it can
be valuable to confront the woman who has demonstrated a bias against her. Women should recognize the
struggle faced by other women and reach out, instead of simply avoiding the issue, or worse, hindering
other women. By making connections, Williams and Dempsey believe that women can build a better support
system for themselves.

In an additional chapter, Williams and Dempsey address the fact that women of color not only face the
biases noted above, but additional prejudices as well. The authors note several of the stereotypes that tend
to be attributed to women of various color. Williams and Dempsey report that for a significant portion of the
women of color interviewed in their study, biases have had an impact on their career.
Lastly, Williams and Dempsey note that women have a final means to handle bias in the workplace: with their feet. Women in difficult situations can change their circumstances by finding a new job. Here, Williams and Dempsey provide the same advice as anyone else advising a person how to change jobs—don’t leave until you have a new job, be proactive about moving on, and don’t undervalue yourself. The authors acknowledge that such a decision is very personal, but that it should be an active decision—a decision that is reasoned and conscious.

In summary, Williams and Dempsey provide some thoughtful and realistic viewpoints of how biases affect women at work. They invite both women and men to read their book in hopes that education will work to minimize biased behavior. One can appreciate that the advice on what to do when facing bias is not one singular package that should be utilized by all women. Instead, a reader can embrace the suggestions that resonate with her, and can use this book as a source of empowerment to confront those who she feels may be biased, or at times, to walk away from the gender biases that subtly permeate the executive world.