

Risk Manager

Is Sandberg's Ambition Gap for Women Really a Likeability Gap?

By: Erin McNeill. Wednesday, February 1st, 2012

Image via Wikipedia



Bloomberg Businessweek posted an interesting video featuring **Sheryl Sandberg**, chief operating officer of **Facebook, Inc.** talking about how women don't identify themselves as "ambitious" and don't seek leadership roles in business organizations. Check it out [here](#).

She analyzes what creates this "ambition gap" that prevents women from becoming **CEOs** or seeking other leadership roles. Part of it is a perception that powerful and successful women aren't likeable. Part of it is that women are actively discouraged from being ambitious at an early age. Part of it is that women still take on the lion's share of work at home, even when they work full-time outside the home as well.

This "ambition gap" is certainly **evident in law**. Women go to law school in equal numbers as men, but few make it to equity partner at **law firms**. The

women I know are certainly ambitious in law school and sought to be the Editors in Chief of law review and other journals, chief justice of the moot court, and tops in the class rank for GPA. Over time, however, those ambitious female law students gravitate away from becoming equity partners – or they are pushed out.

As a female trial attorney, there is another consideration. Jurors need to perceive a party's attorney as credible, trustworthy, and who are enthusiastic. (See, for example, [this article](#) posted by **American Law School** about the power of persuasion. On page 19 of the excerpt, page 4 of the posted PDF, the author discusses how jurors are influenced by the likeability of an attorney.) Powerful and effective female trial lawyers have to balance that line between appearing successful, confident, enthusiastic, but still likeable. It can be a challenge for a female attorney to aggressively cross examine a witness, without bankrupting all the rapport and "likeability" built up with jurors earlier in the trial.

Given these considerations, should people hiring a lawyer think about hiring a man who can negotiate more forcefully and cross examine a witness more aggressively without losing likeability? Sandberg addresses this problem with the resounding answer no. She illustrates the point with a great quote by Warren Buffet, who said that one key to his success was that he "was privileged to work during a period when it was only necessary to compete against half the population." Clearly, allowing women to step aside and surrender leadership roles – in an organization or on a trial team — removes half the talent available to a client or to a firm. For example, I am adept at some of the newest trial technology, because I had the privilege of being a Graduate Research Fellow for the **Center for Legal and Court Technology** when I was a law student at William and Mary. There I learned technology-assisted trial advocacy from some of the best and I have the ability to understand the intersection between traditional trial tactics and the capabilities of new technologies better than many other attorneys at my firm. That is a knowledge base worth keeping, even if I face some unique challenges as a female trial attorney.

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I welcome your ideas on how to balance the need for women to be successful while staying “likeable” and how to keep top female talent in the spotlight at law firms and on litigation teams. How do you strike the balance? How do you think firms and clients can use their talented female attorneys better? Can we cure the “ambition gap” by changing perceptions of successful women?

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