

Obstacles for Women in Business: The Double Bind

What is to blame for the fact that women (who earn over half of all [degrees](#) in the U.S.) are still not [proportionately represented](#) at the leadership levels of American business? As with any stubborn issue, there are many inter-connected causes.

The most fundamental causes – and the hardest to change – are what McKinsey & Co. calls invisible “[mindsets](#).” They are invisible because they are unconscious. No one *intends* to make it harder for women to reach the top. Unconscious mindsets work like blind spots. We know there is a blind spot when we are driving our car. So we consciously compensate. If we become conscious of these mindsets, we can do the same. We can adjust our behaviors and lower obstacles for women reaching their full potential.

The first is the “double bind.” In a nutshell, it is this: If a woman behaves in a “feminine” way, she may be liked, but she may not be respected or seen as a leader. If she operates in a “masculine” way, however, she may be judged and [disliked](#). The title to [Catalyst’s research paper](#) on this topic says it all: “Damned or Doomed.”



I use [prototypes](#), Max to represent masculine styles and Fran to represent the feminine approach. Most workplaces tend to be more masculine (Max-like) than feminine (Fran-like) in many ways. For example, in [communication style](#), the primary language of the workplace is “Max.” This language uses declarations and sounds confident. Fran’s style is more humble; she may qualify her assertions to avoid sounding “uppity.” When a woman speaks “Fran,” she may be talked over, not be heard and not be seen as a leader. Women naturally imitate workplace norms and the styles of those most successful in reaching the top. They learn to speak “Max.” If a woman adopts a masculine approach too often, to too great a degree or at the “wrong” time, however, she may be penalized. Others may think, “Who does she think she is?”

The dilemma shows up in other dimensions of the [masculine-feminine continuum](#), including when a woman:

- In [decision-making](#), drives a team to a goal rather than involving others and incorporating their ideas,
- Is energized by, and motivates others with, a [work style](#) that is competitive rather than collaborative,
- [Influences](#) by giving orders rather than through persuasion, or
- In handling [conflict](#), is direct rather than indirect.

If we are aware of the double bind, we can monitor our knee-jerk reaction (like “What a B____!”). We can learn to recognize an unconscious mindset. As with the blind spot in your car, we can adjust our thinking – and lower an obstacle to gender diversity.