

The Invisible Labor of Likability at Work

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And how to rid yourself of the burden.



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We've all been there. You email one coworker: "I need this by Thursday." You email another: "Hi! Just checking back in. Would you be able to have this ready for me by Thursday? Totally understand if that doesn't work. No rush, except that, sadly, there is a rush. Thank you so much."

And then you read the second email three more times to ensure that you don't sound impatient, demanding, passive-aggressive, or aggressive-aggressive. All that mental work is the invisible labor of likability. It's the time you spend trying to make requests less direct or criticism easier to swallow.

The work no one sees

Women have historically been expected to manage the feelings of others at work. But they're not the only ones. Junior employees. People of color. LGBTQ+ employees. People with disabilities. Workers who don't come from privileged backgrounds. Anyone who has ever been told, implicitly or explicitly, that to succeed in a professional environment, they must not be "difficult." They may spend their days worrying about how they come across. Is

it possible for me to just say what I mean? Or do I need to prepare everyone for the fact that I'm saying it first?

In many workplaces, certain employees are expected to deliver bad news with a smile, offer criticism without offending anyone, and disagree while still making everyone feel respected, validated, and comfortable. They read the room, calm down the room, and even prevent the room from exploding. That work is often invisible, but it's what keeps workplaces running smoothly.

Valuable to the culture, invisible to the hierarchy

The problem is that it rarely helps employees get promoted. In one study, [women were 48% more likely than men to volunteer for office housework](#). And by housework, I am talking about the tasks that are necessary but often don't carry much status. Things like taking meeting notes, planning office parties, onboarding new employees, serving on committees, or mentoring coworkers. Not everyone can predict how a colleague will receive difficult information. Or know when to interrupt tension before it escalates into conflict. Or let an angry executive know that his idea was terrible without actually saying the word terrible.

Those employees often become defined by their soft skills. They're supportive, they're thoughtful, they don't take up too much space. They're reliable. They're so good with people. Yes, those things are important skills, even strengths. But they are not the same strengths that are traditionally rewarded with promotions or prestigious projects.

The personality tax

You can also be penalized for not doing this work. Women are expected to behave in incredibly narrow ways. They are expected to be confident but not abrasive, driven but not self-important, direct but not rude. Other employees have narrow paths they must walk as well. A Black employee might fear that being too direct will be seen as angry. Younger workers might feel they need to soften their opinions to avoid sounding "entitled." Male employees at traditionally masculine companies may feel they can't complain about team morale without seeming weak.

When feedback gets personal

It can feel like walking a tightrope every day. Researchers studying performance reviews pulled data from more than 25,000 employees at 250 organizations. Guess who got notes on their personality more often? Women. Managers weren't just assessing what women accomplished; they were spending time evaluating how women came across.

It's not that people should be rude, lack emotional intelligence, or abuse their coworkers. But think about how much time that invisible labor takes. It cuts into the time many workers already have. A concise email doesn't have to be proofread twice to ensure no one thinks you're angry. Feedback can be honest instead of measured.

What employers need to change

Leaders can start fixing this by tracking who does what office housework and making sure everyone does their fair share. Who takes meeting notes? Who welcomes new hires? Who plans office birthdays? Who supports coworkers without getting credit? Who do people come to when there's conflict in the team? Then give credit to those who deserve it.

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Businesses should also watch how people are described in reviews. Are women told they're "too aggressive" if they speak up, while men are complimented for being assertive? Are men praised for being competitive, while women are criticized for not letting things go?

Managers should also learn how to spot fuzzy feedback. It's on them to say things like: "I know you thought this through, but Janet actually finished her part of the project two weeks ago. When you jumped in without consulting her, that upset her." If someone comes to a manager and says, "Jessica totally disagreed with me," the manager should ask for details. Sit with employees after reviews and help them decipher whether they're being told to "talk less" or if their boss didn't appreciate being challenged.

And having emotional intelligence should also count for something. Mentorship should matter. Contributing to team morale should matter. Knowing how to de-escalate situations before they become problems should matter. Companies should acknowledge that they rely on these skills, and reward them. And if they're truly that important to the company's success, they should promote some of the people who possess them.

How to protect yourself

Until your company culture shifts, we need to learn to spot it in ourselves. Email doesn't need to be bubbly. It just needs to be clear. Is this rude, or are you just being direct? And before you step in and fix everyone else's problems, ask yourself: Do I own this problem, or do I just feel an obligation to fix it? And before volunteering for another housekeeping assignment, ask: Am I taking this on because it helps my career, because I genuinely want to, or because everyone expects me to?

Being liked is important. So is getting work done. But if people spend all their time and energy trying to sound likable at work, they'll have less left for the things that actually deserve that time and energy.