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# THE MALE FACTOR

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The Unwritten Rules, Misperceptions,  
and Secret Beliefs of Men in the Workplace

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## A New Skill Set

“Are you saying women don’t already know that?”

The charismatic African-American businessman sitting next to me in first class looked at me in disbelief. We were only a few minutes into the usual “What do you do?” airplane conversation when I shared something that apparently stunned him.

I had explained that I was a financial analyst by training, had worked on Wall Street, and was now, unexpectedly, a bestselling author and speaker about relationships.

His inevitable question: “What’s your main topic?”

“Men.” I grinned at his wry expression. “I spent a few years interviewing and surveying a few thousand men. My last book identifies some ways that men tend to privately think and feel, that women tend not to know.”

He folded his arms across his chest, and it was his turn to chuckle. “OK,” he said, “hit me with one.”

So I shared one of my findings about men—one that I will share with you in the following pages—and that is when the amusement turned to disbelief.

When I confirmed that even the most astute women may not know that particular truth about men, I could see that suddenly, his thoughts were off in a universe of their own. If he hadn’t been strapped in his seat, I think he would have gotten up and started pacing.

“That explains something!” he finally said. “You see, I’m a corporate trainer and consultant. Fortune 100 corporations bring

me in to help with leadership and strategy at the highest levels of the organization. And all too often, I see skilled and talented women sabotage their careers because they treat the men they work with in a way that no man would treat another man.”

He looked at me with awakening interest. “But from what you’re telling me, these women probably don’t even realize that that is what they are doing.”

It was my turn to be interested, and my notebook and pen were already out. “Can you give me an example?”

“I’ll give you an example of something that just happened a few hours ago.” For the next few minutes, he told me his story (which I’ll relay in a later chapter), and concluded, “I was so puzzled why this female executive would shoot herself in the foot like that! But perhaps she simply didn’t understand how her actions would be perceived by her colleagues—colleagues who were mostly men.”

## THE HOLE IN THE BUCKET

The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And, because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change until we notice how our failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds. —R. D. LAING

Over the last few decades, corporations across America have developed a bucket of programs to help advance or retain women. Many approaches have been quite effective; others, better in theory than in practice. We’ve seen a surge in management attention to work/life balance issues—particularly to retain working moms—and a corresponding surge in flextime and telecommuting options. Businesses and industry groups are increasingly fostering female networks and mentoring relationships as an alternative to playing golf with the guys, and are emphasizing professional develop-

ment for rising women. Organizations large and small have studied and trained their people on avoiding sexual harassment, and on the unique needs of female workers, customers, and stakeholders. Gender-equity task forces have proliferated.

But as valuable as that effort is, I've come to realize that it has a significant hole. We as women can be skilled, talented, highly educated, mentored, networked—and yet trade all of that away by unintentionally undermining ourselves in our interactions with male colleagues. As my new friend on the airplane put it, we can still sabotage ourselves simply because we do not understand the “male factor”: some relevant truths about how the male half of the population thinks—and thus how they may be perceiving (or misperceiving) our words and actions.

Even without that potential trap, we may be missing some important insight, effectiveness, and tactical advantage through a simple gap in information—a gap exacerbated by the fact that (as you will see) men often have clear internal expectations but don't feel able to openly share what they are privately thinking. So the end result is the same: A woman can all too easily be missing valuable information that might be helpful or important for her—information that she would presumably *want* to know in today's market. One senior executive put it this way:

Women in business have seen some tremendous opportunities open up, but have also seen that it is still a man's world in many ways. What I mean, though, is different than you may think. What I mean is that, historically, for better or for worse, men pretty much created what we mean by “the business world” today. And since men still tend to hold most of the top-level positions, their subconscious ideas about how things should work are still framing the debate.

It would be extremely helpful for women to have insights

into what it's like to be a man in that business world. When men say things like, "It's not personal; it's business," it would be helpful for women to understand what "it's business" actually *means* in the minds of the men whose ideas originally defined that business world.

Based on everything I have heard from men about how they think and feel—and how surprising some of those facts have been to the millions of women who have read my previous books or heard me discuss those findings—I would argue that understanding men *in the ways that might impact us* is a career-critical skill set that women can develop, like any other.

Over the years, I've heard from hundreds of women readers who were validated that they had already recognized and incorporated some of these truths into their workplace approach—and from many others who wished they had learned these often-hidden truths earlier or better.

All of us want to be effective and be perceived as "getting it" instead of triggering the unspoken question, *Why would she do that?* While the need for understanding is most obvious among younger women who are still learning their way in the marketplace, a better understanding of men has certainly helped senior female professionals, as well. One senior vice president found her work relationships with men improving so much after she read my original book that she personally bought one hundred copies, one for every woman in her department.

If in your line of work you have any significant interaction with male superiors, coworkers, subordinates, customers, or other constituents, it is worth it to get inside their heads and better understand what they privately think—especially in areas that affect you, but that they would never tell you themselves. Not because their way is "right," or because you should necessarily adapt to their ex-

pectations, but because their perceptions exist and could be affecting you regardless of whether you know what they are. Far better to have full information, so you can make the *informed* decisions that are right for you.

## MEN 101

You may have seen the humorous graphic comparing women and men to two different old-fashioned control panels. The one labeled “Woman” has dozens of random buttons, gauges, and circuit breakers. The one labeled “Man” has an on-off switch.

Pop culture suggests women are complex, while men are straightforward. And in some ways, that may seem to be true. But in other ways, I’ve found it to be quite misleading—and dangerously so. *Not* taking into account the complexity and depth of men’s thinking can put women at a significant disadvantage.

### How I Woke Up to What I Didn’t Know

In 2001, I stumbled across some important facts about what men are often privately thinking and feeling, that women often never know.

I had recently moved with my husband from New York City to Atlanta, and was working as a financial and organizational analyst. In my spare time I was also writing fiction. One of my main characters in my second novel was a man, a good, decent husband and father and successful businessman. And I realized that although I could put on paper what my character was *doing* in my various scenes, I had no idea how to write what a man would be *thinking*. So I began asking male friends for help. I would describe a given scene, and then ask, “What would you be thinking in this situation?”

And I often found myself shocked. Over and over again, the men

described foundational, private thoughts that I would never have guessed at. They described deep, daily ways of thinking and feeling that were a complete surprise to me—even after eight years of marriage. I kept thinking to myself, “Why have I not heard this before!?”

I started doing more and more of these interviews, hitting up everyone from my male colleagues to the guys behind the counter at Starbucks. And it soon became clear that what I was learning was too important to stop with creating a character in a novel. So once the novel was finished I began a more systematic approach to investigating the most important things that women just tend not to “get” about men. Over the course of several years, I interviewed and surveyed more than 1,500 men, conducting two professional, nationally representative surveys.

Very early on, I realized that what I was hearing related to either a man’s personal life or his work life. The men would sometimes describe how they felt or thought in a given home-life scenario, and sometimes describe their private impressions at the office. Both were equally eye-opening to me. But I couldn’t tackle both in the same book. So I started with the personal relationships, and wrote *For Women Only: What You Need to Know About the Inner Lives of Men*, which was published in 2004. Shortly thereafter, my husband, Jeff, and I teamed up to write the companion book, *For Men Only: A Straightforward Guide to the Inner Lives of Women*. The books instantly became bestsellers; in just four years they sold more than 1.5 million copies and have been translated into fifteen languages.

I became extremely busy with traveling and speaking, often at large women’s conferences, churches, government workshops, or marriage seminars. And over the next few years, I continued the process of investigating the key surprises in our personal relationships, researching and publishing books for teenagers about how the opposite sex thinks, as well as a book for parents to help them understand how their teenager thinks (a scary prospect, I know!).

But as each year went by, I continued and expanded my research of men, with an eye toward a book that would help women understand men in the workplace, and, ultimately, help women advance.

In 2007, I turned my full attention to understanding men in the workplace. How do men privately think and feel about things at work that women don't already know? What do men privately say when they are promised anonymity and can be completely honest and candid, that we would never otherwise hear? What are the truths that seem common to most men, regardless of personality, industry, age, race, or any other differing factor—the private truths that we women often misunderstand, or miss completely, simply because we may be wired differently?

*What do men privately say when they are promised anonymity and can be completely honest and candid, that we would never otherwise hear?*

Most important, what are the areas in which most men instinctively tend to act and think the same way, tend to subconsciously expect others to do the same, and view *not* doing so as anything from a confusing aberration to outright weakness? In other words, which of these inner truths about men might unwittingly trip women up without our ever realizing it—and which might help us to be even more effective once we understand them?

In pursuing these questions I found, as I had with the research on *For Women Only*, that my analytical training and Wall Street experience provided an important—if a bit unusual—foundation for uncovering, analyzing, and communicating hidden truths about how people think.

I have a master's degree in public policy with a concentration



in business from Harvard University; my core classes in quantitative and qualitative analysis were taken at the Harvard Kennedy School, and my electives at Harvard Business School. After graduation, I became a financial analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, primarily investigating and analyzing what was going on underneath the surface of the Japanese financial meltdown, and sharing those findings at the highest levels of the Federal Reserve System.

I worked there for only three intense years, but it laid the foundation for an entirely new type of analysis of what was going on underneath the surface in relationships. I am forever grateful to my former colleagues and supervisors for throwing me in at the deep end and setting their expectations high.

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THIS BOOK

Reason is the slow and torturous method by which those who do not know the truth discover it. —BLAISE PASCAL

During the years of investigating how men privately think in the workplace, I interviewed every businessman I could, distilled the truths that I felt would be the most helpful to women readers, and then worked with professional survey designers to develop and conduct a nationally representative survey to test if what I was hearing was common to most men. That sounds simple, but it required an intense effort involving me, seven of my staff researchers and assistants, several corporate consultants, and a team of survey experts from two different companies over the course of eight years. In the end, well over 1,500 men provided input specifically for this book, in addition to the 1,500 men who had contributed their insights to my previous research.

Those numbers don't just include "official" surveys and interviews. I kept a notebook, pen, and digital recorder permanently by my side so I could capture informal interviews in the most unlikely places. I travel a lot, and on every flight, if I was sitting next to a man who was willing to talk (most were), I would ask him questions. At coffee shops, restaurants, on the subway, and in social gatherings, I looked for opportunities to strike up conversations with businessmen and conduct impromptu interviews. It continues to surprise me what a man will divulge when you don't know his name or where he works, and he's on a boring daily commute.

It is also amazing what a man will tell you when you do know his name and where he works—but he has been guaranteed anonymity. I guaranteed each man in writing that all quotes appearing in the book would be completely anonymous, and that they would never be able to be tied to a particular individual or organization. To ensure that anonymity, I promised to judiciously alter identifying details.

As a result, I got virtual—and often physical—access to the inner offices and leaders of dozens of household-name companies and organizations in every corner of the country (and a few beyond our borders). I interviewed hundreds of men—from entrepreneurs with a start-up staff of ten people, to businessmen who started some of our most recognized retailers. I heard surprising insights from both middle-level managers at small companies and C-level executives of the largest companies in the world. I sat down for interviews in cluttered, disorganized offices in remote suburbs, and in the most luxurious penthouse-suite offices I've ever seen. And I did several dozen conference calls with executives who were in cities beyond my immediate travel plans, but whom I couldn't afford to miss.

From Manhattan to Orlando, Omaha to Austin, Minneapolis to Los Angeles to Seattle, and of course in my current hometown

of Atlanta, I was amazed and grateful for the breadth of input I was able to receive.

My main regret is that in the limited space of this book I am only able to pass along a fraction of what I have gathered. I can't, for confidentiality reasons, post full transcripts of these conversations. But if you go to [TheMaleFactorBook.com](http://TheMaleFactorBook.com), the website for this book, I will over time post as much helpful information as I can, scrubbed of all identifying information.

About a dozen senior-level businessmen proved to be particularly helpful and insightful and became more in-depth advisors during the process, agreeing to answer follow-up questions or sitting for multiple interviews. These advisors ranged from C-level executives at nationally recognized companies, to owners of thriving businesses, to partners at management consulting firms. Some of these men are quoted multiple times (although, like all others, they are identified by a fictitious first name).

You also will read a number of examples and stories relayed by a series of helpful female advisors, businesswomen who proved invaluable during this process. Some of these women signed confidentiality statements and spent hours reading through transcripts and draft chapters, setting up interviews with men, helping me develop and test the survey, and thinking through the application of what I was learning to their own experiences.

### Identifying the Surprises and Testing the Survey

Each time I interviewed a successful businessman, I had to avoid the temptation to turn the interview into a crash course in business advice, and instead stay focused on what insight he had to share as a man, that a woman might never otherwise hear. As I listened to these men talk, I gradually came to identify a number of "truths" I felt were the least known, and thus the most helpful, to women

today in the workplace; several specific hypotheses about how men think and feel in several specific areas.

Next I had to design a survey to test these hypotheses. Were these findings actually true and common to most men? Or, despite my often random sampling, had I gotten a skewed view of men's thinking?

Once again, Chuck Cowan of Analytic Focus came to the rescue. Chuck used to be the chief of survey design at the U.S. Census Bureau; he later worked at Price Waterhouse, and then founded the much-in-demand analysis firm Analytic Focus. I had relied on Chuck as my survey design consultant since 2003. He in turn had connected me with the renowned survey company Decision Analyst—one of the top companies in the world for conducting the sort of reliable, nationally representative online survey I needed for my books. Since people are less likely to be honest about certain personal subjects in a telephone survey, the project required a professionally conducted online survey with stringent quality controls to ensure reliability.

With Chuck guiding the process, I developed survey questions and tested them over and over again to ensure they were understandable, weren't leading, and that the men saw "their" answer choice represented. I did more than a dozen rounds of testing. The process of testing the survey itself led to some fascinating insights—not to mention some amusing situations. Like almost getting me and one of my research assistants arrested for criminal trespass on the subway. Apparently, according to a particularly intimidating urban police officer, even when men are voluntarily taking part in a survey it is considered "solicitation."

After the thirteenth round of testing, we were ready to conduct the official survey.

The survey had one primary goal: to test and quantify my hypotheses about men's thinking. I wasn't trying to develop an academic study of every possible permutation about how men think

and feel. I was concentrating on the areas that women tend not to understand about men in the workplace. (If you would like to know more about our survey methodology, please see the appendix written by Chuck Cowan at the back of this book.)

The official survey included 602 men from around the country, including a panel of 100 executives. The survey included a nationally representative sample of men aged twenty-five to sixty-five, across all races and occupations, and provided a 95 percent confidence level, with a margin of error of 3½ percent. I also included a control group sample of 100 white-collar women.

In the end, the survey results confirmed the majority of my hypotheses. But as with each of my other surveys over the years, it was inconclusive on a few others. The confirmed subjects became the starting point of each chapter; the others were dropped from further research for now, and are not included in the book.

## OUR STARTING POINT

The intellectual takes as a starting point his self and relates the world to his own sensibilities; the scientist accepts an existing field of knowledge and seeks to map out the unexplored terrain.

—Sociologist DANIEL BELL

My research was all about developing theories, testing them, and refining them to whatever degree that I could. But I also wasn't starting from a blank slate, nor can I do so in this book. In the chapters ahead, to allow me to reserve my limited space for the key findings about men, I will be starting with the following suppositions, which are based on prior research and information:

## Gender Differences Exist

The most important starting point is the understanding that there are, in fact, fundamental differences between how men and women think. This seems like an obvious statement to many, but for many others it has become controversial to accept or even discuss. I don't pretend to know *why* some of these male-female differences exist, or which ones result from “nature” or “nurture”; that is a discussion that can be left for another book, and another author.

Rather, it is enough to recognize that many scientific disciplines—from clinical psychology to brain science to anthropology—have investigated and identified multiple differences between the sexes. Some of those clinical issues will be outlined in the pages ahead. But for the most part I will stick with focusing on how men think and feel in the workplace and let the men speak for themselves.

## There Are Exceptions to Every Rule

Despite the real differences between men and women, everyone is an individual. When I say that “most” men appear to share a particular perspective, I mean exactly that—most men, not all. I will of necessity make some generalizations in the chapters ahead. One of the reasons I commissioned the survey was to understand what generalizations could be made, and what were the exceptions.

## Some Generalizations Apply to Both Men and Women; the Differences Are Often in the Details

It is also important to explicitly say that, despite our differences, women can of course identify with many things that are important to men. For example, just because I say that men value a “suck

it up” mentality (chapter 8) or look for a particular type of professional respect (chapter 9), it doesn’t mean that women don’t. Quite often, the differences—and the surprises—were in the details: the magnitude, frequency, or cause of a particular perception. For example, both men and women value respect, but it is surprising how unexpectedly easy it is for a man to feel that he’s being *disrespected* by words or actions that women would never have seen that way.

In a similar way, I found that the more high-level a woman was, the more likely she was to share a viewpoint similar to men. Although men tended to answer questions the same way regardless of how senior they were, that was not the case for women. That leads to the intriguing question of whether certain women *became* more senior because they already thought “more like men,” or whether the process of rising through the ranks caused them to change the way they thought—but that question, too, is going to have to wait for a different research project!

### Explanation Is Not Endorsement

Over the past few years of sharing these findings, I have found that some women mistakenly assume that identifying and explaining a commonly held male thought means that I endorse it. As I make clear in the chapters ahead, I am not saying that men’s assumptions are right (I’ve actually included quite a few that are wrong), or that women must change to fit into a “man’s world.” This book can and should be used as much to help men examine their thoughts and assumptions as to help women understand them.

*I am not saying that men’s assumptions are right, or that women must change to fit into a “man’s world.”*

## MY GROUND RULES ON WHAT TO INCLUDE

It may be helpful to know some boundaries and ground rules I set for myself as I decided what could and what couldn't be included in the limited space of this book.

*First*, as noted earlier, I focused primarily on truths about how most men think that I felt would be surprising to women. I tried to stay away from general business advice, no matter how helpful. And if something about the way men thought was interesting but common knowledge to most women seemed more tied to individual personality than gender, or had been thoroughly covered elsewhere, I usually didn't include it.

*Second*, with hundreds or even thousands of fascinating comments and observations to choose from on any given topic, I decided to include quotes only from men whom I felt had a genuine desire to help women advance. If I felt a man was indifferent or perhaps even harboring some private animosity toward women, I continued to interview him, but didn't include his comments.

This was an admittedly subjective judgment. Obviously I had no way of evaluating the goodwill of the men providing comments on the survey. And the data and conclusions themselves cover all sorts of men, since women don't always have the good fortune to work only with men of goodwill. But for any actual interview quoted in these pages, I focused on men who seemed to care about women's advancement and were sincerely trying to help.

*Third*, that said, I didn't pull any punches. If many men in my interviews felt that women needed to know something about their thinking, I tried to make room for it—especially if it was backed up by the results from my survey. There may be times that you may not like what some of the men had to say. But *if* it is true that many or most men are privately thinking or perceiving things a certain way,



it is in our best interest to know it. Knowing the truth is far better than operating based on wishful thinking.

■ *But if it is true that many or most men are privately thinking or perceiving things a certain way, it is in our best interest to know it.*

*Fourth*, although nearly every man gave me multiple examples where female colleagues were effective and “did it right,” I couldn’t balance every negative with a positive. While I have tried to include some helpful positive examples, these findings may often be even more helpful when used to remove hindrances that stand in the way of otherwise-effective women. So I want to provide as many anti-self-sabotage principles as possible. This balance could leave the impression that “all women do it wrong all the time,” and that is not at all what the men were saying. Very much the reverse, in fact. The men went out of their way to point out the many cases of women they worked with who were widely admired and respected by men.

*Fifth*, I tried wherever possible to not only provide information, but also to pass along the thoughts of the men on how we could apply that information. However, those ideas are much more subjective than the rest of my research and are included simply in case they are helpful to some. While there were common patterns in how men thought and perceived things, men’s advice on how women might incorporate that knowledge was highly varied and often seemed to depend on personality, values, or circumstance.

In general, the application implications are reserved for the latter part of each chapter, since my goal in this book is not to advise women on “what to do,” but to pass along the critical knowledge that women need to make their own informed decisions.

In the chapters ahead, I have tried to get you started by in-

corporating a representative sample of the application ideas and some general principles. Beyond the book, I have also worked with women's networks, training groups, mentors, and coaches in various fields to build materials for further development. In the end, everyone's situation is different, and you are far better equipped than I to observe how these foundational facts play out in your industry and circumstance, and develop strategies that work best for you. If you want to go further, and are willing to share those strategies with others, please go to my website, [TheMaleFactorBook.com](http://TheMaleFactorBook.com), and chime in to the discussion. I—and other women readers—would love to hear what has worked for you.