

Top 5 barriers and conversations challenging women in the workplace

A recent research study conducted by The Human Edge on South African women in business has found that women struggle to speak up to persons in higher positions, with 55% having little or no confidence in being able to address challenging issues. Helene Vermaak, business director and co-founder of The Human Edge, says that there is no doubt that women want to take the lead; however, there are very real barriers that are hindering their success in the workplace.



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The study has found that the five greatest barriers to South African women succeeding in the workplace are:

- Having to prove themselves more than their male counterparts
- Family responsibilities outside of work
- The “motherhood penalty” - which can lead to delayed careers
- Gender discrimination
- Less likely to ask for a promotion or a raise

Vermaak says that many women choose not to address these issues due to a *fear* of how they will be perceived following the conversation; believing that this will put the relationship at risk. This highlights a lack of psychological safety within the organisation, as they believe that they will be victimised for speaking up, and due to this fear have not pursued advancement in the past. She adds that when we are afraid, we need to look to Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook for inspiration who said,

“ So please ask yourself: *what would I do if I weren't afraid? And then go do it.* ”

The study also revealed that of the women who did address these issues, a frighteningly 43% found that they did not experience any measurable benefits despite their discussions. Furthermore, Vermaak explains that when The Human Edge conducted this same study in 2012, 85% of South African businesswomen were speaking up about tough issues in the

workplace, compared to the drop to 77% in 2019, with 50% reporting positive outcomes, compared to today's 43%.

Encouragingly, the research has revealed that South African women are taking the lead, with 82% of respondents saying that they see themselves as informal leaders within their organisations and 87% seeking out leadership opportunities. "Successful women in the workplace have, and are showing us, that despite barriers, leadership is there for those of us that actively take it.

It is natural for most of us, men and women, to avoid difficult conversations. Individuals often turn to silence, coercion or even violence where they compel others towards their view. Vermaak says that gaining insights into the most challenging conversation women are facing in the workplace enables us to upskill ourselves in being able to hold these crucial conversations more successfully. These top five conversations are:

- Salary related
- Negotiating limits when asked to do more than is reasonable or possible
- Giving performance feedback to someone without hurting their feelings or damaging the relationship
- Performance related discussion
- Advocating for equality in payment and/or promotions

"It is positive to note that the finding of not receiving support from female colleagues has fallen off the top five list since 2012 – so girl power is real!" says Vermaak.

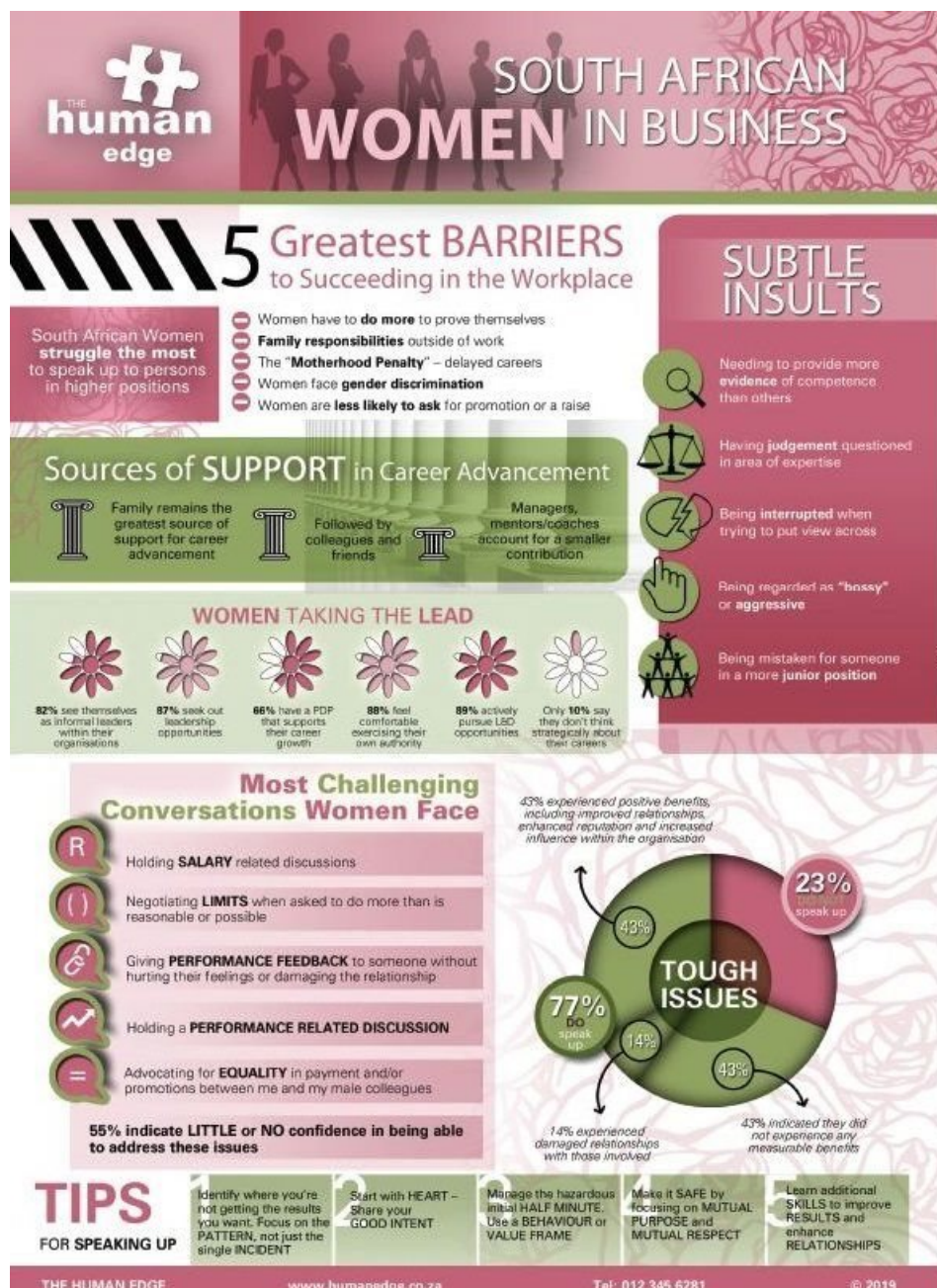
"Despite having made significant inroads in the workplace globally, we still have a long way to go," says Vermaak. A study undertaken by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey – [Women in the Workplace 2018](#), found that women are still experiencing an uneven playing field in the workplace – with less day-to-day support and less access to senior leaders. They are also more likely to deal with harassment and everyday discrimination, often feeling the added scrutiny that comes from being the only woman in the room. And understandably, they think it's harder for them to advance.

The Human Edge's SA study found that women are facing subtle discriminations in the office daily, these include:

- Needing to provide more evidence of competence than others
- Having judgement questioned in area of expertise
- Being interrupted when trying to put view across
- Being regarded as "bossy" or aggressive
- Being mistaken for someone in a more junior position

Vermaak says that the challenges women face in the workplace are real and The Human Edge's mission for the past 20 years has been to eradicate the undiscussables. "By having open, honest and direct conversations in the most respectful manner we are able to tackle these micro aggressions and challenging conversations."

"In the future there will be no female leaders. There will just be leaders," Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer



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