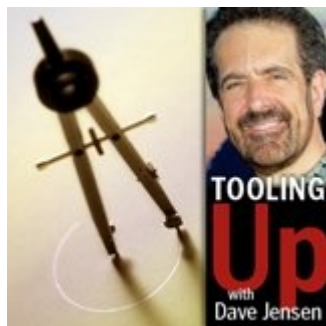


## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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### Tooling Up: Dealing With Men Who Have a Problem With Women

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United States  
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You're a strong, competent woman, and you should be respected for the work you do and the results you bring to your lab. And yet, time and time again, your interactions with one particular male, often the "guy in charge," leave you with a bad feeling. There's friction there, and you're not sure why.

Lots of men--myself included--have occasional problems getting along with women (and men, too). I don't think this has anything to do with sex or gender. Still, a few comments from my wife--who is also my business partner--persuaded me to read the book *What Men Don't Tell Women About Business* by Christopher V. Flett (John Wiley & Sons, 2008). I saw it on the couch one day where my wife had been reading it. It was the subtitle that drew me in: "Opening Up the Heavily Guarded Alpha Male Playbook." I felt I ought to know something about this mysterious playbook, especially because I had been accused before of being an "alpha male."

What I discovered about myself, I figured, is grist for the Tooling Up mill because my male readers might see the same traits in themselves, whereas my female readers could take home some thoughts about improving relationships with alpha males in *their* world.

Even if you're dealing with the world's biggest jerk, he's likely to be the jerk in charge.

### A DEFINITION

The zoologists and behavioral scientists in the audience probably know what the term "alpha male" *really* means. But in a pop-business context, the meaning is a little different. To author Flett, "alpha male" indicates a man who is driven, constantly pushing himself and those around him. This person may be an entrepreneurial CEO or an associate professor working his way up the academic food chain. Whoever he is, he would be happiest being the biggest fish in the pond or (in some cases) the great white shark of whatever water he's swimming in.

Like most character traits, extreme alpha-male behavior is pathological and can amount to sexual harassment. After all, these behaviors have deep psychological/emotional roots. But Robin Ely, a professor at Harvard Business School in Boston and a specialist on race and gender in the workplace, says, "In the course of my research, I have rarely run into such people. I only very occasionally hear stories about them. My sense is that the biggest problems young women face are not going to be men who are willfully sexist and exclusionary."

Far more common--and manageable--are men who engage in moderate alpha-male behavior.

### BLAME IT ON OUR FATHERS

My wife says I owe a lot of my "alpha" behavior to my father, who taught me that it is important to end up on the top of the pile and that money and responsibility are good things to strive for. Sometimes I notice that I'm putting my dad's ethos into action.

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"The type of work I do often requires custom fabrication of components. I had to build a switch box, so I found a switch, got the wiring done, the aluminum cut and bent to form a box, and then realized that it was time to drill the hole. I asked my PI [principal investigator] to do this because I didn't know how to use power tools," Suter says. "He gave me an odd look and said that an electrophysiologist needs to know this, and how could I have come *this* far without knowing how to use a drill."

The father of Suter's adviser was a mechanical engineer, and he--the PI--had spent his childhood in his dad's workshop. Interestingly, Suter's father was also an engineer, "but any time I went into his workshop, he said, 'Honey, can you bring me a cup of coffee?' " Suter reports.

Suter's PI came to work the next day mumbling about his sister not knowing how to use power tools, either. Apparently, the PI's sister didn't get treated the same way he did, even though she grew up in the same household. Suter's PI started a weekly power-tool training session with Suter and a female tech.

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## FORMS OF CURRENCY FOR THE ALPHA MALE

Even if you're dealing with the world's biggest jerk, he's likely to be the jerk *in charge*. Of course, you need to weigh the advantages of working things out with this alpha against your own dignity and self-respect. But unless his behaviors are extreme, it's *you*, not him, who's likely to make adjustments.

If you want to adjust your relationship with an alpha male, you must understand what matters most to him. Flett, the author of the book I found on my sofa, describes the most important alpha currency: reputation and respect. "Reputation is an alpha's strongest currency and the one we will fight hardest to protect. ... If you build a strong enough reputation, you'll have all kinds of freedom. If you bankrupt your reputation, you are absolutely worthless," he wrote in his book.

This person's reputation is like a bank account. When you promise something and deliver it, you've made a deposit. Your reputation goes up and so does his. When you promise something and don't deliver, it isn't just your bankbook that suffers.

Flett believes--and I concur--that these differences are reflected in the nature of the networks we form. An alpha doesn't need to be friends with his contacts, but they must have business value. He owes something to them, and they owe something to him. My Rolodex is full of good contacts, and I am not afraid to use them when I need to. At some point in the future, I'll pay back the favor. It's not about friendship.

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## COMMUNICATION ESSENTIALS: REMOVING THOSE PESKY "FEELINGS"

A key to getting along with an alpha male, particularly if it is your supervisor, is remembering a few communication essentials when you are going one-on-one.

Be direct. Your alpha has so much on his mind (or so he believes) that he really has no time for a description of the *process*. He's solely and exclusively interested in the *bottom line*. Of course, we know he's being closed-minded; a manager needs flexibility to accommodate different personalities and working styles. He doesn't have it.

Another important suggestion, right from my heart: Don't take things personally or make things personal. Don't bring feelings into the conversation. In the eyes of the alpha male, women damage their careers by taking things personally or being overly concerned about the feelings of co-workers. Of course, feelings *do* matter in the workplace, even if (arguably) they shouldn't. But he's not likely to change.

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## LEFT OUT OF THE CLUB

Working with an alpha male isn't going to bring you a lot of warm and fuzzy feedback. But if you live up to what is promised--and what is asked of you--your relationship with that person can give you a mighty boost up the career ladder. Alphas love to see their people succeed; it makes them look good as well.

Despite your best efforts, you may still come face to face with the fact that you are not in the club--but it's possible to solve that problem. Here's how "Ale" described it on the *Science Careers Forum*:

"I presented my science at the big annual meeting of my discipline and my adviser was in the audience. It went well, and when I got back to my seat the other speakers and my adviser congratulated me. Other PI's thought that I did a good job as well, but the males decided to approach my adviser during and after the session and congratulate *him* for *my talk*. They never came to me, even though I was sitting a few feet away in the next row! Those big shot male PI's didn't bother to approach the female young trainee. ... I had never felt such status and gender bias before," she says.

"Ale" approached her adviser directly shortly afterward, not with hurt feelings but with a genuine interest in why they would have avoided her with their congratulations. At that evening's social activities, her adviser introduced her to every big shot in the room. "I ended up meeting all these well-known people, men and women, which would have never happened if I hadn't had that conversation with my boss after the big-guys incident," she says.

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