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One Monday morning, I rode the elevator with an attorney who works in my building. She was fuming. Apparently, she and a male colleague brought an idea to their senior partner meeting. They had both been over-the-moon-eager to make the pitch and spent the week preparing a full presentation with video clips. Then, five minutes into the pitch their hopes were dashed. The managing director didn't like the idea and he was in a hurry to close the meeting. He shut them down with a blunt remark, leaving zero room for rebuttal. My friend was in a spiral. The experience ruined her weekend and she was still thinking about it days later. She felt humiliated and couldn't let it go. You'd think that her colleague would be equally insulted by the shabby treatment. Yet, according to her, he was barely fazed. He took the setback in stride, essentially brushing it off.

Everyone has bad moments and foiled presentations, but not everyone carries it around with them for days or weeks. One anecdote does not indicate a trend, of course, but other evidence suggests that there may be a gender divide in how men and women respond to frustration at work.

This is a common topic of discussion in my coaching sessions with female executives. They report feeling disappointed and sometimes defensive when a decision or debate at work doesn't go their way. Similarly, my review of 360 feedback reports indicates that women harbor what [my colleagues and I](#) refer to as "retained angst." That is, they second-guess themselves and take negative moments to heart for an extended period instead of reflecting on the incident and letting it go. On average, the managers we speak with say that they see more women than men "taking it personally" when the tide turns against them. In addition, in a 2013 survey of 270 female managers in *Fortune* 500 organizations, including McDonald's, Procter & Gamble, and Walmart, and follow-up interviews with 65 top managers, my colleagues and I found that both male and female executives reported that

women have a more difficult time letting go of bad experiences at work. They blame themselves, feel insulted, or harbor resentment for days at a time.

When we asked a senior HR Manager about this he said: “...from my vantage point, I’ve seen that women in business settings struggle with frustration and get defensive when they are challenged. [The problem is that] this takes away their power.” He went on to agree that men are able to express their frustration without sacrificing their authority.

In our interview transcripts, we found a few common threads that help to explain why women may be more likely to feel frustrated and let it show.

1. Women have more to prove. In the executive ranks of many companies women are still playing catch-up in terms of pay equity and promotion opportunities. With fewer female peers to pull them into upper management, the stakes to “get it right” in office interactions are high. Some women report feeling more scrutinized than their male colleagues. (Betty Spence, president of the National Association for Female Executives, calls this “skirtiny.”) As a result, they feel that they need to be perfect. They become stressed and upset when they don’t meet their own impossible expectations or live up to the scrutiny of others.

2. Men think of business as a game, while women want meaning. Many women and men despise the use of sports and battle analogies in business. And yet, many men told us they’ve internalized more than women that business is like a game—you win some and you lose some. One COO told us, “Women internalize things. Whereas men realize that sometimes you lose the battle but you can still win the war.” In other words, know they need to “live to fight another day.”

This difference may connect back to the idea that women, more than men, want to find meaning in their work. A groundbreaking [survey from 2010](#) showed that meaning in work is a prime predictor of high satisfaction for working mothers. While men commonly cite their paycheck as the primary motivation, this study and others tell us that women may be looking for something more.

3. Men keep it inside. Be it constructive criticism, verbal opposition to their ideas, or simply a perceived slight, both men and women can become frustrated by intense opposition. That being said, my experience as a coach, as well as the interviews I conducted with my colleagues, tell us that women simply admit their feelings of frustration more readily than men. They vent, while men maintain a poker face.

This brings us back to our female tax attorney and her male business partner. Is it possible that he was more upset than he is willing to admit? When I asked him, he just gave a little smile. He’ll never tell.

Kathryn Heath is a principal of [Flynn Heath Holt Leadership](#). She is a coauthor of [The Influence Effect: A New Path to Power For Women](#). Join the conversation on Twitter: [@FlynnHeathHolt](#).
