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When Sisterly Support Changes to Sabotage

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Although research on women’s leadership extols the benefits of women’s professional collaborations and mentorship, one cannot assume that all women are trustworthy and supportive of other women. This qualitative study explored the phenomenon of professional sabotage among women in educational leadership. Results revealed that, although women who engaged in sabotage were proportionately few in number, the damage they inflicted on other women’s reputations, careers, and emotional well-being was great.

“Cross a man and you struggle, one of you wins, you adjust and go on— or you lie there dead. Cross a woman and the universe is changed, once again, for cold anger requires an eternal vigilance in all matters of slight and offense.”

—Maguire (1995)

Relationships between women can be powerful assets in women’s professional and personal lives or powerful sources of betrayal and pain. Women count on each other for career assistance, mentorship, collaboration, and friendship. They share their sorrows, problems, secrets, and successes. However, the personal sharing fundamental to women’s relationships also makes them vulnerable to betrayal by the women they trust. Women’s trust in other women is also their Achilles Heel.

Research on women’s leadership extols the benefits of women’s professional collaborations and mentorship (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). As the number of women seeking higher education degrees and professional careers has increased, the interest in women mentoring women has proliferated. The value of these supportive measures and networking opportunities is indisputable.

One cannot assume, however, that all women are trustworthy and supportive of other women. Historical accounts and current research reveals that woman-to-woman betrayal and sabotage covertly coexist along side collaboration and mentorship. Reports of career sabotage by trusted mentors and confidants present a dismal contrast to reports of women’s collaboration. Much of the research on women’s sabotage is related to women’s sabotage that occurs on both personal levels and general work environments (Barash, 2006; Chesler, 2001; Heim & Murphy, 2001; Mooney,
2005). None of the literature, however, explores sabotage specifically among women in educational leadership.

This study explores the phenomenon of professional sabotage among women in educational leadership. The intent is to raise awareness of professional sabotage among women in educational leadership positions and to identify measures to reduce the occurrence.

Review of Literature

Women’s Relationships
The strength and longevity of women’s friendships is documented in centuries of art, literature, and historical accounts of women from multiple cultures. According to Murphy (2000), women value social relationships more than men do, a value that plays a pivotal role in their personal and professional lives. Most women maintain a close circle of friends with whom they regularly communicate. After a woman marries, she usually maintains her circle of friends and will often name another woman, rather than her husband, as her best friend (Heim & Murphy, 2001).

When faced with stressors, such as work-related conflicts, relationship problems, or health-related concerns, women seek out and use the social support of other women. In a landmark study on women’s response to stress, Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, and Updegraff (2000) reported that females responded to stressful situations by protecting themselves and their children with nurturing, or “tending,” behaviors, and forming alliances, or “befriending,” other women. They contended that the “tend and befriend” model more accurately described female behavior than the male model of “fight or flight.” Woman-to-woman relationships are a powerful force in women’s lives.

Equality in Relationships
Given the nurturing and collaborative nature of women’s relationships, one might wonder what motivates women to commit betrayal and sabotage. Some researchers suggest the answer is based on two factors: (1) women’s need for equality in their relationships, and (2) women’s early socialization in dealing with conflict (Chesler, 2001; Heim & Murphy, 2001).

Women’s friendships are based on a flattened hierarchy in which friends have equal status. According to Chesler (2001), “Women demand an egali-
tarian, dyadic reciprocity and are, therefore, more threatened by the slight-
est change in status” (p.109). Determinants of status might include
personal attributes, prestige, power, popularity, or possessions, and include
factors, such as youth, attractiveness, clothing, jewelry, house, car, intelli-
gence, education, competency at work, job advancement, popularity, and
social standing, and wealth of spouse (Heim & Murphy, 2001).

Maintaining equality is a balancing game. If an aspect of a friend’s status
changes, disequilibrium occurs and the friendship may deteriorate. Exam-
ples of status changes that may jeopardize a friendship include one of the
friends getting married, having a baby, obtaining a degree, a new job or pro-
motion, losing weight, getting a divorce, or gaining in wealth or popularity.
Unless the friends can re-equalize the status so neither feels inferior or in-
adequate, the friendship may end. However, if neither woman feels threat-
ened by the change in status, they can have widely different attributes,
acquisitions, and life situations, and continue to remain friends (Barash,
2006).

Women’s Socialization
The second factor involves early socialization of girls. Traditionally, girls
are socialized to avoid overt conflict. They are taught to be nice, cooperate,
and get along with each other. Their games are usually unstructured and
collaborative; in other words, without rules and a designated leader. When
girls disagree while playing, they usually quit playing or change activities
to avoid conflict. Thus, early play experiences do not teach them to negoti-
ate and to resolve conflict in an assertive manner. Instead, girls are more
likely to use passive aggressive behaviors, or indirect aggression, such as
malicious gossiping, staring and giggling, ridiculing, writing anonymous
notes, forming cliques, and excluding someone in response to conflict with
peers (Chesler, 2001). Passive-aggressive behaviors learned in childhood
are likely to continue in adulthood and assume the form of sabotage and
similar forms of guerilla warfare.

Triggers for Sabotage
The situation is ripe for sabotage when women co-workers are in competi-
tion for a position or promotion, or if one woman is promoted and becomes
the supervisor of the other. When one woman has the power to bestow or
take away something desired by the other, the mutual reciprocity of friend-
ship assumes a new dynamic. Sabotage can also occur when a one woman
in a group assumes a leadership role, thereby raising the bar and making
women, who do not aspire to leadership, feel inadequate. Other women in
the group may try to equalize the situation by sabotaging her leadership
(Barash, 2006; Heim & Murphy, 2001).

Career possibilities and societal expectations for middle class women
have changed drastically since the 1970s. Women are attaining careers that
our grandmothers could not image. However, newfound opportunities have
also brought changing and more challenging expectations. According to
Tannenbaum (2002), “Women are caught in an impossible bind. We need to be competitive in order to be truly feminine; yet we can’t be competitive because that would make us unwomanly” (p. 21). Today’s successful women are expected to attain advanced degrees and powerful positions, and at the same time look gorgeous, be perfect wives, have perfect homes, raise perfect children, and be devoted caretakers for aging parents. Women who “have it all” or are perceived as such, often become targets of women, who by comparison, are made to feel inferior.

**Purpose of the Study**

A successful sabotage can derail a woman’s career, making the issue one of paramount importance, an issue that needs to be explored, understood, and avoided. Previous studies have examined sabotage of women in business careers or women in the general population. This study explored the phenomenon of professional sabotage among women in educational leadership. The following questions guided the study:

- Why do women in educational leadership sabotage each other?
- What tactics do saboteurs use?
- What personal factors do women victims have in common?
- What effects does sabotage have on victims?
- What measures can women take to curtail sabotage?
- What measures can women take to avoid sabotage?

For the purpose of this study, the word, sabotage, will be defined as an act or process intending to hamper or hurt someone else’s reputation or career (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sabotage). The word, “sabotage” is a French word thought to be derived from the word, sabot, for wooden shoes. Some believe that the word was coined during the railway strike of 1910 when workers interrupted the morning commute by destroying the sabots (wooden shoes) that held the rails in place. Others contend that the word derives from the Industrial Revolution when disgruntled workers clogged the machinery by throwing their wooden shoes, or sabots, into the gears (http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9064635/sabotage).

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants in the study included eleven individuals with leadership experience at the K–12 or college level. The researcher developed a list of participants known for their educational leadership abilities. The listing approach is a practice referred to as a reputational technique. The purposive sampling procedures and the small number of participants decreased generalizability of the study.
Demographics
Participants reported gender, age, years of administrative experience, education, and geographic area. A summary of the group data follows. Of the 11 participants, ten were female and one was male; one participant was African-American; the rest were Caucasian. All participants ranged in age between late 30s and 60. Participants ranged in experience between 7 and 32 years. All respondents had administrative experience at the K–12 or collegiate level. Their current or previous leadership positions included assistant superintendent, elementary and secondary principal, athletic director, professors of educational administration (with previous experience as K–12 administrators); retired college president, department chair and program director in collegiate institutions. Two participants had master’s degrees; nine had doctorates. Their places of employment were geographically scattered across the United States.

Procedures
Participants were invited to complete a written narrative or participate in an interview. Seven participants completed a personal interview, and four completed a written narrative instrument. Interview and narrative questions, based on a review of the literature and developed by the author, were identical. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes in length; they were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy by participants. Narratives and interview transcriptions were coded for content and analyzed for themes. The qualitative methods of member checks, coding, and reviewing data for verification, enhanced the validity and reliability of data (Creswell, 1994).

Researcher
The researcher has experience in the field of education as a teacher and administrator at the K–12 and college levels. The study evolved from an interest in the power dynamics of women’s professional relationships. The following assumptions guided the study:

- Effective collaborations and mentorships among women are fundamental to women’s professional success.
- Woman-to-woman sabotage can threaten the attainment of a woman’s career goals and professional success.

Limitations
Several factors limited the findings of the study. Data were collected from a small sample. Additional participants would further illuminate the identified themes. Second, the “goodness” of the data depends on objectivity and reliability. Typical of interview and narrative data gathering, informant integrity becomes an issue of rigor. Despite these limitations, the results of the study revealed ten women’s experiences with sabotage and one man’s
observations of sabotage among the women with whom he worked. Data are presented as a basis for further inquiry and discussion.

**Results**

**Themes**
The main portion of the study consisted of written or oral responses to a set of questions related to participants experience with woman-to-woman sabotage, including causes of sabotage, behaviors of saboteurs, damage to victims, and strategies to curtail and avoid sabotage. The following themes emerged from the study:

- A small number of women engaged in sabotage
- Sabotage occurred early in women’s careers
- Victims possessed similar personal characteristics
- Saboteurs were insecure and jealous
- Damage to victims was enduring
- Talking about the sabotage was cathartic
- Strategies to curtail and avoid sabotage

In the following sections, each of the themes will be discussed. Data will be aggregated unless otherwise identified.

**Small Proportion of Saboteurs**
Respondents reported that only a small proportion of women engage in sabotage. One woman suggested that it was not the amount of sabotage, but rather the perceived importance that was the central issue, “Men and women both engage in the same amount of passive-aggressive behaviors, such as sabotage; but women take [woman-to-woman] sabotage more personally.”

All of the women reported that they had benefited from and were appreciative of women mentors; all participants currently mentored other women. However, all of the women said that one or two women had sabotaged them during their career. As one woman explained, “There has been a lot of rhetoric on women mentoring other women. However, the so-called solidarity of women does not exist. Some women are engaged in competition and sabotage.”

**Causes of Sabotage**
Participants spoke extensively about the causes of sabotage, their views covering factors both intrinsic and extrinsic. Most viewed women who engaged in sabotage as insecure about themselves. Additionally, they believed that women are more likely to engage in passive—aggressive behavior than men are because they were socialized that way as children. They concluded that women compete on multiple levels, look for ulterior motives behind things, and are quick to draw conclusions about other
women. However, participants also implicated the changing roles of women as contributing factors. Their comments follow.

- "Insecurity, plain and simple."
- "The cause of sabotage is jealousy by individuals who feel insecure, unhappy with their life."
- "[Women turn against each other and engage in passive aggressive behaviors because of] "jealousy-envy" and "ambition [combined with] weak character."
- "Sabotage toward administrators occurs because the teaching profession attracts people who like to be in control. When a new principal with new ideas and changes arrives on the scene, especially one who is female, teachers who have control issues may feel threatened."

One respondent concluded,

Rather than jealousy . . . there is insecurity on [the saboteur's] part . . . I can see it in my own behavior sometimes, I am ashamed to say. It's almost as if it is an innate woman thing. I'd like to think that I am a nice enough person that I have not gone out of my way to sabotage someone . . . [however] those baser feelings exist. It could be part of human nature. However, I haven't seen that in male behavior . . . it isn't part of the conversation of my friends who are male. If those same feelings exist, they must be handled differently.

**Contribution of Female Socialization**

Most respondents believed that childhood socialization of females was a contributing factor to the indirect aggression used by women when under stress or engaged in conflict. One respondent explained, "Since it is not acceptable for females to be overly aggressive, female children adopt passive-aggressive behaviors and become saboteurs when they grow up."

Another respondent added,

I think [women] use passive-aggressive behaviors more. It is an unhealthy cycle in which women have to claw their way to the top and are either too exhausted to help other women or are bitter because they had to make their way alone and don't want to help others.

**Women and Competition**

Respondents agreed that some women lack competitive skills. Women do not separate personal from professional issues when engaged in competition. Instead, women globalize their competition to multiple arenas. Comments of respondents included:

- "[Some women] don’t understand that someone else’s success doesn’t take anything away from them. Success isn’t a finite commodity."
- "[The saboteur] perceived me as a threat . . . [because] she couldn’t make hard decisions."
Another respondent said,

I think as women, we draw conclusions about other women. We tend to look for ulterior motives behind everything that other women do. There is an immediate judgment that occurs. I don’t get the impression that men do that; it’s like they don’t even get it. They don’t tune into those things; but we tune into everything. . . . I want to believe it is the rare case where those feelings turn into an overt action of some sort. When you are talking about a diabolical act—people sabotaging someone’s career, I want to think that those things are a real rarity. But almost unconsciously, there are feelings that we harbor. We may not go out of our way to hurt each other, but sometimes we don’t go out of our way to help each other. And that’s not overt, it’s just . . . let’s see how she can manage that on her own. It’s a passive aggressive stance where we could have made a difference. Have you ever been to a meeting where a woman is failing miserably because it depends on the interactions of the others, and your responses is . . . let’s just watch and see how you’re going to handle this, Miss Leader.

A male respondent observed,

The women whom I have witnessed . . . simply cannot let another woman, even a ‘friend,’ get one step ahead of them. It is not as if they wanted the same thing the other woman got; it’s just a game of check-and-balance. God forbid a woman in our department actually gets one more advantage than another woman. . . . My female colleagues convey the message that they are to move as an enmeshed group, or else.

**Contributions of Changing Roles**

One respondent spoke at length about how the changing roles of women have created feelings of inferiority, resentfulness, and unhealthy competition, and that women engage in sabotage to re-equalize the playing field.

Women who have embraced traditional roles sabotage women who have chosen not to live in traditional roles, i.e. women who obtain higher education degrees and attain leadership positions. They don’t like women upsetting the applecart. They do not sabotage males because these are traditional accepted roles for men. Other women do not have the courage to take risks or willingness to give up what it takes to achieve leadership positions. They resent women who somehow do so. . . . Other women who don’t feel they have opportunities to excel are resentful to women who are successful. They become angry and bitter women who feel they were denied a pathway to success. Women who pursue leadership give up a lot in terms of their personal lives; delaying marriage and having children later; balancing careers with marriage, children and social lives. They need to be supported by other women. Unfortunately, women who give up a lot and do not achieve their goals, feel resentful and jealous when they see a woman who seemingly, ‘has it all’ and sabotage, rather than support them.
She added that women who sabotage have the following basic themes:

- *Misery loves company.* I’m miserable and I will do whatever I can to jerk you around so you are as miserable as I am. People under and over you do this. Secretaries withhold information, don’t quite finish important reports on time; and supervisors are never quite satisfied with anything you do—always wanting something different, or a little more, or who change the rules mid-stream.
- *You can’t have it all.* It isn’t fair that you have everything—the career, a marriage, and a child, and I don’t.
- *How dare you think outside the box?* Women who forge new territory, especially leadership positions formerly not held by women, are sabotaged by women who don’t have the courage to live outside the box or who feel a need to live in traditional roles. They are resentful of women who dare to be different—be themselves.
- *You have to play by the rules.* Women feel threatened by and sabotage other women who don’t follow traditional, stereotypical rules for behavior, including career choice, or physical appearance, i.e. clothing, hairstyle, make-up, jewelry, etc.

**Strategies of Saboteurs**

Respondents concluded that women who engage in sabotage use subversive strategies, often while deluding the victim into thinking she is a true friend. Women who befriend and confide in other women are easy targets and make unsuspecting victims. Saboteurs deluded their victims with acts of friendship while perpetrating acts designed to make them appear professionally incompetent or, in a few cases, immoral. One woman explained, “They either make sure you don’t succeed in meeting your goal, or they give you hell for getting there.” Their actions took the form of malicious gossip, rumors, withholding information, lost paperwork, and false reports to superiors.

One principal described being the victim of sabotage directed against her by a department chair when she was a teacher. Although she did not realize it until later, the department chair considered her a leadership threat and sabotaged her by submitting false reports about her to the principal. She recalled,

Report after report was given to the principal about me, but I never quite knew where they were coming from. After calling in sick one day, I was subsequently reprimanded by the principal because, according to the department chair, I had not left any work for a substitute as was required. I knew I had left the work, so I went up to school in the evening when none of them were there and found it, stuffed in the back of a drawer in the department chair’s cabinet.

Eventually, this participant became principal of the school and reported using her authority to “get even” with the teacher.
One K–12 administrator reported,

I discovered that not all females were supportive when I was appointed a principal after only 4 or 5 years of teaching. Women who had been assistants for 2–3 years were very angry because I skirted the usual pathway. Also, I was the youngest person to become principal. Tongues wagged and jealousy was apparent. The female teachers in the school made comments, ‘The superintendent must LIKE YOU,’ adding incredulously, ‘I can’t believe he appointed you. . . . Looks must have had something to do with it.’

Another principal described being sabotaged by a teacher-leader,

One female teacher was clearly used to ‘running the place.’ Her nose was in the air looking down at me. I finally had to tell her not to refer to me by my first name. She engaged in backbiting, telling the faculty that I was too young to do the job; wondered aloud what the district was thinking when they selected me; told teachers to continue to do things the way they always did because ‘she won’t be here for long.’ She attempted to sabotage my efforts at change and even refused to attend social events.

Another respondent said, ‘[The saboteur] failed to support the plan we had developed together; supported staff I was supervising, against my recommendations; misled the board of education to cover her mistakes; and rallied community support against me by playing the race card.’

A male respondent shared his observations,

I am right across from the faculty lounge [so women professors] mill about my office door and chat about mundane things. Then, they look over their shoulder to make sure the coast is clear and then, bam! They unload about another female in the department, ripping her apart. . . . I try to respond lightly [do damage control] but nothing I say ever works. . . . I am not sure what they want other than an audience to hear and validate their mean spirited intentions. . . . it’s reason for me to put in a request every year for an office anywhere but near the damn coffee machine! I never have this problem with my male colleagues . . .

**Common Characteristics of Victims**

Most respondents reported that sabotage was more prevalent at the beginning of their careers when they were young, newly appointed leaders, or perceived as a leadership threat. One principal, who was sabotaged by her superintendent, reported that the incident occurred “four months into both of us taking the new positions.” However, one respondent who had several years of experience in higher education reported sabotage by a newly appointed supervisor.

Other victims had not yet been appointed as leaders, but were perceived by the saboteur as potential competitors for leadership opportunities in
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K–12 or collegiate settings. Although they eventually became leaders, at the time of the sabotage they were not actively engaged in seeking a leadership position; thus, they did know they were in competition, and were consequently blind-sighted and confused.

In some instances, victims were unaware of the saboteur’s identity and the motivation at the onset of the attacks. One principal said,

I experienced sabotage behavior on various levels throughout my years as principal, assistant principal, and principal . . . however, [sabotage] has been less of an issue or a problem for me as I get older and as I am in [the principalship] longer.

**Personal Characteristics of Victims**

In hindsight, victims determined factors had made them targets of sabotage: youth, attractiveness, competency, popularity among peers, and friendships with men. Most of the women respondents described themselves as attractive and perceived as competent at the time of the sabotage. Some of them said they had been popular with students; others mentioned popularity among women peers and friendships with male colleagues. One principal explained,

I think there are a number of contributing factors to women’s relationships that can cause sabotage or backstabbing. Some of them have to do with age, attractiveness, and capability, or the perception of capability. When you are younger . . . not homely, fairly competent, and recently divorced, you’ve got a lot of problems for yourself. Women compete on multiple levels, and there are multiple factors that feed into [other women’s] response to you.

This finding is supported by the research of Heim and Murphy (2001) who reported similar factors as displays of power that may incite other women to be resentful.

**Effects of Sabotage.**

Sabotage, especially when initiated by a friend, was painful for respondents, some of whom recalled events that had occurred 20 and 30 years older. The words of the following principal describe the depth of her pain of a friend’s betrayal some eleven years earlier, “. . . I have never shared this with anyone. . . . this almost brings me to tears now when I think about it.”

Another woman said, “[The sabotage] was horrible. [I experienced] betrayal, hurt, humiliation, feelings of failure, and depression (took medication). The hurt was more intense because it was a female friend.”

One principal added,

I was hurt by friends who were not happy for me when I was promoted to principal. They were angry that they had been skipped over for appointments in favor
of me. They were obviously jealous; treated me very coolly. Although they still talked to me, I could tell a difference in their change of tone. Once they were appointed principals, they became friendly again. But it was tough for those three to five years when I was kind of out there by myself.

Another principal recalled,

When I became an assistant principal, there was not one female faculty member who stopped by my office to tell me congratulations... though numerous men faculty did. I asked my good friend what the women were saying about my appointment. She said, ‘Well, it just happened overnight—if you know what I mean.’ I was devastated... Did I feel betrayed? Absolutely—a total betrayal.

A woman currently experiencing sabotage explained, “The sabotage makes me feel uneasy and worrisome. When I see her [the saboteur]—my stomach tenses, and I don’t want to have conversations with her any more.”

The explanation, according to one respondent, lies in the fact that,

Women never forget. We harbor feelings forever. I don’t know if it’s a socialization or what, but men just let things go. They hit the wall, bat a few baseballs, slug down a couple of drinks, whatever it takes, and then it’s over. But, 26 years later it’s as fresh and as painful [as yesterday], even if a few of the facts are blurred. Those feelings just don’t go away.

Potential Career / Reputation Damage

Respondents who reflected on sabotage that had occurred earlier in their career reported that they had overcome the damage to their reputation and career. Although they had weathered the attack and forged onward, painful memories lingered.

Women respondents who currently were experiencing sabotage reported actual and potential career damage. According to one respondent, “I lost complete support of my staff and community; took a leave of absence, and later resigned.”

One woman, who was experiencing sabotage at the time of the interview, protected herself by notifying her supervisor of the issues and inviting her to mediate. She reported, “[No damage] has occurred yet—we meet with the mediator this week... I kept my dignity during my conversation with her, and I hope the meeting is successful.”

Validation and Catharsis

Women in the study reported feeling validation and catharsis by sharing their experience. Although they experienced great anguish and pain, especially when the saboteur was a friend, many of them had not previously disclosed the incident. As one respondent said, “I find this a sort of catharsis... talking about this because we don’t get to very often.” After
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describing betrayal by a friend, one woman added, “Years later I can hardly talk about it, and I have never told anyone about that conversation other than you.” This finding is consistent with previous studies that revealed that when interpersonal conflicts occur, women might disparage themselves as inadequate, blame themselves for what went wrong, and thereby diminish their sense of self-esteem (Gilligan, 1982). In a study of principals dealing with difficult teachers (Brock & Grady, 2006), women viewed the sabotaging, gossiping, and sniping as a personal attack, expressed hurt and disappointment, and critically analyzed their own behavior as a potential contributor.

**Strategies to Address a Sabotage Attack**

Respondents did not agree on a single strategy to curtail an ongoing sabotage, but rather suggested a variety of strategies such as third party mediation, personal confrontation, self-examination, and talking to others. One respondent suggested not fighting back; instead walking away.

One respondent, currently dealing with sabotage, planned to confront her saboteur, using her immediate supervisor as mediator. Her decision to confront the saboteur was supported by a respondent who suggested,

> Use your people skills and the same problem-solving skills you would use with any youth or adult. Keep your dignity by always acting calm, cool, and collected. If something doesn’t feel right, report it in a mature way, and get someone else’s opinions.

However, two other respondents disagreed, saying, “I initially tried to work through the difficulties, but failed. I have never spoken to [the saboteur] again.” Another respondent suggested,

> Don’t feed into it. Step back; see the big picture … name the behavior: petty, unprofessional, and destructive. It’s important to do this, as I know the temptation is to fight back. But sabotaging is bully-like behavior. Stay clear of them … move on …

Other suggestions included:

- “Try to work it out; examine your own position to make sure your ambition is not interfering with your judgment; stay true to yourself and your beliefs.”
- “Keep your dignity—find someone to talk to and confide in, and bounce your ideas off. Find a trusted person to mediate—keep a journal or documentation of conversations.
- “Keep your sanity—you are not crazy—trust yourself and be honest with yourself.”
- “Talk about it. Women need to be encouraged and know that others have been in their shoes.”
Preventing Sabotage

Participants agreed that women can discourage passive-aggressive behaviors such as sabotage by talking about the problem; recognizing it for what it is; separating professional and personal relationships; and protecting their work.

One respondent said,

"Talk about it. Help women see their behavior for what it is and recognize that dysfunctional behavior stifles their creativity. Ask the person engaged in dysfunctional behavior, “Is this behavior helping you? What do you want? What can we do to help you move beyond this theme and help you achieve your goals?”"

Other respondents said that women should separate their work and personal relationships, and that women in academe should become more protective of their work. According to one respondent,

... [Women should] have a unique piece of scholarship or service or role within the university or academe at large. It helps to understand your presence in the profession has fluid walls and you’re not tied to the department or the source of bullying.

As another respondent said,

"Savvy means operating as a solo-ship . . . sad to say, especially for women and even for men, who want to be collegial, and collaborative. But it’s imperative to not make relationships the higher education experience. It can be a part of it. But at all times, a woman must be able to step back and say, “I could leave this place any day and get hired elsewhere without problems.” Thinking globally makes the day-to-day encounters with sabotaging tolerable and within perspective.

Conclusions and Implications

Woman’s acts of indirect aggression to other women present a serious threat to unsuspecting new educators. Although women who engage in sabotage are proportionately few in number, the damage they can inflict to another woman’s reputation, career, and emotional well-being is great. Dante, in the Divine Comedy, reserved the ninth circle of Hell for people whose fraudulent acts involved betrayal of a friend (circa 1308–1321). The women in this study would likely concur. The emotional pain and, in some cases, career damage they sustained was intense and enduring.

Although women sabotaging friends is not unique to this century, in the last decades increased leadership opportunities for women have changed the playing field. Some women embrace these new opportunities; other women feel intimidated and resentful that the bar has been raised. The inse-
curity that surrounds the new playing field creates a fertile situation for sabotage to develop.

Women supporting and mentoring women have played a critical role in the development of women leaders. We need and rely on one another; thus, we tend to overlook, or refuse to admit, our failings. However, pretending that all women are nurturing and supportive is less than realistic and clearly not helpful.

Prospective women leaders need to be aware of the dynamics of competition and indirect aggression to which some women subscribe. Acknowledging the existence of sabotage, discussing the dynamics, and examining the strategies that women can use to avoid it are important steps. The following strategies may help avoid sabotage:

• Understand that not all women are worthy of your trust and willing to support you.
• Be discerning when selecting confidants, mentors, and collaborators
• Separate personal and professional relationships.
• Be discrete in the information you share; leave personal information at home.
• Protect your scholarship and document your actions.
• Avoid or downplay displays of status symbols that trigger resentment.
• Act with self-confidence; saboteurs prefer people who appear vulnerable.
• Relate to other women in ways that elevate their self-esteem.
• Use and model assertive behaviors when dealing with conflict.
• Confront known saboteurs about their behavior; call them on their actions.
• Refuse to listen to or participate in gossiping, backstabbing, and other acts of sabotage; name it when you see it.
• Be proactive in mentoring and supporting other women; nurture and cherish long friendships.

The historic perception of women, engaging in gossip, petty rivalries, catfights, and sabotage, is neither attractive nor helpful to women who aspire to leadership positions. More importantly, the harm women do each other is unacceptable. Women need to come to terms with female sabotage; take proactive steps to curtail it; and teach the next generation of women leaders to eliminate it. As one participant said, “It’s time for sabotage to come out of the closet. . . .”

References