

RESEARCH IN ACTION:

Wharton's Deputy Dean **Nancy Rothbard** Studies Whether Power Protects Women from Workplace Retaliation

THE PROBLEM:

Employees who voice ethical concerns in the workplace often run the risk of retaliation, and that risk is higher for women than men. Although it is widely believed that women who hold positions of authority are insulated from retaliation by virtue of their roles, that reasoning doesn't reflect reality. Power does not free women from the constraints of gender roles, nor does it protect them from backlash when they become moral objectors. According to a study co-authored by Wharton Deputy Dean and management professor Nancy Rothbard, female moral objectors are perceived as being out of control regardless of their power.

Moral objectors are disruptors. They challenge the status quo, violate expectations, and push for change -- all behaviors that can be viewed as selfish, superior, or based on a personal agenda. Selfishness is associated with lower self-control, yet women are often held to stereotypes of selflessness and communal good. That double standard helps explain why high-powered women experience greater retaliation than high-powered men for speaking out about ethical concerns, according to the research. Retaliation can take many forms: being discredited through gossip, being marginalized or left out of important projects, being demoted or fired.

"In the context of moral objection, women do not automatically benefit from power in the same way as men," the paper states. "We show that violating gender role expectations can impact women even when they occupy higher-power positions in organizations."



THE RESEARCH:

In their published paper, Rothbard and her co-author conducted four studies to test their theories, including what they called the “Kevin and Kate experiment.” In the Kevin and Kate experiment, participants were asked to brainstorm ideas, including sourcing the internet for inspiration, then meet with their teammates to discuss. Using an integrated chat software, the researchers programmed one of the “teammates,” Kevin or Kate, who was described as either a high-power or average-power person, to raise a moral objection in two different ways. In one version, Kevin or Kate voiced a moral objection to the possibility of plagiarism from the internet, saying it’s a serious issue that must be stopped. In the other version, Kevin or Kate echoed that statement but added that it must be stopped because the organization and participants could be at risk. Rothbard found that participants were less likely to give a retaliatory response when the moral objection was framed in the context of the organization. Some even thanked Kevin or Kate for bringing up a relevant issue. The results revealed a key difference in whether moral objectors spoke in what the scholars identified as a **standard frame** or an **organizational frame**, and that helped them develop some solutions to mitigate retaliation against women.

THE SOLUTION:

Rothbard emphasized that the recommendations are broad-based because the burden should not be placed solely on women to prevent retaliation. Instead, the recommendations should be applied to all moral objectors.

- 1.** Use an organizational frame when raising your objection, regardless of your gender or authority level. An organizational frame reduces gendered outcomes because it makes you sound more in control, selfless, and it makes others more receptive to your message.

- 2.** Managers should educate employees to use an organizational frame, including providing examples, so they can learn to be more effective when raising a moral objection.

- 3.** Organizations should provide education specifically to raise awareness about gender bias and reduce the possibility of retaliation against women.

- 4.** Organizations should take steps to reduce the extent to which moral objection is seen through a gender lens. One example is to promote the communal benefits of moral objections.



THE SCHOLAR: *NANCY ROTHBARD*

Nancy Rothbard's award-winning research focuses on the interplay between emotions and the workplace, specifically in the areas of motivation, teamwork, diversity, and work-life balance. She's inspired by stories of women who struggle to achieve parity in the workplace and motivated by a desire to make organizations better for all employees.

"I'm an empirical researcher, and when I look at the numbers, I don't see equitable representation of women and underrepresented minorities in leadership roles," she said. "I'm concerned that we're missing out on incredible talent. Societal barriers are preventing us from accessing the full array of talent in organizations."

Rothbard earned her bachelor's degree from Brown University and a doctorate in organizational behavior from the University of Michigan. She joined Wharton as an assistant professor in 2000 and became deputy dean in 2021 after serving for five years as first female chair of the management department. She is also faculty director of the Women's Executive Leadership Program in Wharton Executive Education.

The Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity (CEO) creates research-driven solutions to help current and future leaders ensure equity in business relationships and leadership. Dean Erika James, who is Wharton's first Black and first female dean, is emblematic of a paradigm shift in executive leadership. She has launched the Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity as the hallmark of her leadership commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The initiative is being led by Kenneth L. Shropshire, Wharton emeritus professor of legal studies and business ethics. Shropshire is the former director of the Wharton Sports Business Initiative and former CEO of the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University.