

To Break Typecast, Know the Signals You May Be Sending

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Last year, Ana-Christina Hoffman longed for new responsibilities at her employer, a home-building company. But the only jobs the company considered her for were similar to the purchasing-manager post she already held. The 38-year-old Colorado resident realized the problem: She'd been typecast.

Typecasting is a common workplace predicament and a difficult one to overcome. Workplace reputations are often formed with limited or superficial information, and are hard to shake once acquired. Employees often hurt their own causes by inadvertently perpetuating those stereotypes.

"Everybody is tempted to take shortcuts and to use shorthand for describing people," says Ben Dattner, a principal at Dattner Consulting, an organizational-effectiveness consulting firm in New York.

Employees can be typecast in several ways. Some labels relate to personality and work habits: unable to handle stress, no "natural" leadership qualities, disorganized, or poor work ethic. Other stereotypes relate to skills, such as number crunchers who supposedly can't strategize, or a marketer who isn't believed to understand finance.

To escape the pigeonhole, employees first must recognize that they're in one. Sometimes it's obvious. When the boss says you're a great accountant but aren't cut out for strategy work, that's a pretty clear indication of your reputation.

But co-workers and bosses often avoid such explicit criticism, particularly when it involves personality issues. In those cases, career coaches suggest soliciting feedback from colleagues. This can be a casual conversation, or a more formal arrangement. Executive coach Linda Dominguez, of Coarsegold, Calif., has her clients ask 10 to 12 people in the company to fill out a form about the client's strengths and weaknesses; her office then combines the feedback, and she discusses it with clients.

Another technique: Watch a videotape of yourself in a work situation, such as delivering a presentation, suggests Debra Lindquist, an image consultant based in Denver. You may notice nervous mannerisms that contribute to an image you'd rather not project.

Pay attention to subtler workplace clues as well, coaches advise. Even something as seemingly innocuous as the office holiday gift exchange can provide indications of how you are perceived. "If you're an accountant concerned that everybody views you as a bean counter, and [your co-workers] get you some accounting game or give you a bag filled with coffee beans," that should confirm your fears, says Dr. Dattner.

Once employees have figured out how they are being typecast, they need to determine whether it's worth fighting the stereotype. Not all are bad. A young, successful employee might cringe at being labeled a "Doogie Howser type," but that's not necessarily a bad reputation to have, notes Dr. Dattner. Other times, the stereotype is so ingrained and has persisted for so long that it may be impossible to overcome. In those cases, consider looking for a job at another employer, suggests Ms. Dominguez.

Ms. Hoffman realized she had been typecast as a no-nonsense, analytical purchasing manager. No one explicitly told her this. Instead, she had to figure it out herself. Her biggest clue: Her employer only considered her for other purchasing-manager roles.

More subtly, co-workers in her department made comments about her appearance that suggested she was projecting a harsh, overly serious image. Her wardrobe was plain and predominately black; she wore very little makeup. When she told co-workers she'd bought new shoes, they would say, "Yeah, I bet they're black," she recalls. Some of her mentors noted that they would love to see her wear bright colors occasionally.

She knew her career shouldn't be determined by her clothes, but she also realized that shaking up her dress might alter people's impression of her. She started wearing brighter colors and applied a little more makeup. Co-workers noticed the change. One asked, "Did you go on some sort of retreat?"

After several months, she told her boss she wanted to branch out professionally. What she really wanted to do, she told him, was lead training sessions for other employees. He helped encourage upper-level managers to create a post for her

in which she gathers feedback from home buyers and creates training programs to teach employees how to treat home-buying customers well.

She credits the makeover with helping win her the new job. "I'm sure it's not all the clothes, but I really feel in my heart it was definitely a piece of the puzzle to present myself differently," she says. "Now I'm not just the stereotype of a tough purchasing" manager.

Nikki Novotney, research director at Strategic Programs Inc., a human-resources research and consulting firm based in Denver, is trying to overcome her youthful image. She is 32 but suspects new acquaintances think she's as much as seven years younger. She blames her sometimes-trendy dress and laid-back manner. When she meets new clients, for instance, she feels they initially don't take her seriously. It's not until about 10 minutes into a presentation that she feels she gains credibility.

What's more, if she moves up to the next rung on the company ladder, she is likely to be supervising older workers. To project a more authoritative image, she's working with an image consultant hired by her employer. "If I want to continue building my career, I need to start building an executive image as well," Ms. Novotney says.