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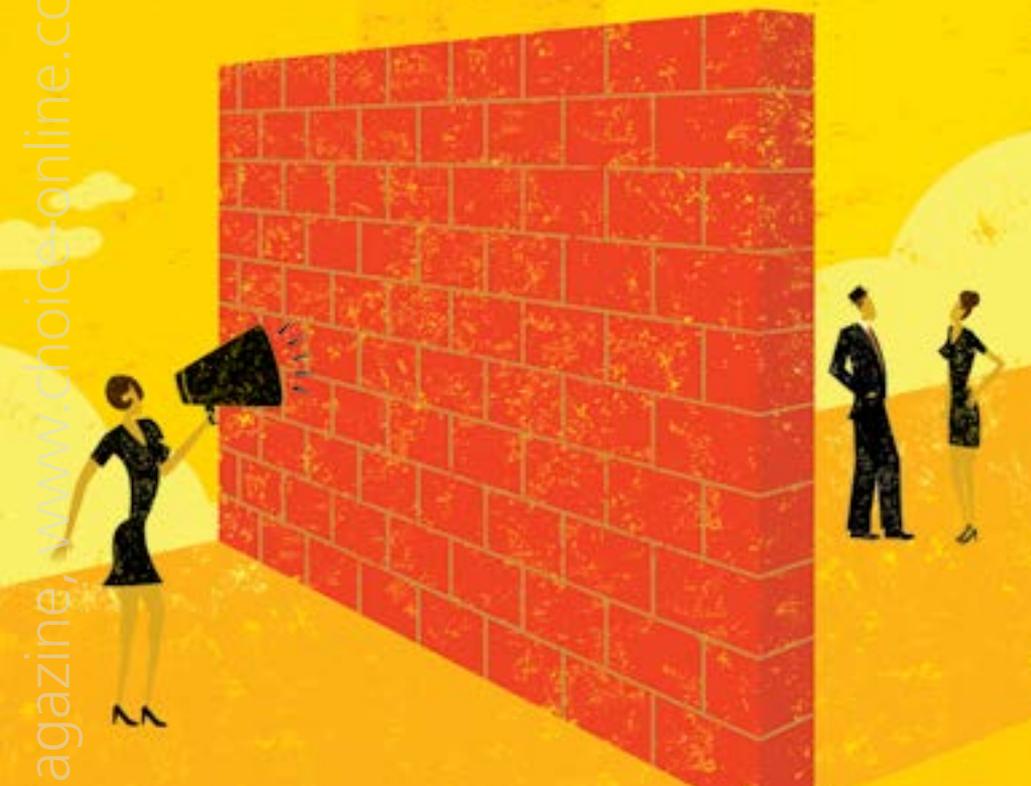
Coaching women
in leadership



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THE SITUATION

“ In a workshop on gender diversity in the workplace, my client (the only female on the executive team) shared that sometimes women’s voices are not heard in decision-making. She said other women often report to her that stating their idea gets no response, then moments later, when a man says the same thing everyone thinks it’s a great idea. The CEO responded, ‘That would never happen in our company.’ What coaching would best support her? ”

How do I support my female client?

THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC®, CEC

Your client, as the sole female leader on an executive team addressing an inequality (in this case, gender), invokes past injustice. In an article titled “*History Backfires: Reminders of past injustices against women undermine support for workplace policies promoting women*,” the authors Ivona Hideg and Anne E. Wilson address this issue. (Source: *Journal of Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol 157, January 2020, pages 176-189.) In the article, they posit that reminding people about past injustice against a disadvantaged group (e.g., women) can invoke social identity threat among advantaged group members (e.g., men) and undermine support for employment equity policies by fostering the belief that inequality no longer exists. The CEO’s comments reflect this idea and the research in the article con-

firm his response is typical given the situation as described by your client. (I recommend reading the entire article for more details).

First, work with your client to help her understand that she and the CEO are facing an issue that is prevalent in workplaces worldwide. Second, a possible solution mentioned in the research reframes an approach that your client might find helpful. While acknowledging the past inequity is essential, also presenting to the CEO the value women bring to the company will help to mitigate any defensive behavior the CEO may exhibit.

Your client should base her comments on facts. She should get data showing how women add to an overall organization’s strength. And without women in leadership, this company may not be competitive in attracting great female leaders to grow the bottom-line, profits. In recognizing the progress to be made, the CEO may shift his

focus from self-protection to open acknowledgment of the problem. Together, they can work to create a collaborative process that isn’t accusatory but focused on the growth of the individuals and the company.

And finally, please remind her that this process will take time, and to be patient. Climbing is slow; falling is fast. Do not move so quickly to resolve the issue that further negative unintended consequences are created. Please work with your client to thoroughly acknowledge any unproductive personal emotions she has grappled with and address them to her satisfaction. Then design an approach using data as to the value women bring to leadership to the organization.

Coach her to develop alternative strategies while remaining committed to creating equity in the workplace. This plan can support her growth and all the women who will follow behind her.

By Suzi Pomerantz, MT, MCC

Ironic, isn't it, that in a gender diversity workshop, when the only woman on the senior leadership team expresses that women are not heard, she is actually not heard. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. According to the most recent data from Catalyst (1/1/2020), women comprise only 5.6 percent of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and 26.5 percent of executive leaders. Since men and women communicate differently, and most organizational leadership has historically been male, women's communication styles are not often recognized.

As the only female on the executive team, she's in a unique position to influence her C-suite colleagues and increase their awareness about the experience of women in their workplace culture. To do so, she has to be heard. She has to be respected. She has to be able to connect her message to something that matters to the CEO, whether

that's increased profitability or reduced attrition, or retention of talent, or whatever he considers strategically important.

How is your client perceived by the senior leadership? How is she perceived by the rest of the company? Who would she like to be as a leader? Is there anything in the way of her being heard, respected, and able to influence the CEO and others on behalf of the unheard women in her company? Does she even want to do that?

The coaching that would best support her must be determined by her. I can't tell you since I don't know her or her objectives in hiring you in the first place, but you could ask her what would best support her in her development as a leader in this situation. As a few possibilities, you might help her:

- Align her internal branding with her intended role as a leader.
- Create strategic opportunities for women to be heard in the organization.
- Increase the awareness of the CEO and

other senior leaders about the experience of women in the company.

- Identify research and data that supports the bottom-line impact to any company for embracing diverse voices in decisions made.
- Manage up and navigate her relationship with the CEO to become a strategic advisor to him about culture improvements.
- Determine who she wants to be in the matter of women's leadership. Does she want to take up the mantle of women's issues, or would that brand her in a way that doesn't strategically serve her or the company? Does she want to be the voice of women on the leadership team as the token female?

Once your client is clear about who she wants to be as a leader, you can support her in aligning her brand, communication strategies and style with the impact she wants to make.

By Craig Carr, BCC, PCC, CPCC

For the first time in a decade of sticky situations, I felt compelled to consult another expert. I wanted to be sure I didn't inject my response with involuntary male bias, so I called on Gillian Windsor, a seasoned coach and facilitator – also my wife – who helps professional women claim authority and influence. What follows is fully vetted by a woman who knows this landscape very well!

First, taking action to shift the dominant paradigm is a call that women everywhere are stepping up to. On the other hand, executive men are burning out and struggling with their own unique, exhausting issues. It's not unusual to see them confusing the strident use of power with leadership, then turning around to find their relationships at work and at home are in turmoil. This is a juicy niche if you're looking.

Gillian and I concur that a first task is determining whether the CEO is an old school bullyboy narcissist that your client will have to navigate around, and wait to be gone,

or if he's an out-of-touch, unconscious gaslighter who is fearful and innocently unaware of the world around him. There's a spectrum here, so making that determination can be tricky. Work with her to tread carefully, assess the territory, be brave, and learn both situational and systemic awareness.

We also noted the irony that the mess surfaced in a gender diversity workshop. Your client needs to know who her allies are. Find out how the incident was handled during the workshop and if anything got addressed after the training. As the only female on the exec team, identify the scope of the cause she wants to lead forward. Become explicit around who will follow, who has influence, what's at stake personally and professionally, and is it worth it?

In terms of immediate action, your client's place on the executive team should ground her authority to speak privately with any idea-pilfering guy. If that's an awkward conversation, you can work on that with her. If she doesn't trust her authority to be direct and fierce, there's work to do on strengthening her position, which may take time, and you should point the coaching in that direction.

Finally, remember that incidents like this are often symptoms of culture issues rather than the result of one person being a jerk, a bully, or an anomaly. Furthermore, it may not be the gender dynamic everyone thinks it is. It takes skill and digging to find real causes involving hidden loyalties, company pain anchored in the past (trauma), and invisible rules about who gets to lead. •

Are you grappling with a sticky situation?

You don't have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Email your situation to: submissions@choice-online.com and put "sticky situations" in the subject line.