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## BREAKING *the* GLASS CEILING

Coaching women  
in leadership



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# 10 WAYS WOMEN MIGHT BE SABOTAGING THEMSELVES AS LEADERS



And how you can help them as a coach

By Wendy Capland, MCC

**W**omen often unknowingly sabotage or minimize themselves, their voices, and their power. Feminine leadership is on the rise, and I believe we are on the brink of a world-altering phenomenon so enormous that women must get better prepared to step into their A-game and stop the behaviors that minimize their contributions, play down their accomplishments, and sabotage their careers.

The war for talent has shifted and women are sick and tired of sitting at the director and vice-president levels in their organizations. Women are going to make an exponential leap in the next 5 to 10 years, and as a coach, you can have a tremendous impact in helping them become their fullest and best selves.

Here are the top 10 mistakes professional women make and my advice after 15 years of specifically helping women advance and 30 years of execu-

tive leadership development as to how to change these behaviors for NOT only us as women but also as coaches in order to help those women to claim the full measure of their power in the business world.

Whether you identify as male, female or non-binary, your voice as a coach is very important and can make a BIG difference in the advancement of women and their leadership.

## 1 Using Minimizing Language

Women use words that minimize their own impact. The words *'just,' 'sort of,' 'maybe,'* and *'kind of'* are some examples. How often do you say, "I *just* wanted to tell you something" or "I *just* wanted to stop you for a minute." The qualifier 'just' sends the subtle message that our statements and opinions aren't all that important.

There are other belittling words

women are prone to using. For example, how often do women say, "I'm feeling *a little bit* concerned about something." I doubt you're really feeling just *a little bit* concerned or you probably wouldn't have brought it up in the first place. Instead, say you are feeling concerned and don't couch your words with unnecessary extra minimizing words. Speaking powerfully is one of the best things you can do for yourself.

**COACHING TIP:** Develop the distinction with your client of the negative impact of using minimizing words and ask the client's permission to point out when they use these words, so they can self-correct.

## 2 Apologizing

Women are prone to apologizing when there's no reason to do so. Many women's voice-mail messages begin, "I'm sorry I'm

not able to take your call right now.” Even in our voicemail, we apologize! Of course, apologize if you have made a mistake; otherwise, cut ‘sorry’ out of your everyday vernacular.

To check whether this applies to you, start counting how many times in one day you say the word ‘sorry.’ The act of counting will help you become aware and reduce the occurrences.

**COACHING TIP:** Start by asking the client where they notice they are doing this currently and what impact they think it might be having. Then explore changes, if any, they would like to make.

### 3 Asking Permission

Women are prone to asking questions when they already know the answers. We don’t want to be too overpowering, and we want to get buy-in up front, so we often ask permission to say something when there’s absolutely no need to do so.

**Coaching Tip:** A good place to start with this one is to ask the client, “Do you think you do this and if so, in which areas are you prone to do this more often?” This conversation will raise awareness, which you can help coach them through.

### 4 Waiting Until We’re Experts Before Taking on a New Role

When offered an opportunity, women will often feel like they need to be fully skilled before taking it on, while a man given the same opportunity will say, “It’s about time they selected me!” Women say, “I’m not ready yet.” Men will say, “I’ll take the job and figure it out when I get there.”

Age doesn’t seem to make a difference. I just spoke to two 30-year-olds, one man, one woman, both unhappy in their jobs. The woman says she wants to get a new job but doesn’t know what else she can really do unless she looks for a similar job in the same type of industry. The man says, it’s no problem, he’ll have no trouble getting another job because he’s so marketable.

**COACHING TIP:** Ask the client to articulate where this may have happened to them in the past. Do they see it happening now? Do they see an opportunity where this pattern could repeat itself in upcoming assignments, projects or key stakeholder conversations?

### 5 Focusing on Cooperation Rather than Competition

Yes, there are a thousand business articles that tell us collaboration is the more effective approach. The problem with that? It’s not the structure of corporate America. This may not be PC to say, but corporate America has a hierarchical structure that is not set up for collaboration to work effectively in the long-term because the way to success is still to climb the ladder.

**COACHING TIP:** Help the client identify the corporate structure in their organization and whether they have found this has hindered their advancement and in what ways. Then have them brainstorm powerful conversations with key stakeholders to clearly articulate their powerful request. It’s also a good idea to have them write out a script and role play with you before they go live with their conversation.

### 6 Questioning Ourselves

A lot of women I’ve been exposed to spend too much time thinking about whether we’re doing it right. Will I be a threat to my husband if I surpass his income? Will

## BUILDING A PERSONAL BRAND

A strong personal brand will help you get what you want whether you’re working in a company or running one of your own. The way to develop a personal brand is to deepen your own self-awareness. Ask yourself, “What makes me stand out positively from other people?”

A personal brand is an asset that defines the best things about you. It’s the impression people have of you, and the impression you want them to have. Spend the time defining what you want to be most known for and align all that you do around it.

**COACHING TIP:** Ask the client to interview 10 people who know them well and ask each for five things they think are strengths, gifts, or talents. Ask the client to make a chart of all the responses and look for themes. Determine if this is enough information to help the client to create a personal brand statement which will provide a ‘north star’ from which they can navigate and be guided.



people think I'm a bad mother because I'm working so hard or running my own business? Will I lose my friends if I upset the balance of power or popularity? And who am I, anyway, to try and move out of the box of what others expect of me?

**COACHING TIP:** Obviously, this topic of 'am I good enough?' is ripe for coaching and helping clients excavate their deepest fears. This exploration might help them move through to the other side towards feeling empowered.

## 7 Not Setting Clear Goals

You have to be really clear about what you want. Do you want a promotion or a job change? Funding for your new company? Do you want to write a book or be a keynote speaker? You have to be very clear about your desires and commitments so that you can set priorities and boundaries. You're going to have to make big asks. If you're wishy-washy about what you're going after, everyone

else will be too and they won't be able to help you most effectively.

**COACHING TIP:** Most coaches are already very good at helping clients get clear about what they want. I am referring to their goals, dreams, and aspirations. You can only do great coaching if you know what your client wants and is aiming for.

## 8 Only Setting Goals we Know How to Reach

Don't be stopped from setting a goal because you don't know how to get there. No one knows exactly how to get to any big goal in the beginning especially where they're stretching themselves. Dream big and figure it out as you go along taking one easy,

non-frightening step at a time.

Years ago, I found myself declaring during a workshop that I wanted to have my own television show. As soon as I said it, I thought, "I have no idea how to do that. That was a stupid goal." But a woman in the audience came up to me afterward, told me she was being interviewed by a cable show the following week, and invited me to come along and observe. I decided this was a good way to get my feet wet with very little to no risk. You can head toward a big goal one baby step at a time. In fact, it may be better that way – you'll avoid setting off your own fight-or-flight response.

Sure enough, I eventually wound up with my own cable program, which ran locally for three years and I had 2.5 million viewers. Not bad, considering

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that I had absolutely no idea how I was going to accomplish this goal when I first set it.

**COACHING TIP:** Great coaching encourages the client to stretch into the person they have the potential to become. In big generalities, men more often already think they're great and women often think they're not ready yet. If you're coaching someone who has big dreams, go for it through your coaching.

If you're coaching someone who could dream bigger, be provocative by asking, "If you dreamed as big as you dared to, with no limitations, what would you do or who would you be?"

reflects badly on them in some way. This is often less true for men.

## 10 Worrying Too Much about Relationships

That 'no' on the cable series was harder than it should have been. I was really clear that it was a 'no' for me, but I think the woman on the other end of the phone was surprised and a tad annoyed. I felt uncomfortable when she sounded annoyed because even though I didn't know her, I worried I was hurting her feelings and maybe ruining any chance at a further relationship together. Nevertheless, I stuck to my guns and declined her generous offer.



***Have the client define what boundaries mean to them and in what arenas they might have looser boundaries than they would like.***

## 9 Not Setting Clear Boundaries

Once I had done the show for three years, I felt I was done with cable TV. My next stretch goal was a PBS special. So, when a woman got in touch and invited me to do a cable TV series, I said no because it wasn't in line with where I was headed. Create some non-negotiable boundaries for yourself so you can say yes to things that lead you toward your goals and no to things that would distract you.

**COACHING TIP:** Introduce the distinction of boundaries with your client. Have the client define what they think boundaries mean to them and in what arenas they might have looser boundaries than they would like.

Also ask, what requests would they need to make? Of whom? And how would this ultimately benefit them? In big generalities, women are more prone to say yes because they don't like hurting other's feelings or they think it

**COACHING TIP:** Ask the client if they say 'no' too often or not often enough. Then ask if there are currently things at work or at home that they could say no to if they had the courage.

If yes, help them wordsmith the 'no' and role play to practice saying it safely without repercussions.

### WHAT NOW?

As a coach, you can use this information with both coaching men and women. For women, I use it to help them increase their power, their voice and their seat at the table, if these are aligned with their goals and desires. For those men who are leaders in their organizations, I use these 12 mistakes women make, to help them coach, mentor and develop their pipeline of female talent.

One simple way to use this list is to share it with your clients and ask them which ones they struggle with or would like to develop deeper awareness or more facility navigating. •



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