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the magazine of professional coaching

## BREAKING *the* GLASS CEILING

Coaching women  
in leadership



VOLUME 18 • NUMBER 2  
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# ‘Being With’

**Beyond coaching for performance, for all genders**

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The proverbial glass ceiling is constructed by everyone, by some overtly and by others unconsciously through habit. Both conditions and anything in between are well served through professional coaching.

Individually we experience or witness the impact of a ceiling, yet most people don't know what to ask for as an alternative. As a result, the mastery required in a coach practitioner focuses on revealing bias, assumption and preference. Gosh, that's true all the time in coaching, so what's different in the vulnerable territory of gender identity?

Professors Robin J. Ely and Irene Padavic studied the question of why women struggle to attain positions of power and authority in the workplace. The classic story is based in gender bias and is called the work/family narrative. Women biologically place family as a higher priority than work. For men, it is the opposite.

The research reveals a different narrative that provides a fresh opening for coaches who wish to support the removal of ceilings for any gender in the workplace. This underlying narrative punishes both men and woman. For men the primary identity as the ideal worker

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generates guilt for missing out on family connection. For women the primary identity with family as all-important, results in accommodation – for example, working part-time for a while – and then resentment for professional ambitions being placed in a secondary position.

The emphasis on one gender versus another perpetuates stereotypes that sustain the ceiling. As the professors' analysis shows, the work/family narrative blocks breakthrough thinking, emotional sensitivity and generative relating. Organizational cultures must attend to producing results, true. However, companies also want to create a climate for original thinking, creativity and learning.

All genders require time to restore energy, time to daydream and imagine, and time for connection that strengthens collaboration. Long hours and unrealistic timelines conflict with these important healthy climate factors and are masked underneath the work/family narrative that appears to create a premium on men as the ideal workers and reduces both inclusion and diversity that best matches the customer population.

Whether we are coaching men or women, exploring the underlying issue – the general culture of overwork –

yields far greater value. Leading self is challenging enough and people who chose then to also lead others accept responsibility for an extraordinary level of clear-eyed perceiving. The paradox is that activity and effort ultimately produce diminishing returns.

Early symptoms are frayed emotions that show up as personal judgments in the form of anger, dismissiveness and/or disproportionate critique. Left unnoticed, these symptoms evolve into more destructive behaviors that further drives a wedge between managers and the team members who deliver business outcomes. Disrespect and incivility are rampant in engagement survey results for organizations that suffer under the culture of overwork.

When we look in the rear view mirror, it's easy to see that optimizing stability and becoming knowledge experts are two high value leadership outcomes. Today's business environment produces continuous disruption that makes knowledge extinct at a pace and scale never before experienced. Instead of optimizing stability, today's workplace requires four alternative abilities.

All of these abilities rely upon the action to be with what is occurring and to see it clearly. More often than not, this requires the discipline to pause, be still, notice beyond habit, assumption and preference, and speak up with genuine curiosity. All of these abilities are well supported through a coach-like mindset and skill set.

The action for 'being with' produces respect for what is emerging. This is the first step in being able to anticipate. Team members at each customer touchpoint are the first to perceive customer signals for change, early, yet rarely speak up. Leaders who are being with each person continuously and deeply listening, fully present and asking questions he or she does not know the answer to, invite team members to trust their perceiving.

The action of being with invites team members to aspire toward new thought and creativity, to be what motivation research identifies as purpose-driven.

## STRENGTHENING 'BEING WITH' PRESENCE

### Coaching questions for leaders

Experiment and tailor the following questions to each leader's way of thinking, learning and creating:

<p><b>Anticipate:</b> <b>See around the corner before needing to turn.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What surprising insights are customer-facing team members expressing?</li> <li>• What preference or habit in your team meetings stops team members from speaking up?</li> <li>• What are the outlier data points catching your attention?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Aspire:</b> <b>Connect to purpose for self-trust of perceiving.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you want to know about from team members that demonstrates you trust and care about their contribution?</li> <li>• What perspective from your front windshield view do you want to share with team members?</li> <li>• What assumptions do you hold about the accuracy of customer-facing team member perspectives?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Adapt:</b> <b>Liberate new thoughts for solution-oriented action.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What authority do team members require to implement solutions autonomously?</li> <li>• What tools and resources do you have to contribute for others to act more quickly?</li> <li>• What evidence strengthens your confidence in team member decisions and actions?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Align:</b> <b>Amplify and accelerate what's working.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is changing for the better that you want to acknowledge and encourage?</li> <li>• What visibility is possible for successful team members to be role models for others?</li> <li>• What are you saying "no" to and actually meaning "not yet" on the path to "yes"?</li> </ul>

Leaders who sustain genuine care and curiosity produce reciprocal dialogue and discover ways to adapt processes and execution more quickly and with fuller ownership at the point of customer interaction. Nothing builds alignment more quickly across an organization than successful change results that are demonstrated by the frontline workforce.

Organizations are moving toward building coaching into managerial capability. As a result, the role of the professional coach is evolving as well. Practitioners who move beyond coaching for performance toward

tapping latent potential to anticipate, aspire, adapt and align will amplify and accelerate a leader's contribution to the organization.

How leaders allocate time is gender neutral. Revealing the clear linkage between time to 'be with' and accelerating successful change is the driver to transform the culture of overwork into a culture of effective work, for all genders. •

NOTES:

*Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2020; "What's Really Holding Women Back?" pages 58-67.