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CORNER OFFICE | WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

Finding, and Owning, Their Voice

Four chief executives describe the importance of taking stands, and of making sure they're heard.

BY ADAM BRYANT

What does it mean for women to have a “voice” in meetings? How can they navigate perceptions around assertiveness, particularly when they are often judged more harshly than men? And is much of the conversation around women and leadership really just about power?

These are just a few of the themes that arose during interviews with four executives about the challenges they have faced at work over the years and the advice they would give to other women about surviving and thriving in the workplace.

These conversations are a departure from my usual Corner Office interviews. Over the years, I have sat down with more than 125 women to discuss leadership, but have generally avoided any gender-related questions. Not that I considered those questions taboo. My goal from the start was to interview many leaders who happened to be women, rather than interviewing them as “women leaders.”

But women and leadership remains a topic of intense interest, and a year ago I went back to four women I had interviewed previously, to conduct a second conversation about the headwinds they have faced in the context of work and the pointers they'd offer to other women. Given the overwhelming reaction to the interviews last year, I sat down for a second conversation with four more women. Their stories, insights and advice have been lightly edited and condensed.



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Jody Greenstone Miller,
C.E.O. of the Business Talent Group

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Photo: Emily Bert

Jody Greenstone Miller

Chief executive, the Business Talent Group, which finds projects for independent professionals

Career highlights: Acting president and chief operating officer of Americast, a television programming venture. Deputy to David Gergen when he was counselor to President Bill Clinton. Investment banker at Lehman Brothers. Legal counsel to Richard W. Riley when he was governor of South Carolina.

Q. Any headwinds you've encountered in your career because you're a woman?

A. If you just ask me about things that affected my career, being a woman would not be on the list. I really don't think of it that way. I also don't think the discussion is healthy about, “Here's how women lead. Here's how men lead.”

I believe that for two reasons. One is that I think there are lots of different kinds of women leaders and lots of different kinds of men leaders. There

isn't one type of leader who is different because of sex.

I also think, “So what?” Let's say it's true. Let's stipulate that women are apples and men are pears. You still have to find a way to succeed in the world. Complaining about differences or identifying differences is not particularly constructive. I feel that what we've lived through the last couple of years is what I call the “women criticizing women under the guise of help” industrial complex.

There have been hundreds of articles and books telling women why they're not succeeding, to the point where I think women — particularly young women, who may not even feel they have a problem — are looking at each other and saying, “Maybe we do have a problem.” Professional women have been put under a microscope. If you did the same thing to men, there would be a long list of things that men have to work on that's stopping them from being successful, too.



Photo: Emily Berl

Ms. Miller noticed that complaining about or pointing out differences in men's and women's leadership styles isn't necessarily a constructive way to succeed.

I do feel that we are in a pretty unhealthy place. Even if we were to say it's true that people don't like women who are successful, what in the world are you going to do about it? You've got to find a way to navigate through it. You're not going to say, "Oh well, I can't be successful," because that's not true, and it's not constructive.

I also think that many issues people point to as factors that hold women back, like the "unauthoritative" sound of our voices, may just be symptoms of the fact that there are not more women in leadership roles, rather than causes. If we had more female leaders, perhaps people would start to associate the sound of a woman's voice with leadership.

The other overarching comment I'd make is that the air is thin at the top. Anytime you are progressing, it's competitive. People will use whatever tools they have to try to prevail over you. The set of tools that is used against women is based on perceptions of their vulnerabilities. I think a lot of this, particularly when we are talking about top jobs, is really about power and not about gender. Some of the ways people fight tactically may feel gender-based, but they're really about power.

Q. Any examples that you've experienced?

A. When I worked at the White House, I would walk into meetings and I would be hazed. I would sit at a table and say something, and people would talk over me as though I had said nothing. They were playing mind games. I called my mentor — Dick Riley, whom I had worked for in South Carolina when he was governor — and I said: "It's really hard here. People are really mean and nasty." He said: "What do you expect? You're at the White House. It's the center of power in the universe. Of course it's a snake pit." That was a big epiphany. It's not always about being a woman.

Q. Other observations?

A. When you are a woman — particularly a younger woman in business, and you're in the company of a lot of men — you're often underestimated. So, you have a choice. You can either make it clear to those around you why you're at the table, which involves a somewhat unattractive need to wear your credentials on your sleeve, or you wait for your moment and make your comments and prove your worth.

I don't think men face the same pressure as women in this way. There's much more of a sense of: "He's here. He must have done something to deserve it. What's she got to offer?" Women don't

have as much of a cushion in terms of what they contribute. You're not given the benefit of the doubt. So maybe you need to be a little more strategic or smarter about what you say and when you say it.

Sometimes it can be an advantage that men underestimate women. I was negotiating a major lease once, but the man I was negotiating with had no idea I was a lawyer. In the end, I got a lot of things because he didn't have his guard up. So there are times when being underestimated is not the end of the world, but it can be frustrating. The other thing I've seen — including with myself — is that women are much less likely to view themselves, and to be viewed by others, as being capable of a stretch job, or doing something they've never done before. I'm not 100 percent sure it's all bad that you want to be prepared and you want to know something about the job, as opposed to someone who may not be ready and is more likely to fail. Women shouldn't wait until they have the diploma to go to the next level, but is it so bad that they want to be sure that they're ready and they want to be successful?

Q. Yet isn't that dynamic one reason that there aren't more women in top jobs?

A. Yes, it's a factor. And I think both men and women can proactively help women feel comfortable about stretching. Men also need to see that women can stretch into new roles. But my view about why there aren't more women in top jobs has much more to do with the limited paths to leadership and less with what I would call these "softer" skills.

I think that many women, and men, just don't like the rules of the game, where working 24/7 for the first 20 years or so of your career is the only route to leadership. There aren't enough options and pathways to the top today for people who are not willing to play the game as it's played today. I think that's a far bigger obstacle.