



Three Reasons Why Women Don't Get Heard at Work!

There's nothing quite like being told to keep quiet. Well, most people aren't quite that direct. In fact, in business circles, I'd say we're much more polite using passive aggressive means instead to silence those we disagree with. Sometimes we do it in such a way that those being silenced don't even know they're being silenced. I may be biased but I think women, in particular, are targeted for silence at work.

Here are some of the reasons why I think more women don't get heard at work.

Women don't raise their hands and when they do, they don't keep them up. Have you seen the TED Talk video of Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, talking about why we have too few women leaders? (View Video) Sheryl gave a similar talk to employees at Facebook. What fascinated me was the comment she received from a young woman working for her organization. As she was wrapping up, Sheryl said she'd have time for two more questions. She took one question, then another. At that time, the young woman told Sheryl that she put her hand down – along with all the other women in the audience. Then Sheryl proceeded to take more questions from the audience but only from the men, who it turns out, had kept their hands up. Because this young woman had already lowered her hand, she missed out on an important opportunity to not only voice her question but to be heard. The lesson learned: raise your hand and when you do, keep it up.

Women are taught to follow the rules. Some of you may disagree with me on this but I think women are more likely than men to follow the rules. Why? Because it's been ingrained in us. Most of us grew up with our parents and other adults telling us things like, "Children should be seen and not heard." Or, my mom's favorite, "If you haven't got something nice to say, don't say anything at all." But one mom I knew well, always told her kids to, "zip it," when they were saying something she didn't like. While well-intentioned, these sayings may have backfired for us women. I remember my brothers blatantly flouting these rules while I respectfully stayed silent. I guess the threat of punishment was enough for me. Unfortunately, that kind of training is hard to shake. Trust me, I know. But if we want to be heard sometimes we may have to change or break the rules that we've been taught. Think I'm wrong? Then ask yourself how many times you've worked hard and done good work only to be passed over for a raise or promotion. You played by the rules, didn't you?

Women cave into bullies. There's been a lot of talk about bullies lately. Nobody likes confrontation or conflict at work, at least nobody I know, and therein is the problem. Our options when approaching conflict include fight, yield or avoid. When confronted by a bully, in most cases, women will seek to sidestep a fight or avoid confrontation because that may feel more comfortable to them in the short term. (Remember, we've been taught to "turn the other cheek.") However, yielding may actually be more detrimental over the long term. When you continually give in or allow someone else to have their way, eventually you may give up and stop caring. When this happens, you've effectively been silenced. While I'm not advocating fighting, I do advocate making your needs known and having your voice heard. Sometimes that means stepping out of your comfort zone.

According to Gregorio Billikopf with the University of California, when disagreements emerge it's easy to 'hear without listening.' I'll do my part and listen to others so that they feel heard but I expect the same courtesy in return. I also refuse to let anyone silence me, and I hope you will refuse to let them silence you too. After all, I don't think it's too much to ask to be heard.