CHAPTER 18

Women in the Workplace: Negotiating Influence as a Leader

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Introduction

Success in an organizational context is partly achieved by being able to read the room and know the rules of engagement for that context. Some people may call it being politically savvy. You can also think of it as marketing or presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) in how you appear to others. It is important to be able to communicate in ways that are considered to be contributing value to the organization and demonstrating that you are both an asset and someone who can be depended on to get the job done.

However, as important as it is for you to be able to read the room, it is equally critical to understand that people in the room are reading

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you as well. Gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors play a role in influencing how people are perceived, and in many cases these traits cause women and minorities to need to prove their competence more often than other groups in an organizational context (McKinsey, 2019). Some of these situational assessments are not as obvious as others and more subtle means of discrimination can be referred to as microaggressions that accumulate over time influencing how candidates are determined to be ready for advancement (Sue et al., 2019). *Microaggressions* can be thought of as daily indignities that are intentional or unintentional, and that can have negative effects on a person's self-esteem and health.

The form of how these subtle microaggressions may play out in the workplace can be categorized as gender microassaults, gender microinsults, or gender microinvalidations (Capodilupo et al., 2010). *Gender microassaults* can be thought of as the old-fashioned way you picture sexism, by the making of overt rude comments and name-calling. *Gender microinsults* are when women are consistently overlooked, as when women and men attend and participate in meetings, but only the men's contributions are positively acknowledged. *Gender microinvalidations* are when male colleagues may bond on shared activities and do not invite women to attend assuming they will not be interested (Capodilupo et al., 2010). These can play a role in how women are perceived as leaders and for being eligible candidates considered for advancement.

Organizational Context

As you move up the ladder in an organization, the scope of the work and responsibilities becomes broader, more strategic, and less operational. It can be a challenge to let go of what you did on the frontlines to take a more strategic view of the larger organization. When you perform well in a certain context and then are promoted, you need to be cognizant of the success measures in this new role and context. In many cases, your strengths that worked in your favor and enabled you to be noticed and promoted in the first place may not be as valued in this new role. You need to discover the measures of success in this new context and role (Fisher-Yoshida, 2022).

In any event, once you discover what is needed to perform well, you will still need to communicate about the performance in order to demonstrate your worth, connect with others, and contribute to the well-being of the organization. It is not enough to only do good work because it may

not be noticed or understood in the way that you want it to be, and that could cause judgment against you about how much effort you exerted. This very act of not communicating about the work accomplished can sometimes work against women because women have been known to be better at advocating for others rather than themselves (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013). Women may assume the work completed to be part of the job and that drawing attention to it would be bragging. In negotiation terminology, this translates into women being more comfortable creating value for others, rather than claiming value for themselves when conditions are favoring more stereotypical male behaviors in a negotiation context (Kray et al., 2004). In addition, organizations tend to recognize leadership behaviors typically associated with a stereotypical male version of a leader and overlook women in the process of identifying talent for advancement (Ely et al., 2011).

Taking all of this into account, you can see that it can be challenging for women to succeed according to rules that were made by men, and the expected behaviors that are more male-oriented. In some cases there is backlash for women adhering to these male-oriented behaviors, which is acting outside the norm (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013), creating the need for conditions that are favorable to women's ways of succeeding. Adler and Osland (2016) found that it is more frequent for women than men to create their own entrepreneurial businesses or run a family business partly due to these larger organizational challenges. In addition, women more often than men, lead social enterprises. A message here is that women are being creative in expanding the pie, so to speak, so that in addition to competing with men on the playing fields men established, they are also branching out to other fields where they can find opportunities for success, utilizing their innate and socially constructed behaviors.

Working with Narrative

The role of narrative and the stories you tell about yourself have an influence on your self-esteem and how you "show up" to others. Czarniawska (2004) differentiates narrative as a sequence of chronological events, while a story is an emplotted narrative. A plot develops in a narrative when there is a change in state or equilibrium and there is an explanation offered to make sense of the series of chronological events. These stories and plots are culturally influenced because the sense making that takes

place needs to be contextually situated to promote a shared understanding of the narrative. A narrative for a woman in an organization can be a chronological ordering of events from recruitment to current ranking, while the process of advancement, with its benefits and challenges, is the story she carries.

The stories you have about selfdevelop over the years from a variety of life experiences and social contexts. Stories with moral implications are communicated to you by your families, communities, education, media, and more. This tells you the way you should be in the world, what you should initiate, what you should follow, and what you should expect. You are usually not aware of the stories by which you live until you are confronted with a competing narrative, as in going to a different culture and seeing the norms are different. This causes you to become aware of the assumptions you hold (Brookfield, 2011) about the way food should be served in a restaurant, how you are supposed to greet people at their homes, and what leadership looks like in an organizational context. It is in the space of recognizing your tacitly held assumptions that transformative learning can take place (Taylor, 2009).

When you operate on autopilot you engage in ways that are familiar and habitual and are reflections of your deeply embedded belief systems and the stories of how you see the world. This can have an effect on how you see gender in the workplace, and if you are not aware of the assumptions you make then implicit biases can be operating. "One impact may be that we may perceive and rate a female leader's performance lower than it actually is due to our unquestioned bias" (Hansen, 2020). This is partly due to the attributions you may unconsciously be assigning to women in the workplace based on male-dominant organizations developing "formal structure and informal norms around gendered notions of work and behavior" (Kolb & Porter, 2015, p. xxvi).

You learn about yourself and develop a keener sense of self-awareness by paying more attention to the stories you tell and how you tell them. This is critical as women advance into leadership roles as their self-talk and narrative about what it means to be a good leader and whether they qualify, can influence how they behave and are perceived as leaders. In some cases, women may sabotage themselves from succeeding based on the stories they tell themselves, which come from the social contexts in which they grew up and currently live and work.

Likewise, it is important in learning about others to hear about their life experiences through the stories they tell about who they are and how

they interact with others. As you listen to their stories, there are many processes you can use to deconstruct the parts that make the whole: How they tell the story; how you raise questions in response to listening; and then in this relational process, how the original narratives are rendered (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011). It is in these renderings that change takes place, and this can be in the form of a coaching relationship.

Role of Communication and Stories

Narratives are known for capturing the lived and told experiences, and perhaps identifying gaps between the two sets of stories that may not be congruent (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). These stories are also better understood when the context is known, as the meaning making process is more enhanced considering these situational boundaries. This is especially relevant when you need to take into consideration the sociocultural context of where these stories originate and take place (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is where the plot development shifts a chronological narrative or retelling of events into a story with a plot that reflects both personal and social origins.

When you use stories as part of work in qualitative research or with clients, a good starting place is asking a general question that is open and broad to allow the space for the client to tell the story the way she wants it to be told. From there you can mutually explore the many factors that created the story, and work toward identifying the aspects of the story that work well and are supportive and constructive, and the parts that get in the way of the client living a meaningful and rewarding life. Asking clarifying questions and going beyond the told story provides an opportunity for the client to expand in areas she may have just brushed the surface of in telling. An example of this could be, "Earlier in the story you were mentioning the meeting you had with Person A. Could you describe that in more detail, for example, how did you prepare for this meeting, what were you expecting, what did you do in response to his reaction?"

Another model that provides for a deeper and more expansive dive into stories is the LUUUUTT model of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce, 2007). The acronym stands for stories lived, untold stories, unheard stories, unknown stories, untellable stories, stories told, and the process of storytelling (Pearce, 2007). This model

expands the typical framing of stories lived and told that is characteristic of narrative inquiry.

CMM is a communication theory and practice that takes a communication perspective and follows the premise that you make the social worlds within which you live through your communication. A question often asked from a CMM perspective is, "What are we making?" This is very meaningful because you see that communication is not just a means to an end, but rather a meaning making process in itself. The quality of how you talk creates the quality of your social worlds (Penman & Jensen, 2019). Taking a communication perspective means you look at communication and not through it. In looking at communication you are identifying the patterns, where they lead you, and what they are creating.

Therefore, it is very empowering when you realize that the stories you tell yourself and about yourself create what happens next. It means that you have a stronger sense of agency than what you may have originally realized, because if you create your narratives, then, likewise, you have the ability to change those narratives to better serve you.

Of course, there are many social influences that shape the narratives you carry, and these narratives are longstanding and deeply embedded. It is not just a matter of declaring that you want to tell a different story. You need to construct the story and create a new habit of thinking, feeling, and communicating that is more reflective of the belief system you want to embrace. As this new learning begins to take hold, you need to integrate these new habits into your story of self to construct a coherent narrative (Siegel, 2007). You need newer versions of your story to create change, and this is done by creating renewed iterations of your narrative through an intentional and conscious process (Hansen, 2020).

Coaching: Advancing in an Organization

This case study is an illustration of a woman coaching client who was being considered for a promotion. For a working definition of coaching, you can say that "Executive coaching is an experiential, individualized, leadership development process that builds a leader's capability to achieve short and long-term organizational goals" (Ennis in Stern, 2004, p. 154). In my experience as an executive coach, organizations typically engage executive coaches for a variety of reasons, with one of the most popular being to advance those identified as high-potential contributors. Sometimes the high potentials need to have an intensive customized program

to advance them more quickly in certain aspects because of an imminent promotion or transfer. In other cases, it could be because they need to be more well-rounded, and a customized coaching engagement provides more directed learning. This is not unique to women, rather, it is available to anyone considered a high potential that the organization deems is worth investing in because they will continue to add value.

Case Study: Marlee

There were many strengths this particular coaching client, Marlee, brought to the organization, and she had several advocates. However, there were also reservations that while she was good at what she did, there were feelings of uncertainty that she would be able to rise to the occasion to a role with broader responsibilities. She worked in finance and the promotion would give her a broader portfolio, larger budget, and an increase in team members reporting to her.

Naturally, being in finance you need to have good detail orientation and be able to back up your work with lots of facts, evidence, and numbers to support your recommendations. However, all of this backup information does not need to be included in how you communicate your findings. It can be there in an appendix, for example, to call upon should more proof be needed as support. Being able to translate these findings into a strategic communication that can be understood by those who are not finance or detail oriented, are not concerned with all the evidence, and are more concerned with the narrative of how this fits into the bigger strategic plan, is critical. It is not the same skill or orientation, and often when you are stronger in one of those skills you need to intentionally develop other ones.

The coaching engagement started with a series of exercises to give Marlee more insights into her own style, character, strengths, and where she could develop further. It came as no surprise that she was strong in detail orientation, very conscientious, and not assertive. She was also not strong in her interpersonal skills, and it was making sense to Marlee that she was very good at her job in finance because of her strengths, but that her career would be stymied if she did not develop other ways to be savvy and demonstrate her value contributions to those who needed to recognize them in a way they would be able to see them.

While these insights provided Marlee with the information she needed to make the difference in her presentation of self and information, her

deeply ingrained behaviors and work ethic prevented her from being able to embrace them. For Marlee, her belief was that in order to demonstrate her worth she needed to share all of the evidence that led her to the final numbers and overall budget. It was very challenging for her to present the budget narrative without getting in the weeds, and it was frustrating to whom she was presenting because they did not think in this level of detail and wanted the big picture summary. The messaging was clear that unless she was able to connect with upper management on this level she would be passed over this round for a promotion.

Marlee's Narrative

The narrative Marlee had looping in her head was that she needed to be thorough, and that sharing anything less was being shallow and not demonstrating her competence. She was very motivated to want to make a difference and also challenged because it turned all of her preconceived and habitual thinking upside down (Mezirow, 2000). She needed to use deductive communication rather than inductive communication, which was her comfort zone. Marlee wanted to take everyone on her journey with her as to how she arrived at the numbers and budget narrative, but they wanted to start at the destination with some evidence of how she got there. They did not have the patience for the whole journey and in their minds it was not adding value for them to know.

This also meant Marlee had to change the narrative in her head about who she is as a professional and how she demonstrates competence and adding value. She needed to separate the worth she brought in how she did the work from how she communicated about it. This may seem like an easy or simple shift to make, but if you had built the past 20+ years of your career on performing in a certain manner, and your self-esteem as a professional was built on this narrative, it is very difficult to change those patterns. Her identity was attached to this version of her narrative. All of her internal predictions about what should be and the ways she should perform were being challenged with these new demands and information (Feldman Barrett, 2017). It felt as though the very foundation her career was built on was being shattered, and it increased her feelings of confusion and of not being grounded.

Of course, that was not the case. She was being recognized for her past accomplishments by even being considered for a promotion; she just needed to modify some of the ways she interacted and communicated

with others, in order to move to the next level of her career. The challenge here, bigger than learning new skills, was the self-talk that Marlee had about who she was as a professional. She prided herself on her great work ethic, that involved being thorough, and now she was being asked to communicate about her work in ways that she felt did not reflect the amount of effort she put into her work. This confusion was generating emotional reactions, and she had some doubts of her ability (Feldman Barrett, 2017).

For Marlee, this was a shift in her worldview about what it means to be professional. Shifting to new ways of communication required her to change the narrative in her mind about what being professional and being a leader meant. She was grappling with being authentic and being effective, and now the ways she had previously defined and acted on those terms were not congruent (Sparrowe, 2005). This caused dissonance in Marlee. "Self-awareness, self-regulation, and consistency thus are central to contemporary perspectives on authentic leadership" (p. 423), and Marlee was feeling a disconnect among those three characteristics.

Cognitively, she understood very well what was expected of her to succeed, but emotionally she was not comfortable with this new way of being in the workplace. It went against what she had built her career on up to this point, or so she believed. Dissonance may not be an enjoyable state of being, but it does provide a foundation for receptivity to transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009).

Marlee's Transformative Learning

Through the process of coaching and critically reflecting on her identity, her relationships, and the organizational context within which she was working, Marlee experienced transformative learning as defined by the characteristics of *psycho-developmental* framing (Taylor, 2017). Specifically, Marlee had a new way of understanding and making meaning of her value contributions to the workplace from her own sense of identity, and not just the behavioral modifications she made in how she demonstrated her competence. This was a significant shift for her because all the ways in which she had been rewarded in her career were linked to her expertise in detail orientation and accuracy in finance. Now she was being asked to continue to have those qualities, but to not share them the way she had before, and instead to tailor her messages in ways that did not explicitly showcase these strengths and the work she did behind the scenes. This

was an identity crisis for Marlee and disorienting her to the point of her feeling incapable of knowing how to move forward (Mezirow, 2000). She felt trapped in her old narrative paradigm.

Types of Transformation

Moons (2016) identified four categories necessary for transformation to occur in a short amount of time through a coaching engagement that includes: "understanding of a 'shift in the room'; setting the scene; working in the reflective space; the happening of the 'shift in the room'" (p. 50). Moons (2016) goes on to say that the terminology "shift in the room" she later changed to "transformational shift" because the transformation was incremental and happened over time (Mezirow, 2009).

For Marlee, understanding the shift in the room happened when she realized that even though she thought she was delivering her best quality work, the needs of the people to whom she was reporting required that the information be presented in a different format. This was a level of other-awareness that shifted her perspective from her needs to the needs of others.

The second category, setting the scene, is about establishing a trusting relationship between the coach and coachee, and creating a safe space for the coaching to occur. This was not very challenging to do because Marlee was very motivated to engage in this coaching process. She has two direct bosses, one for the individual organization within the larger conglomerate, who was very supportive of Marlee advancing. The other boss was for her finance function, and he was more unsure of Marlee being able to handle the nuances beyond finance that would come with a promotion. This helped clarify for Marlee who she needed to appeal to in order for her to be able to advance to this new position.

Working in the reflective space, the third category, is about the coach being responsive to the person being coached and noticing what is happening and deciding what comes next. In Marlee's case, it was about asking different types of questions to prompt Marlee to uncover some of her implicit assumptions about performance and the people with whom she was working and deciding what needed to be done once these were surfaced. Brookfield (2011) uses a three-level typology of assumptions, paradigmatic, prescriptive and causal, that he surfaces through his critical thinking process. Asking questions to uncover the assumptions in the first

place is necessary for Brookfield's process; this begins with identifying assumptions.

One very strongly embedded assumption Marlee held was that she should do more of what she was good at in order to demonstrate competence. Brookfield (2011) would classify this as a paradigmatic assumption in that Marlee's belief system led her to assume her challenges were in demonstrating competency and so every action was geared toward proving her competence. She would, therefore, provide more data, more evidence of number crunching, and more details to show the thoroughness of her work. The big "ah-ha" moment for her was in recognizing that it was not a question of her competence, because those in her workplace had confidence in her capabilities. It was in the delivery of the key points necessary to be valuable for strategic decision-making that was the issue. This was a necessary realization because it now opened the way for her to modify her behavior from a place of deeper understanding of the dynamics.

Once Marlee made this realization, the fourth category of noticing, the happening of the shift in the room, was apparent. Marlee slowed down her process so that instead of working on autopilot to continue providing more data, she was much more thoughtful about what needed to take place. This did not happen smoothly; it took time to shift to this new way of thinking. At first, Marlee was stuck in not knowing what to do next because all of her previous resources and practices were in the frame of providing data to prove competence (Pearce, 1989). The *resources* referred to here would be the abilities and approaches on which she had based her previous assumptions. The *practices* would be the ways in which she acted on those resources. The motivation for wanting to make this shift in how she communicated to demonstrate advancement in performance reflects that "a realm of moral obligation is a defining feature of communication" (Penman & Jensen, 2019, p. 36). Marlee felt the moral reasoning inherent in making these adjustments as a constructively contributing member of the organization.

Coaching Process

The coaching engagement allowed for a few important developments to take place. First, it provided a structured and relational process by which Marlee was able to learn more about herself, her values, how she defined success, and to reflect on different levels of meaning she interpreted in

her interactions with others. This affected how she understood the feedback she received. Instead of continuing to feel confounded by what she perceived as mixed messages, she identified the underlying needs of the people providing the feedback and how that related to her need to demonstrate competence. She was able to flex her style to present information in ways in which she could be valued without losing her sense of identity and self-respect.

A second way is that having a coach as a conversation partner, gave her the language to expand her worldview on what it means to be successful in the workplace. This was transformational for her because she realized she did not need to work as hard as she had been in the areas where she was not getting positive reinforcement. Instead, she was able to shift her energy so that she put extra effort into modifying her presentation of information that was more customized to her audience, even though it was not her preferred style (Fisher-Yoshida & Yoshida, 2016). This shift and transformation came about as a result of making explicit the underlying paradigmatic assumptions by which Marlee was operating and developing more resources and new practices for her to effectively demonstrate that shift.

The third way, which also encapsulated other ways of transformation, is that she learned practices that she could use on her own to continue her journey to becoming more adaptable in the workplace. This further shifted her identity from a fixed framing to a more agile one as she relaxed her boundaries of defining success for herself. It developed a stronger sense of agency in Marlee and revised her self-narrative to being one who is not only competent, but also who is able to demonstrate that competency.

Conclusion

There are many ways to be successful in organizations and identifying your unique contribution is important. Equally important is how you talk about your strengths and contributions, because it affects your behavior and how you demonstrate your value added. Women are learning more strategies for how to advocate for themselves and claim value, which is not as strong a traditional social conditioning as advocating for others and creating value has been.

As you change the narrative that describes who you are and how you add value, which is deeply connected to your identity, shifts in world-view take place. These shifts transform your identify and how you make meaning in your life and work. These transformations take courage, and it is beneficial to have a conversation partner in the role of a coach who is able to guide you in the process, provide feedback and reflection, and support you in entertaining alternative perspectives and ways of seeing the world.

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