


How Can Women Close the Gender Divide?

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It's 2016, more than 50 years since the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963. Yet, the average working woman still earns less than \$4 for every \$5 earned by the typical man. Furthermore, only four percent of CEOs of S&P 500 companies are women, according to Catalyst's Pyramid. How is it that women are still not standing on equal ground?

Women leaders are faced with the challenge of walking a thin line. In order to be seen as qualified, they must defeat stereotypes and present themselves as competent, confident and assertive. However, research shows that women who behave in ways that are uncharacteristically female experience more backlash from colleagues than their male counterparts. Specifically, women who behave in ways that men perceive as aggressive are rated lower on performance reviews than men who demonstrate these stereotypical male behaviors – often resulting in promotion limitations.



Conversely, when women behave in ways that are characterized as communal (caring), they are praised and rewarded. However, when women self-promote, which is necessary for professional success, they often receive lower performance ratings than their male counterparts, [according to research](#). The question remains for women: how can they successfully self-promote to prove they can play in the leadership arena when doing so often invites backlash?

The backlash consequences can lead to a gender-based culture of silence in organizations. This exists when women decide to willfully withhold important work related information in order to stay psychologically safe.

There are two relevant types of silence, which both relate to a [woman's voice in the workplace](#) and are consequences of perceived egregious leadership practices. When women choose Offensive Silence, it is often because their ideas have been used without receiving credit. Defensive Silence is the consequence of perceived backlash. In order to stay safe, women feel they need to quiet their voice to stay out of harms way.

If men help create a culture of voice, [women leaders](#) would feel free to express concerns or ideas without fear of ridicule or backlash. This would help increase a woman's feelings of self-worth and significance. When women aren't afraid to speak up, processes run more efficiently, innovation, new ideas and problem-solving increase – all of which contribute to the company's bottom line.

Are women paying the price for cultural norms that no longer fit society? If we can't rely on men to create a culture of voice, then women can take matters into their own hands by recognizing three different language styles: (1) low challenge, (2) moderate challenge and (3) high challenge.

- **High challenge language** can be perceived as problematic and aggressive, which alerts the listener or (email) reader to the urgency of content. However, it's easy for male counterparts to reject a woman leader's high challenge message altogether, or worse, to perceive the woman's message as being more about her motives and characteristics than about professional intent. Women who use high challenge language can experience more resistance compared to those who use lower challenge language to convey their thoughts and views.
- **Moderate challenge language**, which is somewhere in between high and low challenge language, expresses the difficulty of a situation, a need for change and a way to avoid further decline or problems.
- **Low challenge language** expresses a problem as an upgrade opportunity, an improvement of the current state and way out of a situation. The use of low challenge language may seem to some women they are conceding to an unacceptable communication norm, but this may actually be a practical way for women to ensure their voice is heard by men.

Cultures of voice should have no gender boundaries. My male colleagues have a lot of work to do in order to eliminate gender-based cultures of silence so that all voices can be heard without naïve attributions or gender bias.

***About the Author:** Dr. Rob Bogosian is the founder and principal consultant at [RVB Associates, Inc.](#), which offers a range of consulting services focused on linking management and leadership development to business strategy. Dr. Rob is co-author of [Breaking Corporate Silence: How High Influence Leaders Create Cultures of Voice](#). As a leadership and management expert, he has been featured in *Business Insider*, *CNN Money*, *Fortune*, *Chief Executive*, *Entrepreneur*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and more. He is Executive Adjunct Faculty at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) and former Professor at Hult University (formerly Arthur D. Little School of Management) in Cambridge Massachusetts. Follow Dr. Rob on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).*