

PowerTalk: Strategies for Women Leaders

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PowerTalk has been especially designed for women leaders who want to leverage Return on Investment (ROI) in their careers and life experiences and take the next leap. Each issue of PowerTalk focuses on key strategies that will increase your leadership effectiveness. Review the suggestions and write down ways you can implement. Use these suggested strategies today to enhance your tool kit or even rewrite the script for your future.

Peripheral Vision: One of Your Most Versatile Leadership Tools

Are you facing stiff competition for new roles and opportunities? Do you want to increase your influence at your institution? One way to get ahead in today's competitive environment is to become a trusted advisor - someone who is known for testing assumptions, offering multiple solutions to complex problems and thinking outside the box. The first prerequisite for becoming such a trusted advisor is to have sharp peripheral vision.

In my coaching with leaders I have identified five interrelated blinders that hinder peripheral vision and keep individuals seeing only what appears to be clearly in the line of sight.

Blinder #1: An over-reliance on prior success strategies.

Leaders tend to roll their strategies forward from one institution to another, or one role to another, assuming that replicating past successes will make them effective in the future.

Example: One of my clients assumed that her way of interacting with her prior team would work in her new senior-level role. She had always been able to delegate significant projects and let her direct reports run with the ball. An open door policy had also served her well. However, now those strategies were no longer working because she had failed to assess her new team's capabilities and communication styles. They did not meet deadlines and vented issues across the campus, rather than taking advantage of her open door policy.

Blinder #2: Failing to effectively assess the culture or climate of a new institution or division. You'll know you're wearing this blinder if an implementation strategy suddenly comes to a screeching halt. You've run head-on into unwritten norms and expectations and have to backtrack to gain the buy-in that should have been solicited at the outset.

Example: One vice president had grown accustomed to a chain-of-command leader who trusted her judgment and let her make administrative decisions unilaterally. However, when she brought a decision to the president at her new institution, his first question was, "with whom have you collaborated?" This president believed that all decisions brought forward should reflect a collaborative effort that included examining institutional impact.

Blinder #3: Experience. If you believe you already know how to do something well, you may neglect to take the time to collaborate with others to consider alternative plans of action.

Example: One of my clients had a great sense of urgency about getting a strategic planning process completed in record time so that the campus could move ahead with implementation. An accomplished strategic planner at her previous university, she failed to consider that the faculty expected to be widely consulted, and that this campus was accustomed to a slower pace of change. Having to backtrack to gain buy-in negatively impacted both her credibility and her timeline.

Blinder #4: A packed calendar. It has you running on auto pilot, racing straight ahead from meeting to meeting, and deadline to deadline. It keeps you from asking subtle questions and picking up the nuances of cultural norms and unwritten expectations.

Example: A newly appointed president failed to take control of his calendar by questioning engagements others had placed on his schedule for the coming academic year. As a result, he raced from speech to speech and other one-time appearances with little to no time to conduct his internal listening tour and to build key relationships that would have helped him better understand the campus culture and environment.

Blinder #5: Fatigue. The race mentioned under Blinder #4, of course, also leads to fatigue and hence a loss of resiliency. This diminishes innovation and momentum.

Example: Newly appointed leaders often fail to recognize that they are running a marathon, not a sprint. In one instance, a client was so focused on surviving day after day of back-to-back meetings that he told me he felt his staff thought they could just "wind him up and send him out again." He had almost no time for preparation or reflection on what he wanted to accomplish in these meetings with key constituents.

"If you believe you already know how to do something well, you aren't likely to test your assumptions or consider alternatives."

Six Ways to Sharpen Your Peripheral Vision

At a time when global competition demands agility, organizations need leaders who can think beyond what is directly in the line of sight.

1. **Curb the desire to "just get it done."** Rushing forward too quickly can project an image that you are not interested in alternative approaches. When your boss says, "just get this done for me," take a deep breath, probe for understanding and take the time to really listen. Ask for clarification - "Tell me more about the outcomes you expect and how you want me to proceed." Look for opportunities to engage others in the project so you can utilize their ideas to improve upon the way you have always done it. However, note that a *lack of urgency* can also dull your peripheral vision and make you look "asleep at the wheel."
2. **Be willing to test assumptions.** For example, when a client empowered a direct report with the writing of a high-level report, she was disappointed with a missed deadline and poor quality work. She had mistakenly assumed the individual had developed such reports before. Before assigning projects, ask questions like, "Have you done this type of work before?" Or, "What other priorities and deadlines do you have that may interfere with this project?"
3. **Take control by giving up control.** Use your peripheral vision to uncover other talented individuals who may be looking for an opportunity to play a more visible role and develop their professional portfolios. Audit your calendar and be proactive in eliminating those commitments that are not directly aligned with the goals to which you have agreed with your team. Give up that board or executive-level presentation or speech - let someone else experience the limelight and use the time for more important strategy-level work. Try someone else's approach and don't allow intellectual arrogance to reduce your ability to be innovative or agile.
4. **Use a mind map tool in problem-solving to generate a wider range of options and increase creativity.** It will get you out of the linear rut as you brainstorm with others to analyze new opportunities and challenges that require peripheral vision.
5. **Practice strategic networking.** Seeking out the advice and ideas of others is a great way to sharpen your peripheral vision. Women tend to see networking as primarily a social activity, but it is also a strategic opportunity for self-directed learning that accelerates professional development. When you attend conferences and events, approach your networking strategically. Listen to others and learn about new approaches you can take back to your campus.
6. **Stay healthy. Get enough sleep and allow time to restore your energy.** "It is very difficult to stay open, curious and mindful when the press of work and expectations and the need for speed require absolute efficiency of thought and action," said Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee in *Resonant Leadership*. In addition, because peripheral vision is sharpest when you're full of energy, carve out time for discussing complex projects first thing in the morning or at a time of day when your energy is high. Have an agenda and know what you want to accomplish.

Sharp peripheral vision is one of the most versatile of all leadership tools. You can apply it to every task you will encounter throughout your career.

Additional Resources:

- [The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential](#), by Tony Buzan with Barry Buzan (Plume, 1996).
- [Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion](#), by Richard E. Boyatzis and Annie McKee in (Harvard Business School Press, 2005).
- [How Leaders Create and Use Networks](#), by Herminia Ibarra and Mark Hunter (Harvard Business Review, January 2007, Reprint R0701C).
- [Leadership Resilience](#), by Barbara Kaufman (Powertalk: Strategies for Women Leaders, Volume 1, Issue 4, September 2006).

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