

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..

Dysfunctional Working Relationships How They Get Started, How to Avoid Them

Disagreements are unavoidable given the diverse backgrounds of players who work in an environment of unrelenting change, manage a high volume of complex work and also juggle frequent leadership transitions. While differences of perspective contribute to a healthy decision-making process, they can also lead to interpersonal conflict that spirals into dysfunctional relationships. This often occurs when someone doesn't have all the facts. He or she relies on second-hand information or assumptions about what someone apparently said or their behavior in meetings rather than asking for clarification from the source.

Why does this happen? Often it's an attempt to avoid conflict, particularly when an individual is uncomfortable raising an issue, feels intimidated by someone with greater authority or position power, suspects a personal agenda or just doesn't want to sound argumentative. For whatever reason, they miss an opportunity to get the real scoop straight from the horse's mouth. An emotionally charged situation results, and as the issue is bandied about in the hallways and in cyberspace, layer upon layer of faulty assumptions build up into the proverbial house of cards. People form camps or divide into in-groups and out-groups. Positions become fortified..

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Left unresolved, what began as a misunderstanding can escalate into entrenched beliefs about a boss' or colleague's role, style or motivations as stories become reality. Eventually, the dysfunctional relationship deteriorates into a dysfunctional decision-making process characterized by superficial cordiality and a focus on process. Outcomes seem unattainable due to conflict that lies just below the surface. Underground rumors and perfunctory meetings become the norm and the real issues get discussed afterwards in the hall or parking lot. People work around one another rather than with one another. The long-term impact of what started as a simple misunderstanding is a high price to pay.

Fertile breeding ground for dysfunctional interaction is almost any issues involving competing priorities. Common examples are budget decisions that may require numerous committee meetings to determine funding priorities; a budgetary process that lacks transparency; committee members who don't attend meetings or actively engage issues; or a senior leadership team that does not manage the message. Other areas of conflict often involve office space issues, program reprioritization decisions or campus IT competing priorities.

Although the associated interpersonal conflict may make such problems appear formidable, these conflicts are really just a house of cards. You can bring it down by getting to the bottom and getting the facts. But wouldn't it be better to nip the situation in the bud before it escalates? Here are some dos and don'ts:

- "Don't make assumptions based on second-hand feedback about someone. Go to the source and get the facts even if it makes you uncomfortable. Find out if what you heard is an accurate representation of what was said. Use lead-in phrases such as: Tell me more about... Help me understand... I'd like to hear more about your perspective... Would you share with me the rationale for your decision.
- "When someone makes a statement that leaves you feeling uncomfortable, clarify what message was really intended before jumping to conclusions.
- "When someone has made a decision with which you disagree, don't engage in verbal bludgeoning after the fact via email or with others in casual conversation. Instead, ask for clarification *at the moment the decision is made* using the lead-in phrases above.
- "Get the senior leadership team on the same page and speaking with one voice once the decisions are made. This leaves less room for misinterpretation and rumor mills about cabinet members' intentions or for the game of divide-and-conquer to be played out.

Beware the Evils of Email!

Email is a great tool for information sharing, but not for problem solving or collaboration on complex issues. Collaborative problem solving can only occur in an environment of trust. And trust building in turn requires face-to-face dialogue. Individuals need face time to bond, form relationships and set role boundaries before they can work together effectively. Email cannot replace this person-to-person trust-building process; it can only serve as a tool for sharing intelligence and follow-up actions once there is a common understanding of a decision or for fine-tuning implementation strategies.

Used inappropriately, email perpetuates misunderstandings, encourages debate rather than dialog and contributes to entrenched positions. An exchange of a series of emails cannot possibly take the place of a one-hour in-depth conversation. Emails are short-hand communications which lack context and don't allow you to read non-verbal behavior or understand the nuances of a response. You also can't test assumptions with email because no one stops to ask what was really intended.

I once walked into a small office that had doors around it in a semicircle. All the doors were closed and behind them were people emailing each other. When I interviewed them, each threw down several feet of email as proof of how so-and-so next door was behaving. In another instance, I saw an executive assistant emailing her boss who sat only six feet away. She had just been in his office, so I asked her why she was now emailing him. She said she felt that he did not value her or her work, and that she preferred to email him about that because it made her uncomfortable bringing up the issue in person. Rather than having a conversation which might get differences of opinion on the table, she chose to use email, which actually created more conflict.

Don't use email as a way to:

- Avoid addressing an issue face to face
- Express an opposing point of view
- Prove that you've entered into a dialog
- Communicate with a boss who intimidates you
- Collaborate with someone you'd rather not work with in person
- C.Y.A.

Preventing interpersonal difficulties and dysfunctional relationships comes down to one key principle: Go directly to the source. This means in person, not through email. If you don't, you'll be laying the foundation for a house of cards that will eventually turn into a formidable structure cast in concrete.

Learn to overcome these self-destructive indulgences and take the first steps toward a more resilient you. Start now by freeing up some "white space" on your calendar for strategic activities that create value for you and the organization.

Your Thoughts Are Invited

I'm just beginning my research for an article on leadership resilience in women. What do you think differentiates women leaders who maintain their resilience? What are the characteristics that let them deal with stress and adversity? How do they maintain a healthy but pragmatic optimism and continue moving toward their goal rather than getting stuck or thrown off course? Please email me with your insights at drbarbkaufman@earthlink.net.

For further reading:

- [Click here to review more articles by Dr. Barbara Kaufman](#)
 - [The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation](#), by Daniel Yankelovich. New York: Touchstone. 2001.
 - [When Consensus Is Not The Answer](#), by Dr. Barbara Kaufman. University Business, April 2004.
 - [Trust and the Virtual Organization](#), by Charles Handy. Harvard Business Review, 1995, Reprint 95304.
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Your comments and questions are invited: info@roiconsultinggroup.com

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